

Aesthetic Poverty in an Affluent Society

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Recently, I heard a delightful fable and would like to share it with you. It is titled Noah Way and is found in the Journal of Eastern Region of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

And the Lord said unto Noah: "Where is the ark which I have commanded thee build?"

And Noah said unto the Lord: "Verily, I have had three carpenters off ill. The Gopher-wood supplier hath let me down-yea, even though the gopher-wood hath been on order for nigh upon 12 months. What can I do, O Lord?"

And God said unto Noah: "I want that ark finished after seven days and seven nights."

And Noah said: "It will be so."

And it was not so. And the Lord said unto Noah: "What seemeth to be the trouble this time?"

And Noah said unto the Lord: "My subcontractor hath gone bankrupt. The pitch which thou didst command me to put on the outside and on the inside of the ark hath not arrived. Shem, my son who helpeth me on the ark side of the business, hath formed a pop group with his brothers, Ham and Japheth. Lord, I am undone."

And the Lord grew angry and said: "And what of the animals, the male and female of every sort that I ordered to come unto thee to keep their seed alive upon the face of the earth?"

And Noah said: "They have been delivered unto the wrong address, but should arrive on Friday. "

And the Lord said: "How about the unicorns, and the fowls of the air by sevens?"

And Noah wrung his hands and wept, saying: "Lord, unicorns are a discontinued line. Thou canst not get them for love nor money. And the fowls of the air are sold only in half-dozens. Lord, Lord, thou knowest how it is."

And the Lord in his wisdom said: "Noah, my son, I know. Why else dost thou think I have caused a flood to descend upon the earth?"

This bit of imagined biblical history, of course, finds its humor in the fact that we have all felt similar frustrations in our lives. And, aren't we all glad that none of us has, so far, developed the ability to find release for our frustrations in such a catastrophic fashion?

I am feeling a special kind of frustration regarding our society today, a frustration that has plagued many of us who teach in the areas of the Arts and Humanities. This frustration is based upon a lack of financial support and a lack of public concern for the arts. Let me share some recent statistics distributed by the Congressional Arts Caucus Education Program concerning the portion of taxes that various governments contribute to the support of the arts in their countries:

Austria contributes \$100.00 per citizen for the arts per year

France contributes \$28.23 per citizen for the arts per year

Canada contributes \$6.07 per citizen for the arts per year.

Great Britain contributes \$3.60 per citizen for the arts per year.

And the United States, the richest nation in the world, contributes \$.70. If recent proposals are successful, federal funding for the arts will be slashed to half that amount-\$.35 per American. Imagine, that out of the \$1,000 to \$5,000 of income taxes many of us in this theatre pay, only a suggested \$.35 would go to the arts. Certainly, here is dramatic evidence of a lack of support for the arts in our affluent society!

Let us consider some facts found in our own community. There is no vocal music program in any of the elementary schools. At the secondary level, the three fine 50- and 60-piece orchestras of 10 to 15 years ago are gone. There is now only one functional orchestra and that group has only six string players. Students in music and drama activities in our Santa Barbara high schools have been paying for the privilege of participating. Can you imagine that singers in the outstanding Santa Barbara High School Choral Program, under the direction of Phyllis Zimmermann, have paid a surcharge of \$35.00 so that they will have the opportunity to experience great music, outstanding performance, and that special sense of personal worth--an experience that heightens sensitivities and broadens horizons?

Surely this example, so close to home, is further evidence of a lack of aesthetic concern. Evidence of this nature can be found in all areas of our country--from the smallest hamlet to the largest cities.

This kind of frustration leads me to my topic today- Aesthetic Poverty in an Affluent Society. Hopefully, you will conclude with me, we have a need to expand awareness of our aesthetic spirit. Before going further, some may be unclear as to what this aesthetic experience is. Let me try to define and illustrate it here.

The following quote is by Ralph Hoffman:

If a parent wishes to give his children three gifts for the years to come, I should put next to pursuit of truth and a sense of humor, love of beauty, in any form.

Love of beauty--that is at the very heart of this aesthetic business, the artistic as relating to or dealing with the beautiful, or, in other words, that which gives aesthetic pleasure and moral satisfaction (according to Webster's Dictionary). Let me share some examples of beauty with you.



Plate I. Nike of Samothrace, circa 200 BC, The Louvre, Paris

Nike of Samothrace (Plate I) is more commonly known as Winged Victory. This sculpture stands imposingly on the first landing of the great stairway in The Louvre in Paris. The statue is considered by many authorities to be the greatest masterpiece of Hellenistic sculpture. Its appeal is found in the graceful arching of the wings, imparting the feeling of being airborne. There is a sense of unseen winds pressing against the drapery that outlines the figure. Nike appears to be alighting upon the prow of a ship. There is a great sense of balance. The beauty here appeals to every eye.

We should, by the way, be aware that some artistic ideas can be expressions of ugly, horrible events and yet be beautiful in concept and rendering. Such an expression is Francisco Goya's Third of May, 1808, commemorating the execution of a group of Madrid citizens by the Napoleonic armies that occupied Spain in 1808 (Plate II).



Plate II. Francisco Goya, *The Third of May*, 1814-15, The Prado, Madrid

Here we see in the spotlight an artistic statement emphasizing the denial of human rights. Faceless men perform this centuries- old ritual of execution, the destruction of life itself. This is not a beautiful sight, but the artist has created images with which we can empathize. The painting is a perpetual reminder to viewers that events like these continue even today. The timelessness and universality of this "not so pretty scene" all add to its aesthetic qualities. If you have responded to either of these examples, your aesthetic sensitivities have been stimulated.

This brief discussion of aesthetics is helpful but a bit too superficial. We must go beyond this simple exposition and ask, "How can we define our various aesthetic experiences?" This problem is one with which great thinkers have wrestled for centuries. It is an overwhelming assignment, but maybe some workable concepts can help us understand the problem.

Thanks to such men as Leonard B. Meyer and Bennett Reimer, highly respected scholars and music educators, we can focus on three modes of responding aesthetically to the arts. Both authors speak of three major concepts, but Reimer defines them most clearly. They are absolute formalism, referentialism and absolute expressionism.¹ All three modes sound rather threatening because they appear obscure on the surface. Let me give some examples that can help us relate rather quickly to these formidable labels.

Those who approach aesthetics as absolute formalists look for the meaning and value of a work of art in the formal structure, its design, balance of colors, those elements used in creating the work. In music, it is the arrangement of sounds, the textures, rhythms and other elements that are used in creating a piece of music.

In *Basket of Apricots*, by Louise Moillon, we have evidence of formality, beautifully balanced design, and, in the original painting, you would also note care for harmonious coloring. There appears to be a reverence for the very shapes themselves (Plate III).



Plate III. Louise Moillon, *Basket of Apricots*, circa 1635, Heim Collection, Paris.

A musical example of absolute formalism can be found in the opening statement of the Beethoven Quartet Opus 59, No. 1, First Movement. Upon hearing this music, we would notice how the cello introduces the lovely melodic line, while the other members of the quartet give sensitive yet lively support. Eventually, the melody is given to the first violin and all lines lead to a major point of arrival where all instruments move together toward new material. The music demands the highest level of musicianship. * This would be pure joy for the absolute formalist-perfection in creation and perfection in performance. The essence of beauty in both of these examples lies mainly within the very works themselves.

The referentialists would reject this concept with a resounding "wrong." They would find the meaning and value of a work of art existing outside the work itself. The ideas, emotions, attitudes and events, refers you to, or tells you about, or helps you understand, or makes you experience something which is outside the created thing and the artistic qualities which make it a created thing. In music, the sounds should serve as a reminder of, or a clue to, or a sign for something extra-musical.

For example, the official aesthetic doctrine of Marxism regards art as a servant of social and political needs. This referentialist point of view is clearly stated in the statute of the Union of Soviet Writers, from which I quote: Socialist Realism (we are defining as Referentialism) is the fundamental method of Soviet literature and criticism (and of all art): it demands of the artist a true, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Further, it ought to contribute to the ideological transformation and education of the workers in the spirit of socialism.² The metal sculpture of a worker in his workman's apron found in Plate IV is reflective of the artistic spirit behind the Iron Curtain. This worker is portrayed as handsome, direct, strong, and eager. Plate IV. Metalworker, Metalworkers' Vocational School, Leningrad.



Plate IV. Metalworker, Metalworkers' Vocational School, Leningrad.

As you probably realize, the referentialists are more concerned with the message. The emphasis is not placed upon "art for art's sake." In the Soviet Union, if Art is created without a message, it is regarded as merely a titillation of the senses with no value beyond that of sheer decoration. For the "socialist realist," the message must serve some non-artistic end, such as a higher regard for the communal society or for fellow workers.

Our third and final viewpoint, absolute expressionism, "works both sides of the street," finding meaning and value in the work of art itself and, also, finding meaning as the art form relates to the deepest levels of life's significance as expressed by the artist.

The artist's experiences "yield insights into human subjective reality, into self understanding-into mankind's sense of its own nature . . . into the humanizing value of self-knowledge."³ Absolute expressionism includes both the intrinsic quality of "art for art's sake" and, also, deals with the affective essence within the creative effort. All examples or illustrations that follow will relate to this last aesthetic concept, absolute expressionism.

Accepting these definitions of the aesthetic experience, let us now consider the question, "Is the aesthetic experience really necessary?" "Should we be concerned about experiences relating to beauty and its creation?"

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of our greatest theologians, states

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To the essential nature of man belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments and determinations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differences-in short, his character as a creature embedded in the natural order. On the other hand, his essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process, and, finally, his self-transcendence.⁴

In the book, *Art and Character*, Albert E. Bailey speaks of mankind and points out the choices we have: It is within our power to will and to attain complete selfhood; as it is also our privilege, if we so desire, to suppress the unifying and orienting impulses that reside in the forebrain and to sink back to the biological level. In this case we become animals, veneered with conventional conduct-reactions that enable us to keep our place in respectable society, but animals none the less. We then find the satisfactions of life in sensation. We engage in the scramble for wealth and social position and power for the 'kick' we get out of it and for the further pleasures their possession brings; we cease to be concerned with ideals and moralities, with the problems of personal growth and social progress.⁵ This biological level certainly does not appeal to me. Surely all of us can agree that we do not want a banal existence, but, rather, we want more for ourselves from life.

The following statements suggest that human beings are designed for greater things than a life that resembles that of domesticated animals:

We are self-conscious. This quality is the basis for personal and social responsibility.

We have powers of reflective thinking, abstract thought.

We have the ability to make ethical choices. Our conscience, our sense of "ought," our eternal restlessness, all are the hope of mankind.

We have the power of aesthetic appreciation, not only to observe beauty, but to create it.

We are able to seek out, at the spiritual level, ideas and hopes that transcend our human condition.⁶ Well, there we are packaged neatly with some glowing statements about ourselves. In spite of these outstanding attributes, look at a very realistic picture of our society today. Let me share this quote of a concerned member of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra made last year:

I hope that we Americans are heading toward a renaissance. But often, as I drive to work or walk through downtown Los Angeles and see the hordes of bums, not old time alcoholics but young men and women, I fear for the worst. It seems that as mediocrity, as blandness has increased, so has a great new class of untouchables invaded American cities. Teenage boys and girls offer their bodies for sale on street corners not far from my house. Not only has life become plastic and sleazy, it has become cheap. Sometimes, it seems pointless to hear Yehudi (Menuhin) playing a Beethoven concerto when I am filled, not with hope, but with revulsion for what we have wrought.

A rather frightening statement about a kind of creeping social bankruptcy, I must say.

Other problems we might agree upon would be: a society that spends beyond its means, resulting in conspicuous consumption; a society that overuses its natural resources, resulting in our energy crisis; and a society that has developed a sedentary life style . . . Need I list more? I do not plan to provide a panacea for us, but if members of our society were encouraged to find value in the creative experience, there would be less time available to use drugs, to find recreational fulfillment through the waste of energy, to spend precious hours misused in passive observation of a few highly paid athletes and television performers.

I have, thus far, made an effort to define some terms and to show that the aesthetic experience is important to mankind. I suggest that experiences that call upon our artistic nature might help in providing some solutions to distressing problems in our society. I do not wish to imply, however, that solving some social problems is the main thrust of the aesthetic experience. Let us move on to the effect of the aesthetic experience and determine if it can be made accessible to all.

If we wish to study past societies, the most obvious source of information is history. There we find the facts, but, to fully understand those past societies, we must feel their living pulse-that which reflects the ideas, the attitudes, the Zeitgeist, the spirit of their age. Through the arts and literature of a society, we are given this opportunity to empathize with the past.

Probably one of the most interesting epochs in history is an age defined as the romantic period of the late 18th and 19th centuries, a period of revolution, "liberty, equality, fraternity." An emphasis was placed upon the personal- the individual and the artist was encouraged to explore his own unique experiences and observations. There also was interest in the supernatural. Being a period of revolution, an emphasis was placed upon nationalism. Highly expressive results of this period come to us through literature, music, painting, sculpture, dance-in other words, all the fine arts.

Daumier, the French artist, in *The Third-Class Carriage*, deals with the very personal, depicting several figures in close relationships. Here we have a view of the human condition, showing a central figure-a simple peasant who is part of "the lonely crowd" and an everyday life situation of the common individual (Plate V).



Plate V. Honore Daumier, *The Third-Class Carriage*,
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The heroic image and, particularly, that found in German nationalism of the period, is expressed powerfully in Wagner's music. Wagner reaches back several centuries to find the roots of his German heritage. In the Grand March from *Die Meistersinger*, an opera devoted to the art of music set in a period of the great guilds in 13th century Germany, we hear the majestic and triumphal sounds reflecting the German spirit of the romantic period. The qualities expressed in this music are unmistakable. The stately rhythm, massive chords, and an upward thrust of the melodic line all add to an heroic statement.

To find examples of interest in the supernatural of the romantic period, one only has to turn to literature. Consider *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a chilling poem that tells of an eerie misadventure at sea. Strange visions and events stirring our eager imagination are revealed in such lines as:

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.
(or)
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white
(or)
The souls did from their bodies fly-
They fled to bliss or woe!
And every soul, it passed me by,
Like the whizz of my cross-bow.

This fascinating story cannot be developed here. To those who have not read the poem, I urge you to do so. Other examples of the supernatural can be found in music-*Dance Macabre* by St. Saens, or Berlioz's *Symphony Fantastic*.

These then are some very brief expressions of attitudes and ideas of the spirit of the romantic period. These sounds and visual samplings reflect an age that appealed to the heart, national pride, empathy with the common man, and idealism.

An exercise of this kind could be repeated for all the various periods in history. Next, let us take a look at the present-the here and now. Does this business of aesthetics have any practical application to our lives today?

Allow me to share with you a most interesting concept being developed by one of our largest national firms. IBM is making an effort to bring about a wedding of the arts and industry in a practical fashion. The leaders of this firm believe that, if employees are surrounded by contemporary expressions of creativity, there will be a similar release of creativity in the individuals who work in the IBM labs. This summer, I was privileged to have an extensive tour of IBM's Santa Teresa laboratory. This complex is located in the rolling hills south of San Jose, away from the congested "Silicone Valley," near Palo Alto. Offices at Santa Teresa are surrounded by restful vistas of cattle grazing on the slopes of oak-covered foothills (Plate VI).



Plate VI. Office View, IBM Laboratory, Santa Teresa, California.

Plate VII. Corridor, IBM Laboratory, Santa Teresa, California.



Plate VIII. Steven Akana, International I, IBM Laboratory, Santa Teresa, California.

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Plate IX. IBM Laboratory, Santa Teresa, California.



Plate X. Inner-Courtyard, IBM Laboratory, Santa Teresa, California.

Plates VI through X

Twentieth century art works are displayed throughout the buildings, with examples ranging from cubism to abstract expressionism, including works of such contemporary masters as Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, and Stella (Plate VII).

Corridors have become modern art galleries. Included is Steve Akana's painting titled International I (Plate VIII).

The modern design of the actual buildings is not altogether exciting of itself, but, once we have seen other views, I believe we can all recognize that a dynamic ambience has been created (Plate IX).

Several beautiful planted inner-courtyards have been created for the enjoyment of those who work here (Plate X).

According to executives at IBM, most workers with highly developed skills will only remain workers with highly developed skills 10 years hence-unless there is an injection of creativity. This company finds it is cost effective to provide such laboratories throughout the United States. They feel that, if only one new and important creative concept a year is developed in these environs, it is well worth the expense.

Another interesting point should be made here. In the Los Angeles area, two of the most successful IBM marketing managers are not engineers or computer experts but, instead, one was a philosophy major in college and the other was a music major.

Let me now try to build for you an aesthetic experience reflecting our American heritage. Through the art of music, I shall attempt to show how our basic folk heritage impacts upon our art forms today. We can agree the American qualities that this country has demonstrated are qualities such as vigor, practicality, and eclecticism-that is, combining various ideas from a number of sources to solve problems.

There are a variety of musical examples that would give us a sense of our aesthetic heritage. If we heard a performance of a simple unsophisticated thing called Effing, which is an unaccompanied syllabic nonsense verse wherein vowels are interspersed between vocal sounds including gasps, snorts and various other exclamations, we would be impressed by its humor and highly rhythmic effect. We immediately become aware of its essential American folk elements. While listening, how can one not help but smile and empathize with these moments of funning?

Another simple and interesting folk-like performance that is heard today in many parts of this country is the auction. Frequently, two auctioneers work together, with one calling out the bids and the other keeping the action alive by nonsense phrases which often break into a square dance call. A direct outgrowth of this example can be found in a dance movement from Aaron Copland's Rodeo Suite, titled "Hoedown." Undeniably American as apple pie and Thanksgiving, this barn dance is enough to give us all hayfever.

Another bit of our plain unadorned music is heard in the sound of the black American spiritual sung with simplicity, honesty, earthiness. This is the soil in which our culture's aesthetic musical meanings are rooted. The sounds of syncopation and call-response are the inspiration for the sounds that we hear everyday in the world of jazz-a unique product of our society.

Jazz is the result of both black and white contributions and is a style that has been able to absorb offerings from many ethnic groups. Some may have misgivings about the whole area of jazz, for, after all, its earliest environs are not the most select. But let us not forget that some of the earliest dance forms eventually employed in Bach's church music had somewhat "X" rated beginnings.

Dave Brubeck's composition, I'm in a Dancing Mood, is an example of "cool" jazz, calling for precision as well as inspiration. It is eclectic in its changing styles and it is practical in its small instrumentation that provides great versatility. When listening to this selection, we should give attention to the lovely introduction using a kind of neoclassic delicacy. This is followed by a waltz tempo, a return to the opening idea, and eventually to a Latin rhythm.

I find in this Brubeck performance the aforementioned concepts of vigor, humor, practicality, and eclecticism. But there is another idea expressed here-the exciting idea of freedom. Jazz musicians deal with freedom through improvisation constantly.

Let us give attention now to music with greater depth. Consider an excerpt from Leonard Bernstein's Mass. The Catholic Mass has provided the structure for musical settings for centuries, starting with Gregorian chant dating from the sixth century. Listen to two excerpts from the section of the Mass called the "Gloria." If Bernstein expresses the aesthetic of our day successfully, he will sing this text glorifying God with the joy the text demands, and he will be eclectic, and vigorous-which are all characteristics of our time. The "Gloria" in past historical periods has been expressed through the aesthetic attitudes of earlier societies. When listening to the opening passages, we are aware of the unique five-beat pattern. Usually we hear two-, three-, or four-beat rhythms, but this is an abstract five-beat design, with Latin sounds overlaying the musical line.

Consider another section of the "Gloria." We would note that unison passages are used, reminding us of early Gregorian chant, but accompanied by contemporary harmonies and syncopated rhythms. Eventually, the Mass moves to its concluding section with a special praising of the Lord, Laudamus te. The power and breadth of this music is appropriate for a final show of reverence for God. This last statement is a canon, a form coming to us from the distant past. The musical lines imitate each other in a lovely restatement of the "praise of God." It projects a sense of a never-ending restatement that could be echoed eternally. The last portion may be a bit strident for some. Could this be a reflection of the tension we experience in our modern society?

For me, this music represents my feelings about our society-aesthetic attitudes to which I can relate easily- those ideas of energy, freedom, and eclecticism which we so proudly call a "melting pot."

Well, friends, there it is. My goal was to give you a new sense of awareness, showing that maybe we are deprived in the area of aesthetics in our affluent society. You will know if you have been deprived if you have not been asked to be creative, if you feel that our society is one that . . . "finds satisfactions in sensation . . . a society engaged in the scramble for wealth and social position for the 'kick' it gets out of it and for the further pleasures their possession brings."

John Adams, our second President, was ambitious for his children and future generations. He wrote from Paris to his wife Abigail:

I must study Politicks and War, that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, Natural History and Naval Architecture, Navigation, Commerce and Agriculture in order to give their children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Music, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelaine.

He wanted for his grandchildren and for us an enriched life with expanding horizons through the creative experience-that experience which involves us aesthetically. I submit we are almost 200 years off schedule.

It is my hope that you will agree that our society has been deprived aesthetically. In this hour, I have made an effort to show what an aesthetic experience is and have endeavored to show its importance. I have demonstrated through just one art form, music, how our cultural spirit can be experienced.

Until now, I have not offered any solutions. There are some things we can do to inspire an interest in this high level experience. The most important first step to be taken is in education. Instead of discouraging participation in the arts by a "pay for performance" surcharge, we could require of every student, from the first year in school, participation in painting, sculpting, acting, writing, playing instruments, singing, dancing-all activities requiring creativity from the individual.

Second, we could encourage positive reinforcement through family support that is so necessary for these young students. This is positive reinforcement that helps one become aware of one's individuality-your creative, unique inner-self that is basic for each of us to live well. Once selfrealization is discovered, I doubt there will be time for the practice of sedentary observation. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow both advocate the importance of the fundamental drive of creativity to realize one's full, inherent potential.

It is not too late at any age. We all can remember the euphoria we experienced when the art teacher had his or her hour with us in school. We have learned to satisfy, most effectively, our material and sensual needs, but you and I are capable of much more demanding and rewarding experiences.

And now I conclude with words of the great American scholar-philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson:

When the act of reflection takes place in the mind, when we look at ourselves in the light of thought, we discover that our life is surrounded by beauty. . . . within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related; the One. When it breaks through our in- tellect, it is genius, when it breathes through our will, it is virtue, when it flows through our affections, it is love. Love . . . love . . . love.

NOTES

* Recorded musical examples were presented during the lecture.

1. Bennett Reimer, A Philosophy of Music Education (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 14-16
2. Monroe Beardsley, Aesthetics (New York: MacMillan and Company, 1966), p. 360
3. Reimer, A Philosophy of Music Education, p. 25
4. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1964), p. 270

5. Albert Edward Bailey *Art and Character* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1938), p. 67

6. Harold H. Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy* (New York: American Book Company, 1964), p. 150