

ART FOR WHOSE SAKE? PAYING THE PIPER

by James Kates

A couple of years ago, when I served a term as poet-in-residence in a public school system in Massachusetts, the chair of the English department at the high school invited me to talk to his advanced class. He particularly wanted me to address the question, *What is the function of art?*

At first the question baffled me. Then it angered me. At last, it saddened me. In no other culture on the face of the earth, and in no other time but our own, could that question seriously be asked. When King David composed his psalms, when Plato banned the poets from his Republic, when the Irish high kings sent their bards and satirists into battle ahead of their armies, the question would have been absurd. It would have been equally absurd to John Adams, who wrote “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.” And to Thomas Jefferson, who regarded the establishment of the University of Virginia as a higher achievement than the establishment of the United States of America.

The question behind that teacher’s question is, *What is the function of a society that questions the existence of its own arts?* What is the possible use of a society that regards its own soul as a disposable trinket, useless out of season, when the bills come due? For what possible purpose beyond naked survival can that society exist?

Nobody admits to desiring a society without arts and sciences, but nobody wants to pay for them. We do not see them as essential, like the mortgage and the dinner-plate. Our blindness here is especially stupid. As an editor of a literary magazine, I am often told by aspiring writers that they don’t buy literary magazines. They ask me for my address so that they can send me their work. I ask them, Do they want to be published? Of course they do. Who will pay for their publication? Somebody else will, of course. They choose to spend their \$2.50 on a pizza or a six-pack.

Or, if we do allow an importance to the arts and sciences, we want to pick and choose among them the way some reprehensible governments do, supporting only our own, comfortable choices, the ones that don’t challenge our complacency. Who cares if the others go to Hell in a handbasket? But the arts and sciences gain strength from one another, and none flourishes where the others are in decline. Moreover, what we call masterpieces are composted in a rich manure of failed experiments and bad art — these experiments and failures should not be despised.

Voluntary benefits are one way that people can materially encourage the arts, but they are limited by the immediacy of the *quid pro quo* of the performance. When artists donate their time and energy, we forget they *are* donating something of significance, something dearer to them than the few dollars we pay for admission.

We might as well have paid for their performance without the virtue of a benefit; we haven't really given anything. The artists are the ones who have given up their fee, the wages of their profession, their sustenance.

A poet I know was asked why she didn't read for free. After all, the questioner burbled, shouldn't artists be delighted to share their talents with an audience? Shouldn't they rejoice in the performance itself? What would this poet *do* with her money, anyway?

The poet's voice turned to ice. "Buy groceries. Pay rent," she answered.

The Romantic myth of the suffering artist — "I thought of Chatterton, that marvelous boy" — is a rationalization of the emerging middle class of the nineteenth century that wanted to eat its cake and have it, too. Down through the ages, artists have worked at their trade and been professionally rewarded, most often by the governing body. When the elaborate conventions of patronage began to break down in the eighteenth century, artists relied more and more on their marketable skills. Painters turned illustrators, composers always had been performers, and writers became journalists. With the rise of what capitalism calls "the private sector," patronage reasserted itself. Universities took over the role of monarchs, and corporations replaced barons. In many ways, the corporations have been kinder; they have not demanded that the artist take up a new profession — teaching — on the side. On the other hand, corporations have been more controlling, sponsoring the safe or profitable arts at the expense of challenging or experimental ones.

The shifting economics of art have not been totally to the disadvantage of our culture. Great artists have made great art in the middle of medicine (William Carlos Williams, Anton Chekhov) the law (Charles Reznikoff) and insurance (Charles Ives, Hart Crane). When Wallace Stevens announced his vocation as a poet at the age of eighteen, his father said, "That's fine — then learn a trade." But tokenism is not triumph. What is lost is the composting ferment, the dialogue of art. And the disfranchised minority artists are lost. It is no accident that all these exceptional artists I named were white and male.

We need to support, in every sense of that word, the silver poet, the middling sculptor and the young dancer. It's a blue-chip investment, a sure thing in the long run of civilization.

All of us now struggle to maintain ourselves in a society that has determined that both of its primary functions — the physical well being of its citizens and the nurturance of arts and sciences — are disposable frills, or the voluntary responsibility of a mercurial elite. As quickly as the federal government cuts back its support, state government follows the leader — and town government refuses to finance arts and sciences in our schools as if these were as unnecessary as lunch.

And, on every level, we are that government.