7

CULTURE AND ART

ART MUSEUMS. CONCERT HALLS. OPERA HOUSES. These remain today our standard symbols of high culture. These are the places, from generation to generation, where great art survives. They define us. They showcase the best of the human spirit. And they wouldn't exist, we are constantly reminded, without rich people.

Affluence and the arts have always gone — and will always go — together, or so the friends of fortune have always contended, down through the centuries. To create, artists need patrons, individuals who can both appreciate great art and support the artists who create it. Only wealthy people can adequately fit this patron bill. Only wealthy people, the classic "leisure class," have the time to cultivate a sophisticated appreciation for art. Only wealthy people have the wherewithal to keep starving artists from starving.

"The rich make life more interesting: they are a luxury a civilized society should be able to afford," as William Davis, one admiring chronicler of the ways of the wealthy, has noted.[1] "Walk around any museum and look at the treasures they have left us, and ask yourself what there would be to see if Communism had arrived four centuries earlier."[2]

An art lover so inclined might start this walk-around exercise at New York's glorious Metropolitan Museum, the perfect place to reflect upon the cultural contributions of J. P. Morgan, the greatest business kingpin — and art collector — of his time. Morgan, before his 1913 death, spent over $900 million, in today's dollars, buying artwork. He literally stocked America, most notably the Metropolitan Museum, "with the world's great art."[3]

An art lover in a reflective mood might next want to drop in on New York's Museum of Modern Art and contemplate here the far-flung legacy of banker David Rockefeller, the grandson of J. P. Morgan's contemporary, John D. Rockefeller. David, the museum's chairman emeritus, devoted years of his life "acquiring fine art, especially Impressionists and early Modern masters like Picasso" and years more "creating a corporate art program that today numbers over 20,000 works in 350 locations."[4]

What would art in America have done without David Rockefeller? And what would art in America do without the men of means who have followed in his art-collecting footsteps, the billionaires like Bill Gates who, in 1994, transformed "himself from a role model for nerds into a cultured gentleman"

Originally published in *Greed and Good: Understanding and Overcoming the Inequality That Limits Our Lives* by Sam Pizzigati (Apex Press/Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). For more, see Inequality.org.

by laying out $30.8 million for a celebrated notebook of jottings and drawings by Leonardo da Vinci.[5] Four years later, for $36 million, Gates added Winslow Homer's *Lost on the Grand Banks* to his increasingly impressive collection. No one had ever paid more for a painting by an American.[6]

The love of fine art, some observers believe, just comes naturally to the very rich.

"Billionaires almost cannot help becoming art collectors," noted one recent survey on the art-collecting scene in *Forbes* magazine. "With so much money and, usually, so many houses to decorate, it only makes sense that they would surround themselves with much of the world's finest artworks, furniture, porcelain and other objects of beauty."[7]

Once imbued with this love of beauty, rich people just seem to have to share it. They simply cannot bear the thought of a museum going without. In 1999, for instance, high-tech multimillionaire Jonathan Ledecky found himself attending a fundraising dinner for the famed Phillips Collection. The museum, Phillips officials explained, needed a few dollars for a refurbishing project. "Ledecky leaned over to a high-tech pal," the *Washington Post* would later report. "'I'll go half if you go half,' he whispered. 'Let's announce it right now at this little dinner.' 'Done,' said his friend."

"And the museum had an additional $375,000," the *Post* related. "Just like that."[8]

In the closing years of the twentieth century, rich people seemed to be making it happen — "just like that" — for cultural institutions all across the United States, and all the arts, performing as well as visual, seemed to share in this generous benevolence. In New York, financial services mogul Sanford Weill took over as the chairman of the Carnegie Hall board in 1991. Over thirty fellow CEOs would eventually join Weill on that board, with each expected to donate $100,000 a year. Midway through the 1990s, Weill upped the ante. He announced a $75 million fundraising goal for Carnegie Hall's endowment and "almost immediately raised half of it from the board, the average director contributing nearly $600,000."[9]

Weill's high-minded, high-octane philanthropy reflects, according to art critic Hilton Kramer, "a well-established American tradition."

"Anyone familiar" with America's great cultural and educational institutions, Kramer argued in 2001, "knows that most of our major art museums, concert halls, libraries, universities, and research institutions were created by private wealth."[10]

The more private wealth in the pockets of wealthy people, cultural guardians like Kramer believe, the more secure our culture will be. Wealthy Americans, at least as far as the arts are concerned, may be the ultimate "good hands people." They preserve and protect our cultural patrimony. They can be counted on — unless the rest of us do something stupid, like tax their fortunes away — to make America not just rich, but beautiful.

FOR WELL OVER A GENERATION NOW, ever since the late 1970s, the rest of us have cooperated. We have taken no steps toward taxing great fortunes. Instead, we have reduced the taxes the wealthy are expected to pay. We have sat back and watched new J. P. Morgan-sized fortunes emerge, one after another, right in the heart of America's greatest cultural centers. We should now, as a result, be witnessing a flowering of fine art in America, a veritable renaissance. Are we? Some observers think so.

These observers marvel at the amazing new additions to America's cultural landscape. In Los Angeles, they applaud the visually stunning J. Paul Getty Museum, "a Shangri-La and Starship Enterprise rolled into one."[11] The Getty opened in 1998. That first year, 1.8 million visitors "would brave the rigors of limited parking" to ogle the masterworks assembled by Texas oilman J. Paul Getty's billions. So many people came — "by car pool, by shuttle bus, by taxi" — that museum officials found themselves forced to launch "an anti-attendance advertising campaign." That campaign worked. Attendance at the Getty dropped to a more manageable 1.4 million in 1999.[12]

The next year, in Getty's home state, the Houston Museum of Fine Art would open a new wing named after Audrey Jones Beck, the granddaughter of Jesse H. Jones, Houston's most celebrated business leader. Over the course of the new wing's first twelve months, 2.2 million visitors rushed in.[13]

Overall, across America, museum attendance jumped 45 percent in the 1990s. Curators counted 900 million visits in all, and that was more, art enthusiasts exclaimed, than the total attendance for all the decade's pro baseball, basketball, and football games combined.[14] And Americans who weren't walking through art museums seemed to be taking their seats in theaters and concert halls. The performing arts, one report noted in 2001, "appear to be booming." More arts organizations were offering live performances than ever before.[15]

Even symphony orchestras, by the end of the 1990s, were sounding happy notes. A dozen years earlier, orchestral leaders were all but convinced their art form wouldn't make it to century's end. "The symphony orchestra as we know it is dead," Ernest Fleishmann of the Los Angeles Philharmonic had declared in 1987.[16] "There is little doubt," music critic Samuel Lipman had added, "that the long-expected terminal crisis of American orchestras is upon us."[17] But by century's end, the "terminal crisis" had passed, and the American Symphony Orchestra League trumpeted the news. In the 1999-2000 symphony season, the League noted, ticket sales hit nearly half a billion dollars, up 53 percent from 1990-1991. In this same 1999-2000 season, over two-thirds of America's top orchestras ran their budgets in the black. The 109 orchestras that shared their data with the League ended the year with a combined $12 million surplus.[18]

"Nine years before," the League crowed, "the same orchestras reported a combined survey deficit of $26.7 million."[19]

Did all this add up to a renaissance? Who knew for sure? But those attendance numbers certainly looked good and, at least in America's concert halls, sounded even better.

FANS OF AMERICA'S GREAT FORTUNES tend to see the history of the arts in America as a history of the wealthy in the arts. Artists make art. The wealthy buy it. The wealthy share it. Curtain down. A standing ovation from a grateful American public.

In real life, America's most wealthy, even in their flushest moments, have never made the sorts of investments the arts in America have needed to keep going and growing.

Americans first learned that lesson in the 1920s. In the Roaring Twenties, as in the 1980s and 1990s, new grand fortunes appeared to be popping up everywhere. The performing arts groups of the time had great hopes for these grand new fortunes. America's new super rich, they figured, would rescue art from grimy fiscal pressures. Artistic brilliance would shine anew. Culture would captivate America.

But the new super rich, in the 1920s, never rode to the rescue. They gave what they wanted, not what they could. The age's wealthiest individuals, one subsequent study of the arts noted, would prove "unable or unwilling" to subsidize "such high-cost performing organizations as symphony orchestras and opera companies."[20] Major arts groups, consequently, spent the decade scrambling. They aggressively solicited donations from whatever deep-pockets they could convince to serve on their boards. At the same time, they redoubled their ticket-selling efforts. But neither deep-pockets nor ticket sales would deliver the needed results. Chronic underfunding seemed destined to be the arts community's eternal burden.

At least until the 1950s. After World War II, arts activists began challenging the old funding formulas. The arts community, activists argued, needed to develop funding sources outside the ticket marketplace and traditional philanthropy. The arts, they believed, needed — and deserved — government support. In 1960, the activists would score their first breakthrough. In Albany that year, lawmakers would okay the creation of the New York State Council on the Arts, the first state arts agency in the nation.[21] Four years later, Congress would establish the National Endowment of the Arts. The federal government would now become, for the first time, a significant player in arts funding.[22]

In 1966, two leading scholars would blow away what remained of the polite fiction that live performing arts could "support themselves in the marketplace."[23] In a landmark study, economists William Baumol and William Bowen would help policy makers understand that the arts in America could make no real headway without help from tax dollars.[24] That understanding, in fairly short order, would speed historic increases in government aid to the arts. In community after community, federal dollars would begin leveraging growing "private and state and local government support for the arts through a system of matching grants and grants-in-aid to states."[25]

But this generous flow of public tax dollars would not, in the end, survive the Reagan era. In the 1980s, amid rising federal budget deficits and angry attacks from cultural conservatives, arts funding would start losing its political appeal on Capitol Hill. By the early 1990s, states and localities, not just Congress, would be cutting back on aid to the arts.[26]

With government support fading, the arts now needed new patrons. Once again, arts advocates would look to the super rich. Once again, they would be disappointed. Total individual contributions to performing arts organizations would increase over the course of the 1990s, but these increases would come largely from arts lovers of modest means, not from rich donors. And these smaller donations required "higher development costs" to obtain.[27] The bottom line for performing arts groups: After subtracting fundraising costs, the net revenues from individual contributions weren't nearly enough to keep pace with rising general operating expenses.

Corporate contributions would not make up the difference. Corporations, overall, did boost their total arts giving in the 1990s, but the executives who made these contributions tied them more tightly than ever before "to individual corporate marketing campaigns."[28] General operating deficits within arts groups continued to grow wider.

With individual and corporate contributions inadequate, with direct government subsidies evaporating, arts groups had no choice but to hunt for money in the marketplace. That meant, essentially, selling more tickets — at higher prices. And that meant, in turn, making artistic decisions based purely on economics. Who could fill the most seats at the highest prices? Arts groups knew the answer. Only big names could fill high-priced seats. So arts groups jumped on the big-name bandwagon. They increasingly produced "lavish programs featuring celebrity artists to attract large audiences."[29] Stagings of familiar, tried-and-true classics could also fill seats. So arts organizations increasingly recycled old "warhorses," in what would become known as the *Nutcracker* strategy. These old favorites delivered good bang for the buck. They could be produced cheaply — no need to bother with new sets — and arts groups, by producing warhorses instead of nurturing new work, could avoid paying royalties to creators.

Celebrity blockbusters and endless warhorse reruns would not, everyone involved understood, elevate America's general artistic levels. But blockbusters and warhorses weren't expected to have any elevating effect. They were only expected to give arts organizations a badly needed fiscal shot in the arm. Unfortunately, they didn't do that either. The marketplace, in the 1990s, would not deliver. The blockbusters and the warhorses would not raise enough revenue to offset shrinking support from government sources. By century's end, arts groups were receiving no more revenue from marketplace initiatives, as a share of total revenue, than they had back in the late 1970s.

"In the aggregate," researchers from RAND, America's original think tank, would note in a major 2001 study, "performing groups are about as dependent upon the market as they have been in the past, despite intensive efforts at marketing and audience development, and despite sharp rises in the cost of tickets."[30]

The RAND research, conducted for the Pew Charitable Trusts, analyzed America's entire theater, opera, dance, and music scene — and sounded some rather discouraging notes.[31] The researchers acknowledged that overall attendance at arts productions had increased somewhat between 1982 and 1997. But this increase, the researchers concluded, reflected population growth and related factors, "not an increase in the percentage of the population that engages in the arts."[32] And the population that did engage in the arts, the researchers found, was aging. In 1982, people under forty made up 27 percent of the audience for classical music. By the end of the 1990s, concert-goers under forty constituted just 14 percent of the classical music audience.[33]

On stage, among performers, researchers uncovered other troubling trends. The emphasis on blockbusters had tilted the rewards for performing to a few select superstars. The rest of America's performing professionals faced rising economic insecurity.

"On average," the study noted, "performing artists earn less, work fewer weeks, face higher unemployment and are much more likely to take jobs outside their profession than other professionals with comparable education."[34]

These trends, the RAND analysts argued, were driving a "fundamental shift" in America's "performing arts system." That shift, they explained, couldn't really be seen in America's biggest cities — or smallest towns. In the nation's largest urban centers, the nation's premiere arts organizations were continuing "to grow by focusing on star-studded productions that pull in the crowds." In small communities, meanwhile, the arts emphasis still remained on "low-budget live productions that rely largely on volunteer labor."[35] The changes were taking place everywhere else, in the mid-size metropolitan areas that had once employed the vast majority of professional performers. Arts groups in these mid-sized areas, the RAND researchers documented, "are facing the greatest difficulty in attracting enough of the public to cover their costs."[36] These mid-sized arts groups "lack the resources to put on blockbusters."[37] Many "are likely to disappear."[38] Those that hang on are likely to survive by eliminating almost everything but "traditional programming and fairly mainstream artistic endeavors."[39]

Do those who care about culture need to worry about these mid-sized arts organizations? After all, if elite arts groups in America's biggest cities are continuing to prosper and if volunteer arts groups are continuing to put on productions in small communities, what's the big deal? The big deal, the RAND researchers stressed, is the role that mid-sized arts groups in America have historically played. These mid-sized arts groups offer talented young performers the stages they need to get serious about their art and develop their skills.[40] But that's only the half of it. If mid-sized arts groups can only survive by relying on the stale warhorses of America's performing arts repertoire, innovation will likely become a luxury our culture simply cannot afford.[41]

In the 1980s and 1990s, the RAND research demonstrated plainly, America had experienced no renaissance in the performing arts — and no renaissance loomed.

"The world of the performing arts is sick and needs attention," Michael Kaiser, the president of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, would agree late in 2002. "The arts world is moving close to becoming a virtual cartel of a few large mainstream organizations that survive and thrive. This would be catastrophic. A healthy arts ecology demands that we have large and small organizations, mainstream and edgy, and of all ethnic backgrounds."[42]

The RAND analysts, for their part, saw ahead an America "likely to make it more difficult for talented actors, composers, musicians, and dancers to mature artistically."[43] And this bleak future beckoned even in those places where wealth in the United States had concentrated the most, places where potential patrons of the arts could be found around every corner, places like Silicon Valley.

On June 4, 2002, in the capital city of Silicon Valley, the San Jose Symphony Orchestra announced plans to file for bankruptcy. The orchestra, a fixture in San Jose for over 120 years, faced debts that amounted to "more than a third of its annual $7.8 million budget." Many of the eighty-nine musicians in the orchestra, violinist Kristen Linfante told reporters, will be "going back to school to begin new careers."[44]

In San Jose, as in most of the rest of America, the renaissance would have to wait.

THE PEOPLE WHO RUN VISUAL ARTS ORGANIZATIONS, unlike those who run performing arts groups, don't have to worry about filling seats. They don't have to pay musicians, dancers, or actors either. But they do face chronic budget pressures every bit as tight. By the end of the 1990s, these pressures had created in the visual arts a mirror image of the performing arts.

In the visual arts, as in the performing arts, government funding support started ebbing in the 1980s and 1990s. In the visual arts, as in the performing arts, America's ever-wealthier wealthy sat, for the most part, on their checkbooks and offered no substantial relief. In the visual arts, as in the performing arts, arts groups then rushed off to the marketplace for any and all dollars they could capture.

These visual arts groups had several money-raising marketplace options. They could sell reproductions of the art that hung on their walls, for instance, and they could sell food and drink in their museums. Most lucratively of all, they could sell tickets, and that's just what they set out to do.

The art museum experience in the United States had traditionally been, in much of America, a free experience. People walked into museums the same way they walked into public libraries. They couldn't "take out" art, as they could take out books, but they could linger before an artwork, no charge, for as long as they wanted. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, this library-like era ended, almost everywhere in the United States.

In many cases, admission fees would follow directly on the heels of cutbacks in government support. In Los Angeles, after the 1978 passage of Proposition 13, America's first major statewide tax cut initiative, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art imposed its first general entrance fee. Adults would have to pay $1.50 to enter inside.[45] The fee would make an immediate impact. Within a month, attendance at the Los Angeles museum dropped 44 percent. Within a year, average daily attendance would fall from 1,400 visitors a day to 370.[46]

Still, despite these attendance losses, there would be no going back, in Los Angeles or anywhere else. Museums would either succeed in the marketplace — by selling more and more tickets, at higher and higher prices — or have to pack up their paintings. And how would museums endeavor to sell more tickets? They would follow the performing arts script. They would produce "blockbuster" shows based on "warhorse" art that had already demonstrated clear drawing power.

The script, on one level, "worked." Blockbusters — "exhibitions on Impressionism, Egyptian art, Picasso and most of all van Gogh" — did generate ticket sales.[47] In 1996, only fourteen art shows in the United States attracted more than two hundred thousand customers. That total rose to eighteen in 1997 and twenty-one in 1998. In 1999, thirty-one blockbusters drew at least two hundred thousand people.[48]

These sorts of blockbusters undeniably multiplied revenues. But they did not, in any meaningful sense, expand the audience for art. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art offered a typical example. In 1977, before entrance fees, the museum counted about half a million visitors. Not a bad figure for a metro area with 7.5 million people. By 2001, that metro area population had grown to 10 million. How many visitors stopped by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2001? About half a million, the same number the museum had welcomed back in 1977.[49]

Blockbusters had not, in Los Angeles, worked any magic. Nor did they work any magic anywhere else. How could they? Museums across the country, over the course of the 1990s, had raised their entrance fees to heights that all but eliminated the casual visitor. In Los Angeles, the county museum's original $1.50 admission fee in 1978 had been hiked, by 2002, to $7.[50] But that would be a bargain compared to the $12 charged, in 2000, at the Guggenheim in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.[51]

These fees didn't just eliminate huge swatches of the population from regular museum going. They radically changed — for the worse — the museum-going experience.

In free public museums, notes *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight, people can experience art casually, as part of everyday life. They come, over time, to see this art as belonging to them, part of their "cultural patrimony." Stiff entrance fees have ended this sense of common ownership. We pay to see art, just as we pay for a movie, a ballgame, or any other "commercial entertainment."[52]

By century's end, America's museum directors could care less about nurturing an appreciation for humanity's common "cultural patrimony." Museum directors had become entertainers, ever on the lookout for "popular attractions geared toward drawing crowds rather than nourishing the soul."[53] These "popular attractions" would include an exhibit on the history of the sneaker — nourishment for the sole? — that appeared at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 2000.[54] And these popular attractions would also include, perhaps most profitably of all, air conditioning. Pumping up the AC, the *Wall Street Journal* would report in 2001, "is helping fill galleries" across the United States.[55] To lure sweating passers by, art museums were turning thermostats down, to as low as 69 on the hottest days, and running "cool rules" ad campaigns.

"Our air conditioning," the marketing director at Kansas City's Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, boasted to the *Journal*, "is a huge selling point for us."

BLOCKBUSTERS, WARHORSES, AND AIR CONDITIONING all helped up arts attendance in the boom years. But they brought no artistic renaissance, no greater role for the arts in American life, and no guarantee that the arts would survive to thrive in the years ahead.

Real security for the arts, analysts note, can only come from a widening of the audience for artistic excellence. And that audience, they believe, can be widened — not by blockbusters, but by education, not by air conditioning, but by a systematic effort to support teaching about and appreciation for the arts in America's schools.[56]

Educators, not surprisingly, have been making this same recommendation for years.

"Because of the role of the arts in civilization, and because of their unique ability to communicate the ideas and emotions of the human spirit," notes the national society that represents music educators, "every American student, preK through grade 12, should receive a balanced, comprehensive, sequential, and rigorous program of instruction in music and the other arts."[57]

A "balanced, comprehensive, sequential, and rigorous program of instruction" in the arts, music educators know, is just what America's public schools are *not* providing. The National Assessment for Educational Progress, the testing arm of the U.S. Department of Education, would document — and come to symbolize — this neglect in the mid 1990s.

The National Assessment for Educational Progress, or NAEP, had for years regularly tested students across the United States in reading, math, and other subjects. But not the arts. In 1996, NAEP officials finally set out to remedy that situation. They prepared broad samples of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students for an arts assessment. But the assessment had to be postponed when the Department of Education couldn't find the dollars to pay for it. The testing eventually did take place, the next year, but in truncated fashion. Federal Education Department officials could only find enough budget dollars to assess arts knowledge among eighth graders.[58]

The results from this limited assessment would prove valuable nonetheless. They confirmed what arts educators had long suspected: America's schools were offering students precious little contact with the arts. Only 25 percent of eighth graders, the assessment showed, were "actually singing or playing an instrument at least once a week."[59] The same percentage attended schools where visual arts classes were only offered once or twice a week. Another 17 percent attended schools where visual arts classes were *never* offered.[60]

"This NAEP assessment verifies that most American children are infrequently or never given serious instruction or performance opportunities in music, the arts, or theater," Secretary of Education Richard Riley told reporters. "That's wrong."[61]

The NAEP arts assessment, and Secretary Riley's anguished response to it, would get no rise out of America's champions of culture, those men and women of private wealth and exquisite taste who see themselves as noble protectors of humanity's fine arts heritage. These wealthy patrons of the arts, in the wake of the NAEP report, made no massive move to rescue America's young people from artistic illiteracy. These patrons of the arts simply did not have time to focus on schools and art education. They had more important work to do. They were too busy underwriting artistic monuments — to themselves.

These monuments — luxurious new concert halls and art museums, or new wings for old buildings — proliferated wildly in America's turn-of-the-century years. In 2002, *USA Today* counted "at least" sixty major arts building projects over $10 million "either underway, in planning stages or just completed." These sixty projects, by conservative estimate, together cost $5.1 billion.[62]

Not all Americans of means, to be sure, cheered this building boom. Some worried that edifices and air conditioning, in the absence of arts education, might not be enough to give the arts a fighting chance for the future. One such worried American of means, cable TV multimillionaire John Sykes, would actually move to change that future.

Sykes, midway through the 1990s, had volunteered to serve as a "principal for a day" at a public school in Brooklyn. The school's students had welcomed him with a musical show, and their energetic effort left Sykes, the president of cable television's popular VH1 music network, all smiles. But those smiles faded when a music teacher told Sykes the school couldn't afford to keep its music program going. A shocked Sykes promptly decided to "adopt the school" and outfit the kids with new instruments. His philanthropy at this single school would soon turn into a citywide program and then, in 1998, into a national philanthropic effort, the VH1 Save The Music Foundation.[63]

The Foundation's goal: to help restore instrumental music programs in America's schools and increase children's access to music education. Toward this end, Save The Music would enlist a long list of partners and sponsors, outfits of substance ranging from the National School Boards Association to Subaru.[64] By May 2002, Save The Music had donated $21 million worth of musical instruments to nine hundred public schools. In just five years, the program had touched the musical lives of four hundred thousand children.[65] By 2008, Save The Music officials noted, an estimated 1 million public schoolchildren would regain access to music education *if* Save The Music were able to raise enough donations to successfully complete its ten-year plan.[66]

But even this success, Save The Music officials understood, would be limited. At the start of the new century, only one quarter of America's schools offered music as a basic part of the curriculum.[67] If Save The Music were able to reach 1 million kids, that would still leave about 35 million more children yet to be reached.

"We've helped so many children and schools these past five years," acknowledged Bob Morrison, the Save The Music executive director, early in 2002, "but the need to restore music education programs unfortunately continues in the face of significant education budget cuts across the country."[68]

Save The Music, gallant though the effort, was not making much more than a minor dent.

IN THE 1990S, VH1 PRESIDENT JOHN SYKES HAD ONE IDEA — his Save The Music program — on how the affluent ought to go about nurturing public appreciation for the arts. Steve Wynn, the stylish, art-collecting chairman of Mirage Resorts, had another.

In 1998, amid massive fanfare, Wynn opened a "Gallery of Fine Art" inside his luxurious new Las Vegas resort hotel, the Bellagio. Over the next two years, an average of two thousand customers a day would pay $12 a head to take a peek at Wynn's $400 million worth of "paintings and sculpture by the likes of Renoir, van Gogh and Picasso."[69]

Elsewhere in Las Vegas, on and around "the Strip," Wynn's fine arts derring-do would quickly inspire a mini-boom in masterworks.

"Strip moguls recognize," noted one reporter, "that art is entertainment, just like golf or nightclub acts or gambling."[70]

In 2001, to cap off this artistic flurry, a new casino and resort known as The Venetian, an even grander palace than Wynn's Bellagio, opened an opulent art gallery all its own, after teaming up with New York's Guggenheim Museum and Russia's venerable Hermitage.[71]

"It's a great combination — high kitsch and high art at the same time," noted The Venetian's proud president, Rob Goldstein.[72]

Other observers, like Dave Hickey, a University of Nevada at Las Vegas art critic, weren't so sure. Hickey had the quaint notion that museums ought to offer a "refuge" from commerce, not opportunities for new profit centers.

"All of this is based on the presumption that art is a spectator sport, like a tractor pull," noted Hickey, after surveying the burgeoning Las Vegas fine arts scene. "You're not in the museum business anymore. You're a carnival."[73]

Some American cities, in the boom years, did try to stick to the museum business — and offer all people, not just those who could afford the price of admission, a refuge where fine art could be experienced, not just consumed. Of these cities, none would make a more admirable effort than St. Louis.

A democratic people, leaders within the St. Louis arts community believed, ought not count on the whims of the wealthy to protect and preserve the best their culture has to offer. That perspective had deep local roots. A century earlier, after the 1904 St. Louis world's fair, local citizens — "working-class European immigrants who smarted from the memories of the elitism of their homelands' cultural institutions" — had converted the fair's only permanent structure, the Palace of Fine Arts, into the St. Louis Art Museum. They carved into stone their new museum's mission — *Dedicated to Art and Free to All* — and hoped the generations ahead would never forget that motto.

Those generations never did. The St. Louis Art Museum, down through the decades, has remained free.[74] City and county local residents pay, as part of their property taxes, a "museum tax." At one point, local political leaders did propose an admission fee to pay for capital improvements. City and county residents rejected the fee. They voted, instead, to double their museum tax, "to keep the free admission policy."[75]

The St. Louis museum tax — at century's end, $220 on a home assessed at $100,000 — came to supply nearly 80 percent of the city art museum's general operating revenue.[76] That solid base of support, in turn, gave museum officials the creative freedom to think beyond warhorses and blockbusters.

"The great challenge for museums," as Brent Benjamin, the St. Louis Art Museum's director, noted in 2000, "is to build an audience for exhibitions that are not Impressionism or antiquities."[77]

The St. Louis Art Museum seemed, at century's end, to be doing a fairly good job at that. The museum, throughout the 1990s, consistently topped attendance lists for touring exhibitions, perhaps the art world's best comparative attendance measure.[78] The museum was surviving, even thriving — without depending on the wealthy.

The fine arts in St. Louis have always, to be sure, welcomed contributions from the city's most affluent, but the arts in St. Louis, more so perhaps than the arts in any other city, have never *had* to have those contributions to stay alive and thrive. The direct result? The arts in St. Louis have never been left in the lurch when the priorities of the privileged didn't quite match up with the needs of arts organizations. The arts in St. Louis have never had to rush wildly into the marketplace to make up for the dollars the wealthy have not seen fit to throw their way.

Elsewhere in America, arts community leaders have, for the most part, never stopped counting on the wealthy. They have been systematically disappointed. Amid that disappointment, they have turned to the marketplace — and only compounded their problems. Arts leaders have ended up shrinking the public for fine art and giving this shrunken public an arts experience that is decidedly less than fine.

The "accumulation of wealth," President Calvin Coolidge, a dependable friend of wealthy people, once declared, inevitably brings forth a "widening of culture."[79]

Not necessarily.

Not if that accumulated wealth sits concentrated, at the top.