




# ON WHY MILLIONAIRES MAKE BETTER ART PATRONS THAN THE GOVERNMENT

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Recently I've become involved in several debates about — and in them I've been putting the case against — government art subsidies.<sup>1</sup> I usually begin my case with the claim that, since other government subsidies do harm (think of the British car industry, for example, or the steel or ship-building industries), why should we expect government arts subsidies be any different? Subsidies separate artists from their audiences, high art from popular art. Good, artistic-type artists are replaced by bad, “political” artists, who are clever at getting money out of their political paymasters but less clever at communicating with audiences. I don't say: art is bad, so it shouldn't be bankrolled by the government. I say: art is *good*, so it shouldn't be bankrolled by the government. Also, I try to talk about those arts that I love (with me that tends to be music) and the damage that subsidies do and have done to them, rather than about arts that I am indifferent to (painting, posh literature), of which I consequently know relatively little.

This avoids the “philistine” accusation, commonly used against the enemies of government arts subsidies.

Once I have endorsed the goodness of art, the next challenge tends to go thus: Maybe arts subsidies *are* rather unsatisfactory, but what is the alternative if art is to flourish? Haven't there always been subsidies from powerful people to artists? Are you going to rely on eccentric millionaires to pay for everything that mere customers won't back? And if you *are* going to rely on eccentric millionaires, why are they any better than the government at paying for art? What follows is not a complete justification for abolishing government art subsidies; it is merely a part of my answer to this particular objection.



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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**



## VARIETY

Eccentric millionaires, although individually less generous in their arts spending than the government, are more numerous and less uniform in their tastes. So art that is backed by millionaires instead of merely by the government is going to be more varied, less conformist, less completely dominated by the dominant artistic conventions and theories of the day.

Fine. That says why freelance arts subsidies from rich odd-balls are good. These are — as they've always been — an abundant fact, and no-one has argued, in my hearing, recently, that they ought to be forbidden. But what is so bad about the government *also* paying for art? Is not artistic variety best contrived with a mixed economy in arts spending?

## ACCOUNTABILITY

No. There is something inherently unsatisfactory about a government — especially a modern, democratic government — paying for art.

Which art does the government buy?

Millionaires don't have a problem choosing. They buy the art they like, and ignore the stuff they don't like.

And why pray, does Sir Moneybags Fatcat prefer this painter to that theatrical impressario, this museum to that start-up film company? Well, he just does. He likes the way this painter chappie uses colour, in a way that just, I don't know, somehow lingers in your memory. On the other hand, that film fellow reminded him of a sergeant he once encountered during the Korean War, who turned out to be a crook. So the painter gets the money, and the film company has to keep looking. Easy.

Sir Moneybags doesn't have to explain himself to anyone. He doesn't even have to explain himself *to himself* if he's not inclined to. It is enough that he's spending his own money, and that he can spend it how he likes and on whom he likes. If it turns out that the painter is a worthless fraud whose tiny handful of new paintings are so vile and sloppily done that not even Sir Moneybags can endure looking at them, let alone anybody else, and it was all money down the drain, well, that's how these things sometimes turn out, and anyway, it was only eighty thousand quid, so what the hell.

Compare and contrast, as they say in exam papers, the above arbitrary whimsicalities with the behaviour of a government arts bureaucracy, such as Britain's Arts Council. Bodies like the Arts Council *do* have to explain themselves. They have to be “accountable”. All of my opponents in my various arts debates of recent weeks have asserted vociferously that government arts spending should above all things be accountable.<sup>2</sup>

Accountability equals explicit, publicly stated rules. A state bureaucrat can't bankroll a painter with the taxpayer's money because he just *likes* the paintings, but can't say why. He can't persuade his colleagues to back his bets merely by saying that his favoured painter's paintings are *nice*, on account of their inherent, you know, niceness. He has to do better than that.

Suppose that, for some reason, his decision to spend government money on this artistic enterprise rather than that one is later subjected to public scrutiny by meddling politicians or inquisitive journalists, how will he justify his decision? In

accordance with what principles will he say he was acting? Why did he decide to do what he decided to do?

## CRIMINAL LAW VERSUS AESTHETIC THEORY

Some things you *can* systematise. Take the criminal law. The criminal law, when it is functioning properly, consists of fairly clear — and very low — standards of conduct beneath which we must not sink. We mustn't attack other people, steal their stuff, defraud them out of their stuff, kill them, rape them, drive drunkenly in their vicinity in such a way that their lives are threatened, and so on. Otherwise, we can do what we want. The government demands of us only that we rise above a basic line that separates adequate conduct from barbarity. (That, at any rate, is how things ought to be. For how reality differs from that description, see the rest of the output of the Libertarian Alliance.)

But while a short(ish) list of rules can separate the blatantly aggressive or predatory from the behaviourally tolerable, such a list is far less good at dividing the excellent from the merely adequate.

Such rules are particularly bad at pinning down artistic excellence. Rules will say what the music of Mozart and the music of a mediocre contemporary of Mozart have *in common*. They both grew up in a similar musical culture, learned their music from similar teachers and then performed to similar audiences. Both followed the same rules. But where are the rules to explain *what made Mozart's music different*? Critics *still* agonise about that. The ghost of Mozart himself probably couldn't tell you.

## THE HOLY GRAIL OF OBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION

Faced with the utterly impossible task of systematising that which cannot by its nature be systematised, government arts bureaucrats fall into paroxysms of costly indecision. They spend an ever increasing proportion of their budget on themselves, and on their impossible and consequently interminable deliberations. They spend fortunes on petrol and train tickets, roaming the country, viewing this, and that, and him, and her, this theatre company, that art gallery, desperately trying to put off the dread moment when they must decide that which can only be decided arbitrarily. They try to second and third guess themselves with committees, subcommittees, consultative bodies, regional review bodies, and unwieldy exercises in public or "consumer" participation. They cast about for the holy grail of objective justification for that which can only, in the end, be an objectively unjustifiable matter of taste.

They seize upon fashionable artistic theories, which seem to promise the magic of a clear boundary between good art and bad art. But when a great hoard of aspiring artists all master these rules and all yell for money, and a decision has to be made *between* the best of them and the rest of them, how is that to be done?

## TRANSACTION COSTS

In among all this publicly funded agonising, that central *je ne sais quoi* that the best artists manage to capture and communicate tends to get ignored, because that can't be talked about rationally.

Sir Moneybags Fatcat may not spot this indefinable something-or-other either. He too may be in thrall to some fa-

tuously artistic theory of the sort that government bureaucrats are so drawn to, and thus degenerate into a mere camp follower of the various government arts bureaucracies. But at least Sir Moneybags *might* see or hear that special something, shout "Wow!!!", and write out a check.

Rich art patrons, to summarise all of the above in the language of economics, are able to keep their transaction costs close to zero, while public sector arts spending transaction costs tend, by their nature, to spiral out of control.

## PICKING WINNERS

So, getting back to "Wow!!!", perhaps *future popularity* — even *future commercial success* — should be the guiding principle. Where the rich and powerful say Wow!!!, surely many of the masses will later join in with their own shouts of enthusiasm, and with their own — individually smaller but taken together far greater — arts spending. But if that's the rule being followed, doesn't the subsidising of art degenerate into mere second guessing of the very free market, the alleged inadequacy of which was the original excuse for government arts subsidies in the first place? Why drag in the government, so relentlessly bad at picking winners in other areas of human endeavour, to pick artistic winners?<sup>3</sup>

## DESPOTS, TYRANTS, PRINCES ... AND BIG BUSINESSES

The above account of government arts subsidies and of their unworkability and often absurdity also fits snugly with the fact — and it is a fact — that political despots and monarchs have often done rather well at bankrolling art. Think of the Italian Renaissance, and of all those German princes and bishops who paid for so much of the best seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth century classical music. Think of Wagner's patron, mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. But of course. Despots, tyrants and princes, by their nature, didn't have to be accountable either. Just like our millionaires, they could indulge their whims.

On the other hand, to the degree that a modern private sector institution also has to be "accountable", to shareholders for example, to that degree it also tends to become a timid follower of government sponsored arts fashions, rather than a cultural force in its own right.

## FOR ART READ LIFE

Here's a final thought. As I've already hinted in my comments about the criminal law, it isn't only art that the above observations apply to. Consider what a search-and-replace job, removing "art" and instead inserting "life", would do to this piece. Think about that.

## NOTES

1. See for instance my *Against Arts Subsidies*, Cultural Notes No. 2, Libertarian Alliance, 1983; and also my "Art in the market-place", *Guardian*, Wednesday December 4th 1996, p. 15. I have since debated arts subsidies twice with Arts Council opponents, before audiences good-humoured middle manager types of appealingly varied political and institutional complexion, assembled by something called Common Purpose, to whom I am grateful. I learned a lot, both about how to put my anti-government-subsidies case better on the radio and the TV, and about the arts and arts subsidies generally.
2. This point was made with particular force by Julia Peyton-Jones, Director of the Serpentine Gallery, with whom I debated arts subsidies on Radio 4's "The World Tonight", July 11th 1997. This piece began its life as me pondering what I should have said then, but failed to say.
3. See John Burton, *Why The State Should Stay Out of Culture: An Economist's View*, Cultural Notes No. 21, Libertarian Alliance, 1990.