GRESHAM

COLLEGE

Reproduction of this text, or any extract from it, must credit Gresham College

INDUSTRY AND THE ARTS

Three Lectures by

JOHN PICK

Emeritus Professor of Arts Management, City University
Sometime Professor of Rhetoric, Gresham College

7 April 1997
THE TYRANNY OF CHARITY: PATRONAGE, PHILANTHROPY AND STATE INTERVENTION

14 April 1997
THE ARTS INDUSTRY: CULTURE AND THE ‘REAL WORLD’

21 April 1997
BINGO AND THE NATIONAL LOTTERY: PRICES AND CULTURAL VALUES

GRESHAM COLLEGE

THE TYRANNY OF CHARITY

Sir Thomas Gresham was undoubtedly the dominant figure in English financial history of the sixteenth century. By his skilful manipulation of the exchange markets, by his restoration of the value of the pound in the newly revised currency, and by his close involvement with Queen Elizabeth's commercial and legislative reforms, Gresham may be said, more than any other person, to have been the creator of British capitalism.

It was that new Elizabethan capitalism that for the first time allowed troupes of musicians, actors and entertainers to move away from a reliance upon noble patronage. Groups of artists - later including Shakespeare's own company, the Chaberlain's Men - were now able to form themselves into Joint Stock companies and build their own capital from the investment of their new shareholders. It was the first step in a long stretch of British history, spanning several centuries, during which artists generally sustained themselves without state subsidy and with little private patronage - a long period during which all of the arts in Britain were not just commercially viable, but were frequently highly profitable.

One interesting sidelight on an extraordinary man is Thomas Gresham's painstaking interest in tutoring the young Queen Elizabeth in the ways of economics - most particularly the operation of the currency exchange markets. In 1554, justifiably proud of the fact that he had at last been able to discharge her father's debts (said to have been in excess of £40,000 a year), Gresham wrote a long and patient letter to Elizabeth explaining how this had been achieved. At the letter's conclusion he offers an interesting defence of a strong pound and the high exchange rate. I would like to quote a few sentences to you, not because the economic argument is unfamiliar, but because there is one word in it whose usage will strike you as archaic, if not perverse. The letter concludes:

> '....the exchange is the chiefest and richest thing only above all other, to restore your Majesty and your realm to fine gold and silver, and is the mean that makes all

> foreign commodities and your own commodities with all kinds of victuals good cheap, and likewise keeps your fine gold and silver within your realm....So consequently the higher the exchange riseth, the more shall your Majesty and your realm and commonwealth flourish, which thing is only kept up by art and God's providence.'

For us, now, the surprising word, surely, is 'art'. In our own time we still tend to regard the business of creating wealth (in comparison with the exalted business of spending it on state subsidies), as being rather sordid. Gresham makes no such distinction. For him skill in financial management _was_ 'art'.

His use of the term reminds us that, until the end of the nineteenth century 'art' usually meant skill. And that even up to the middle of our own century, we tended to believe that art could refer to _any kind of skill_, good or evil. This is an important point. Previous ages perfectly understood that an art could be nobly used, as when Milton in _L'Allegro_ (1632) speaks of the 'faithful herdsman's art' and that the term could describe a skill of great evil (Macbeth, you will recall, speaks of the witches' skills as their 'art'). Accordingly 'art' was often conceived of as a two-faced, false and duplicitous thing, like its cousin 'artifice'. Which is the way Ben Jonson uses the word in _Epicoene_ (1609):

> 'Give me a look, give me a face
> That makes simplicity a grace:
> Robes loosely flowing; hair as face;
> Such sweet neglect more taketh me,
> Than all the adulteries of art:
> They strike mine eyes, but not my heart.'

So, for a long period, 'art' referred to skills that could be merely cosmetic, were as likely to be riotous as soothing, and as likely to be disruptive as they were inspirational. Put another way, the arts were Dionysian as well as Apollonian. We shall return to that point at our conclusion.

*

One of the many legislative reforms of the Elizabethan age was the creation of charitable law, a framework in which the needy - those whom war, or social or personal upheaval, had left weak and wanting - might be legally assisted. There was a good deal of charitable activity in the seventeenth century, largely in the field of education, particularly in the setting up of the charity schools, but it was not until the eighteenth century that charities came to serve the needy over a wider range, and became such a prominent part of our national life, and giving to charity became a pressing duty for the privileged.

I want to begin by mentioning just one of these eighteenth century charities, a very famous one. Sir Thomas Coram's charity was formed in the early eighteenth century to support and manage the Foundling Hospital in London. It was set up to care for the hundreds of infants, most of them illegitimate and many dying, who were left abandoned in the streets and doorways of London. In foreign cities such children were often cared for by the municipal authorities or by the Catholic Church, but in Britain their well-being depended upon public spirited supporters from the private sector. It is noticeable that when, in 1737, George II gave his approval to some 375 Foundling Hospital Governers - giving us our first list of Britain's 'great and the good' - at least nine tenths of them were from the merchant classes.

These men gave generously to Coram's charity. Yet there was another interesting way in which the Foundling Hospital swelled its coffers. Among its strongest supporters was the great British artist William Hogarth. Hogarth, together with a group of fellow artists, including Francis Hayman and Joseph Highmore, took to exhibiting his latest works in the public rooms of the hospital. His aim was to attract the well-to-do, in the belief that though the rich might 'come to stare' at his paintings, they would then 'stay to give' to the hospital. It was a great financial success. So, as happens again and again during the following three hundred years, artists worked with the commercial grain, and used their art to support private sector charities.

*

For the eighteenth century saw the development in Britain of a substantial new middle class public culture. Choirs and orchestras seemed to spring up in every community in the land. Almost every town with more than a thousand inhabitants built a theatre (some, like Ludlow, built two). Nearly all small towns soon boasted bookshops, print shops and a library. Societies sprang up everywhere - many for the purposes of religious, scientific or political debate, others for the promotion of a particular art - painting, literature or music. These new societies grew up and (usually) flourished alongside older bucolic pleasures. which like the holidays, festivals and feasts were rooted in the church calender, or, like the traditional fairs, were just as firmly rooted in the secular one.

The newspapers of the eighteenth century well illustrate that astonishing story. Early newspaper advertisements were not, as we have later become accustomed to seeing, inducements to conspicuous consumption of cosmetics or household goods, but were largely for artists and artists' works. Dancing masters, musicians for hire, musical scores, new books, the services of portrait and landscape painters, the latest plays and operas, formed the staple diet of the eighteenth century advertising columns.

The arts did not survive by seeking sponsorship from commerce. Instead they themselves flourished as a highly profitable part of the commercial sector. Nor was there much in the way of Royal or state subsidy. Nevertheless it was a century in which the enterprising (but unsubsidised) artist could reasonably expect to grow rich. Alexander Pope made $4,000 profit from The Iliad (whereas only fifty years before Milton had made a meagre £10 profit from the entire sales of Paradise Lost). Even more spectacularly William Hogarth made £12,000 profit just from The Harlot's Progress. Many artists became rich men ; when Reynolds died, for example, he left more than £100,000.

Many of the great arts organisations simply ran themselves as ordinary commercial businesses, beginning in the customary way with very modest capital, ploughing back profits into the enterprise, and expanding to meet growing public demand. That was the way the publishing houses grew, and that was the way the touring companies grew and prospered. One of the most spectacular examples of the latter is probably Astley's great horseriding and circus show. It began in 1768 when, after completing his tour of military service, Sargeant Major Philip Astley was honourably discharged. He had worked in the colours as a horse breaker to his regiment and so, fittingly enough, he was given a white charger as a retirement gift. He and his wife - investing their combined capital, all of twelve pounds, in the enterprise - hit upon the idea of exhibiting the 'Little Military Learned Horse' in an open field in Lambeth in the Spring of 1768. It was a novelty, and an immediate success.

With the profit from that first season the Astleys were able to hire a more central site at the junction of Westminster Bridge Road and Stangate Street, and in the following year present a rather more ambitious programme. It grew rapidly, and by the 1780s Astley's Circus was being presented on the same site in a permanent roofed building, and was soon undertaking national and even international tours. By the time Dickens became an enthusiastic spectator Astley's was playing twice a day to audiences of more than 4,000, and its promoters were rich men. It successfully survived until 1893, and all without any form of private or public patronage.

Most touring companies ran on such straightforward commercial principles, but there was another means by which many of the receiving venues were built, and many local arts organisations formed. That was by means of public subscription - an important strand in the history of British arts management. We may perhaps find the term confusing, for modern 'subscription schemes' are somewhat different and more modest in scope than the complex schemes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At that time public subscriptions were raised to provide funds for building, annual subsciptions of various kinds were then levied to sustain cultural organisations, and special fund-raising events were promoted by separate subscription schemes. They had a widespread and varied use and continued until well into our lifetimes. A great number of the small town kine-variety theatres and indeed a majoroity of the pre-war repertory theatres in Britain were founded upon subscription schemes.

Again and again we read of towns in the eighteenth century setting up a local committee to launch a public subscription to build a complex of assembly rooms, a concert room, a library or a theatre in their town - then establishing a further subscription scheme which drew annual subscriptions from the intending audience. Hundreds, probably thousands of cultural societies and buildings throughout Britain were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries financed by public subscription schemes. Schemes as ambitious as the Royal Academy of Art were floated on public subscription, as were more modest enterprises such as the Yeovil Glee and Catch Club. The schemes were often imaginative, sometimes allowing people to subscribe by donating their work time rather than money, and sometimes allowing them to subscribe by making donations in kind. For example, the committee formed to set up a new Public Library in St. Martin's Lane in 1791 announced:

> 'Every subscriber to pay Two Guineas, to be laid out in Books, or to send in Books to the value of that sum, which will entitle him to have a share in the property of that library...'

The advantages of subscription to arts managers were obvious. Subscription brought its own social cachet. Subscribers were self-selecting, easy to communicate with and easy to gather together. They paid 'up front', and artists and audience were clearly contracted to meet within a specific realm of art, and hence were unlikely seriously to disappoint each other. Yet disadvantages were equally clear. Some artists felt themselves too restricted by the inevitable conventionalities of public taste, an attitude Garrick seemed to make clear in the epithet famously prepared for him by Dr Johnson, and which one always imagines the actor delivering through clenched teeth:

> 'The drama's laws the drama's patron's give,
> And we that live to please, must please to live.'

Another disadvantage, at least for the reforming conscience, lay in the fact that as subscribers to the more grandiose schemes were each sometimes asked to lay out a considerable sum of money, those arts activities tended to become more or less the exclusive preserve of the middle class. (Though not all arts activities were like that. We should always remember enterprises such as the coalman Thomas Britton's at the turn of the century. Admission to the weekly concerts held in the room above his London shop cost a mere penny.)

Yet our first illustration of the subscription method, the story of a north western music club, illustrates a danger. It shows the way in which an educated and appreciative audience could be built by subscription schemes, but also demonstrates the way in which, inevitably, such schemes excluded large sections of the population from participation in the arts.

The Manchester Gentlemen's Concert Society was formally created in 1770. Subscribers - many of whom were themselves musicians - at first held weekly concert meetings in the public rooms of a Manchester inn. They husbanded their resources well and within seven years they were able to build their own concert hall in Fountain Street. It seated 900 people. As the list of annual subscribers grew, their programme became both higher-quality and more exclusive. Fewer local and amateur artists were engaged to appear, and they now held only one major concert each month (six of these were choral, and six 'miscellaneous') - at which evening dress was now compulsory. (The society continued to hold other, private, concerts at which casual dress was acceptable.)

By 1804 the society had 500 subscribers, each paying 4 guineas annual subscription. By 1831 their burgeoning popularity led them into another move, this time to a new Concert Hall between Lower Morley Street and Peter Street. The new hall, which cost just over £7,500, was financed by yet another public subscription appeal - this time for 80 subscribers to give £100 each. Their new hall seated just over 1,000. As it was policy to leave a proportion of the hall for family and friends of subscribers, the management now felt it prudent to hold the number of annual subscribers at 600. Subscriptions had now risen to 5 guineas. Yet, in 1831, in Manchester, records show that in addition to the 600 members there was still a waiting list of more than 200 men eager to join this society.

There could hardly be a clearer illustration of both the merits and demerits of subscription. That it was a male middle class preserve is obvious enough; few, if any, Manchester millworkers could conceivably have afforded five guineas a year, let alone have paid for the full evening dress that remained compulsory. Yet without its carefully fostered exclusivity there would not have been the large, well educated and appreciative audience that Mendelsshon found when, in 1847, he conducted Elijah there in the Gentlemen's Concert Series.

A second, and less clear cut, illustration of the strengths and weaknesses of subscription schemes may be found in the turbulent story of Britain's first Royal opera House. The first London home of the Italian opera, known until 1714 as the Queen's theatre, was designed by Vanbrugh and occupied a then rather distant site in the Hay Market. Finance for its erection came from 'Thirty Persons of Quality' who each paid a subscription of £100. The new opera house opened in 1705, and was granted a Royal patent in 1707.

However, in spite of the fact that the habit of opera-going was soon established in London society, with habitues paying an annual subscription to attend any of the first six nights of each production, and public prices for pit and boxes at an astonishingly high half a guinea, the new opera house proprietors were quite soon in financial difficulties. The main cause (it will hardly surprise you to hear) lay in the very high fees demanded by visiting Italian singers.

So, in 1719, a further effort was made, again through public subscription, to shore up the opera's finances. This time the money did not go directly to the opera house proprietors but was instead given to an independant chartered body, the first Royal Academy of Music. That first RAM had no teaching function; its sole purpose was to guarantee the expenses of opera production at what was now the King's theatre.

The astonishing thing about that first Royal Academy of Music was to see how very like a modern Arts Council it was - excepting that all of its funds, some £15,600 pledged from 62 subscribers, came entirely from the private sector. It created an expert panel operating on the peer group principle, its officers regularly scrutinised the opera house's books, and most crucially it offered to its client what has since became known as 'deficit funding'. That is the Academy made good the agreed 'loss' at the end of each financial year.

That 'private arts council' believed that its available funds would subsidise the production costs of Italian opera for twenty one years. But, not for the last time in our history, the actual losses of the Royal opera house proved very much greater than anticipated. (Unsurprising perhaps in view of the fact that the Italian castrato Senesino had to be paid £2,000 a season, and the great Italian sopranos Cuzzoni and Faustina £1,500 each.) After only two seasons the Academy found that it had already paid out £4,524, nearly a third of its total capital, and three times more than they had budgeted for.

The Academy tried to raise further monies from yet more public subscription schemes and the Academy's chief officers, in a well publicised public gesture, even gave up their free boxes in the theatre so that they could be re-sold to the general public. Yet things continued to slide out of control. The coup de grace to Britain's first privatised arts council came in 1728 with the huge popular success of The Beggar's Opera; audiences deserted the Italian opera for the new ballad opera. The Royal Academy of Music was bankrupted.

We can discern the dim outlines of a pattern in this. Subscription schemes represented an important shift from patronage by the nobility, to a broader-based support from the middle class. With subscription schemes we have arrived at that point at which the artist is being supported by a section of the public at large, rather than by an individual patron. However that middle class support was frequently in its turn undermined by the broader commercial success of popular art works such as The Beggar's Opera, which drew support from a much broader band of society.

The battle between the broadly popular English ballard opera and the Italian opera, which enjoyed the support of the nobility and the middle class, gave rise to lively debate in contemporary eighteenth century journals, Defoe for example speaking out against the encroachment of the mass audience, and, predictably enough, Dr Johnson speaking in its favour. Certainly it is somewhere here that we begin to hear the first sounds of what later became an axiomatic twentieth century belief - amongst the metropolitan establishment at any rate - that because the innately superior arts, recognised as such by the truly discrimating, can never long survive the downward pressures of the open market, and because their natural affectionados cannot be expected to bear the great costs of supporting them, then it must be the duty of Royalty. or failing that, the state, to do so.

*

All that however was in the future. Except for such abberations as the first Royal opera house, the greatest part of the literary and performing arts were in the eighteenth and nineteenth century commercially contained and profitable. And for two hundred years and more all of the arts in Britain shared one other characteristic. As we have already seen in the case of William Hogarth and his work with Coram's Foundling Hospital, artists frequently played a leading role in supporting charities, national and local. But there is more to say than that. Our research leads us to state that the social imperative to support charities was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a prime motive for the creation of many arts organisations. This was perhaps particularly so in the musical world, though in a different way the obligation to assist charities was also a major factor in the lives of the touring circuit managers.

In almost any town and city in Britain any local tragedy, whether it arose from natural disaster or fire fires or industrial accident, would be followed immediately by a charitable appeal, spearheaded by a cast-iron money-raising certainty - an arts benefit, that is a concert, exhibition or drama performance. We can quickly illustrate this by taking examples from just one place, Leicester. In 1774 the first performance of William Boyce's Ode To Charity was given at St. Martin's church 'for the benefit of the Leicester Infirmary'. In 1778 the resident company at Leicester's Theatre gave a benefit performance for a business couple in the town who were in great need 'through misfortune, sickness and a large family...' In 1796 a grand benefit concert was held for the 'Lunatic Asylum of the Infirmary'. In 1797 another for 'the widows and orphans of those seamen who fell or were wounded in LORD DUNCAN'S late engagement with, and glorious victory over, the Dutch.' Later in the same year yet another benefit for 'the Committee for Voluntary Contributions for National Defence.'

So it goes on. You can tell the same story for every large town or city in Britain. Thus for several centuries most arts organisations did not receive money as charities. Rather, as successful commercial organisations, did they raise it for charities. And there seems little doubt that raising money for local charities was a duty frequently placed upon touring arts managers by government, church and local civic authorities, and equally little doubt that it was sometimes an irksome duty. Managers frequently found that they were given licenses to perform in a town explicitly on condition that they staged additional benefit performances for local 'good causes'.

My colleague Dr Anderton discovered in the course of his researches a fascinating record by one touring manager, Thomas Shaftoe Robertson, father of the well-known playwright. He, in the course of touring the East Midlandsat the end of the eighteenth century, felt that he had to give the complete receipts of one performance in each town that his company visited to 'the patriotic fund at LLoyds'. He lists the amounts, and although they are to our eyes quite small - from a performance at Lincoln £29.11.0d, from one at Spalding £29.12.6d. - we should remember he was playing in two or three different towns each week and those near-compulsory charitable donations certainly made the difference between a comfortable profit and just scraping by.

This great unwritten duty caused one famous manager memorably to curse 'the tyranny of charity!' This was Andrew Ducrow, the leading performer in Astley's great touring circus extravaganza. It was Ducrow's invariable habit to give benefit performances to local charities and in the Astley archives there are many letters thanking him for his generosity. (Some are slightly menacing, such as a letter from the Mayor of Leeds [dated 11.2.1836] which thanks Ducrow for his generous support of the local House of Recovery, adding that, as a result of his generosity, anybody Ducrow recommended would now be accommodated there free....). However Ducrow's tolerance was often stretched. When a benefit at Aberdeen yielded a poor house he felt he had to chip in an extra ten pounds from his own pocket. And he expressed some disquiet when the authorities in Northampton made him give benefit performances for the 'impoverished' families of apparently well-to-do local shoemakers. It may have seemed to him that, under the guise of charity, the arts were sometimes being forced to subsidise industry.

*

It is time to draw our conclusions together. I have emphasised that for a very long period much of the arts world in Britain sustained itself in normal commercial ways, helping to fill the charitable bowl rather than holding it out. That would have seemed to have been Keynes' intention when he created the post-war Arts Council. It is now clear that he saw the Council as a part of the post-war recovery programme rather than as a part of the welfare state. His expectation was that, after a short period of post war reconstruction, arts organisations would be able to operate commercially again. He certainly never gave voice to what later became one of the pervasive myths of state aid for the arts ; that state aid was stepping in to the breach left in funding by the withdrawal of the private patrons of the nobility.

Things have of course developed quite differently. What was seen as a temporary incapacity has developed into a permanent state, and we are now told that it is in the nature of things that the high arts, at any rate, cannot ever again sustain themselves commercially, that they must be supported by taxpayers' money, and that they are themselves natural objects of charity.

Yet questions must remain in our minds. We cannot help noticing that it is only a selected part of the arts world, a part which bears a striking similarity to those privileged arts activities which for a couple of hundred years sustained themselves on middle class subscriptions - which is now deemed to be deserving of the title 'art' and hence deserving of the taxpayers' charity. Meanwhile the popular arts - popular music, popular comedy, popular dance - which are not considered to be of sufficient value to be classed as high art and hence as charities in their own right - continue to be highly profitable. These much derided popular arts also continue the old practice of making considerable sums of money for genuine charities through such activities as 'Live Aid' and 'Red Nose Day'. In this contrast there seems to be what we might, charitably, call an interesting economic paradox.

Yet that economic paradox is not the only difficulty. We have, quite suddenly, and for the first time in our history, decided that financing arts organisations is just as much a charitable activity as feeding the poor or building a hospital. This has created another problem, less a paradox than a public deception.

You may recall I stressed at the beginning of this talk that in previous ages we have understood that the arts stand ready to be used in a variety of ways, with good or bad results. Indeed I suggested that the arts are classically seen as being predominately Apollonian or Dionysian, after the Greeks' habit, before each day of their great arts festivals, of worshipping both at the shrine of Apollo (the God of inspiration, nobility and purity) and at the shrine of Dionysus (the God of disorder, revolution and overthrow). For in truth most art involves both deities. Art, all kinds of art, surely stirs both Apollonian and Dionysian impulses within us, simultaneously inspiring us and inciting us to revolution. In a recent article John Tusa put it very well. The arts, he wrote, 'make order out of disorder and stir up the stagnant with movement.'

Yet in order to create what Lord Goodman called the 'benevolent deception' that the arts are a charity, we have had to deny that they are ever anything but inspirational, have had to deny that they are ever out of step with state-defined education. We have had to deny Dionysus, and hence much of the complexity of art. We have to pretend that all of the arts, all of the time, simply inspire us and permit us to think only noble thoughts, that they are, in a word, unrelentingly and for ever 'good causes'. Certainly that would seem to be what Mrs Bottomley believes. She explained what she considered to be the higher purposes of the arts at the Annual Dinner of the Royal

Academy of Arts last year (3.6.96):

> 'Music, drama, poetry, paintings, sculpture elevate the human spirit and enrich life....works of art in their widest sense show that life can hold more for us than the simple pressing need to make ends meet and survive from day to day. The arts are part of our heritage. They tell us where we came from and they signify the direction in which we are going....(etc.)'

In spite of the grandiose reference to 'works of art in their widest sense' this kind of pronouncement is painfully close (far closer I am sure than Mrs Bottomley would wish) to the sort of stuff we hear from tin pot dictatorships wherein the arts are used only for narrow propaganda purposes. Artists - Hogarth, Blake, Dickens, Stravinski, Lawrence, do not simply 'elevate' us - they surprise us, they shock us, they force us to question our lives, they infuriate us and they sometimes depress us...

Nor do they do anything as simple as to 'signify the direction in which we are going'. Although of course they may choose to warn us, as George Orwell warned us, of where we may end up if we don't fight off attempts to redefine the true meaning of noble concepts such as 'charity', and if we don't resist those who would proscribe and control the true purposes of so important a thing as art.

© John Pick