

**AMERICA'S DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD**

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# ARTS DIPLOMACY: THE NEGLECTED ASPECT OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

John Brown

“Why doesn’t your embassy sponsor more exhibits and concerts?”

“The French, the Germans, the Japanese, other countries: they organize artistic events—why don’t you have as many as they do?”

“Doesn’t your government have any interest in showing American art abroad?”

Such are the questions that host country nationals constantly peppered me with in my twenty-some years practicing public diplomacy during the Cold War and its aftermath in eastern Europe. This essay is an effort to answer their questions, which I am rephrasing in two ways: (1) Why does the U.S. government’s cultural diplomacy neglect the presentation of American art abroad, which I am calling, in this essay, “arts diplomacy”? (2) Is arts diplomacy important, and should the U.S. government support it?

But first, an attempt at definitions. By art, I mean the high arts: painting, music, literature, architecture. Whether certain works of high art should be considered universally accepted artistic achievements is, I would suggest, intrinsic to their even being considered “high art.” Of course, it is on occasion hard to distinguish between high and low art or “popular culture.” But most of us do sense a difference between, say, a classic American film (you name it) and a television commercial for beer, even if they are not as unconnected as some purists might think. Finally, when I write about cultural diplomacy, I am focusing on the U.S. government’s support of it, although I am aware that much “cultural diplomacy” can take place without government involvement.

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The title is adapted from Charles Frankel, *The Neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs: American Educational and Cultural Policy Abroad* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1966). I thank all the colleagues who were kind enough to read earlier versions of this paper and made many valuable suggestions.

## I.

While serving in communist and post-communist eastern Europe, where culture, as in some other parts of the world, is perhaps more important than politics, I quickly became aware that not only the intelligentsia, but people from all walks of life—mostly patrons in the open access United States Information Service (USIS) libraries that existed in this period—could not understand why the United States government, representing the most powerful and richest country in the world, did so little to promote its art overseas. To be sure, the users of our libraries were impressed by these facilities' bright, inviting, "American" atmosphere and their resources, especially current magazines. But the popularity of the libraries could not overcome the widespread view among many segments of the local populations that the United States, unlike other industrialized countries, did not make presentations of its artistic achievements a priority of its foreign relations. The USIS libraries were not quite, in the view of those who frequented them, "cultural centers." I was often asked by their patrons, for example, why the libraries, though they covered subjects like economics and politics, had such small collections of *belles lettres*, especially contemporary American literature. In Poland in the late 1980s—when I was serving in Krakow, by many Poles considered the country's cultural capital—the requests for such volumes were so frequent that I felt compelled to buy these books myself rather than expect (or even hope) the United States Information Agency (USIA), my home agency, to pouch them to the post, despite the existence of a regional librarian responsible for these matters. So, during rare motorcar trips to Berlin to purchase necessary consumer items (then considered capitalist luxuries in Poland), I would raid the fiction section, perhaps too indiscriminately, of the U.S. Army book store in that city and, safe in my diplomatic immunity, triumphantly bring the literary goodies across the Iron Curtain, with no questions asked by border guards.<sup>1</sup>

As my personal experience with USIA during the Cold War suggests, a neglected aspect of our cultural diplomacy—at least as our foreign interlocutors see it—has been the poverty, both quantitative and qualitative, of its artistic dimension.<sup>2</sup> This judgment is echoed today by the recent report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, *Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy* (2005), in which we learn the following from the committee's fact finding mission to Muscat, Cairo, and London:

A theme emerged from a luncheon in Muscat with members of the Omani Fine Arts Society, which we would hear throughout our travels: the need for more

exchanges of actors, animators, artists, directors, writers, state technicians, and Web designers. ...

At the National Cultural Center [in Cairo], a dazzling \$60 million complex of theaters, music halls, exhibition spaces, and offices built for the Egyptian people by the Japanese government, we saw the results of cultural diplomacy: 700 performances a year, attended by 300,000 people, each of whom, in some small corner of his or her mind, remembers the benefactors of the space in which they take such pleasure. ...

“You reach the people through art and culture,” said an official [from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo]. But our cultural presence in this country no longer exists. The French Cultural Ministry can give you a monthly calendar. We can’t do anything, because we don’t know when anything will happen.<sup>3</sup>

## II.

The neglect of arts diplomacy by the U.S. government reflects certain long-term traits of the American national character: it is puritanical, democratic, void of a national culture, yet it influences the world through its mass entertainment.<sup>4</sup> It is, of course, an oversimplification to reduce America’s national character to being “puritanical.” But it is undeniable, as the respected art historian Lloyd Goodrich noted, that in America, thanks to “a survival from our pioneer and puritan past,” art has been “considered a luxury and non-essential—an attitude that still persists.”<sup>5</sup> Hard work, not arts appreciation, is the Puritan’s priority, even if he did tolerate church music.<sup>6</sup>

A second element in our national character that makes our government historically disinclined towards arts diplomacy is the political—specifically, democratic—nature of American society, for which culture—specifically, the high arts—is far less important as a means of national self definition than in countries with older, more established cultures in continental Europe or Asia (France and China immediately come to mind).<sup>7</sup> To be sure, from its very first days the Republic included citizens who had an admiration for the finer things in life (John Adams and Thomas Jefferson among them), and by the end of the nineteenth century wealthy American industrialists were well on their way to accumulating great art collections.<sup>8</sup> But, despite this minority interest in the high arts, it was not artistic achievements or standards, but universal political ideals stressing the dignity of the common man, which made the United States what Americans consider it to be: “democratic,” not “cultured.” “We the people” see little need for a unique national high culture that should be promoted at home or abroad; as Sumner Welles, the under secretary of state during the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration, remarked, “The

concept of an 'official culture' is alien to us.”<sup>9</sup> We are *e pluribus unum*, as reading Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* suggests, by our sense of belonging to a community or communities, often local, ephemeral ones that do not have the range, permanence, or country-wide magnetism of a state-supported “national culture.” This is true today more than ever. “We live in a multicultural nation, and no scholar would think of writing as confidently about a single ‘American mind’ or ‘American culture’ as did the postwar historians,” Professor David S. Brown recently noted.<sup>10</sup>

But if we Americans, like the British, do not feel we have a national culture that should be promoted abroad as France did with its *mission civilisatrice* or Germany with its *Kultur*, we certainly have a superficially ever-changing popular culture that has seduced (some critics of cultural imperialism would say violated) the world since World War I: our B-films, pop music, fashion, best-sellers.<sup>11</sup> This culture—essentially entertainment or “relaxation” that provides biological rather than aesthetic satisfaction—is the product of the profit-seeking private sector, and its global expansion provides intellectual ammunition to American citizens, both inside and outside of government, who see no reason to promote arts diplomacy abroad at the taxpayer's expense. The planetary dominance of Hollywood—while increasingly under challenge—is a third long-term reason why the American government neglects arts diplomacy.<sup>12</sup>

### III.

In the twentieth century, the United States fought three great wars: World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. These global conflagrations were the first total wars in history, and involved entire populations. In their efforts to be victorious, governments turned to all possible means at their disposal to wage what they saw as a life-and-death struggle. Among the many tools they saw available was art.

This was especially true for World War II and the Cold War. Even before these wars began, totalitarian aggressor states made extensive use of art as propaganda.<sup>13</sup> Faced with this challenging situation, the United States government felt compelled—contrary to its national traditions—to present and promote American art abroad in order to counteract its enemies' aesthetic offensive. This use of arts diplomacy can be divided into two periods.<sup>14</sup> The first is pre- and post-World War II, 1938–1947; and the second is the Cold War, 1948–1991. While, during these periods, arts diplomacy played a role in U.S. foreign policy, Washington continued to neglect it for two main reasons: first, many in the government and among the public at large continued to view the promotion of high art abroad as useless, if not suspicious; and, second,

even when arts diplomacy was reluctantly used, it was only a small, if not negligible, part of America's overall international efforts.

By the late 1930s, the Roosevelt Administration, eager to establish a "Good Neighbor" relationship with Latin America, had become concerned with the growing impact of the Axis powers' cultural propaganda south of the border. It was in direct response to this perceived threat, rather than from a tradition-defined desire to engage the government in arts promotion abroad, that the State Department's Division of Cultural Relations was established in 1938, making the United States "the last major power to enter formally the field of cultural diplomacy."<sup>15</sup> The Departmental Order of July 28 of that year establishing the division noted that among its goals was "cooperation in the field of music, art, literature and other intellectual and cultural attainments."<sup>16</sup> But, as the historian Frank Ninkovich points out, "[w]ith an extremely small staff, and with congressional appropriations providing for operations only in Latin America, the new division was given little to do ... the State Department's plans for artistic promotion, largely because of budgetary priorities, provided for little more than the encouragement of private initiatives."<sup>17</sup> It was not until 1941 that the division, thanks to a bureaucratic arrangement with the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), created in July 1940, helped organize exhibits in Latin America. The OIAA was led by the activist Nelson Rockefeller, a wealthy art patron whose eagerness to get things done in the artistic field right away contrasted with the cautious, scholarly bureaucrats in the State Department who pursued "mutual understanding" through academic exchanges, in their view the longer term the better.

Thanks to Rocky's drive and determination, the OIAA exhibits drew some 200,000 people, but among their 300 paintings were some condemned by members of Congress as "outrageous" and "freakish" because of their nonrepresentational nature—reactions which, needless to say, did not help the cause of displaying American art abroad under government sponsorship.<sup>18</sup>

As the war progressed, the Division of Cultural Relations—and, to a lesser extent, the OIAA, which was more active in organizing artistic events until its arts and music programs were turned over to the Department of State in 1943—was greatly overshadowed by the Office of War Information (OWI), founded in 1942.<sup>19</sup> Among the many activities in OWI's portfolio were fast media operations such as the Voice of America. While it did not use the word "propaganda" as an official description of its work, the OWI was in fact the far more benign American version of Goebbels's infamous Ministry of Propaganda. The use of high culture as a

tool of influence was not among OWI's priorities, although it established libraries abroad under the USIS logo that stayed open after the war (and that the United States Information Agency, established in 1953, took over during the Cold War). The OWI was abolished in 1945.

The Division of Cultural Relations, under various designations and organizational schemes, survived for some thirty years after World War II in a minor, almost invisible role at the State Department. In 1978, having acquired the perhaps unfair reputation of being the last refuge for Foreign Service officers who could not quite make it in the political or economic career paths at the State Department, it was consolidated into the United States Information Agency, after a brief moment of prominence during the artistically inclined Kennedy Administration, when it was renamed the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Throughout its *petite histoire*, the Cultural Division, or CU as it came to be known, justified its existence primarily through its premier educational exchange, the prestigious Fulbright Program (established almost single-handedly in 1946 by the internationalist Senator from Arkansas of that name, a former Rhodes scholar, as Public Law 79-584). CU was at heart an education-focused facilitator of exchanges, and the word "culture" (in the sense of high art) to characterize it was a misnomer, although during the Cold War its responsibilities included some artistic presentations such as jazz concerts. To its credit, it always sought to protect its important educational programs, which brought thousands of distinguished foreigners to the United States, from being turned into base propaganda. But as a vehicle for displaying American art abroad it was enormously limited. Art simply did not "educate" enough for it to be CU's true vocation.<sup>20</sup>

In the postwar period, the State Department's limitations in handling arts programs overseas is best illustrated by the cultural fiasco known as *Advancing American Art*, an exhibit that was the brainchild of William Benton, assistant secretary of state for public affairs in the late 1940s.<sup>21</sup> Benton, a Yale-educated advertising man and art collector (a "culture mulcher," in the words of Drew Pearson),<sup>22</sup> hoped that the display of American art abroad would offset the foreign perception that Americans are "a materialistic, money-mad race without interest in art and without appreciation of artists and music."<sup>23</sup> As part of Benton's cultural initiative, in 1946 the State Department bought, at the cost of \$49,000, seventy-nine paintings with the intention of displaying them abroad. As Louis Menand points out, "very few of the paintings were abstract, but most were identifiably modern: naturalist, expressionist, painterly. The State Department wanted the world to know that the United States was not

just a nation of cars, chewing gum, and Hollywood movies.”<sup>24</sup> Among the artists represented were Philip Evergood, Arthur Dove, Stuart Davis, Max Weber, John Marin, Ben Shahn, and Marsden Hartley.

The collection was well received in Europe (the last stop was Czechoslovakia), but when the American media and the Congress got hold of what it was actually displaying, all hell broke loose back in the USA. The show had already been criticized by the conservative American Artists Professional League (in a communication to the State Department) as “strongly marked with the radicalism of the new trends in American art” and “not indigenous to our soil.”<sup>25</sup> Following a February 1947 *Look* Magazine article reproducing some of the exhibit’s items under the headline “Your Money Bought These Pictures,” the Hearst press attacked the exhibit mercilessly, with other media loudly and merrily joining along.<sup>26</sup>

President Truman took part in the public uproar, noting that *Look* magazine had shown examples of (in his term) “ham-and-eggs art.”<sup>27</sup> In a letter to Secretary of State George C. Marshall, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee wrote that “the paintings are a travesty upon art,” adding that “[t]hey were evidently gotten up by people whose object was apparently to, (1) To make the United States appear ridiculous in the eyes of foreign countries, and to (2) Establish ill-will towards the United States.”<sup>28</sup> Truman, an amateur landscape painter, informed Benton, in a note that became public, that modern art was “merely the vaporings of half-baked lazy people.”<sup>29</sup> Congressional inquiries into the artists’ background ensued, and the names of nearly one third of the forty-seven artists were found to be in the files of the House Un-American Activities Committee, with three of them reportedly Communist Party members. Faced with this scandal, Secretary Marshall instructed that the exhibit be called back and its contents were sold as war surplus. As Louis Menand notes, “Marshall announced that no taxpayer money would be spent on modern art again, and the State Department issued a directive that no artist suspected of being a Communist or fellow-traveler could be exhibited at government expense.”<sup>30</sup>

Not long after the *Advancing American Art opera buffa*, and as the Cold War was heating up with the Soviet propaganda offensive in Europe, Congress—now greatly concerned about the perils of communism—passed the U.S. Information and Educational Exchanges Act (1948), which, in the words of Frank Ninkovich, has become the “basic charter” for these activities since.<sup>31</sup> Given the fiasco with the *Advancing American Art* exhibit, it is not surprising that “the word ‘cultural’—an unappealing idea to the House—was dropped from its title, and the word ‘educational’ was substituted in its place.”<sup>32</sup> As was the case with the Fulbright legislation

of 1946, the Smith-Mundt Act—heavily weighed toward information programs and security—hardly mentions “cultural” and “the arts.”

#### IV.

With this kind of meager legal authority for the promotion of American high art abroad, the U.S. government became haphazardly and often reluctantly involved, as the Cold War unfolded in its zigzag fashion, in promoting American high culture overseas, largely in reaction to what it perceived as Soviet cultural attacks showcasing the USSR's artistic achievements, mostly in classical ballet and music. “Cultural,” however, did not entirely vanish from the vocabulary of American foreign policy. In 1958, the U.S. government signed a “cultural” agreement with the USSR, but the agreement focused on educational exchanges.<sup>33</sup> In 1961, during the administration of John F. Kennedy (a White House interest in high culture is what helps set JFK's tenure apart from other presidencies in American history), an act consolidating various exchanges, the Fulbright-Hays Act (Public Law 87-256), was passed by Congress under the title of the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchanges Act.<sup>34</sup> But this occasional resurfacing of the “cultural” label during various periods of the Cold War did not mean that the U.S. government had overcome its traditional discomfort with using the arts as a tool of foreign policy. Indeed, Kennedy's appointee to the new post of assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, Philip H. Coombs, had this to say about his uneasiness regarding “cultural” as a way to describe his operations:

It is, for one, even more ambiguous in English than the word “educational,” meaning for some the fine and performing arts alone; and meaning for others, among them the sociologists, all the folkways, techniques and values of a given society. Secondly, the term “cultural relations” has long been used to connote an aspect of diplomacy practiced by European nations which is considerably narrower in outlook than the educational component ... and I should like to differentiate the two. Finally, there is the unhappy fact that in our society this excellent word “culture” is in some quarters its own worst enemy, as anyone will agree who has ever sought funds for “cultural affairs” from a congressional appropriations committee. There are still those who find it a less than manly word and deride the notion that anything wearing the label could possibly have important bearing on the serious business of foreign policy. (Even the British have their troubles with it. The London *Times* in 1934 congratulated the founders of the British Council for avoiding “culture” in its title. It was a word, the *Times* observed, which “comes clumsily and shyly off the Englishman's tongue.”)<sup>35</sup>

Despite the State Department's reservations about culture as a tool of foreign policy, a small minority of officials, together with their allies in the private sector, were of the strong opinion that high American art could play an important role in foreign policy, and particularly in winning the hearts and minds of the intelligentsia in Cold War Europe. Among these true believers, as recent studies have pointed out, were cultivated elitist agents in the Central Intelligence Agency, who for some fifteen years from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s covertly used agency funds to promote American high culture abroad supposedly without the Congress knowing about it.<sup>36</sup> This considerable CIA support was not limited to the display of avant-garde exhibitions with paintings by groundbreaking artists like Jackson Pollock, but to music and literature as well. The CIA's secretly-underwritten high-brow operations were facilitated in large part by the agency's front organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, many of whose distinguished members, intellectuals from Western Europe and the United States, later claimed they had no idea their freedom-loving organization was subsidized by art-admiring agents well connected with eastern establishment types like Nelson Rockefeller. The credo of these culture vultures is perhaps best summarized by the Cold War guru George Kennan, who noted that "[t]his country has no Ministry of Culture, and the CIA was obliged to do what it could to try to fill this gap. It should be praised for having done so."<sup>37</sup> But the CIA's game—it is not unfair to call it that—was up by 1967, when its covertly funded arts diplomacy was disclosed by the media and then liquidated by Congress, thereby leading to the continuing neglect of cultural diplomacy.

While important, the role of the CIA in arts diplomacy should not, however, be unduly emphasized. By the time of the Eisenhower Administration, the government was involved in the overt support of artistic presentations abroad, again not because it was continuing a tradition of government involvement in the arts that never really existed, but because it felt it had to respond to the Soviets at every level of the Cold War struggle. But, taken as a whole, these activities were a limited, if not miniscule, percentage of the U.S. government's far more extensive hearts-and-minds overseas campaign.<sup>38</sup> On several occasions, they led to controversy, confirming the assumption of cautious foreign-affairs bureaucrats that arts diplomacy was a hot potato that was far more trouble than it was worth. Take, as an example, the art exhibition that was part of the biggest and most important U.S. government-organized fairs during the Cold War, the 400,000 square-foot American National Exhibition that opened in Moscow's Sokolniki Park in the summer of 1959, a blockbuster that displayed everything from a typical American kitchen to a RAMAC

“electronic brain” computer that was contributed by IBM. In the words of historian Walter Hixson:

... the proposed art exhibition at Sokolniki aroused a storm of controversy. The selection of paintings to be exhibited, chosen by a committee of distinguished artists and museum directors, included examples of modern art, which many Americans found objectionable and unrepresentative of popular tastes ... Various officials, including Nixon [whose “kitchen debate” with Khrushchev at the fair made history] suggested withdrawing the art exhibit entirely from the Moscow fair.<sup>39</sup>

A solution to the artistic dilemma was finally found: the number of items to be displayed was increased with (in the words of a U.S. government official) “some good examples of nineteenth century art.”<sup>40</sup> “The additional paintings,” Hixson points out, “helped mollify critics on the eve of the opening of the exhibition.”<sup>41</sup>

As for the jazz concerts that the State Department’s CU organized, they too faced difficulties that limited their quantity, as Penny M. Von Eschen suggests in her *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*.<sup>42</sup> This artistic program was criticized by Congress throughout its existence, and the State Department “often tried to shield the integrationist agenda of the tours—their core diplomatic message—from conservative audiences at home.”<sup>43</sup> The musicians themselves realized the irony of representing a country that discriminated against blacks at home: “Forget Moscow,” said Louis Armstrong. “When do we play in New Orleans?”<sup>44</sup> State Department officials overseas, meanwhile, were often ill at ease with the *bons vivants*, often uncontrollable performers. Thomas W. Simons, who went on to be a high official in the State Department, had as one of his first assignments traveling as an escort officer with the Duke Ellington tour of the Middle East in 1963; he concluded the following about the performance of the free-wheeling musicians:

Band members continued to feel that they would rather play for the “people,” for the men in the streets who clustered around tea-shop radios. More rationally, they believed that the lower classes, even if unimportant politically, were more worthy of exposure to good Western music than the prestige audiences for whom they played.<sup>45</sup>

Von Eschen notes that “Simons’ ultimate assessment of the tour—that groups of this size and trips of this length were inefficient in reaching

target audiences and achieving desired effects—seems to have been taken seriously, since there would be a hiatus in such tours.”<sup>46</sup>

Simons’ “we’re not in the culture business” attitude was (and still is) shared by many in government, including members of the former United States Information Agency, which was created in the Eisenhower Administration as an anti-Soviet propaganda/information machine, not as a promoter of American arts abroad. USIA, though it managed overseas American libraries (most of them shut down in the 1990s) and organized some exhibits and art-related events throughout its forty-six years of often-controversial existence, remained basically true to its original, very nonartistic mission, as adopted by the President and the National Security Council in October 1953: “The purpose of the U.S. Information Agency shall be to submit to peoples of other nations by means of communications techniques that the objectives and policies of the United States are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace.”<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps USIA’s greatest contribution to promoting American art abroad—almost by accident—were the multi-decade jazz programs of Willis Conover over the Voice of America (which was part of the agency during the Cold War). Willis, while loved and admired abroad, remained a lowly independent contractor throughout his forty years of association with VOA (1955–1996), an odd man out and subject to the “grumblings in Congress about wasting taxpayers’ money by broadcasting frivolous music” who “had his share of run-ins with Voice of America officials over the years but never backed down.”<sup>48</sup> At home, he was virtually unknown, due to the Smith-Mundt Act, which bans the dissemination of U.S. government–supported information products (including radio broadcasts) inside the United States.

As the twentieth century progressed, and tensions with the USSR declined, USIA’s work was increasingly described as “public diplomacy,” a term coined in the mid-1960s by Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Diplomacy as an acceptable way of describing propaganda.<sup>49</sup> “Public diplomacy” is seen today as having educational and cultural components, and to some, “cultural diplomacy” is even a subset of “public diplomacy.” In the case of USIA, however, its most important, “bottom line” function was always propaganda, an activity that was prioritized during the Reagan years, when Charles Z. Wick—the president’s close Hollywood acquaintance—was director for eight years, persuading Congress to give his agency money for fast media projects like WorldNet television and anti-Soviet disinformation initiatives (as well as educational exchanges).<sup>50</sup> To be sure, funding was obtained for cultural projects as well, such as the

Artistic Ambassador program, but Wick's focus was on creating a movie image of America with Ronald Reagan as the Leader of the Free World fighting the Evil Empire. High art had little to do with promoting the Gipper, the star of so many B-movies.

The end of the Cold War—a propaganda struggle par excellence, in the eyes of Washington power brokers—meant the end of USIA. Much to the trepidation of its employees, who did not want to lose their agency's relative bureaucratic independence, it was consolidated into the State Department late in the Clinton Administration. In what can best be described as a funeral oration, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright diplomatically called the USIA (which she helped abolish) “the most effective anti-propaganda institution on the face of the earth.”<sup>51</sup> The advancement of American art did play a small role in USIA's “anti-propaganda” activities, but, all things considered, it was indeed a minor one.<sup>52</sup>

This historical judgment finds some confirmation in a statement by a leading expert in American studies, the Austrian scholar Reinhold Wagnleitner, who writes that in the Cold War,

all of [the] activities in the area of information vigorously promoted the image of a powerful America but failed to achieve what from the point of view of the European elites should have been one of the central tasks of U.S. cultural diplomacy: to convince the former enemies (and, to be sure, also the Allies) that the United States had become a nation with a flourishing “serious” culture.<sup>53</sup>

## V.

Given the historical neglect of arts diplomacy—even during the Cold War with its near total mobilization of American resources to combat communism—it is not surprising to read the following from the above-cited report from the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, *Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy*:

With the end of the Cold War and the subsequent abolishment of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in 1999, official American cultural presence abroad was significantly reduced; cultural programming was slashed even before the dispersal of USIA personnel through the U.S. Department of State (DOS) destroyed the institutional memory necessary for the maintenance of cultural ties. What remains is an ad hoc congeries of programs, administered largely though the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) at DOS, with a reduced budget and staff, a diminished position in the hierarchy of diplomatic values, and a vision of cultural diplomacy incommensurate with American ideals and foreign policy objectives.<sup>54</sup>

Few diplomats have better described the post-USIA paucity of U.S. government arts-related programs than Cynthia Schneider, a Georgetown University art historian who was ambassador to The Netherlands during the Clinton Administration. In 2000, she was a prominent participant in a high-powered White House conference on cultural diplomacy that, she admits, brought much highfalutin talk but no results: “The conference did not stem the tide of reduced funding, nor did it validate cultural diplomacy within the State Department ethos.”<sup>55</sup> Ambassador Schneider writes the following about her field experience:

Anecdotal evidence further attests to the gradual diminution in importance of cultural programs and those who promoted them. When I first spoke with my Public Affairs officer in August 1998, soon after I assumed the position of US Ambassador to the Netherlands, she proudly told me, “We (the public affairs section) don’t do culture, we do policy.” When I explained that with 150 other people doing policy, I wanted the public affairs division to concentrate on cultural diplomacy, she looked disappointed and confused. Her rejection of cultural diplomacy as a viable undertaking reflected the toll taken by years of demands for quantifiable results, with no compensatory appreciation for the longterm value added of increased understanding and relationship building.<sup>56</sup>

The most recent report on public diplomacy, the Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) very critical “U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Efforts Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Persistent Challenges,” ignores the absence of the arts in public diplomacy programs.<sup>57</sup> This omission, by the very critics of current public diplomacy, reflects a defining characteristic of public diplomacy itself: its neglect of arts diplomacy. The testimony is silent about the few new (and low impact) cultural programs that have been undertaken in recent years, such as CultureConnect and the Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation. It does, almost as an afterthought, mention the “American Corners” established in this new century, which Ambassador Schneider describes as “pockets of America placed inside local libraries and cultural institutions [that] offer access to the Internet, plus videos, CDs, and books about the U.S.”<sup>58</sup> While these Corners (cheap substitutes for the memorable USIS centers shut down after the Cold War) can play a valuable role, I know from my own experience as a Cultural Affairs officer in Russia—where the Corners program began—that they often disappointed people by their limited, modest scale and available resources, including ones pertaining to high art. Not always directly expressed, but nevertheless often made clear by tactful insinuation, the reaction of many Russians to the Corners was: Is that all America has to offer?

**VI.**

So why is America's neglected arts diplomacy important?<sup>59</sup> I answer this question with the assumption that arts diplomacy can do only so much, and that it will not automatically win the world over to the United States. It can provide no quick fixes for America's "image" abroad, nor will it suddenly move the needle of global public opinion in favor of the United States, as if humankind were a sort of Frankenstein that will suddenly come to life if sufficiently invigorated by strong shocks of U.S.-provided cultural electricity. Arts diplomacy will not instantly lead foreign consumers to drink Diet Coke (especially where local populations are starving) or eat additional pounds of American frozen chicken in countries with great culinary traditions. Nor is it self-evident (Platonic assumption of well-meaning culture vultures notwithstanding) that art (when "ethically" appropriate for the mind) will necessarily lead to virtue abroad as we Americans see it—for example, to less anti-Americanism in countries that "hate us."<sup>60</sup> Finally, it would be hard to justify government-supported arts diplomacy as a great American tradition (which it was not and still is not) or by its past "triumphs" in the Cold War (which were few and far between).

So I approach the question of justifying the need for arts diplomacy modestly, with the full realization that for many in America it is a superfluous enterprise, and that for the few who do support it, it is (in the words of Frank Ninkovich apropos of public diplomacy as a whole) essentially an "act of faith."<sup>61</sup> I am also aware my justifications may disappoint those who, in their understandable and well-intentioned eagerness to obtain congressional funding for arts diplomacy, make claims about it that are not, in my view, always logically or historically sustainable.

Having said that, three reasons stand out for the U.S. government to engage in arts diplomacy:

**Arts diplomacy is a response to the desires of overseas publics.** America, for all its faults (and nobody's perfect) continues to fascinate the world. There is a strong desire overseas to know more about our country, even in this age of the Internet and instant communications. Foreign audiences, proud in many cases of their own high culture, expect the U.S. government (not just the American private sector) to expose them to American cultural achievements. Arts diplomacy, when subtly but visibly sponsored by the U.S. government and its embassies abroad, is an answer to this desire: it is a gentle (yet official) gesture showing that we, through our government, are interested in others, that we want to share our lasting artistic accomplishments with the rest of our small planet. This may sound mushy to some, but as a foreign policy tool, arts diplomacy is

certainly cheaper—and far better for the American image—than bombing Baghdad.

**Arts diplomacy provides a context for American culture.** Arts diplomacy, when not turned into a base propaganda tool, suggests that American culture is of infinite variety. Without necessarily downgrading American popular culture, arts diplomacy demonstrates that it is only one part of that great ongoing experiment, the United States. While it may not have a “message,” as information programs do, or “educational goals,” as exchanges do, arts diplomacy helps present America as a complex and multidimensional country that cannot be reduced to slogans or simplifications.<sup>62</sup> In a word, it shows that America is human.

**Finally, arts diplomacy provides audiences with unique and memorable experiences.** It is all but impossible to describe the aesthetic experience, which is a highly individual matter. But for many, a work of art is a form of revelation, of illumination. Art creates powerful impressions that are often remembered forever. At the very least, arts diplomacy can make people abroad associate America with the kind of unique moments that make our lives worth living.<sup>63</sup>

## NOTES

1. No altruist and no Andrew Carnegie, I was to be eventually reimbursed for these expenses from the Embassy Warsaw's General Operating Expenses (GOE), money that could be used prior to approval from headquarters in Washington. I am in eternal gratitude to Warsaw's executive officer for not questioning the validity of these purchases.
2. For a theoretical discussion of the role of culture in international relations, see Frank Ninkovich, “Culture, Power and Civilization: The Place of Culture in the Study of International Relations,” in Robert David Johnson, ed., *On Cultural Ground: Essays in International History* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1994), 1-22. A recent must-read on American cultural diplomacy is Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005). Michael L. Krenn's recently published *Fall-out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), which I obtained after the completion of this paper, deals with many (and more) of its themes in fascinating detail and subtle historical perspective.
3. State Department Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, *Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy*, report to the U.S. Department of State, September 2005, 12-13. Available at [www.publicdiplomacywatch.com/091505Cultural-Diplomacy-Report.pdf](http://www.publicdiplomacywatch.com/091505Cultural-Diplomacy-Report.pdf).

4. Since antiquity, of course, there has existed a tension between the government and art that has led the state to neglect—or repress—art (yet not without, on occasion, exploiting it). See the insightful observations by Alexander Nehamas, “Culture, Art and Poetry in The Republic” (Columbia College coursewide lecture, Fall 1999), [www.college.columbia.edu/core/lectures/fall1999/index.php](http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/lectures/fall1999/index.php).
5. Lloyd Goodrich, “The Federal Government and Art,” *Magazine of Art* 41 (October 1948): 236. Goodrich made this observation nearly sixty years ago, but it is still applicable today. Indeed, America’s methodical, frenetic pursuit of entertainment today reveals a puritanical approach to having a good, relaxing time. In some ways, Las Vegas is the twenty-first century version of John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill.” Contrast this puritan mindset with the words Sean O’Casey, the Irish playwright: “I’d rather be inspired by idleness than bullied by ‘busyness,’” cited in Warren Hoge, “Money, Jobs, Big Cars: How’s an Irishman to Cope?” *New York Times*, July 17, 2000, [www.irishside.com/tis/content/nyt/124.htm](http://www.irishside.com/tis/content/nyt/124.htm).
6. The British scholar D. W. Brogan writes: “I am aware that English (and American) Puritans had a high and competent sense of the place of music in divine worship. Nevertheless, the new environment was not that provided by Rome for Palestrina or by Leipzig for Bach.” D. W. Brogan, *America in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960), 90.
7. Brogan, 88. For a stimulating discussion of America’s democratic culture, see Martha Bayles, “Anti-Snobs and Anti-Artists: Toward a Democratic Aesthetic,” *Society* 41 (March-April 2004): 34-42.
8. *The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts*, [www.arts.gov/pub/NEAChronWeb.pdf](http://www.arts.gov/pub/NEAChronWeb.pdf), 6. This document, ironically enough, is also a perhaps unintended illustration of the lack of federal support for the arts throughout American history.
9. Cited in Frank Ninkovich, “The Currents of Cultural Diplomacy: Art and the State Department, 1938-1947,” *Diplomatic History* 1 (Summer 1977): 217.
10. David S. Brown, “A Historian Who Saw the Future,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2006. [www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-op-brown14may14,1,4657998.story?coll=la-news-comment](http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-op-brown14may14,1,4657998.story?coll=la-news-comment).
11. See Anthony Parsons, “‘Vultures and Philistines’: British Attitudes to Culture and Cultural Diplomacy,” *International Affairs* (Winter 1984-1985): 1-8. For a brief survey of how governments have used culture in foreign policy, see the dated but still useful Ruth Emily McMurry and Muna Lee, *The Cultural Approach* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947).
12. John Brown, “Is the U.S. High Noon Over? Reflections on the Declining Global Influence of American Popular Culture,” *English* (Journal for Russian Teachers of English) 7, February 16-22, 2004): 28-29, <http://archive.1september.ru/eng/2004/07/3.htm>. Note that Krenn suggests a sense of American cultural inferiority contributed to America’s reluctance to promote its arts abroad (pp. 16 and 79).

13. Igor Golomshtok, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People's Republic of China* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990).
14. Note that George Creel, the head of the U.S.'s first propaganda agency, the Committee for Public Information (CPI) in World War I, recalled in his memoirs that the CPI's "approach to the neutral countries was simple and direct. Instead of prattling about 'cultural relations' ... we went straight to the governments with a plain statement of purpose ... not the coercion of public opinion, but its information." George Creel, *Recollections of Fifty Crowded Years* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1947), 169-170. Some WWI U.S. propaganda posters, however, were not void of artistic qualities.
15. Ninkovich, "Currents of Cultural Diplomacy," 216.
16. McMurry and Lee, 208.
17. Ninkovich, "Currents of Cultural Diplomacy," 216, 218.
18. *Ibid.*, 218-219.
19. Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).
20. Arndt, *op. cit.*, is an excellent, and sympathetic, source on CU's history.
21. A detailed treatment of this controversial exhibit is found in Ninkovich, 227-35, as well as in Krenn, 9-49.
22. Ninkovich, "Currents of Cultural Diplomacy," 232.
23. Taylor D. Littleton and Maltby Sykes, *Advancing American Art: Painting, Politics, and Cultural Confrontation at Mid-century* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 32.
24. Louis Menand, "Unpopular Front: American Art and the Cold War," *New Yorker*, October 17, 2005, [www.newyorker.com/critics/content/articles/051017crat\\_at-large](http://www.newyorker.com/critics/content/articles/051017crat_at-large).
25. Menand, n.p.
26. Ninkovich, "Currents of Cultural Diplomacy," 227.
27. Ninkovich, "Currents of Cultural Diplomacy," 229.
28. Menand.
29. Ninkovich, "Currents of Cultural Diplomacy," 229.
30. Menand.
31. Frank Ninkovich, *U.S. Information Policy and Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1966). This book is a very useful overview, especially for pedagogical purposes.
32. Sydney Hyman, *The Lives of William Benton* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 383.
33. Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange & the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 14-20. Interestingly, a major Cold War study, Frederick C. Barghoorn's *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

- Press, 1960), notes that "it is doubtful if one could as yet very meaningfully speak of an American cultural diplomacy," 11. Cultural diplomacy as a weapon used by "the other side" rather than by the U.S. is also suggested by the title and content of Herbert Passin's book, *China's Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Praeger, 1963).
34. Kennedy, at the dedication of a new library at Amherst: "I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist." Cited in *The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts*, [www.arts.gov/pub/NEAChronWeb.pdf](http://www.arts.gov/pub/NEAChronWeb.pdf).
  35. Philip H. Coombs, *The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy: Educational and Foreign Affairs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 18.
  36. For coverage of some of the literature, see John Brown, "Three Schools of Thought on Culture and Foreign Policy During the Cold War," *Place Branding: A Quarterly Review of Branding, Marketing and Public Diplomacy for National, Regional and Civic Development* 1 (November 2005): 420-423; also at [http://usepublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/johnbrown\\_detail/july\\_4\\_7\\_2005](http://usepublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/johnbrown_detail/july_4_7_2005).
  37. Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999), 408.
  38. See, as a point of reference, Kenneth A. Osgood, "Hearts and Minds: The Unconventional Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4 (Spring 2002): 85-107.
  39. Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain. Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 172. See also Krenn, 155-73.
  40. Hixson, 173. The official was the USIA Director George V. Allen.
  41. *Ibid.*
  42. Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).
  43. Von Eschen, 41.
  44. *Ibid.*, 83.
  45. *Ibid.*, 137-38.
  46. *Ibid.*, 138.
  47. Appendix II: Mission of the United States Information Agency (Adopted by the President and the NSC, October 22, 1953), in Louis W. Roth, "Public Diplomacy and the Past: The Search for an American Style of Propaganda (1952-1977)," in *Fletcher Forum* 8 (Summer 1984): 353-396. An exhaustive history of USIA, based on extensive archival research, is forthcoming by Nicholas J. Cull, *American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-2001: A History of the United States Information Agency* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press).
  48. Robert Mcg. Thomas, Jr., "Willis Conover, 75, Voice of America Disc Jockey," obituary, *New York Times*, May 19, 1996, [www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/conover-obit.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/conover-obit.html). As a cultural affairs officer in Moscow (1998-2001), I had the honor to help organize with Russian partners a two-day series of concerts commemorating

- Willis on the fifth anniversary of his death.
49. Nicholas J. Cull, "‘Public Diplomacy’ Before Gullion: The Evolution of a Phrase," *Public Diplomacy Blog*, April 18, 2006, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/pdfs/gullion.pdf>.
  50. The propaganda/information essence of USIA is evident from Wilson P. Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004). Andrew Berding, a USIA official, noted in 1953 that USIA was "not interested in art for art's sake. We do not intend to embark on a vast program for spreading all and any American art abroad" (Krenn, 94).
  51. Madeleine Albright, "The Importance of Public Diplomacy to American Foreign Policy," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* 10 (October 1999): 9.
  52. For an examination of the artistic programming that did take place, as seen from a field perspective, see Arndt, chapter 16, "The Arts of Vision," 360-79, and chapter 18, "The Arts of Performance," 398-417. Not all USIA officers were considered adequate *kulturtragers* by persons knowledgeable about American artistic achievements; see John McCormick, "The United States Information Service," *The Kenyon Review* 24 (Spring 1962): 330-350. For culture as a "dirty word" in foreign service life and the misunderstood role of the cultural attaché, see John L. Brown, "But What Do You Do," *Foreign Service Journal* 41 (June 1964): 23-25, [www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives\\_roll/2002\\_07-09/brown\\_cao/brown\\_cao.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives_roll/2002_07-09/brown_cao/brown_cao.html).
  53. Reinhold Wagnleitner, "Propagating the American Dream: Cultural Policies as Means of Integration," in Richard P. Horwitz, ed., *Exporting America: Essays on American Studies Abroad* (New York: Garland, 1993), 317.
  54. Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, 4.
  55. Cynthia Schneider, "Culture Communicates: Diplomacy that Works," Netherlands Institute for International Relations 'Clingendael,' *Discussion Papers on Diplomacy* 94 (September 2004): 16, [www.clingendael.nl/publications/2004/20040300\\_cli\\_paper\\_dip\\_issue94.pdf](http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2004/20040300_cli_paper_dip_issue94.pdf).
  56. *Ibid.*
  57. Jess T. Ford, "State Department Efforts Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Persistent Challenges," testimony before the subcommittee on Science, 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2d sess., May 3, 2006, [www.gao.gov/new.items/d06707t.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d06707t.pdf).
  58. Schneider, 21.
  59. For recent articles making a case for cultural diplomacy that pertain to arts diplomacy, see Schneider, *op. cit.*, and her "There's an Art to Telling the World about America," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2002; Martha Bayles, "Goodwill Hunting," *Wilson Quarterly* 29 (July 2005), and "America's X-rated Cultural Image Abroad," *Winnipeg Free Press*, September 21, 2005; John Brown, "Changing Minds, Winning Peace: Reconsidering the Djerejian Report," *American Diplomacy* (September 5, 2004), [www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/); Joan Channik, "The Artist as Cultural Diplomat," *American Theater* 22 (May 2005); Helena Finn, "The Case for Cultural Diplomacy:

- Engaging Foreign Audiences," *Foreign Affairs* 82 (November 2003): 15-20; Samuel G. Freedman, "What U.S. Image Will Linger," *Foreign Service Journal* 79 (March 2002): 34-35; Patricia Kushlis and Patricia Lee Sharpe, "Cultural Diplomacy Matters—And It Works," *Whirled View*, September 26, 2005. [http://whirledview.ty-pepad.com/whirledview/2005/09/cultural\\_diplom.html](http://whirledview.ty-pepad.com/whirledview/2005/09/cultural_diplom.html); Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, "Art as Diplomacy," *Boston Globe*, September 4, 2005; Alan Riding, "Entr'acte: An Old Weapon Revived: U.S. Cultural Diplomacy," *International Herald Tribune*, October 27, 2005; Elizabeth Rohatyn and Françoise Cachin, "Foreign Policy Can Include Art," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 6, 2000; Michael Z. Wise, "Culture Sent Via Federal Express; The State Department Revives Support for Foreign Tours of Singers, Writers and Other Artists to Bolster Diplomacy," *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 2003.
60. See note 5 and Noël Carroll, "Can Government Funding of the Arts Be Justified?" *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (Spring 1987): 32.
61. Ninkovich, *U.S. Information Policy and Cultural Diplomacy*, 58.
62. Of course, in real life, the information/education/culture distinctions made regarding public diplomacy, like most intellectualizing, tend to fade. See John Brown, "The Purposes and Cross-Purposes of American Public Diplomacy" *American Diplomacy* (August 2002), [www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives\\_roll/2002\\_07-09/brown\\_pubdipl/brown\\_pubdipl.html](http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/archives_roll/2002_07-09/brown_pubdipl/brown_pubdipl.html).
63. T.S. Eliot defined culture as "that which makes life worth living." Cited in Robert Taylor, "Cultural Diplomacy: The Future" (n.d.), <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=pmt&requesttimeout=500&folder=7&paper=364>.