

ADDRESS BY

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to the

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## SHOULD PEOPLE CARE ABOUT ART?

Thank you Mr. Heeney, ladies and gentlemen. I am going to talk with you this afternoon on a subject which is always a matter of lively discussion in Toronto - and elsewhere: Should people care about art?

The topic has special relevance today in a society that has a sharp awareness of economic problems at home and genuine want abroad. When people are anxious about meeting the fuel bill, when the air is thick with talk of economic disaster - surely it's time to jettison any concern for effete and unproductive "luxuries" like art.

When life is real and life is earnest, who wants to bother with the frivolities of the "art world"?

In fact, the phrase itself - "the art world" - says a great deal. There is the real world, the place in which men and women live and work - and then there is the "art world" where

presumably artists and their girlfriends live an idyllic, if somewhat impoverished, life of bohemian irresponsibility. Or there is that other view, also current in this century, of an elegant world of collectors, critics and dealers - invariably cartooned looking at pictures through lorgnettes over cocktail glasses.

Although both these fictions have some basis in reality, neither help to make art available to more people. As an art museum director I have to admit that museums and art galleries still suffer the stigma of their origins - playthings of the elite - in spite of the attendance statistics and facts which disprove this in recent decades.

Today art galleries devote a great deal of energy to making art more accessible to the general public. To do this, they reach out into the community in many ways, invariably in cooperation with individuals and agencies which are not necessarily culturally oriented. For example, this weekend we opened at the A. G. O.

a display of the maquettes for the Toronto Subway art project.

What better place for "the art world and "the masses" to meet than in the bustling environment of so-called "mass transit" - the subway.

Perhaps the results of that plan to brighten up the subway stations of our new Spadina line provide an excellent way of looking at a series of assumptions - about art, about art museums, about people (including artists) and about their interrelationships.

Briefly, the Toronto Transit Commission agreed two years ago to spend \$500,000 on art for the new subway. This amount is, by the way, 1% of the total construction costs. For that money, the TTC, on the advice of a highly experienced consultant, commissioned ten works of art - all of them from Ontario artists. The result would have been to bring contemporary art to people with an impact never before achieved. It would have dispelled the sterile, boring and depressing atmosphere of the system. In December 1975 the TTC's Board, pointing out that \$114,000 of the total budget had been spent, reaffirmed its intention to go ahead

with the project - despite a general move to belt-tightening. The cries of indignation at the waste of money could be heard from one end of Metro to the other. The TTC, bowing to the pressure, postponed the project. This is very unfortunate to my way of thinking. Postponement can only mean increased costs. Labour and materials are not going to be less expensive six months from now. And to lose the project would be tragic!

The presence of art in the subway would have provided a life, a sense of pleasure - a bright moment if you will, in the generally dull routine of being transported underground. Those things that unexpectedly please and amuse or enlighten us quickly become beloved. And if that seems like soft sentimentality, consider The Archer. That work of genius gives a focus to Nathan Phillips Square and sets off the beauty of Viljo Revell's City Hall and is consequently loved by the thousands of men, women and children who every year experience it. They touch it shyly or climb all over it. They photograph it or criticize it but it becomes a part of their lives as

it has become a part of the life of the city.

I supported and continue to support the idea of subway art because I believe that if alienation and sterility lead to anti-social behavior, then anything which is life affirming and vital is a wise investment. Art is based on faith in the future, and as such is one of the most life affirming things I know.

Which brings us to that most thorny question, "What is art?". It's sometimes easier to define what art is not. It is not found in the dense prose and elitist mumbo-jumbo of many people, including some artists and critics. Art IS important - so important that the Russian leaders today exercise iron control over it. So important that Adolph Hitler, no matter how busy trying to conquer the world, always had time to plan - and in some cases to actually destroy art he saw, quite rightly, as "dangerous", dangerous to his ideology and to his regime. Artists must have freedom to create and the Dictator fears individual freedom.

Art, ultimately, is a mystery - like love or honour. So it must be, since art by its very nature lies beyond the frontiers of reason. In fact, one powerful argument for art's importance is that it demonstrates that reason is only one of many weapons for an understanding of the universe, and that imagination is a far more powerful weapon. Art is full of paradoxes. For example, the paradoxical relation of the artist to his finished work. What can he do with it? What purposes does it serve? Does he own it? In the days when painters and sculptors were employed by churches and temples the answers were apparently quite simple. The works of art decorated the holy places and fulfilled a religious function. They belonged to the Church or the community of monks and officiating priests who presided over the Church. The artist had shared divinity and to that extent he was regarded as one possessing a special knowledge of the mysteries. After the Renaissance, of course, secular art came into its own and artists turned increasingly away from the Church and the court.

Landscape and portraiture became acceptable to the merchant princes who enjoyed seeing themselves in their finery contemplating their estates. Gradually painting became secularized until in the 19th century there was scarcely any religious painting of significance. Until the 19th century artists were a special category of seer, deeply conscious of their power and perfectly aware of their privileged place in society.

Artists became the wounded veterans of the Industrial Revolution; unable to reproduce an easily distributed and consumed product, the artist was treated with contempt. He reacted by aligning himself with society's outcasts. Like many outsiders his exclusion from "the norm" gave him the opportunity to see society clearly and to become its futurist. And if that sounds high-flown, consider how the artist in our time accepts what is being rejected by society and by the time society gets around to agreeing, is off somewhere else, at some new frontier of taste or thought. This is not a new phenomenon. The style known as Impressionism, developed in

France before the end of the 19th century, adumbrated an approach to colour theory which was later used in the development of coloured film. In fact, the invention of the camera and moving pictures was foreshadowed by the concerns of many painters in the second half of the 19th century. Again, some artists in the early years of this century, foresaw with amazing accuracy many aspects of space exploration and travel. In the last decade we have seen a veritable kaleidoscope of changing styles making witty, entertaining and often disturbing and critical commentary on the world in which we live.

For his opposition to and prophetic voice in society, the creative artist has paid dearly. According to Statistics Canada figures based on the 1971 census, the Canadian artist is lucky to earn \$3,000 per year and only half that pittance in the case of women artists.

(That's taxable income which means that the artist with a grant may actually make a little more from time to time.)

At various times artists have attempted to improve their lot by

cooperative effort. The most notable of these attempts is the Canadian Artists Representation which was founded in 1967. CAR defines itself as an association of professional artists practising in the visual arts which acts on behalf of those artists to deal with all aspects and issues in the profession. CAR has often shaken up the lives of gallery directors. And I am not myself unscathed. But in the main it has been good for artists, and in the long run that is good for art and society. In particular it has secured better and more consistent exhibition fees in most galleries and has helped revise the copyright laws so that the artist need no longer lose all rights to his creation. This is especially important when it comes to reproducing an artist's work for multiple sale. In this matter of copyright you might be interested to consider the following anomaly:

when an <sup>author</sup>~~artist~~ writes a book he is paid a royalty for every copy sold. When a composer produces a symphony - or a pop song for that matter - he is paid a royalty each time his work is performed. The better, the more valuable, or merely the more

popular the book or work becomes, the more money the creator will make. Not so the artist. He sells his work but once. After that, though it may increase in value two, five or ten times, the artist derives no benefit.

Group of Seven member Fred Varley, for example, lived to see some early works of his, for which he had received \$50, resold for many thousands of dollars.

I know that under present law this equity seems reasonable. There is an obvious difference between a single painting and a million books. But there is little difference in the act of creation. Should creators, whatever the nature of their art, not be rewarded more equitably? If there are lawyers in the audience today perhaps they might help find an answer. Perhaps that answer lies somewhere in the Capital Gains Tax Law.

Let me return for a moment to the sometimes touchy subject of the use of public funds to support artists. It appears to present a pair of related dilemmas which affect the artist, or could affect the artist most powerfully. They involve his freedom to create,

in his own manner, that which as an artist he must create. And I have already said that freedom is an essential ingredient of the creative process.

Is there a danger that in receiving support from the State artists may find their creativity inhibited? A grant cannot be, must not be, a fetter to the spirit.

Yet, are we so naive? Do we not know that the right to call the tune when you've paid the piper is a fundamental of human nature? If the artist is to be subsidized by the taxpayer should not the taxpayer have something to say about what the artist produces?

As recently as last May, Senator Maurice Lamontagne addressed himself to the subject:

"I would submit, (however)," he said, "that the object and the raison d'être of cultural policy is the citizen not the artist. Of course the artist must be encouraged and assisted through public funds and other means but as a servant of the public interest, as a supplier of cultural enhancement and enjoyment rather than for

his direct well-being and for his own sake. It is precisely this social role which qualifies the artist for public support."

With respect, the Senator is not only advocating an undesirable course, he is advocating one that is dangerous. When taxpayers money is used wisely and on the advice of qualified art historians, curators, and other artists, there is no chance for producing work which is meritricious. Controversial, certainly. Distressing, sometimes. Exciting, absolutely. But in supporting the arts the public is buying the fruit of talent, a view of the world. It is not buying acquiescence, obedience, syncophancy. Find me an artist who will paint to please a politician and you have found me a decorator.

If he expects to earn less than the legal minimum wage, if he stands to watch his work fetch more for others than for himself, if he knows that he is more likely to be admired dead than alive, why does the artist persist?

The truly creative artist has a kind of focussed energy which

gives him peace only when it is harnessed in the service of creativity. Like the creative scientist he solves the problem because it is there - even if the problem is consciously of his own creation.

The artist has a need to share his perceptions and he cannot stop to enquire whether his peers are prepared to be shared with.

The story of one such artist, Tom Thomson, is as well-known to every Canadian as the story of his own life. The life of monastic poverty, isolation and service to his talent. His courage, willing to define for us a new way of seeing our own country. Forcing us to look around with new eyes and a new sensibility. When Tom Thomson died in 1917 the Group of Seven had not yet been formally born and, in fact, did not exhibit for three years after that tragic event. In 1926 the Canadian Club, in a singularly generous gesture, honoured the opening of new galleries of the then Art Gallery of Toronto by bestowing on it a Tom Thomson painting, West Wind. This work, one of

the finest of the artist's large studio works, painted just before his death, has affectionately been called "Canada's other flag".

On a memorable night almost fifty years ago to the day, Canadian Club past President, George Locke, presented West Wind to the Gallery and the people of this city. He spoke of the appreciation of art as a luxury of life - a luxury that he said "gave colour to our lives....without (which) life would have no living in it - (would be) just a mere grey existence in a drab, drab world".

Today in our more complex, more splintered world, Mr. Locke's words are more appropriate than ever. The luxury of 1926 has, in fact, become the necessity. What was generosity has become urgency; what was graciousness has become responsibility.

Generations of people - from across the street, across the province, across Canada, would join me, I know, in saying Thank You for the Canadian Club's perceptiveness of that long-ago night. You have enriched us all. Year in and year out West Wind

remains one of the Gallery's most treasured paintings.

It gives me special pleasure today to bring a token of your gift back to the Canadian Club. I should like to present to you, Mr. Heeney, this printed reproduction of West Wind - we would, as I'm sure you'll understand, not part with the real thing. I hope that you will find in it a reminder of the past and an inspiration for you all, singly and as a group, to share with the Gallery the work of supporting and preserving what is best and most lasting in our nation's artistic heritage.