the new man in the arts

"There is abroad in the world a passion for participation."

by Jacques Barzun

The most salient fact in the artistic culture of this country since 1930 is the rise of the amateur. This may well be part of a broad change of habit and outlook throughout Western society, but I am at the moment solely concerned with the American scene. Our reality is symbolized by the fact that we have a President who paints and who followed in office an amateur pianist. Their predecessor, who came to the White House in 1933, belonged culturally to the old order of things: he only collected postage stamps.

Painting and music are, almost of necessity, the chief arts in which the new amateur flourishes. There is in the first place a tradition connecting leisure with the practice of these particular arts. This tradition, in turn, is implied in their forms of being: in both arts the activity and the thing to show for it are easily manageable and domesticated. One can play or paint for oneself and for friends. It is hard to imagine amateur writing, for instance, ever becoming similarly acceptable. Rather few people enjoy the act of literary composition for itself alone, and almost none can endure the reading of manuscripts. It is notorious that editors and publishers have to be paid to stand it. For other obvious reasons architecture is not a satisfactory avocation; and sculpture and the dance, though possible, are beset with more

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practical difficulties for the unassuming citizen than music and painting.

We thus have hordes of amateur musicians, quantities of amateur painters, whose principal recreation has already had the effect of changing America’s attitude toward art in general. What is notable about the last two Presidents’ toying with the muses is not so much the fact itself as the casualness with which it is universally received. Art is seen to be compatible with manliness, on the one hand, and with serious business—indeed with affairs of state—on the other. The fine arts are acquiring the respectability of fishing and golf.

It may, of course, be argued that most of the amateur work in music and painting is the merest dabbling and is to be called “art” only by courtesy; and resemblance is fortuitous and would seem to be purely external. But the disparity between the various degrees of amateurism and “true art” must not be overdone. There are many disciplined amateurs. And that the new addiction to music and painting is not all make-believe is shown by the tremendous increase in the sales of good music on discs and in the attendance at museums. The same people, it is reasonable to suppose, paint and see exhibitions, or play and listen to recorded performers.

These facts bear witness to the development of what we may call a “taste”—if we use the word in its neutral sense—a habit of contemplation having for its object masterpieces in a great variety of styles. For by now, the long-playing record has expanded musical choice to very nearly the limits of the conceivable repertory; and the public museums are hospitable to nearly every type of artifact from primitive to contemporary. With reproductions added to the stock, the new connoisseur can satisfy his craving or curiosity like a housewife in a supermarket.

This is not to say that every amateur possesses an encyclopedic appetite—far from it. The tendency is rather toward specialty
and voluntary limitation in individual tastes; but these taken together give the spectacle of a large popular audience choosing at will from the available riches of the world in two eloquent and abundant arts.

At this point it is necessary to forestall the confusion that might arise from the term "popular audience." It does not mean the same thing as "mass audience"; and the mass audience itself is not, as we tend to imagine, equivalent to the whole of the adult population. When we speak of the movies as a mass medium, we mean that its products reach perhaps one-third of the people in any one week, and figures tell us further that the majority of these viewers are children and adolescents. Again, when we say that a periodical has a mass circulation, we have regard to its being printed in five or six million copies, which family use may bring before the eyes of some twenty million readers. These numbers all represent modest fractions of the whole, at the same time as they record only the probability of spiritual contact between the given object and the indicated citizen. Not every child or adult of the fifty million sees any one movie; not every one in the family circle reads any given articles in Life or Look. In other words, the figures by which we estimate the mass audience for either praise or blame are subtly deceiving: the reality eludes us, as always in statistics. We would be nearer the living truth if we visualized our movie-goers and our readers of magazines and comic books as broken up into diversified cliques, not to say elites.

The point of this digression into numbers is that the new vogue of high art in America need not be universal and ubiquitous to qualify as popular. Nothing is in fact ubiquitous; every taste, high and low, falls far short of the universal. What makes music and painting popular avocations today is that they are not the appanage of a group, class, or profession. It is true that the devotees of these arts tend to concentrate in large cities and near academic institutions. But other things converge there too for social reasons which underlie the fabric of our lives, not merely
the avocations that interest us. To put the same thing differently, there is no way of predicting which American one meets will turn out to be an amateur musician or painter, which of them a collector of records or art books. But that in any gathering there will be more than one is likely.

Thirty years ago the chance of such an encounter was rare. A sudden flush of pleasure greeted the discovery that Mr. X, a business or professional man, was “keen about art.” It meant, usually, that he bought original paintings or was on the board of the orchestral society. He was a patron, and hence a rich man, who consorted mainly with his fellow buyers and stokers of foreign art. Now the breed has been democratized, largely by technological means: discs are excellent and cheap and so are reproductions of works of art. It is no more surprising to run into a stranger well supplied with both, despite his modest means, than it was surprising thirty years ago to find a man owning a collection of books. It is the bookish man who may in the future become the rare surprise if music and painting continue their inroads. But at this moment, with the vogue of paperbacks still high, it has ceased to be true (as it was for Matthew Arnold) that the United States is “the most common-schooled but least cultivated” nation on earth.

The new amateur, then, is very much a product of industry and social equality. But he is also moved by more obscure forces. Why, with the world’s great artists mechanically at his beck and call, does he want to paint or play, as we say, personally? Why do communities increasingly prefer to be entertained by unprofessional talent nearby and even entrust their bare walls, private or public, to the perilous brush of the modern primitive in their midst?

The clearest answer to this last question only removes the difficulty a little way: it is that one feels on all sides a growing community spirit which relishes what is local and of the group. Further causes are speculative: the family unit has perhaps been
replaced by this larger aggregate. Again, the greater leisure and the desire to supplement the life of livelihood with the life of self-cultivation impel people into community enterprises. And what once might have been a religious endeavor is now secularized, taking the form of art, which for a century and a half has been the religion of the intellectual.

There is, finally, a strong economic inducement. With the wide extension of the living wage and the union rule, the price of professional services has become unapproachable for all but corporations. The patron who formerly gave himself or his principality the luxury of a permanent orchestra could, today, barely afford an occasional flute solo. And in addition to the expense is the trouble in a crowded world of arranging anything at a distance. It is easier to paint one's own murals than to ascertain and commission the best man for the money available. It would be simpler for a group of laymen to reproduce the Sistine ceiling from memory than to secure, insure, house, hand, open, and ship back a loan exhibit. "Let's do it all ourselves" is the spontaneous answer to the "problem of communication." And doing it ourselves, together, assuages at the same time the anguish of isolation that many people feel in modern life. Thus do we return, after centuries of straining individualism, to self-sufficiency in common on the village green.

But none of this touches the first of the two questions: What impels a person who is absolutely free of pretensions about art and of illusions about himself to perform as a solitary amateur? Here individualism undoubtedly survives, but in a democratic guise. The earlier, competitive individualism said: Careers are open to talent; let genius disclose itself. The modern kind says: Each man has some slight ability worth exercising; let him develop it for his own limited joy. I have elsewhere tried to give an idea of the many forms which contemporary musical talent takes in this country and tried to relate the new amateur in music to the conditions of trade and training which encouraged his activities. The determining cause seems to be that there is

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more genuine talent than disposition to support, or even to wit-
ness it in the old way. With the passing of the class system there
also went something of the mild subordination needed for being
a spectator. There is abroad in the world a passion for partici-
pation. This is so true that we have made the noun an absolute
term, applicable to the demands of the kindergarten, the crown
colony, or the self-taught timpanist.

The new pride, at any rate, is not in being or becoming a great
artist, or even in passing for an artist in any sense; it is the pride
and the right of taking part in the general, anonymous, collec-
tive life of the spirit through art. "I, too, am a painter," was said
by Correggio in emulation of Raphael; it could be said by John
Doe in emulation of his President, and it would be a corollary
to their common citizenship. This does not prevent the more per-
ceptive and disciplined of the amateurs from "participating" in
another sense, through an ever more intimate knowledge of the
thoughts and emotions they encounter in the works of the mas-
ters. As a less-than-literate dentist who was a remarkable viola
player said to me after doing his part in Beethoven's Opus 127:
"When I play I feel I'm cosharing the mind of the composer."

Also present in the amateur's zeal is an impatience with the
ready-made in its commercial aspect, with technique in the
wholly modern sense of slickness. It is, of course, a sound arti-
stic instinct to prefer spontaneity to routine and strong intent
to mindlessness. For many years now, competition in all the arti-
stic trades has enforced a professionalism of detail at the ex-
 pense of idea. To succeed, everybody has had to exhibit the
standard virtuoso tricks, rather than the virtuosity which may at
times be a relevant effect. But the penalty of tricks is that by
repetition they tire the beholder even when he is too ignorant to
know in what they consist. The amateur certainly is unable to
reproduce them, but he knows that he wants freshness, and he
knows where to obtain it, of the most artless kind.
The upshot of these motives is indeed an artless art, and a use of past art that is also artless. I refer to the great greedy consumption of the good things of the past, which I cannot help seeing also as a kind of dissipation of their meaning. We have so often been told, and quite rightly, that art is for use, that we use it up. This appears not alone in our careless dealings with profusion, nor in the rapid succession of vagues, nor in the diminished attention to any one thing which necessarily follows, but in our heedless mixing of one purpose with another. When masterpieces of painting advertise canned goods or when the excellences of music preside over the opening of a soda fountain, the objectionable part is not that greatness is degraded by the commonplace; it is that a symbol of life has been reduced to a trivial sign: the “Mona Lisa” stands for “quality,” regardless of the object; the Mendelssohn “Midsummer Night” music means only that a thoughtful management has provided pleasant noise for the ear as well as pleasant color for the eye. The degradation is not in the use but in the nonuse. The use would be to stop and look, to sit and listen, whether or not the occasion was noble.

If we are so much at ease that we cannot be brought to attend, excepting only when we have our little amateur ax to grind, the chances are that our role is other than we conceive it to be. Possibly we are unconscious agents in a necessary task of annihilation, pounding to bits and scattering the elements of our entire artistic heritage since the Renaissance. I am more and more coming to think this a prerequisite to any future greatness we shall achieve in art. It may, of course, be that we shall grind our treasure into dust and starve our talents in one and the same operation. More probably, the new democratic amateur is disseminating the feel and taste of artistic experience while emptying art itself of its overwhelming substance. The result should in time be a generation of young men broken in to a vocabulary but unhampered by a message. In recent years, lacking the salutary breaks in tradition which catastrophes brought about in less historical-minded times, it has been the weight of meaning and symbolic force of five centuries of art that have paralyzed the newcomers.
The present situation is in any case thrilling by its ambiguity—much culture and much ado about it, a democratic carelessness lavishing a cornucopia of artistic products and proficiencies upon indiscriminate uses, and no proportionate means of sustaining creation. As chief nobility, there is the amateur with his Friday-night violin case or Sunday box of paints. And to one side is the other eloquent art, the literary, squeezed in the crowd of visual and mechanical competitors and beginning to suspect that words no longer penetrate, yet seeing year by year the number of poets—young and difficult—multiply. There, too, attrition by numbers is at work; the professional is hard to distinguish from the sanguine amateur, both doing their share of termite's work, clearing the ground for the future—a disaster first and then a boon.

America has been awaiting her great artists for a long while. They have had a way, so far, of turning up suddenly in our past, having remained incognito in our present and inconceivable in our future. Forty years ago G. K. Chesterton, speaking of an American who waited for a compatriot Shakespeare, called the expectancy "a hobby more patient than angling." Today the hope can no longer be for one supreme specimen to arise in the normal way. It must be for a whole generation of men once more fired with greatness in diverse degrees and able to embody it freely because little or nothing shall then stand in their way. I am no prophet and would decline the office if tendered, but I venture to name without comment three things whose lack seems to me still to hinder the production of great art in our society. Their presence would not be enough by itself, but these I think we must have:

One, better talk about art—that is, less small talk among amateurs, and less pedantry among "men of ideas"; a more flexible, richer, stronger vocabulary of criticism; and a truce to self-consciousness about likes, dislikes, "positions," and philosophies.

Two, a freer atmosphere for the outgoing affections—from admiration to sexual love. This means less, far less, regimentation—
not only by society but by cliques and by “ideas”—of whatever belongs to the erotic sphere. If we were easy on this score there would not be so much low- and high-grade pornography. Prurience is a vice of cold blood, a form of negation. Now the freedom of dissent must always be defended, but there is another freedom, that of the generous passions, which needs protection inside ourselves. Perhaps the way to put it is that everyone should care less so as to enable everyone to care more.

Three, bigger houses. The average American family house—three bedrooms and two baths—contains itself with twelve hundred square feet of space. No sense of scale, abstract or concrete, can develop in such a cubicle. You disbelieve this at your peril, for skepticism here breeds loss of perception. Read in Mill’s *Autobiography* the effect on his spirit of first going into a large and noble dwelling after a youth spent in a puritan, almost an American, suburb.

In every age what the House of Art has most needed is many mansions.

*Jacques Barzun, Dean of the Graduate Faculties of Columbia University, is author of The Teacher in America, Romanticism and the Modern Ego, and other books in cultural history and education. He is on the editorial boards of The Magazine of Art and The American Scholar.*