Patronage—**dreams that money can buy**

Any patronage is better than one deriving from the politicians, that is fundamental.
— *Wyndham Lewis*

There is scarcely a great artist in the history of modern civilization whose work would not have been incomparably greater if he could have lived in spiritual and economic security.
— *Herbert Read*

‘O dear Mother outline! of wisdom most sage,  
What’s the first part of painting?’ She said: ‘Patronage.’  
‘And what is the second, to please and engage?’  
She frowned like a fury, and said: ‘Patronage.’  
‘And what is the third? She put off old age,  
And smil’d like a siren, and said: ‘Patronage.’
— *William Blake*

In the film *The Third Man*, Orson Welles (above) improvised a speech for the film’s sinister but charming bad guy ‘Harry Lime,’ pictured above, this is what we might call the Lime Dichotomy:

After all it's not that awful. Like the fella says, in Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.

**What did Orson Welles mean by this?** In rationalising his dubious activities it seems to laconically suggest that art thrives under corrupt Patrons who wage brutal unremitting antagonistic conflicts; that somehow great art is in harmony with this. **Is it historically accurate?** The Swiss were a major military power during the Renaissance times, Albert Einstein was Swiss, and the cuckoo clock originated some time later in the Bavarian Black Forest. But the argument that art can flourish under despotic rule is similar to the observation that capitalism can flourish without democracy. Other factors...
similar to the observation that capitalism can flourish without democracy. Other factors may have been involved: maybe the Borgias refused to pay their bills, but people take these truisms as emblematic. If we questioned Harry Lime we might suggest that artists and writers make their ‘best’ work when they are being persecuted and patronised—but possibly this a cliché that doesn’t stand up to any careful inquiry.

Bill Gates bought Leonardo da Vinci’s Codex Leicester (below) in 1995 for $30.8m. Although he lived long enough to be appreciated, nothing like that happened during Leonardo’s life. During the much vaunted Renaissance his best work was misunderstood and would have been considered dangerous: so he had to hide all his more advanced scientific work, write backwards and in code largely because he would be treated like a witch. Both da Vinci and Michelangelo’s work highly suggests they would rather be free from their patron’s dictates and power: the works are almost style wrestling against content: imagine what they would have done if they were free from the imposition of Theocratic conventions. But how much was Leonardo paid who were his patrons?

He spent about twenty years in the service of Lodovico Sforza, the Duke of Milan who frequently neglected to pay him. Da Vinci broke free of the guild system and opened his own art studio in Florence, but this period of self-employment was short-lived and he went on to work for many important people over the course of his life. They begrudgingly paid his living expenses while he worked on his art that developed and grew with each change in patronage (he also had property and rights to water ways and land) and eventually he employed a number of apprentices. Most commissions were for paintings that depicted biblical images for places of worship. In his portraits the sitters were painted to record and show to others their social standing, wealth and level of influence. The people would wear their finest clothing and jewellery to capture the moment of their greatest prosperity. By the age of 50, he gave up painting (except the ‘Mona Lisa’) because of his annoyance with patrons’ idiosyncrasies and to focus on his private studies of nature and science (in the Servite monastery the monks still pressured him for paintings in exchange for his stay). He had this to say about patronage: “From
him for paintings in exchange for his stay). He had this to say about patronage: "From Patron you first get flattery, then hard work, then ingratitude and recriminations." With the ‘Virgin on the Rocks’, the patron was furious Leonardo had not painted halos on the heads of the characters and didn’t pay.

A dominant feature of the story of art history is the patronage system: from Renaissance Europe to Feudal Japan, Leonardo da Vinci to William Shakespeare, Kings, Popes and aristocracies have supported artists and have tried to use art as an ideological technology. Cultural patronage would seem to require a diversity of centres of influence: sometimes working in opposition to one another. Rightly or wrongly, several artists have grown to mistrust the directing cultural role of their patrons. If art relies on funding, what constraints are put upon it?

Patronage was an essential feature of the Salon, and there are several figures here such as Madame Helvétius (Anne-Catherine de Ligniville) under who’s influence the ideological movement was born. The people who gathered there (Condillac, Diderot, D’Alembert and Benjamin Franklin) were the most important connecting links between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The salons ended around the time the wealthy felt a need to keep a lower profile as the French revolution was approaching. In the 1620’s the Hôtel de Rambouillet had hosted literary salons in the ‘Blue Room’ of Madame de Rambouillet and her rival Madeleine de Scudéry. The popular style of the day was to wear ‘bas-bleues’ (blue stockings) a term that came to mean an intellectual woman. The rococo salon was the common meeting ground for those who had been invited and was something of a woman’s queendom. It was an attempt to mold the literary world and public opinion and assist the birth of new ideas by stimulating authors. The great hostesses offered material aid, fed them, even put them up, advertised new works, paid bills and lauded the merits of their protégés to prospective patrons if they met her approval. The salon mediated between authors and the public to correct the author’s conceits and the public’s indifference in an insufficiently enlightened world. Often the exchange of ideas became a game and genuinely creative intellectuals were shunned because they ignored the rules or did not engage in the flattery, cliquishness, rivalry and manipulation that salon society often bred. The salons helped eliminate the aristocratic monopoly on culture and patronage and democratized and broke down barriers—they were overshadowed in this respect by the rise of the coffee houses—but persisted into the twentieth-century, most notably with Gertrude Stein’s Saturday salons. When Picasso painted her someone commented that Stein did not look like her portrait, Picasso replied, "She will."

In the middle of the eighteenth-century, Dr. Johnson announced the decline of the literary patron and offered a less glowing definition than Harry Lime: "one who looks with unconcern on a Man struggling for life in the Water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help." For writers one of the changes in the relation of the writer to the public was when works were published by subscription: this divided the power of a single wealthy, usually aristocratic patron among several hundred possibly more open-minded patrons.

With the nature of painting it was difficult for a work to reach a comparable number of people. Most Victorian commissions did not come from the Church, State, or Aristocracy but from Merchants and Manufacturers. So, to attract these new, potential
buyers artists had to make them aware of their works by exhibiting them in public—this gave us the first ‘art galleries’ and this in turn produced the ‘art critic’ offering criticism in the periodicals of the day. John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* is a classic example—this examined the rival factions who claimed to represent British art. Artists could also gain a reputation and improve their financial position by election to the Royal Academy. However the new middle-class patrons were often independent-minded and reluctant to follow the art establishment and this weakened the authority of the Academy. One of the earliest ‘galleries’ was the Grosvenor on Bond Street, opened in 1877 by Sir Coutts Lindsay and his wife Blanche, it was the first gallery to be lit by electric light. This encouraged the Aesthetic Movement, those artists whose approaches the Royal Academy did not want. It was Blanche's money that made it all possible because she had been born a Rothschild. Victorian England had little in the way of government patronage but there were a lot of wealthy patrons to go round as the Empire expanded.

When Artist's exhibited major works (sometimes with the assistance of a dealer) they could now charge an entrance fee: this copied the subscription methods and transferred financial dependence from a single buyer to a large number of people accustomed to pay for events. By the 1860s Holman Hunt showed all his ‘major productions’ in this manner. Turner had his own exhibition gallery. Reproductive steel-engraving, wood-engraving and book illustration also gave artists financial rewards and Turner earned more money from his art than any previous English painter, mostly from engravings reproducing his works. The middle-class market for these enabled him to paint as daringly as he wished (Wood, 1983). We also see the rise of the Public Museum in the late nineteenth-century and the acknowledged that the lower classes also formed part of the artist's public. Here the elites are being left behind to a certain extent.

We could remind Harry Lime that Beethoven wrote in reaction to what he saw happening in society to rebel against the market place. The rise of patronage is often linked to social change (not just warfare) and we can see this in Beethoven's late eighteenth-century Vienna. Here if we look at the elite’s receptivity to a new ideology it occurs against a backdrop of change in the organizational basis of patronage: this recast the function of art and the old patrons tried to catch up and absorb rather than lead the way. This happened because the emphasis on the qualitative sponsorship of a distinct musical ideology resulted in a more highly articulated scheme of patronage types—connoisseurs vs. less learned patrons. In Vienna the decline of the private house ensembles resulted in a social broadening of music patronage that tended to erode the traditional institutional means for aristocratic authority in musical affairs. The exclusive function that the qualitatively different ideology of "serious" music could provide went beyond music's function as royal entertainment and celebration: it reaffirmed traditional cultural boundaries through ideological rather than institutional means with the subsequent embrace by Vienna's Aristocrats (DeNora, 1991).

**So have things changed? Have aristocratic and exclusive models of culture changed or become obsolete?** These kind of questions began to inform the post World War II art school students, the first such group to include a substantial number of people from working and lower-middle-class homes. This affected attitudes towards this idea that culture was something that necessarily travelled only in one direction: from 'high' to 'low' (which is also somewhat implicit in Harry Lime’s understanding). Raymond Williams' work concentrated on the interaction between politics, economics, education and culture, and by the 1970s anti-elitist interpretations of culture generally find their way (are absorbed) into elitist media.

To understand patronage and its relation to the history of art and money we can bring to mind and contrast two patrons of the arts who I think have largely been forgotten. The first, Katherine S. Dreier is an example of what we might call ‘Altru-Patronage’ and the second, Raymond Roussel who we could say engaged in ‘Auto-Patronage’. Dreier spent all the money she inherited on others and in supporting the arts; Roussel spent all his money on himself on his own writing and plays and ‘lifestyle’. Both were an influence on Dada and Surrealism.
Katherine Dreier’s patronage influenced US art by providing some of the key works to the Armory Show and from there to funding and running the first modern art museum in the US. Aspects of patronage had begun to shift from the industrial capitalists—guided merely by a desire to amass more wealth—to a new class of ‘cultural aesthetes’ who tried to address the problem of patronage, they were:

...the readers and followers of Neitzsche, Bergson, Whitman, Veblen, and often Blavatsky. They represented a professed desire to keep the art market autonomous from the markets for other goods where "it is not for the maker to set the goal for art, but for the buyer."

In 1914 Dreier formed the Cooperative Mural Workshops, a combination art school and workshop modelled in part after the Arts and Crafts movement and the Omega Workshops of Roger Fry. In 1916 she helped found the Society of Independent Artists (SIA) and that brought her into an influential circle of European and American avant-garde artists, most notably working with Marcel Duchamp as friend, partner and patron (both are pictured below in Dreier’s home).

The SIA’s managing director was Walter Arensberg who was also a patron of Duchamp (who lived in his house and owned a version of ‘Nude Descending a Staircase’). Dreier joined with Arensberg, Duchamp and others to surpass the Armory Show in 1913. 'The Big Show' held at the Grand Central Palace in New York in 1917 was the largest exhibition in American history but coincided with US involvement in World War I. The SIA’s 'dedication to democratic principles as part of a larger struggle,' saw the group consciously adopt a no-jury policy, with the works hung alphabetically. For $6 ‘artists’ was offered an opportunity to exhibit and join the group, regardless of style or subject matter. Duchamp was originally the director of the installation of the show and this claim of complete artistic freedom provoked him and his friends. Since artistry was no longer required then objects could be ready-made sculptures and this resonated with his surprise when arriving in New York at seeing the availability of ready-made clothes and cigarettes and consumer objects such as a snow shovel (which he had no idea existed).

What looked like a urinal signed 'R. Mutt', arrived through a delivery service with its $6. The central anti-academy philosophy of accepting all works was easily mocked and
some members took it upon themselves to remove the work from the exhibition two days before the opening. Duchamp made an even bigger show of resigning from the SIA. ‘Fountain’ was not seen by the public, but the joke was kept running in the ‘open submission magazine’ *The Blindman* which Duchamp and his friends printed to accompany The Big Show. It began as a joke and was extended in the subsequent issue into a system of assault using the pretend scandal the magazine invented.

![Richard Boix (1921) *Société Anonyme, Inc.*](image)

Dreier indulged him in all this and New York Dada was ‘launched’ via her backing. In 1920, Dreier, Duchamp, and Man Ray met in Dreier's apartment (the Arensberg's had escaped to the West Coast) to found a centre for the study and promotion of the international avant-garde. Dreier wanted to call it "The Modern Ark," perhaps symbolising her shipping an unrivalled collection of European Modernism over the Atlantic, but Man Ray suggested a typically tedious Dada word game: the French term for "incorporated," so the name would read "Société Anonyme, Inc." which translates into "Incorporated, Incorporated." Dreier added the subtitle "Museum of Modern Art: 1920” creating America’s first with the motto: “Traditions are beautiful—but to create them—not to follow.”

Dreier’s International Exhibition of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926 rivalled the SIA's Big Show of 1917 in its scope and diversity. It is arguably one of the most successful, well curated and highly attended exhibitions in America in the twentieth-century. It also made deliberate attempts to affect people in a more lasting manner. She had four galleries in the exhibition made up to resemble rooms in a house to illustrate how modern art could readily integrate into an everyday domestic environment, and there was also a prototype of a "television room," designed in conjunction with Frederick Kiesler, which would “make any house or museum a worldwide museum of art by illuminating different slides of masterpieces with the ‘turn of a knob.’” Concurrent with the exhibition the Societe sponsored eighteen lectures, fourteen of which were delivered by Dreier herself.
It was in fact more or less single-handedly organised by Dreier—an astonishing effort demonstrating her commitment to the Société and the avante-garde. The extensive catalogue (given free to participating artists) was dedicated to Kandinsky's 60th birthday and abstract art seemed to dominate at the exhibition. The Brooklyn exhibition featured 308 works by 106 artists from 23 countries and attracted over 52,000 visitors in seven weeks. It travelled to Manhattan, Buffalo and Toronto and was the first introduction in the US of Surrealism. It also offered a larger sampling of Soviet and German (and simply non-French) modernism that had been made by the Armory Show.

It was also the first time Duchamp's 'La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires', or 'The Large Glass' (1915-23), was exhibited. It seems to have been largely ignored, only picking up attention when it was exhibited in the New York Museum of Modern Art after the war. Dreier was Duchamp's main supporter, commissioning, owning and enabling many new works, including the repair of the ‘Large Glass’ when it was shattered in transport. She had an intimate relationship to most of his output, many of which make oblique references to her: 'T'um' was a mural commissioned for above her bookcase based on the shadows cast by his other works in her house.

In 1957 the young Michel Foucault noticed some faded yellow books in José Corti's famous Parisian bookstore, the hang out of the Surrealists and the Parisian demi-monde, and tentatively asked the grand old man "who was Raymond Roussel?" Weared by Foucault's ignorance, Corti looked at him with a generous sort of pity and feeling of loss sighed: "But after all, Roussel..." What Corti told him and what he found in the pages he raced through mesmerised Foucault into paying for an expensive copy of 'La Vue' and (in two months) he had finished the darkly romantic Death and the Labyrinth on Roussel's extraordinary world his first book.

In lavishly published volumes Roussel's technique develops strongly from La Vue (1903), Impressions d'Afrique (1909) and then Locus Solus (1914), what were they about? Locus Solus is summed up by John Ashbery as:

A prominent scientist and inventor, Martial Canterel, has invited a group of colleagues to visit the park of his country estate, Locus Solus ("Solitary Place"). As the group tours the estate, Canterel shows them inventions of ever-increasing complexity and strangeness. Again, exposition is invariably followed by explanation, the cold hysteria of the former giving way to the innumerable ramifications of the latter. After an aerial pile driver which is constructing a mosaic of teeth and a huge glass diamond filled with water in which float a dancing girl, a hairless cat, and the preserved head of Danton, we come to the central and longest passage: a description of eight curious tableaux vivants taking place inside an enormous glass cage. We learn that the actors are actually dead people whom Canterel has revived with "resurrectine," a fluid of his invention which if injected into a fresh corpse causes it continually to act...
Both Apollinaire and Marcel Duchamp attended Roussel's lavishly expensive theatrical performances and both were heavily influenced. Put on at Roussel's utterly self-indulgent expense, they enjoyed some vogue largely because of the vociferous reactions by the audience. According to Foucault the Surrealists tried to 'orchestrate the character of Roussel' with contrived demonstrations. Breton, Aragon, Picabia, Robert Desnos and Micheal Leris went to the series of 'premieres' that tended to end with the police being called to assist with something like a rugby scrum between the actors the audience and (as the ball) the Surrealists.

It was horribly obvious the actors were entirely in it for the large amounts of money Roussel paid them, but this made the theatre come to life and life all the more theatrical. At the first night of 'Impressions d' Afrique' all hell broke loose with Andre Breton attacking hecklers with his cane. A few critics worried that the plays were the new *Ubu Roi* or *Calagari* but when revues of 'Impressions d' Afrique' appeared in the popular press Roussel initially felt that he had passed 'quite unnoticed'. He was completely self-obsessed, manically believed his money would buy him fame as a writer and also very probably mentally ill:

> What I wrote was surrounded by radiance, I closed the curtains, for I was afraid that the slightest gap might allow the luminous beams that were radiating from my pen to escape outside, I wanted to tear the screen away suddenly and illuminate the world. If I left these papers lying about, they would have sent rays of light as far as China and a bewildered crowd would have burst into the house...

The Surrealists (yet to enter their political phase) did not fail to notice that he was a walking advertisement for the redistribution of wealth, and mercilessly sponged off him, as did practically everyone in the art world he came into contact with. he also left his work to the Surrealists to preserve for the future which is possibly why you may have never heard of him. Roussel's theatrical ambitions clearly delineated that any aspect of the tightly controlled artistic society could be bought: and that notions of artistic integrity were illusory. That probably made people uneasy too. From this distance...
Roussel comes out of it all looking like a hybrid of an artist and patron and a paragon of charm, wit and *elan*, unconsciously exposing an art world blind to its venal aspects and confined within the boundaries of simplistic rules. He had to pay the actors extra money to go on stage and gave them pearls and rare gifts and more and more cash:

The actors were selected with a view to attracting the public. Roussel was open handed and paid them what they wanted. When observing how hard it would be to make one of the lines work, which, despite its dullness, Roussel was particularly keen on keeping, Pierre Frondaie exclaimed in desperation; "To make that work we'd need Sarah Bernhardt!" Roussel replied: "Do you think she would accept? How much would she want?"

Eventually he seems to have been devastated by the reviews, particularly since Pierre Frondaie (who had been hired to adapt *Locus Solus*) had slipped in cutting jibes at the reviewers sitting there on the first night. Still devastated ten years later Roussel wrote that afterwards there followed a 'river of fountain pens' from the critics. Nevertheless, he had an almost clockwork pretend confidence, an indefatigable ability to persevere, oblivious to the insanity of his plays he wrote:

Thinking that the public's incomprehension perhaps derived from the fact that I had until then presented only adaptations of novels, I decided to write something specifically for the stage.

After the stock market collapse the third play was put on with slightly more modest resources, here we see Roussel 'composing his audience' as if it were part of the casting giving away hundreds of tickets to people he wanted to be there. When things got completely out of hand with the plays he, on occasion, would dive down to the piano and rattle off a crowd pleaser. At one performance they performed the whole thing to one person in the audience and then gave him his money back.

Roussel's extravagant squandering of his fabulous wealth was mostly on his writing and his curious mental states are the subject of numerous anecdotes of self-indulgence and pretence as Roger Vitrac put it in the twenties:

Was it not from India that Raymond Roussel sent an electric heater to a friend who has asked for something rare as a souvenir?

Practically no one bought the books or went to the plays. The first edition of 'Locus Solus' was not sold out until 22 years later. To make them look like best-sellers he produced several impressions at a time, printing 'tenth impression' on the covers of brand-new publications.

Roussel was the child of an overbearing mother: after the death of his brother Madame Roussel insisted that her surviving son should undergo a medical examination every day. On their last foreign holiday they went to Ceylon and Madame Roussel brought along a coffin, so as not to inconvenience the other travellers in case she passed away.
Supposedly Roussel, through a detective agency, commissioned a commercial artist named Henri Zo to provide 59 illustrations for one of his last works. Roussel supplied Zo with simple verbal descriptions for each image and, without ever meeting the artist, accepted the results that emerged. Roussel also travelled around Europe in a giant furnished motorised caravan: forty years ahead of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. He displayed this in front of the Pope and Mussolini who were suitably impressed and it appeared in the equivalent of Hello magazine. But, and it's a huge psychological but, daily contact with reality seemed strewn with pitfalls and obliged Roussel to take a number of precautions. During a certain period of his life when he suffered anguish whenever he happened to be in a tunnel, and was anxious to know at all times where he was and avoided travelling at night. The idea that the act of eating is "harmful to one's serenity" also led him, during one period, to fast for days on end, after which he would go to expensive sweet shops devouring a vast quantity of cakes and marshmallows. After numerous attempts at what would now be called rehab (where he met Jean Cocteau) in a tragic state of barbiturate dependency, with all his money gone, surrounded by empty pill bottles he was found on a mattress at the threshold of his pretend mistress' adjoining bedroom. Around his death Roussel had organised a seemingly simple explanatory essay and it is this Foucault explored in his book.

How would you patronize the arts?

References


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