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george f. kennan

*international*

*exchange*

*in the arts*

the international council of  
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*The International Council was formed in 1953 by  
the Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art  
to help increase understanding  
and mutual respect among nations  
by fostering, in the field of modern art,  
cultural interchange between the  
United States and other countries.*

*Address by The Honorable George F. Kennan at a Symposium  
sponsored by the International Council  
of The Museum of Modern Art, May 12, 1955*

## *international exchange in the arts*

Mr. Chairman, members of the International Council, friends and guests of the Museum of Modern Art: All that I can offer to the discussion this evening consists of a few reflections based on about a quarter century of experience in the profession of diplomacy, which bears a somewhat peripheral but always friendly and, I think, sympathetic relation to the arts. I have the feeling that what I am about to say will seem to many of you to fall into the realm of the commonplace and really ought to be said to the audience that is not here rather than to the audience that is. But they are my thoughts, and if they seem to you to be commonplace, I can only say and hope that it will at least be interesting to know that what you believe in also commends itself to those who are long immersed in Foreign Service work.

The first thought to occur to me in this connection is one that may surprise some of you, coming from a person who is commonly supposed to be preoccupied exclusively with the international connotations of all phenomena; but it represents a very deep conviction, and I give it to you for what it's worth. It is the belief that however great the importance of international cultural exchange from the standpoint of our relations with other countries, this is not the main reason why we Americans have need for cultural contacts with other peoples at this time. The main reason lies rather in our own need as Americans for just this sort of enrichment of our national spirit.

I am persuaded that any really creative development in the field of art or of literature is intimately connected with international contact and is, in fact, unthinkable without it. To test the proof of that proposition, I think you have only to glance at the roots of our own American culture and see how varied they are, and from how many types of soil, both in time and in space, they spring. No such culture could ever have developed in isolation, and, what is more important for us today, I am sure that no such culture can continue to retain its spiritual vigor if it is kept in isolation.

Now there are people, I am afraid, who think that cultural activity, once it is part of the tradition of a nation and once the educational facilities are there, is something that just proceeds by itself and would go on even though the respective country were entirely walled off from contact with the outside world. I am per-

suaded that there could be no more shallow nor dangerous assumption than this. When water is taken out of this great stream of international thought and inspiration and channeled into a closed national backwater — I have seen this happen to some extent in the Soviet Union — it quickly becomes stagnant and sterile. This is, of course, because creativeness is so intimately associated with divergence and contradictions. It is only in the reconciling of contrary phenomena that new perceptions arise as new form is created. There cannot be any progress of the spirit without trial; and trial, as Milton once observed, is by what is contrary.

It is particularly important for us Americans to be conscious of this, because in this respect great continental countries like our own are in a particular danger. In the smaller countries (I am thinking here especially of the small maritime countries of Europe), association with other people is something that you can hardly avoid. Travel becomes absolutely necessary, a knowledge of foreign languages likewise. The use of foreign educational and cultural media is common and known to practically everyone. But in the great interior spaces of our country — and, incidentally, this same thing applies to Russia — conditions are different. Here people can lead their lives with scarcely a single confrontation with that which is foreign or different.

The tendency of our own mass media today, involuntary perhaps but none the less compelling, is to eradicate even those divergencies in cultural stimuli and outlook that might otherwise spring from the real variety of tradition and psychology which we have inherited from the past of our own country. These media, as I don't need to point out to you, are centralized today and are becoming more so. Their product is increasingly standardized. They are aimed at passive amusement rather than at creative challenge. They are adjusted to mass needs rather than to the needs of that minority of people (and I think it always must be a minority) who are capable of participating in creative artistic effort and of leading other people to new levels of appreciation and expression.

I think this is a matter of great seriousness for us. I recently completed a trip across the country and back. I come from the Middle West, and I always look at it and the whole interior of this country with particular curiosity. I have no question as to the immense potential creative resources of our people in the world of the spirit. But I cannot help questioning whether those resources are likely to find anything resembling a normal degree of development and expression today, unless we can see some way or other of breaking through, as an educational experience, the monotony and what I might almost call the narcotic effect of the modern commercial cultural product, and finding types of stimuli that are more kindly to the development of the creative spirit. In such a country as ours, faced with these facts

of geography and of modern technology, the impact of foreign cultural values is needed just as rain is by the desert. And needed — I would like to reiterate this — for our sakes alone, for our development as individuals and as a nation, lest we fall into complacency, sterility and emotional decay; lest we lose our sense of the capabilities of the human spirit, and with it much of our sensitivity to the possible meaning and wonder of life itself. For this reason I would be prepared to say: let us by all means have the maximum cultural exchange, even if America had before it no problem whatsoever of outside opinion; even if we had no need of any sort for other people, and all that was concerned was our own development here at home.

Actually, of course, we have at this time the greatest and most urgent need to correct a number of impressions that the outside world entertains of us, impressions that are beginning to affect our international position in very important ways. I think we are gradually becoming aware for the first time of the frightening extent to which negative conceptions about us prevail to one degree or another abroad; but many of us still do not realize how largely these negative feelings are related to cultural rather than to political conditions. Here I, whose training has been in the political field, would say that I believe that many of the feelings about us which other people would think are political have their origins in the impression that we are a nation of vulgar, materialistic *nouveaux riches*, lacking in manners and in sensitivity, interested only in making money, contemptuous of every refinement of esthetic feeling. Now, it is true that this impression is in part deliberately fostered by others who wish us no good and would like to make us hated. It is also true that in some parts of the world, and particularly I think in Western Europe, these feelings are due to the fact that we have become identified in the minds of people with things and impulses of the modern age which they hate in themselves — such things as modern technology, standardization and mass culture, which they themselves are rapidly acquiring. And while they abuse us, they follow helplessly in what they believe to be our own path. But there is certainly a large area, and probably the predominant one, in which the prevalence of these negative feelings is the result of our own carelessness and neglect, our own failure to take any adequate measures to see that the impression we create abroad actually does reflect the real values of our civilization.

It seems to me that by and large until quite recently we have been content to leave the external projection of our cultural life almost exclusively to the blind workings of commercial interests, with results that from time to time, I can testify from personal experience, were absolutely frightening. This, of course, really has been the result of our failure to realize what the life of the spirit means to people abroad. I can think of few countries in the world where the artist, the writer, the composer

or the thinker is held in such general low esteem as he is here in our country. To the people in many other countries, for whom the prospects for material development are not so favorable as they are here, and who have never been taught to see personal relationships, and particularly the relationship between the sexes, as having the same sort of romantic glorification that distinguishes our folk-lore and literature — to many of these people, cultural life appears as the highest and the most hopeful form of human activity. And these people are apt to measure other civilizations by the degree to which they are considerate of cultural values and cause cultural activities to flourish within their confines.

Beyond this, of course, this world of art and the spirit has a symbolic value in international life which has been the subject of an appalling number of clichés, but is no less significant on that account. It is a fact that in the creation of beauty and in the great monumental works of the intellect, and there alone, human beings have been able to find an unflinching bridge between nations, even in the darkest moments of political bitterness and chauvinism and exclusiveness. In many years of living in totalitarian countries, both Germany and Russia, I have been struck time and time again by the fact that where every other manifestation of human life has been given some sort of a political coloration and planed, so to speak, for the political process, artistic creation and the higher forms of scholarly thought have remained the only areas in which it was conceded, even by the totalitarians, that men of different political faith and allegiances might conceivably find a bond. Even at the blackest moments of the cultural isolation forced on the Soviet Union by Stalin — and those moments were black indeed — never was the principle really challenged that there were cultural values, universal in their meaning and their appeal, in the appreciation of which all men, regardless of class or social allegiance, could meet and find a common subject of understanding. Not even the crushing extent to which the Soviet regime tried to force the Soviet intelligentsia into the service of its own political purposes could obviate this underlying reality. In fact, subconsciously it was in a gesture of profound respect and, in a way, humility that the Soviet leaders were forced to come to the artists, to cultivate their favor and to seek their assistance in the propaganda activities of the Party, knowing that these intellectuals enjoyed a form of confidence in the minds of men elsewhere which no political ideology could ever rival, and that they were capable of bestowing upon the regime a certain pattern of approval and legitimacy that nothing else could bestow. In this long, tortuous contest between the Soviet leaders and the cultural world of the people under their rule, a contest that has gone on now for some three decades, for all the terror and all the brutality, it has really been the politicians who were the supplicants, and the people who wield the pen and brush whose influence

was courted. The totalitarians recognized that only if they appeared outwardly to enjoy the confidence and enthusiasm of the artists could they plausibly claim to have created a hopeful and creditable civilization. And I find it sad to think that they should have come to this appreciation so much sooner than many of our own people.

It is for these reasons that I personally attach such high importance to cultural contact as a means of combating the negative impressions about this country that mark so much of world opinion. What we have to do, of course, is to show the outside world both that we have a cultural life and that we care something about it — that we care enough about it, in fact, to give it encouragement and support here at home, and to see that it is enriched by acquaintance with similar activity elsewhere. If these impressions could only be conveyed with enough force and success to countries beyond our borders, I for my part would willingly trade the entire remaining inventory of political propaganda for the results that could be achieved by such means alone.

There are two reservations that I would like to voice about that proposition. One is concerned with what we give to others, the other is concerned with what we take from them. The first is this: We must not make the mistake of thinking that any sort of cultural product will do for interchange, as long as it is American, and that the content of our contribution is a matter of secondary importance. Of course, we can't be perfect in the arts; our things are always going to have deficiencies. A great deal is also going to depend on the modesty, naturalness and humility with which we bring these things to other people. But we can be selective. There are a great many Americans who don't understand this. Fortunately, I think, not many of them are concerned with matters of international cultural interchange, though many of them are concerned with governmental affairs and with diplomacy. There are many who feel that we are such an interesting and glamorous people that any and all manifestations of American culture ought *ipso facto* to be welcome and helpful anywhere. I have seen American ambassadors, for example, in more than one instance exhibit one silly and inferior American film after the other to invited foreign audiences, in the happy confidence that no product of Hollywood could fail to be impressive and enjoyable to the foreign observer. So when we deliberately enter into this sort of exchange, let us by all means see to it that what we send is the best we can muster, and that it is something that is comprehensible and acceptable elsewhere. Above all, let us not make the common American mistake, so characteristic of the commercial media, of thinking that contributions of weak artistic talent or content are going to be acceptable if only they are packaged in pretentious and elaborate frameworks of technical execution.



My second reservation relates, as I said, to what we take from others. It concerns, quite simply, our graciousness as a host to foreign cultural activities in this country. It is not enough to let other people send things here and come here themselves. It is, of course, important to see that any cultural activity sponsored by foreigners that takes place within our borders is surrounded at all times with an atmosphere of hospitality and warmth, friendliness and perceptive sympathy. Now, artists are peculiar people, sensitive people. They move unceasingly in a sort of painful half-world between the feeling of the artist and the level of public taste and appreciation. I think they can take a great deal of criticism, as long as they feel that it is honest and disinterested, but what they cannot stand is disrespect for their art itself, and they have not quite the same tolerance that most of the rest of us have for minor frustrations and tactlessness, stupidity and bureaucracy.

Here, of course, is where our government could be of help. Perhaps these words will reach it. The experience of foreign artists with American hospitality begins when they first come into contact with American officials abroad with regard to their visas. It is only too evident that this experience today is rarely a happy one, and I would like to raise the question once more whether this is really necessary, whether it is really beyond the resources of a great nation like ourselves to make arrangements whereby such visitors and others, too, would be given their visas in a relatively relaxed and civilized way. I would raise the question whether we have no alternative but to fingerprint them like common criminals. Let's remember that what was offensive to the Soviet student editors (and I think needlessly and undesirably so) is no less offensive to visitors from those countries with which we have long been associated by bonds of friendship. And, of course, these things are only symbolic of the treatment at all stages of their contact with this country. We have already created a situation, or we have had a situation in recent years (I hope it is passing now), in which the holding of scientific and cultural gatherings in this country has been so difficult that many well-meaning people quail at the thought of initiating them and refrain from doing so if they can. It is absolutely essential, to my mind, that we correct these conditions, that we learn as a nation to make distinguished foreign artists feel, whatever their origin or whatever the merits of their art, that they have come to a country where cultural values are respected for their own sake, where the obligations of hospitality are inviolable, and where they are surrounded at all times by appreciation and tact and good-will.

While we are on these unhappy problems of security, let me mention one more thing. In recent years, it seems to me, there has grown up among us a most reprehensible habit, a totalitarian habit in fact, of judging the suitability of cultural contributions by whatever political coloration we conceive their creators to have

acquired. I know of nothing sillier than this. A painting is not more or less valuable because the artist once belonged to this or that party or contributed to this or that group. The value of a symphony concert seems to me to be quite unaffected by the nature of the political regime under which the conductor may once have plied his trade. If we are going to encourage any form of artistic expression, for goodness' sake, let's do precisely that, and let's look, like mature people, to the content of what we are promoting and not to irrelevant personal attributes of those who participate. After all, cultural events are not political livestock exhibits in which we put forward human figures to be admired for the purity of their ideological features. And no matter how overwhelmingly important or significant those things may seem to some of us, they are not going to seem either interesting or pertinent to peoples abroad. To the extent that we let this sort of childishness enter into our approach to international cultural exchanges, to that extent it seems to me we are going to weaken rather than strengthen the effect of what we do.

All this is admittedly going to require something in the nature of a revolution in the attitude of many of us toward cultural activity generally as well as toward our obligations here in the international field — and that is not going to be easy. A country which is an indifferent home to its own cultural life, a country which, for example, can spend millions annually on horse racing or on the slot machines but cannot have an opera house in its own national capital, has a good distance to go, and I think there is no use deceiving ourselves about it. But we can at least begin with the realization that the realm of the spirit has a far higher rating outside of our borders than we have been accustomed to giving it at home; that a larger part of the hopes and enthusiasms of mankind are oriented to this realm than most of us have been inclined to believe; and that we are not going to make our way as we would like to make it, or find that pathway we seek to the feelings and understanding of other people, unless we learn to share something of this appreciation and this hope in the capacity of the human being to create beauty and to reach the higher and more subtle forms of apprehension of this life.

If we can learn to do this, if we can come to attach to this whole field of human endeavor a respect and a significance comparable to what is given to it abroad, then I think we will have come a great step on the way to the improvement of our international situation generally. But, as I said at the outset of this discussion, if we do that, it will not be in our external relations nor in what we mean to other people that our gain will be the greatest. These things will be important, to be sure. But our most important gain will be the gain for our own sakes, the gain in what we mean to ourselves — and in what, I suspect, life means to all of us.