

Valuing Culture

Speech by Charles Saumarez Smith, Director National Gallery

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm very pleased, as one of the co-convenors of this conference, to provide a brief introduction to its themes. It will be obvious that I do so as someone currently grappling with the issues raised by the management of one of the great institutions of high culture in this country — the National Gallery. It is an institution, which, at the end of the day, can ultimately only really justify itself by an appeal to traditional cultural values. That is, it is a publicly funded, national institution, founded in 1824 by act of parliament. It is dedicated to the widening and deepening of the experience of western European painting.

I say this as if the grounds of discussion of cultural values were straightforward. But, of course, they are not. And I — like, I suspect many other people in this room — spend much of my life justifying the existence of the National Gallery in terms which are entirely different from the language of purpose for which it was founded. In other words, I would normally expect — particularly if I was talking to a politician — to make reference to how much the National Gallery does for the promotion of tourism through the more than 2 million foreign visitors who pass through its front door every year. I would expect (and be expected) to make reference to its contribution to the

leisure economy as one of the five top leisure attractions in the United Kingdom, beaten only by Blackpool illuminations and, possibly, but not necessarily at the moment, by the British Museum. I would normally allude to the work it does with the regions through its programme of exhibitions in cities outside London and its support of education, not least by teaching children the imagery of Christianity and the nature of European myth.

I would seldom — in fact, in my experience, never — think of talking about and describing the way that the experience of works of art can enrich individual lives. I would not normally think of mentioning the fact that Patrick Heron became a painter because his art master in the 1930s one day drove him from his school in Letchworth to see the work of Cézanne. I would not justify the Titian exhibition on the grounds that Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and Peter Blake were the first people through the door to see it, in order to study and understand and learn from the work of a great artist of the past. I would never dream of arguing that there is a role for looking; for understanding art; for individual contemplation; for the realm of the beautiful; for the development of minds and the creative imagination through the study and appreciation of the greatest paintings of the past. Why would I not bother about marshalling these arguments when talking about the reasons for the existence of the National Gallery? I would not do so because I would normally take it for granted that they would fall on deaf ears — that politicians over the last twenty five years, indeed, since the IMF crisis in 1976 and the election of a conservative government in 1979, have been indifferent or positively hostile to the belief that culture might be of value

for its own sake and not just for what it does for education or urban regeneration or cultural tourism or the leisure economy. This, then, is the theme of this conference: why is it that for twenty five years we have been indifferent to the idea of cultural value ?

I thought that I would start by giving my own account as to how and why this has happened in the hope that my own version of its causes will be supplemented and, no doubt, contradicted during the course of the day.

I think that much of the problem lies in the fact that I belong — like, I suspect, the majority of the audience — to a post-war generation who, in the early part of our lives, took the virtues and values of cultural provision for granted. I certainly was brought up to assume that the state had a duty to provide for the arts through, for example, the development of regional theatres — I remember particularly going to performances in the newly opened Yvonne Arnaud theatre in Guildford; through maintaining and allowing free access to national museums — I recollect particularly visiting the Science Museum as a child; and through teaching about art and music in schools — not only how to paint and play a musical instrument, but why it might be of value to listen to classical music. This was, broadly, the experience of the post-war welfare state — that the virtues and benefits of cultural experience should be universally available alongside free school milk. The benefits of cultural experience were available, but the set of values and presumptions on which they were based were not articulated or, if

they were, it was in a language and depended on a set of beliefs which were innocently and indefensibly paternalistic. As a generation, we took too much for granted.

This automatic assumption that there was a virtue and value in universal cultural provision made it profoundly vulnerable to attack, when the attack came in the early 1980s. I remember, for example, only too vividly how vulnerable the V&A was to regime change in the early 1980s, when I was working there and when Derek Rayner was sent in to test the institution's economic efficiency, Roy Strong began to advocate compulsory admissions, and staff, like rabbits in the headlights, were suddenly expected to justify the reasons for their existence. We began to be subjected to a regime of endless cuts which were supposed, in the economic doctrine of the day, to improve our functional virility. Faced by a political philosophy which took for granted that the only justification for investment in the arts was economic, it is hardly surprising that a whole generation of civil servants and arts administrators began to hone the arguments with which we have become so familiar: that the arts, like everything else in life, must be measured and costed and scrutinised for their contribution to the national economy. Economy, efficiency and effectiveness was the first of many subsequent Treasury mantra, which we all learned to chant as dutiful apparatchiks.

What, then, happened in 1997? It seems to me to be obvious in retrospect — it was even fairly obvious at the time — that the incoming Labour administration was elected on a platform of economic competence and managerialist capabilities, rather

than on the basis of any promise to change the language of cultural experience or its ideology. Chris Smith, the highly cultured former Secretary of State for the newly renamed Department for Culture, Media and Sport, set out his arguments for investment in the arts in his book *Creative Britain* in the only language that he thought the Treasury would understand: the language not of Wordsworth, but of gradgrind utilitarianism.¹ Tony Blair invited Blur to 10, Downing Street. The Department of Trade and Industry erected its now no doubt forgotten big tent on the Horseguards parade. Culture was presumed to consist, above all, of the cultural industries — design, fashion, pop music. The new mantra was excellence, innovation, regeneration and access, although what exactly was meant by excellence in an era of advanced, postmodern, cultural relativism was never adequately defined.

So, what has happened now to suggest the need for a change or, at the very least, a discussion about the fundamental purposes of cultural experience for its own sake and not just for what it might do for other parts of national life? The first reason is, I suspect, partly electoral: that there is a growing realisation that a platform of economic efficiency and modest redistribution and managerial competence is not a creed which does very much to capture the minds and hearts of an electorate which in due course will have to go to the poll. There needs to be a belief that the last seven years has led to a fundamental change in the way that British public life is ordered and that it has not been just a matter of extra money which has flowed into some areas of the arts as a result of the first, exceptionally generous financial settlement to the Arts

¹ Chris Smith, *Creative Britain*, London, 1998.

Council. The second reason is political: that the cultural agenda of the first Labour administration appears from the outside to have been set by the likes of Peter Mandelson and Philip Gould, whose cultural values lay in publishing and broadcasting and the dome, but not in art and music and literature. But now I sense that Jack Straw and Paul Boateng and Tessa Jowell and perhaps the chancellor too have a sense of dissatisfaction with the flotsam and jetsam of a purely consumerist culture. Others, beside me, may have read Tessa Jowell's account in the *Sunday Times* after Christmas of how she took consolation in looking at Caravaggios in Rome. This is a rather different political vocabulary to that to which we have become accustomed — a change which I very much welcome. The third reason is to do with the *zeitgeist* and the recent Iraq war: that the loss of cultural artefacts in the looting of the Baghdad Museum reminded everyone of the importance of history and memory and of how these are maintained by cultural institutions. All of these events are coinciding and colliding with a purely market-driven view of culture, producing a recognition that culture must inspire a set of ideas and beliefs which retains some degree of independence and isolation from the computer and the shopping mall.

I suppose I have been in a position to watch one of the symptoms of this change: that is, in the set of arguments and debate which has surrounded the proposal to allow the export of the *Madonna of the Pinks* to the Getty Museum in California. Last October, when its sale was first announced, nobody paid very much attention to it.

Commentators declared that they could not see the point of retaining great works of art in this country and that the work of Raphael might just as well be shipped off to

the west coast of the United States. But the mood is changing. Large numbers of people are coming to the National Gallery to see the picture. And the issues are not just those of instrumentalism as to how and whether the picture will be toured to other parts of the country and utilised in programmes of public education, but also about the qualities and experience of great works of art and whether or not we as a nation are still capable of being moved by a work of art — a painting — produced by an artist in Florence in the early sixteenth century; and whether or not the experience of that work of art is worth preserving for the four and a half million people who come to the National Gallery, not just to graze in the interests of cultural tourism or to drink cups of coffee but to enjoy the intensity of visual and aesthetic experience, the solitary communion with greatness, that works of art are able to provide.