



Today

Author(s): Frederick Lewis Allen

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TODAY

FREDERICK LEWIS ALLEN

Associate Editor, *Harper's Magazine*

(Read April 19, 1940, in *Symposium on Characteristics of American Culture and Its Place in General Culture*)

IN the year 1917—twenty-three years ago—a distinguished American literary critic, the late William Crary Brownell, brought out a little book entitled “Standards,” in which he examined the condition of American culture and found it depressing. Mr. Brownell was disturbed to find the field of art and letters becoming, as he put it, “less and less a sheltered enclosure and more and more open to the winds of the world.” Noting the wide popularization of education and of what passed for art and letters of a sort in the slick-paper magazines, the Sunday newspapers, the sugary best-selling novels, and the upstart movies, he quoted the dictum of Manet that “art always loses in height what it gains in breadth.” He saw a great, half-tutored, indiscriminating mob invading the cultural domain where fastidious, aristocratic taste had once ruled, and he realized with dismay that this mob would try to make it—as he said—“an absolutely unenclosed domain—the common of civilization, so to say, whose weedy aspects and worn places and rubbish heaps are as legitimate details as its cultivated area. Ought not,” asked Mr. Brownell, “ought not access to this territory to be made more difficult, as difficult as possible?”

I quote Mr. Brownell not because he was a critic representative of his times—for even in 1917 he was a classical-minded conservative, a backward looker; I quote him because he described so well what *has not happened*. The twenty-three years since 1917 have played a good joke at the expense of his thesis. Of course it may be said that some parts of the gardens of American art and letters have been trampled into bare patches. But the gardens have also been vastly enlarged; and what Mr. Brownell called “the common of civilization,” with its “weedy aspects and worn places and rubbish heaps,” is now springing into green at a score of places.

To leave metaphor behind, I believe that we Americans are now a distinctly more mature people, a more culturally enlightened people, than we were a generation ago; that we are on the whole better off, rather than worse off, for the participation of the millions in cultural things that were once considered chiefly the affair of the few; and that we are now witnessing, if we will but realize it, a flowering—or at least a budding—of an American culture of which we may be proud. It may even be fair to say that we have here the basis for an “American renaissance”—if we refuse to be misled by the connotation of the first two letters of that word. They suggest to most of us, I think, a repetition of something that has gone before. We shall better understand what is happening in this country if we rid ourselves of any expectation of seeing duplicated here what happened in the Athens of Pericles or the Florence of the Medici or, for that matter, in nineteenth-century England or France. For the essence of this American flowering is that it is new, that it takes unprecedented forms, and that it is manifold.

I realize that anybody who speaks in such terms as these may seem to be—in the expressive phrase of the day—sticking his neck out. Certainly when we look at the Europe of today it seems queer to be speaking of a renaissance. It may seem queer even if we are speaking simply of our own country, wrestling as it is with the overwhelming problems of an obstinate depression and overhung as it is by the clouds of war. Nor do I deny that as one examines the American culture of 1940 one finds plenty of evidences of undisciplined or corrupt taste. Listen to some of our radio programs—indeed to most of them; read the concentrated pap which passes for fiction in many of our magazines for the millions; sit through some of the Class B pictures at the movies; or look at the shoddy contractor-built suburban developments and devastated regions which lie at the edges of our American cities; and you may well wonder what in heaven’s name I am talking about. Even if you examine the American performances in some of the traditional arts during the thirties—in poetry, for example—you may question my generalization. I am well aware, furthermore, that when an editor of one of the last remaining magazines of what used to call itself proudly the “Quality Group,” a cultivator of one of the last remaining flowers in what used to be considered the garden of

distinguished monthly journalism in America, talks of an American cultural blossoming, he is sticking out his neck particularly far.

Nevertheless I stand by my guns. I think this country is making cultural progress in a new and exciting way, and, I may add, in a way which Benjamin Franklin would have appreciated and welcomed.

Now before I begin to haul out my evidence and lay it before you I am afraid I should define my terms. In the first place, I am *not* using the word "culture" in the anthropological sense, meaning simply a people's way of living. No, I use it in its more usual non-anthropological sense. But even in this sense it is an inclusive word. To most people, perhaps, it connotes refinement and familiarity with, and appreciation of, choice and tested things. But in a somewhat different shade of meaning it may connote an eye and ear for beauty, a sense of order and graciousness, whether cultivated or instinctive, and whether accompanied by wide learning or not. Under the shelter of the word "culture" there must also, I think, be room for a more dynamic ingredient added by the person who can produce fine things. A Shakespeare may not possess refinement and wide learning, but he enriches the soil of our civilization; the periods which we think of as the great flowerings of culture were periods not merely of appreciation but of production preeminently; indeed, any culture would be sterile which was not animated by the devouring curiosity of the discoverer and experimenter, the fierce energy of the creator.

I emphasize these latter shades of meaning because it is in these latter respects that American culture seems to me to be showing special progress. What is happening is that innumerable Americans are becoming more sensitive to beauty and order, and that our creative energy is stirring.

First of all, I should like to call to your attention the enormous expansion of cultural opportunity which is taking place in this country. In no other cultural flowering in history has more than a small fraction of the population been involved. The picture here and now is amazingly different. In the United States of 1917 Mr. Brownell complained that the domain of arts and letters was becoming unenclosed; he would be amazed to see how the fences have come down even since then.

First, look at the musical scene. By means of the radio, vast numbers of Americans now hear great music and enjoy it increasingly. It is estimated at the NBC, for example, that Toscanini's weekly symphony concert has an approximate audience of four and a half million people, and that the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts reach some ten million people. It would take over a hundred Yale Bowls to seat that astronomical audience of listeners to the opera. Walter Damrosch's NBC music appreciation hour, to pick only one example from among many, is heard each week by several million school children, to say nothing of a million or so adults. Have any such opportunities for the mass of the population to hear good music finely played ever existed—and been taken advantage of—before in the world? And it has all come about since Mr. Brownell wrote. (Incidentally, speaking of radio audiences, those of you who enjoy "Information, Please" may be interested to know that, according to recent estimates, that program is heard by twelve million people.)

It is true that the piano is no longer the standard household ornament that it once was, and Mr. David Cohn reminds us that Sears Roebuck's sales of fiddles and guitars have dwindled in the past generation; but can we measure the amount of participation in the making of music in America without noting also that there are now some thirty or thirty-five thousand school orchestras in this country, and without noting, on a somewhat higher level, how many of our school and college glee clubs have become choruses singing fine music which no glee club would have thought of singing in Mr. Brownell's day?

Until now our American composers have been handicapped by living in an environment uncongenial to creation, and this is still true in some degree. Most of our important conductors and impresarios are even now foreigners who, whatever their transcendent merits, are not likely to be able to judge new American music except as something alien to their natures. Yet the audience is being prepared; the ground is being cultivated for a native expression in music.

Next, consider reading. It is true that current book sales on the whole have shown little increase during the past generation. But there can be small doubt in the mind of one who compares the best-seller lists of today with those of 1900 or 1917 that the books which sell very widely now represent, on the average, a

considerably higher level of quality than they used to, thanks partly to the intelligent selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club. We must remember, too, that the book as a form of entertainment and instruction occupies a different position now from what it did a generation ago. Not only does it compete, as entertainment, with the radio and the movies, but the book-reading public is now underpinned—and presumably reduced—by a magazine-reading public such as did not exist then here and exists now nowhere else.

If the magazine which I represent seems to be one of the last flowers to remain in bloom in a fine old plot, the death of the other flowers in that plot is not necessarily to be attributed to a deterioration in the public taste; one important reason may be that the flowers in the neighboring plots have improved in quality. It is true, I believe, that *Harper's* contains a kind of thorough and untrammelled discussion of contemporary problems which is rare in the United States in 1940 and is greatly needed. But it is also true that many of the good things which magazines like *Harper's* and *Scribner's* and the *Century* and the *Atlantic* used to bring us fifty years ago are now being brought, too, by other periodicals—not only by the *New Yorker*, for example, which during the past fifteen years has set a new standard in American humor, but also by magazines of huge popular circulation. Fifty years ago there was not a single magazine in the United States with a circulation of a million. Now there are twenty-six of them. Of these, thirteen have circulations of over two million, and five—*The Saturday Evening Post*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Collier's* and *McCall's*—have circulations of over two and a half million. Some of the popular periodicals are full of literary marshmallows and shy at the expression of an idea which might possibly offend a perceptible number of readers or advertisers; yet I think it is safe to say that if we take these magazines as a group and remember the scores of millions who consume them, and think how many good things are to be found among them, they offer an impressive exhibit of mass culture.

When we turn to the fine arts, we note that the popular magazines are now producing articles about them, with reproductions in color, to an unprecedented extent, and that during the past year or two there has been a well-rewarded rush to bring out

books of masterpieces of art, old and new. And if there has been a dismal downturn in the collecting of painting by private individuals since 1929, there has also been a large increase in the sale of good color reproductions. I visited recently a college where some 150 reproductions of fine paintings, from Giotto to our contemporary Americans, were in steady demand for rental by undergraduates. I shall leave to Mr. Taylor the change which has been taking place in the function of our art museums; but no one who is aware of the number of schools and colleges in which boys and girls are painting and modeling and the huge attendance at traveling art exhibits, such as the Van Gogh show, will be disposed to deny that the American public which is actually excited about art is growing fast. The recent Picasso exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was attended by 99,503 people during its fifty-one days; and if you don't like Picasso, let me add that the Italian Masters, at the same Museum, were seen in seventy-three days by 277,794 people: an astonishing record.

Nor should we leave this question of the breadth of the base of our culture without discussing the growth in educational opportunity. That many of our universities have elephantiasis—and also footballitis—I should be the first to agree. The inspiring fact that millions of Americans have wanted a higher education for their children has put a heavier load on the educational machinery than it could carry without creaking here and there. But again, consider the other side of the picture. The opportunities are there; and thanks to such Foundations as that which Dr. Keppel heads, there are so many agencies now looking for young talent and ready to smooth the way for it that I have heard it said that in the United States of 1940 there need be no mute inglorious Miltons. If there is in Pennsylvania or Georgia or South Dakota a boy of genius, he will be found out and aided to bring his gifts to fruition. That statement may be exaggerated—but that it could be seriously made is something excitingly new. And do not forget what the WPA has done in recent years; do not forget the men who had not sold a picture for years—and then were given post-office murals to paint; the half-starved musicians who found themselves playing to big audiences in WPA orchestras; the companies of WPA actors who gave life to the languishing theatre. Call this boondoggling if

you will; admit that most of the talents thus aided were negligible; but ask yourself if it does not represent a new conception of the responsibility of the general public to see that potential artists shall have a chance to be artists, no matter what their circumstances. Yes, the democratic base of our culture has been widened.

In the second place, I should like to remind you how many new arts have sprung up beside the seven arts of tradition. Let us forget for a moment the traditional assumption that one measures the state of a culture chiefly in terms of such familiar vehicles as books, plays, paintings, sculpture, architecture, and music. Let us assume that other vehicles may offer a means of expressing the impulse to create and enjoy beauty, and let us look about us.

New arts? One thinks immediately of the movies, which after a long period of high technical competence and singular evasion of reality are now showing signs of growing up. One thinks perhaps of that awkward and often ridiculous fledgling, the radio drama. One thinks with somewhat more assurance of that remarkable subdivision of the movies, the animated cartoon drama, realizing that in Disney we have an artist using a medium which hardly existed twenty years ago. One thinks of the remarkable increase in interest in photography—of the hundreds of thousands of people who are taking pictures in the true spirit of the amateur of the arts. But let us look farther.

Drive over the magnificent parkways being built in the outskirts of some of our big cities—especially about New York, thanks to the energy and vision of Robert Moses—and see how the highway engineer and the landscape architect have joined hands to create majestic avenues in peculiarly twentieth-century style. Look at some of our new bridges and dams: are they not works of art as well as of utility? Is there any of us who does not see, let us say, the George Washington Bridge without a lift of the heart at its extraordinary beauty, especially at night when the great sweep of its cables is picked out with lights? And if you will permit a New Yorker to crow a bit more among Philadelphians, may he suggest that the incredible effects achieved in lighting the New York World's Fair demonstrate effectively the possibilities of another virtually new art—that of lighting with color?

Think of the numerous uses to which the industrial designer has brought the art of functional design. No automobile manufacturer decides upon his new model nowadays without the most anxious consideration of the way in which millions of possible purchasers will react to the grace and sweep of its lines. Look at that functional masterpiece, the present day airplane. I wonder if ever until the past decade a designer has been called in to plan a railroad train as a unit, as some of the new silver streamliners were planned. Compare the best of the new railroad coaches and dining cars with their equivalents of the vintage of 1917. Notice the way in which the packaging of goods has been revolutionized: compare any well-remembered cereal package of 1917—let us say the old Shredded Wheat box, with its picture of the factory with all flags flying—with the packages of today. Go into a modern kitchen and see how much of the equipment there has been carefully designed with due regard for the functional principle and the gay use of color. Look at some of Frank Lloyd Wright's or Albert Kahn's factories; why, even factories and the machinery inside them have now been brought inside the enclosure of the arts, as if they too were intended to be seen! Little by little we are re-learning what we had forgotten during the latter nineteenth century: that useful things can and should be not ugly but beautiful. Look, for that matter, at the best of Woolworth's glassware: I can give you no better example than that of the cultivating of the common of our civilization.

Go up to the attic and pull out a pile of the magazines of 1900—or even of 1917—and compare them with their equivalents of today; in type and format the advance has been remarkable. The improvement has extended to books and to every sort of use of type, even to the designing of letterheads; if you occasionally receive, as I do, a letter from a railroad office which has not changed its letterhead within the memory of the oldest employee, you will wonder who could ever have hit upon such an absurd combination of discordant types.

Do we not see, too, the beginnings of an art essentially new to America in the groping efforts here and there toward town planning and regional planning, toward the designing of our communities in the large? The sort of overall design represented in, say, Rockefeller Center, and in a masterly way at

Jones Beach on Long Island, and our beginning attempts to lay out Radburns and greenbelt villages, may be the early steps toward the development of new techniques for harmonizing and rationalizing the work of architects, landscape architects, engineers, and what we may call social engineers. And the result may be nonetheless culturally valuable for being collectively rather than individually created.

There is an almost perverse element in this flowering of new arts: it almost seems as if we made the most striking progress in those areas where there are no academic standards and traditions to limit us. I live in New York near an avenue of department stores whose windows provide an ever-changing spectacle of bold patterns in color and light and ingenious, imaginative compositions; and I often notice, as I stroll up this avenue at night, how many of the other strollers are manifestly not so much window-shopping as enjoying the show—as one might enjoy a visit to a gay museum. Then I wonder whether the designers may not be doing better work for the absence of any cultural expositors to talk to them about classical tradition and make them self-conscious and imitative. If there is a half-truth in this, let us take good cheer from it, for it is a sign that there is a very widespread popular instinct for good design today, for the thing that looks well. It never occurs to most of the people who exercise this instinct that they are rendering art judgments. They may think they are outside the sacred enclosure of the arts—but they are inside it all the time. For the fences have been moved.

Very rapidly we Americans are getting away from the Colonial attitude. Already it is a long time since we talked of the "great American novel" in tones which suggested that it would burst upon our immature culture suddenly, as a child expects that his twenty-first birthday will find him abruptly a new being. It is a long time since we took it for granted that American novels should be respectable imitations of the best English works. Now we know we have our own tradition: in a literary sense, we are grown up. And we are beginning, too, to be far less subservient in other arts. If we still make pseudo-Venetian furniture in Grand Rapids, still design bank buildings to look like Parthenons, we are apparently approaching the end of this

phase. Our new streamlined trains are not Byzantine, or Louis XV, or Dutch Colonial.

I do not say that this national cultural independence is wholly good. The classicist will hasten to remind us that there is little to be gained by throwing away the past—and of course he is right. The political scientist may add that autarchic nationalism is the curse of the twentieth century, and ask us if it is not even worse to close the cultural trade-routes than to close the economic trade-routes—and he, too, is right. We want no tariff walls against the best products of foreign civilizations. Our American culture must not try to walk alone, without benefit of the past or of the contributions of its neighbors. Yet what is to grow in our soil must be what is adapted to that soil. We may compare, we may learn, but I am glad we are coming to build for ourselves. For that is the only way in which anyone can build greatly.

One closing word: if I have said little about the peaks of our cultural landscape, if I have dodged the question as to whether our finest products in arts and letters are better today than they used to be, or better than they are elsewhere, this, I must confess, is because I would prefer to dodge a question which would let this company in for endless and possibly heated discussion. One may be conscious, as one drives across country, that one is climbing on to rising ground, and yet lack the surveyor's instruments to judge the precise altitude of the surrounding summits. But if I have avoided that sort of estimate, it is also partly because I wish to focus your interest upon the groundswell of the land all about us. Whether or not the very finest things that we produce are better than they used to be, at least the conditions are being made more congenial for the production of fine things in the future. If Mr. Brownell were here today, and were to lament our supposed lack of authentic contemporary American masterpieces, I should be tempted to quote to him those familiar lines of Arthur Hugh Clough's:

“In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!
But westward, look, the land is bright!”

MR. KEPPEL: If what Mr. Allen has said to us has stirred up in you any questions, just keep them in mind—tie a figurative string around your finger—because we will all have a chance to speak soon.

I once heard the next speaker describe himself as a grave-robb^{er}. On this occasion it would be much more fitting to present him in other terms, and I shall do so as an archaeologist-anthropologist, and the Chairman of the Division of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. He will look backwards—as it happens, a good long way backwards. I present our fellow member, Mr. A. V. Kidder.

MR. ALFRED V. KIDDER: Mr. Allen very accurately defined the anthropologist's conception of culture as the way the people live, although if he had attended their anthropological meetings or read of the hair-pullings that arise in an effort to get a proper definition, he would realize that there are many discrepancies. However, that is the anthropologist's definition of culture; and the archaeologist, who is the mouldier variety of anthropologist, deals with the culture of the past, and, of course, in general, with the material culture of the past, because that is all that is left to him.

LOOKING BACKWARD

ALFRED V. KIDDER

Chairman, Division of Historical Research, Carnegie Institution of Washington

(Read April 19, 1940, in Symposium on Characteristics of American Culture and Its Place in General Culture)

THE archaeologist is the only grave robber whose activities are contemplated by society without abhorrence, the reason, of course, being that the men and women whose tombs he violates have ceased to be persons and have faded, nameless and unremembered, into the mists of the past.

To this loss of individuality, this merging of the great with the humble, the good with the bad, this universal levelling and averaging, is due the major distinction between the study of archaeology and that of recorded history. Although it has its drawbacks in obscuring the enormous influence that single men of outstanding ability must always have exercised in directing the march of events and in the development of human culture, it permits a breadth of outlook, a smoothing, so to speak, of the curves of history, that should give unique opportunity to perceive the major trends of man's career.

I say "should" advisedly, for just as the historian or the student of art or literature risks over-preoccupation with the