Remarks presented by David Rockefeller at the 50th Anniversary Conference of the National Industrial Conference Board (now known as The Conference Board)
The Business Committee for the Arts holds its first annual meeting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; January 22, 1968.
Bankers and businessmen from the Medici to the Mellons have often been enthusiastic patrons of the arts.

Cosimo de' Medici established Europe’s first public libraries as far back as the 15th century, and supported such men as Donatello, Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, and Fra Angelico. At one time, his private contributions to cultural and related activities were said to have amounted to twice the income of the entire Florentine state. His descendants carried on the tradition of artistic patronage in still more lavish fashion, encouraging among their protégés such Renaissance figures as Michelangelo and Cellini.

Today, we hear exuberant talk of a “new Renaissance,” a “cultural explosion,” and the statistical evidence, at least, is impressive. Americans spent some $4 billion on cultural activities last year—twice as much as a decade ago. By 1970 this figure is expected to top $7 billion. The 750 groups now presenting opera in the US are almost double the number so engaged a decade ago. Theatrical enterprises now number about 40,000, again a substantial increase over the past ten years. More people saw “Hamlet” on television in a single night than had seen it in live performances in all the years since it was written. Some 300 million people visit art museums each year, about 150% more than a decade ago, and 14 million American homes contain an original work of art.

These statistics point up with startling clarity the fact that we live in a period of increasing cultural interest that is not mere lip-service but is genuine and active. Impressive as the figures are, though, they don’t tell the whole story. Interest is only one side of the coin; quality can be quite another. Most of the expansion in the creative arts has been among amateurs. Professional artists and art organizations have barely held their own. Of the 800 American cities with populations of 25,000 or more, only one in five has been visited by a professional theater group or heard a professional orchestra in the past three years. Millions of our fellow citizens have never seen a professional performance of any kind.

This is a situation that should concern us all, both as businessmen and as citizens. For the arts are a vital part of human experience, and surely our success as a civilized society will be judged largely by the creative activities of our citizens in art, architecture, music, and literature. Improving the condition of the performing and visual arts in this country calls, in my judgement, for a massive cooperative effort in which business corporations must assume a much larger role than they have in the past. The corporate community as a whole has a long way to go in accepting the arts as an appropriate area for the exercise of its’ social responsibility.

I’d like to share with you my own reflections on why I feel business should consider substantially greater involvement in the arts, and how it might go about this.

Almost imperceptibly over the past several years, the modern corporation has evolved into a social as well as an economic institution. Without losing sight of the need to make a profit, it has developed ideals and responsibilities going far beyond the profit motive. It has become, in effect, a full-fledged citizen, not only of the community in which it is headquartered but of the country and indeed the world.

The public has come to expect organizations such as yours and mine to live up to certain standards of good citizenship. One of these is to help shape our environment in a constructive way. When I speak about environment, I mean the vast complex of economic, technological, social, and political forces that influence our cities and the people who live in them. In shaping this environment, the corporation must initiate its share of socially responsible actions, rather than merely responding passively to outside forces.

Mainly through the impetus provided by our business corporations, we have achieved in the United States a material abundance and a growing leisure unprecedented in history. It is sadly evident,
though, that our cultural attainments have not kept pace with improvements in other fields. As people’s incomes have risen, a proportionate share has not been devoted to artistic and intellectual pursuits. As leisure has increased, so has the amount of time given to unproductive and often aimless activities.

Corporations genuinely concerned about their environment cannot evade responsibility for seeing that this leisure is channeled into rewarding activities such as those the arts afford. We must face up to the task of bringing our cultural achievements into balance with our material well-being through more intimate corporate involvement in the arts.

From an economic standpoint, such involvement can mean direct and tangible benefits. It can provide a company with extensive publicity and advertising, a brighter public reputation, and an improved corporate image. It can build better customer relations, a readier acceptance of company profits, and a superior appraisal of their quality. Promotion of the arts can improve the morale of employees and help attract qualified personnel.

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At Chase Manhattan, we have seen first-hand evidence of these benefits from our own efforts in art and architecture. When we decided to build our new head office in Lower Manhattan, we wanted to use modern concepts of architecture to express a contemporary image of banking instead of the traditional stodginess of the past. We were eager to have a building that, in addition to being highly efficient, would enhance the Wall Street area, give pleasure to the thousands who passed by every day, provide a stimulating atmosphere for our employees, and, hopefully, exert some influence toward civic improvement.

Because there are stretched of pavement in the congested financial district which get less than 24 hours of sunshine in a full year, we felt that an open plaza would be a welcome addition to the scene. So we designed our building to occupy only one-third of the 2 ½-acre site. The rest was devoted to the plaza which includes sycamore trees, circular granite benches, and a sculptured water garden.

When it came to decorating the interior of the building, we felt that fine art would be the best complement to the complementary architecture we had chosen. So we set up a special Art Committee which included some of the country’s leading museum officials, and gave them a budget of $500,000. The works they selected ranged from primitive Americana to recently painted abstracts. Altogether, the bank has now accumulated about 450 paintings and pieces of sculpture, some of which are lent out from time to time; others have been donated to museums.

So far as results are concerned, we believe the building has helped humanize the image of what was once considered a cold and impersonal business. We believe it has enlivened the downtown community and given pleasure, reassurance and delight to employees, customers and visitors. In fact, customers have told us repeatedly how much they enjoy doing business in these surroundings. And many employees have remarked on the added benefits of working in such an environment.

At lunch-hour during the spring, summer, and fall months, the plaza is a popular strolling place. Band concerts and other forms of entertainment, which are staffed regularly, draw capacity crowds and extensive coverage in the newspapers and on television. We have been told frequently—and we like to think it is true—that public spirited gestures of this kind have reinforced our slogan about the “friend at Chase Manhattan.”

I am confident that if you were to talk with Tom Watson, Jr., of I.B.M., or Herbert Johnson of S.C. Johnson & Son, or Joyce Hall of Hallmark Cards, or Leigh Block of Inland Steel, you would hear similarly enthusiastic stories about the business-related advantages of using the arts in one form or another to promote corporate goodwill.

Let’s turn now from the question of why business should involve itself, to the equally important consideration of how it can do so most effectively. The truth is that there are almost as many approaches as there are companies, ranging from the modest to the monumental.

For sheer expansiveness of concept, it would be hard to match the program of S.C. Johnson & Son. This company decided it wasn’t simply enough to encourage American art; it wanted to encourage artists. So, it bought more than 100 canvasses of
consistently high quality, embracing all the important styles and trends in contemporary American painting. As a gesture of good-will toward people everywhere, this notably fine and varied collection was sent on a world tour to be seen by millions in London, Paris, Rome, Vienna, Athens, and Tokyo. Recently it was donated to the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution where Americans will have the pleasure of viewing it in the months and years to come.

Symphonic music was the particular area selected by the Schlitz Brewing Company. The firm underwrote a series of free summer concerts by the New York Philharmonic. The first concert in Central Park attracted 75,000 people, the largest audience ever to hear a symphony concert anywhere.

The roster of corporate sponsors of symphonies, operas, and ballets is expanding rapidly. For years, Americans regarded these more or less as the entertainment of the sophisticated few—or as my Harvard undergraduate friend, Cleveland Amory, put it, “like a husband with a foreign title: expensive to support, hard to understand, and therefore a supreme social challenge.”

But lately, 26 companies in the Detroit area contributed to underwrite a reorganization of the Detroit Symphony. The Pantene Company won wide recognition for its sponsorship of a ballet production, the American Export and Isbrandtsen Lines for an opera, and Dell Publishing for Shakespeare in the Park. Some 360 companies gave almost 10 million for the construction of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

Obviously, not every business can pick up the bill for an international art show, a concert series, or a Shakespearean festival. But surely each one can re-examine its own activities in the light of the opportunities which are within its grasp.

For instance, every company has an opportunity to project a corporate identity that is clear, forceful, and unmistakably individual. When the identity scheme is artistic and is a planned one, so that each visual element is blended with the others, the result can be quite striking. This can find expression in many forms—in fresh concepts for buildings, offices, showroom displays, furniture, advertising, brochures, letterheads, and of course in products themselves.

Without question the arts provide a fertile field for building the corporation’s image. It has been estimated that the business community in the United States and Canada spends more than $600 million a year on public relations. If only a small expenditure were directed into the field of the arts, the arts would receive over $30 million annually from this source alone. Added to the total support now received through corporate gifts, it would more than double the business community’s present contribution to culture.

Businesses can see to it that their products are tastefully and well designed and that the appeal made through advertisements and other media caters to something more than the lowest common denominator. The level of general merchandise today is certainly higher, in aesthetic terms, than it was 25 years ago. This represents a conscious effort on the part of business. It means that businessmen have come to accept the fact that adopting high standards of artistic excellence in seemingly unimportant items of everyday life not only contributes to raising standards of public taste, but can also pay off in terms of the profit and loss statement. For example, much of our advertising and commercial art has been improved by first-rate typography and photography, as well as by the influx of ideas from other fields such as painting and sculpture.

The architecture of a company’s buildings can contribute enormously to its environment—or, if poor in quality, can equally well detract from it. Good design can transform a whole area, and provide relief and refreshment for both the eye and the spirit. Those who have discovered this fact and have acted accordingly will be blessed for it by generations to come. But, alas, we have only to look around us here in New York to realize that far too many have still to learn from this lesson.
In the area of financial contributions, each company can well afford to take a fresh look at the ground rules it has established for corporate giving. It is a curious but demonstrable fact that while health, education, and welfare organizations are now widely regarded as “safe” beneficiaries, cultural groups have not quite achieved the same measure of respectability.

A variety of reasons are offered for this phenomenon. One of the most popular is summed up in the plaintive query: “What would the stockholders say?”

Actually, companies that are major supporters of culture and arts have encountered very little objection from this source. The fact is that many stockholders, as individuals, are heavily engaged in cultural activities and understand the urgent need for corporate backing.

Only once can I recall a stockholder raising an objection, at an annual meeting, about the art program at Chase Manhattan. She had stopped off at our ground-floor banking office to cash a check and her eye has been caught by a somber abstraction on one of the walls.

“Please, Mr. Rockefeller,” she said, “let’s have no sad paintings down on the banking floor among the living. Let’s move them up to the Trust Department where they specialize in the estates of the dead!”

Another reason cited by some companies for not contributing is that culture and the arts are controversial. Take a firm stand, they say, and you are sure to alienate some groups who can hurt your business.

In our own case, this has not been so. Most customers coming into our head office or our branches have either expressed themselves in favor of our art work or have accepted it with stoic silence. We have no evidence to date of anyone closing a checking or savings account because he disagreed with the Art Committee’s selections.

Recently some of our more sensitive individuals in the bank had qualms in this regard when the committee selected a piece of sculpture by Jason Seley for our ground-floor concourse. They were worried over the fact that the sculptures readily identifiable raw materials were automobile bumpers. Curious about the reaction, I watched customers milling around the piece the day it was put up. One of the few critical comments I overheard was from a taxi driver. “They must have picked up those bumpers in Jersey,” he said “because after New York accidents there isn’t that much of the car left.”

I feel it would be enormously helpful for representatives of business and the arts to exchange views face to face, to seek new ideas from each other, to clarify misunderstandings and explore new possibilities.

Still another reason given for not contributing is that now that the Federal Government has moved into the field with its National Endowment for the Arts, there is no longer any need for corporate support. Personally, I am heartened to see the government taking an active hand in encouraging artists. This has worked out satisfactorily in several major countries around the globe, and I think it is a salutary development here at home where we are dedicated to maintaining a healthy balance between public and private endeavor. But the funds appropriated thus far by Congress for the National Endowment are very modest indeed. The Endowment is expected to run a nationwide program on a budget that is less than that of the Metropolitan Opera. By contrast, Austria’s government spends more on the Vienna State Opera than on its entire Foreign Service. So I don’t believe the U.S. Government’s present role as a cultural “angel” will appreciably lessen the need for corporate support.

The fact is that sources from which the arts have traditionally drawn their support—primarily wealthy individuals and foundations—are no longer able to cope with the growing needs, and not enough companies have moved in to take up the slack. The recent Panel Report, sponsored by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, on the Problems and Prospects of the Performing Arts brought forth some disturbing and challenging facts. Reflecting the examination by concerned and expert citizens of the status of the theater, the dance and music in America, it noted that only about half of the nation’s businesses contribute anything to the performing arts. Altogether, only a tiny fraction of corporate giving goes to meet cultural needs—less than $25 million in total. And a survey by the National Industrial Conference Board has pointed out that contributions to the arts in 1965 amounted to less than three cents of each corporate philanthropic dollar. The result is that progress has been to slow to sustain the necessary “breakthrough” to a dynamic growth in the arts.
Corporate financial contributions to the arts are in roughly the same situation now that contributions to higher education were a dozen or so years ago. At that time, the foundations became concerned about the problem and resolved to do something about it. They helped set up a Council for Financial Aid to Education to encourage greater voluntary support of colleges and universities, with special emphasis on corporate participation. It is no mere coincidence, I am sure, that over the past decade corporate contributions to higher education have increased by more than 150 percent.

Here, in the presence of so many distinguished leaders of business and industry, I would like to propose that we seriously consider the establishment of a comparable organization for the arts—a Council on Business and the Arts.

Such a Council, drawn from the ranks of businessmen knowledgeable in the arts, cultural leaders, and representative artists, could provide strong impetus and clearly defined direction for what is often rather haphazard progress.

As I see it, this organization would devote itself to broadening the base of corporate support through four main avenues. First, it would conduct research on a national basis to provide statistical analyses of the voluntary support being generated on behalf of the arts. These reports would furnish and authoritative yardstick for the appraisal of progress being made in the arts.

Second, it would provide expert counseling for business firms seeking to initiate new programs or expand existing ones. Such counseling could range from comprehensive program analyses and recommendations to special detailed treatment of varied kinds of aid.

Third, it would carry on a nationwide program of public information to keep corporations informed of opportunities that exist in the arts, and to appraise the artistic community of what corporations are doing in their particular fields.

Fourth, it would work to increase the effectiveness of cultural organizations in obtaining voluntary support from business and industry, and to encourage the involvement of more businessmen as trustees of cultural groups.

Quite frankly, it has been my observation that some cultural organizations don’t always make the most intelligent and forceful case for themselves when they seek corporate support. Their reasoning is often fuzzy, their documentation fragile. Even the most public-spirited corporation has, I think, a right to expect the organization seeking its help to prove that it has competent management, a realistic budget and workable plans to attain immediate objectives as well as long-range goals.

I feel it would be enormously helpful for representatives of business and the arts to exchange views face to face, to seek new ideas from each other, to clarify misunderstandings and explore new possibilities. It would help bridge the gap between the sometimes rigid mentality of the businessman and the creative spirit of the artist. Both sides could benefit far more from constructive critical interest than from biased attack or hostile neglect.

Of necessity, the concept of a Council on Business and the Arts must be outlined here in its broadest terms. Yet I would hope that the basic idea has sufficient validity to justify further exploration of its possibilities. What a resounding acknowledgement this would be that the enhancement and development of the arts are worthy objectives for the exercise of corporate social responsibility. Too often the tendency is to regard the arts as something pleasant but peripheral. I feel the time has come when we must accord them a primary position as essential to the nation’s well-being.

In our increasingly mechanized and computerized world, the arts afford a measure of consolation and reassurance to our individuality, a measure of beauty and human emotion that can reach and move most men. They are indispensable to the achievement of our great underlying concern for the individual, for the fullest development of the potential hidden in every human being.

Among our own people and those I talk with from other nations, there is insistent questioning about the significance of our material advances. What does it matter, they ask, that America has the largest Gross National Product or the biggest atom smasher or the fanciest automobiles? What does it matter that, in the words of Archibald MacLeish, “we have more things in our garages and kitchens and cellars that Louis XIV has in the whole of Versailles?”

Are these hallmarks of a truly great society? Clearly, they are not.

The ultimate dedication to our way of life will be won, I am convinced, not on the basis of economic achievements alone but on the basis of those precious yet intangible elements which enable the individual to live a fuller, wiser, more satisfying existence. I know of no other arena in which you and I can spend our time and talents and energies more rewardingly.
Americans for the Arts is the nation’s leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America. With more than 50 years of service, we are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.