

Disputation CCLV

November 10, 2022

Dearest Peucinians,

The greatest (American) architect Frank Lloyd Wright once wrote, “The mother art is architecture. Without an architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization.” This evening, we ask what it means to have an art of one's *own*. If, as we did last week, choose to live close to our mortal end, how can we take our short time to create meaning that nourishes ourselves and a communal soul? What art — that highest expression of life — is left to be made in a world already full of beauty and talented artists? When we lay down for our final sleep, will we know that we have engaged in the creation of something transient, personal, and genuine? Or will we perish a passive enjoyer of great art, but forever below it? President Lincoln calls us to action, to shirk the artistic malaise...

RESOLVED: ~~CLOSE~~ BURN THE WEST GALLEY (of the national gallery of art)

Affirmative: President Abraham Lincoln ‘24

Negative: Chief Kondiaronk ‘24

We live in a society where art is decidedly a sideshow. Bowdoin asks we take only one VPA, we build [the bat cave](#), and parents seem to smile but grimace at non-stem degrees. Art is respectable but only if it comes with millions of dollars. America, or any part of the world, seems to lack any unifying artistic movement. The great cause of this calamity declares the Affirmative, is the ease with which our erotic longing for beauty is fulfilled. As a people, we always can go and enjoy the work of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Picasso, Dali, Khalo, Virgil, Milton, Hisaishi, Shakespeare... the list goes on. The beautiful work of the world fills our very own Museum and our collective minds. But what of us, the United States, [the Usonian](#)?

Lincoln is tired of the imported art which sits in the West Galley. That which robs us of the pain and the suffering of having a desire for the beautiful unquenched. Once people journeyed, pilgrimed even to see the beauty of *The Alba Madonna*, yet Lincoln could see it in a 20-minute metro ride this summer. The ability as a people to see that which is beautiful takes us out of the only conducive state to great artistic creation. The Affirmative stills see value in this art which is not his “own”. While Lincoln does not fear it for what it is, he does have grave concern about how we as a people respond to it. The people of democracy, the democratic man, fails to foresee the consequences of enjoying beautiful art. Most will let the art satiate them. Great art should serve as means to creation, not ends in itself. But we treat them like ends when it fulfills our passions and quickly we become silent students instead of peers and collaborators. The artistic promise of Usonia is forever stunted by being spoiled rotten.

The affirmative wants to head into the unknown alone. Why do we need all this great art? Why can we not just sit with the Pines, what would happen? To live free from custom or convention, we are forced to create a meaningful connection with nature. Instead of our muse being the shadows of Europe, it can become nature. A nature that runs so deep in us all it furnishes our minds. Deprivation from the influence of others' art leads to flourishing as each person begins to create their own art. The desire to create art will penetrate all. Perhaps we could reform to a time where art is not the language (and tax evasion) of elites, but of the common man. A way for all to philosophize, to find meaning and dignity. As a nation, we are being pulled apart. Art can channel these artistic passions to unify us. A regime that now feels more fragile than ever could become more stable, but only if we let ourselves desire it without its immediate fulfillment.

The negative is not persuaded by this pessimistic view of democratic man. Instead, when one can engage with great art they are ennobled and inspired to respond. Instead, we suffer from an educational problem. Shakespeare is taught by stuffy professors who cannot communicate the democratic, the beautiful, and the queer aspects of Shakespeare. How hubristic is it to expect us to be able to turn away from the great art and wisdom of this world and be able to surpass it? To reject it castrates culture.

While the American urban sprawl is detestable, even our best creators, Hopper, O’Keeffe, Warhol, Thoreau, and Whitman could only reach heights standing on the shoulders of giants. What is Whitman without the mind of Europe? To let Nature become our muse may not wholly be better than the great minds of this world. To become too close to nature as mere mortals is misguided. We need some separation, some artifice to function, to be stable. Otherwise, becoming too close to nature may lead to our own destruction as seen in the Actaeon myth. Instead, become learned, and the people of democracy will engage in the yearning to transcend their time. To commune with the universal truths of art, which are more easily conversed with in dialogue with previous Greats. America will not have Shakespeare. If we truly could see him for what his, perhaps, someone we may go beyond Shakespeare.

This is not a disputation about architecture, or exclusively American. But a question about what our relationship to Great art is, and how we can create it. I look forward to seeing you tonight—I have a feeling we all have quite a bit to learn and discover.

Peucinian Society Disputation CCLV
Thursday, November 10th, 7:45pm*
Faculty Room, 3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall**
Business Casual Attire Encouraged***

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus,

John Langshaw Austin

*Members are encouraged to socialize beginning at 7:45; orations will begin promptly at 8:10.

**Like many of the College’s activities and classes, Disputations are held in an inaccessible space, reachable only by stairs. If you would like to attend and this poses a challenge for you, contact the Society President at hredelma@bowdoin.edu

***In the spirit of Machiavelli, members have traditionally “take[n] off [their] clothes of day... [and] put on [their] regal and courtly garments” to demarcate Thursday evenings as a special time to “enter the courts of ancient men.” Interpretation of elevated dress varies widely by identity and culture. While encouraged, it is never required nor expected. Above all else, whatever form it may take, come dressed in garments that allow comfortable participation in a rigorous intellectual conversation amongst friends.