

The American Vision

With the approaching Bicentennial, there is a lot of talk about American art. Almost every proposal includes an American art show, and the rummaging and ransacking of museum cellars and attics have already begun. For too long, Americans have thought of their native work as a poor second to European sources. But the best American work reveals a fresh vision, gentle insights, incisive reporting and surprising beauties. American art is due for a stunning re-evaluation with Bicentennial attention.

But what about American artists? How do we really treat their legacy? Too often it is cash over culture. Plans are being made to disperse a treasury of George Caleb Bingham drawings because the St. Louis Mercantile Library needs money, and it may be necessary to break up this incomparable collection for the highest bidders. Bingham immortalized the life and light of the Mississippi; what the library holds is an esthetic and historical archive that has its greatest meaning in the way it defines and expresses a time and a place in the American past with superb effect.

Similarly, the work of one of America's greatest architects, the late Louis Kahn, will have to be dispersed for the commercial market to satisfy the debts of his estate unless an alternative solution is found. A bill currently in the Pennsylvania Legislature would appropriate money to keep the Kahn drawings together as a public trust. Both Yale and the University of Texas want them, but the Kahn drawings belong in Philadelphia, his adopted city, as the Bingham drawings belong, and should stay, in St. Louis, their native habitat.

In each case, however, individual examples are so fine that buyers will pay a price to destroy the whole. And in each case, the greatest value lies as much in the completeness of their documentation as in their high artistic worth. But when funds are needed, even a patrimony has its price.

To keep these major works of the American genius together and available to scholars, to retain their collective brilliance as an American legacy, would be more than an act of cultural conscience. It would be an appropriate Bicentennial birthday gift to the nation.

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