

Ups and Downs With the Arts

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pg. 22

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There is a certain relaxed satisfaction in the public attitude toward the arts today: They're doing fine, thank you; creativity and attendance have never been greater; more people go to museums than to baseball games. The arts are indeed flourishing, regionally, nationally and internationally—but they still rest on a shaky economic base. The world-famous Edinburgh Festival, for example, had to cancel performances in a drastically underfunded program this year, while the Edinburgh City Council handed over land needed for an opera house to hotel developers. It was no contest between art and commercialism.

Sometimes cultural institutions resort to remedies that seem borrowed from a Woody Allen movie (no mean art form in itself). London's Tate Gallery will hold a lottery in order to buy two 18th-century paintings, offering a 51-piece Wedgwood dinner set and an Austin Mini automobile as prizes. The hope is that creativity and consumerism can make it together.

On this side of the ocean the news is a little better in at least one area of the arts. The General Services Administration, the agency in charge of all Federal buildings, has announced an increase from $\frac{3}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ percent

in the portion of the construction budget devoted to the commissioning or purchasing of works of art. Federal expenditures on art have fluctuated wildly, from a high of \$2 million in 1974 to a low of \$200,000 in 1976. And while $\frac{1}{2}$ percent is not exactly a princely sum (in West Europe the figure ranges from 1 to 2 percent), the important thing is that it has gone up, not down.

But Federal arts programs have always gyrated like a yo-yo—usually with a four-year spin up or down. And although the General Services Administration, with the help of the National Endowment for the Arts, has been picking outstanding examples of major American artists and installing innovative work, this does not improve the quality of some of the buildings it has commissioned. For too many, no esthetic salvation is possible. But there is an occasional winning combination, such as the superb Mies van der Rohe Federal buildings and Alexander Calder sculpture in Chicago; and any government that has the wit and spirit to put up Claes Oldenburg's Batcolumn (baseball bat as classical column, also in Chicago) can't be all bad. Administrations and city councils come and go but the arts go on forever. Let's hope.

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