

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

June 6, 1995

Remarks by
First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
at the 125th Anniversary Celebration of the
Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York, New York

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, very much. It is such a great honor and pleasure for me to join you this evening. I am someone who is a great fan of this Museum and a great fan of the Cantors.

And to have an occasion such as this where we celebrate both is special. I want to add my word of thanks to this Museum and to all of you who have supported it, nurtured it, loved it, brought it to where it is today. I have just had an opportunity to view the proposed new galleries, for the exhibition of the collection of Greek and Roman art, as I was told, the finest collection in the Western hemisphere.

And it is very exciting to see the plans for this and to know what a contribution it will make to the continuing greatness of the Museum. None of this would be possible without all of you who have been patrons and supporters of this Museum. And tonight, we honor two people who have been especially important.

Iris and Bernie have over the years stood behind so many important causes in health care and education. And tonight, we celebrate their contribution to the arts. What they have done by their generosity has not only meant that literally millions of people have been enhanced by their eye, their passion, their commitment. But it has also, I believe, served to spur others to be similarly generous with their own love of art.

For all we celebrate tonight, I must say, though, it is something of a bittersweet moment, for those of us who care deeply about the arts in our country. Because, there is, as you know well, a movement underway to undermine the cultural traditions that all of you in this room are upholding by your presence tonight.

It is sad, that there are those among us who do not appreciate what this Museum represents - what it stands for. And who more than that, do not understand that our democracy depends upon culture. We are witnessing a full-scale assault on public support of the arts which in many ways is misguided and misinformed. One of the great accomplishments of the arts in America, is that it truly has become part of the public domain.

Accessible to all, firing the imaginations of all. I was told that Bernie saw his first Rodin here in 1945 and look where it has led. There is a proud tradition in our country of both private and public support - a unique partnership unlike what exists in many other countries not only in modern times but going back through history. Where art was either the domain of the public or of the private. But instead, in America there has been this marriage.

And that is thanks, in large part, to far-sighted people, like yourselves in both the public and the private sector. The NEA has helped to bring art to millions of Americans who would not have otherwise enjoyed it.

It has supported artists and teachers, students, men, women and children, whose daily lives have been transformed by their exposure to great art. And I would like to thank Bill Lures and the trustees, and the members of the business committee and all of you who have raised your voices in the last months on behalf of public support for the arts. I hope you will continue to do so because we cannot afford to retreat from that commitment.

I would argue strongly, that, contrary to what some say, "Public support for the arts is a luxury we can no longer afford," that it is, instead, a necessity for the continuing strength and vitality of our community of culture in this country.

It is particularly ironic that those who bemoan the loss of civility and character and the loss of values in America are the first to recommend obliterating the federal agencies, in many ways cutting back on state and local support, responsible for promoting our cultural traditions.

For example, the Greek and Roman exhibition that is being worked on now, for those who at one hand, claim they support our Western traditions and Western civilization but who on the other hand would not support the kind of exhibition that would bring to life those very traditions and roots; are living, in my view, a very ironic way of demanding we do what they say, without recognizing how important it is to give other people the chance to have the same experience that they have had.

They fail to appreciate what every generation of Americans have intuitively known, that our artistic imagination is critical to our civilization and our democracy. So I hope that, as we think about this Museum tonight and the contribution of the Cantors, we will think about ways that each of us can try to continue the traditions represented. And we will think, too, about all of the children, two hundred to three hundred thousand a year, who come to this Museum. The potential artists and teachers and lovers and patrons of the arts of the future.

To make sure that their potential for appreciating what we have today, thanks to the partnership between public and private lovers of the art; will always be there. Yes, we have hard decisions to make in America; yes, they are challenging. But let us remember what really lies at the root of greatness as a people - investing in our future, caring about the best of our traditions. And let's not turn our back on that kind of legacy.

With your help, your generosity, your energy and your commitment, I don't think we will, but I know this is a challenging time. I personally wanted to be here this evening to thank the Cantors, to thank the Museum and to thank all of you for standing up on behalf of the arts in America. Thank you all.
(Applause)

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