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## Why should we care about the arts?

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THEATERS and orchestras are shuttering. Media coverage of the arts is decreasing. Brandeis is closing the Rose and possibly selling off its paintings. You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing when it comes to the arts in America. The good news is that President Obama wants to include the arts in his bailout package. Conservatives, however, are up in arms.

The one constant in all this is that art in America has come to be seen as a frill, by everyone from right-wing talk-show hosts to the trustees of Brandeis. It may seem, after the Mapplethorpe controversy or the never-ending bickering about National Endowment for the Arts and Corporation for Public Broadcasting funding, that it has always been thus. But it really wasn't all that long ago that artists graced the covers of every magazine from Time to Life, that NBC and CBS had symphony orchestras, or that Exxon and Mobil competed with each other to present the most sophisticated television they could find.

What happened? There are any number of reasons, from the economic crisis to the Reagan revolution and the merger of companies like, well, Exxon and Mobil. And perhaps the biggest factor was the growth of a social order in which entertainers are held in higher esteem than artists or intellectuals. It's ironic to see so many artists at the Rose celebrate the same pop culture mentality that often deems museums as superfluous.

But the bigger question is, why should we care? There will always be those who tell the story of their tribe, their country, or their world whether they do it on the walls of caves or on the wall-screens of our private homes. Some people would say that the writers and producers of "Lost" or "Big Love" do that job as well as any playwright or painter.

Even if that were true, there's something different about the Rose, or an Irish play at the lamentably lost Segan Theatre Company. Art creates a kind of sanctuary that, even at its most topical, takes us outside of such everyday concerns as the economic downturn, whether anyone has texted us recently, or how the Patriots could have blown the Super Bowl last year. (Sorry, the Steelers winning in the last minute brought back unpleasant memories.)

The idea isn't to escape those concerns, it's to give us the wherewithal to put all those other matters in perspective. That's as true of a Lichtenstein painting as much as a Beethoven quartet.

I can't prove it, but my bet is that those wall drawings were as important as the invention of fire to getting out of those caves. That's why we talk about arts and sciences in the same breath. No person is complete without a grounding in both creativity and logic, which is one of the primary lessons anyone learns in college.

Which brings us to a less-discussed aspect of Brandeis's decision. I'm not a big fan of tribalism, but I'm as proud of the tradition that has produced so much art, and so much philanthropy that's gone to supporting that art, as any other aspect of being Jewish. The knowledge that we aren't complete human beings without art is as important as anything in the Torah.

That the president and the trustees of a Jewish-supported university have turned their back on that lesson and are planning to shut down the Rose should be as shocking as if they closed the Berlin Chapel (the Jewish house of worship on campus). These days, the arts need all the help they can get, and if they can't get it at a university like Brandeis, maybe it's time to throw in the towel for arts in America.

But we won't, of course. Those who've tasted what a great work of art can provide will keep looking for it, wherever they can find it, on cave walls or in museums that aren't beholden to short-sighted leaders.

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