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Patronage of the Arts

Robert Spoo

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Patronage was central to Ezra Pound's conception of the just society and the health of art and literature. Early in his career, he had been the recipient, for two years, of roughly $1,000 per year provided by Margaret Cravens, an American living in Paris. Although Cravens's gift was cut short when she committed suicide in 1912, her disinterested and intelligent generosity remained for Pound a model of what the relationship between the artist and the public could be.

Pound's faith in collaborative patronage was reinforced a few years later when John Quinn, the New York lawyer and art collector,

responded to Pound's urging that he increase his support for living artists and writers. Before his death in 1924, Quinn had purchased manuscripts from T. S. Eliot and James Joyce and art by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Wyndham Lewis, Brancusi, and many others. Quinn also made outright gifts of money to artists, writers, and little magazines, occasionally in the form of a "loan" or a "salary." His indirect assistance included defending the *Little Review* editors against charges of publishing obscenity and his efforts to get Modernist authors printed in the United States. He personally saw to it that American editions of Pound's *Lustra* were issued without the deletions that had marred the English edition. Quinn's gallant, perspicacious support for living artists made him, in Pound's mind, a modern-day equivalent of Sigismondo Malatesta, the fifteenth-century Italian ruler who employed talented architects, painters, and sculptors to reconstruct the church of San Francesco in Rimini.

Pound's own support of artists and writers was generous, if sometimes disarmingly idiosyncratic. He provided cash gifts to Joyce, Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, Basil Bunting, and many others, yet his benefactions could be more concrete and direct: secondhand clothes for Joyce; meals for Eliot; a check drawn for Louis Zukofsky in the amount of a dollar. With his wife Dorothy, Pound purchased art by Lewis, Gaudier-Brzeska, and others. His most ambitious patronage scheme, dubbed "Bel Esprit," was to free Eliot from his bank job by assembling some thirty patrons to give an average of £10 per year for as long as Eliot should need it. Pound had obtained twenty-one pledges before the plan unraveled toward the end of 1922 as a result of Eliot's embarrassment and his unwillingness to throw up his bank position without a guarantee of greater financial security. Bel Esprit manifested the more quixotic side of Pound's drive to free artists from bureaucracy and drudgery. His most valuable acts of selflessness—as in his tireless work to get *Ulysses* and *Tarr* published and his brilliant editing of *The Waste Land*—are beyond monetary calculation and represent collaborative patronage in its purest form.

Pound had envisioned Bel Esprit as a sort of equity investment in genius that he likened, in a letter to Quinn, to investing in "small pearl-fishing ships . . . where there was a great deal of risk but a chance of infinite profit." With the onset of economic depression in the 1930s, Pound came to believe that support for artists must be grounded in the totalitarian state and fortified by Douglasite economics, stamp scrip, and the elimination of usury. By 1933, Pound's hopes for patronage were bound up with his faith in Mussolini, whom he saw as promoting "quality" in national production. In this respect as in others, Pound believed that Mussolini reincarnated the factive personality of Malatesta.

Pound's belief in patronage was rooted, from beginning to end, in a distrust of capitalism. His essential conception of patronage—despite the political and economic overlay of the 1930s and 1940s—was that of a voluntary collaboration of artist and benefactor that bypassed the arbitrariness and impersonality of market forces. Integrity in this relationship could be maintained if donors gave adequate but not lavish support to young writers and artists of genuine promise, thereby enabling them to concentrate solely on creating. If enough deserving beneficiaries could be brought together in cities or "supercolleges," a new Risorgimento might ensue. The antithesis of such intelligent, personalized generosity was the art world's speculation in old masters or the government's granting a stipend to a famous, aging poet. In Pound's conception, the true patron was neither speculator nor consumer but rather an equal of the artist and, in a sense, a cocreator. As he wrote Margaret Cravens in 1910 after learning of her gift to him, "[W]e both work together for the art which is bigger & outside of us" (Pound, 11).

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