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## The Arts Administration

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MAYOR [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) is not wildly fond of looking at art.

This should not insult anyone. Spectating is just not his thing.

In his pre-mayoral days, when he attended the opera with his friend Beverly Sills, he would fall into a slumber ended with a sharp jab of her elbow. During a private tour of the Vatican in 2000, the thing that piqued his interest was the church's collection of Bloomberg terminals, an aide who traveled with him recalled.

Television? Movies? Concerts? Happenings? Never, rarely (unless they feature [Will Ferrell](#)), reluctantly and not on purpose.

Even his own enormous personal art collection, which ranges from the Hudson River School to 20th-century masters, has not been built through the sorts of obsessions and longings that guide most collectors. He works with a dealer and a decorator, and has a hard time remembering when and where he even acquired some works. When it comes to choosing art for his corporation or the city - with the exception of the few times he has requested something huge, challenging and preferably next-to-impossible to install - he also delegates taste to the art experts around him.

But in the most striking paradox of his mayoralty, his administration has done more to promote and support the arts than any in a generation.

Under Mr. Bloomberg, public art has flourished in every corner of the city - from "Element E," a Roy Lichtenstein sculpture in the center of the former Tweed Courthouse, to a classic limestone statue in the Bronx, to "The Gates," set up by Christo and Jeanne-Claude last winter in Central Park, a project for which he personally lobbied for almost a decade. The city's art commission, once knee-capped by the Giuliani administration as an elitist irritant, has been empowered at the highest level, with a voice in every significant public-works project in the city.

Mr. Bloomberg doles out city arts awards, and holds quiet dinners for less-endowed arts institutions, where he woos potential donors and board members over cocktails and burgers. He has donated millions of dollars from his own fortune to various art groups. His administration has borrowed significant works of art for City Hall and the lawn of Gracie Mansion.

Even something as prosaic as the city government's directory - known as the Green Book - now features modern artworks on its cover. This year, instead of green, it will be saffron, in honor of "The Gates."

The mayor's arts agenda has infused policy-making throughout the municipal government. The administration has created the first public school arts curriculum in a generation, and created zoning policies to encourage the growth of the art galleries in Chelsea. In the process, it has developed a constituency that is perhaps more enamored of the mayor than any other special interest group in the city.

Mr. Bloomberg "clearly understands that the small dance company with the office in the choreographer's kitchen is as much a part of what makes New York the great vibrant city that it is as the Met," said Ruby Lerner, president of Creative Capital, a nonprofit arts foundation that does not receive city money.

"That the reason artists want to be here, to stay here, to come here," she added, "is the dynamic mix between the institutional and the individual, the commercial and nonprofit, the flow back and forth, the incredible diversity here, aesthetic, cultural - the striving aspiration of all, at every level, to set the highest standards."

Beyond that, Mr. Bloomberg knows, art brings in tourists and deep-pocketed sophisticates. World-class cities have buildings designed by famous architects, controversial public art pieces and passels of van Goghs. World-class cities in turn attract large companies, community investment and good international press.

Art, in short, is good business.

"It's not about personal aesthetics," said Patricia E. Harris, Mr. Bloomberg's closest aide and the force behind much of his art agenda. "I think it is very pragmatic."

Nothing in particular about Mr. Bloomberg's 2001 campaign suggested he would place an emphasis on the arts. Indeed, in his first budget, Mayor Bloomberg hacked away at the operating budget of the Department of Cultural Affairs, infuriating some of the city's largest arts institutions. He reneged on the Giuliani administration's promise to turn the spectacular 19th-century Tweed Courthouse into the Museum of the City of New York, opting instead to put the Department of Education there. The building has too much natural light for art to be properly viewed, he said just last week, adding: "What is more important than our children!"

Still, as one of his first acts as mayor, he dispensed with the "decency commission" that Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#)

had set up to contemplate standards for museums, formed in the wake of the "Sensation" show at the Brooklyn Museum. And he mentioned to Ms. Harris that he would like to see "The Gates" - for which, as a Central Park Conservancy board member, he had lobbied unsuccessfully - finally erected.

A few months later, men were seen wheeling giant bubble-wrapped objects into City Hall, past the security desk and into the mayor's side of the building. With little fanfare, the city had borrowed nine paintings and three sculptures from the Whitney Museum of American Art. The mayor's ceremonial office, a pair of tobacco-scented rooms where predecessors hammered out deals, is now basically an art gallery. Rare works from the city's archives dot the rest of the building, a striking contrast to municipal offices that are usually painted the color of a pediatrician's restroom and adorned with ripped maps.

Later that year, he revived the Doris C. Freedman Awards, named for one of the city's first cultural affairs commissioners. Even the grating hold music at the City Hall switchboard was replaced by [Wynton Marsalis](#) performing with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

The larger city was brought in on the change, as public artworks began popping up all over the five boroughs with the Bloomberg administration's direct help. What was going on here?

In truth, no one much noticed.

The city was lurching toward a fiscal crisis, and disconsolate over the recent terrorist attacks. Firehouses were closing in Brooklyn, and normal people were staring suspiciously into the eyes of the passengers seated next to them on the A train, looking for signs of ill intent. There was not a lot of chatter about lofty arts awards, or the growing number of wacky large-scale sculptures dotting the city's parks.

Then, word leaked out about something that gets every New Yorker's attention: large sums of money. It was disclosed that Mr. Bloomberg had given \$10 million of his own money to the Carnegie Corporation to benefit 162 small and medium-size cultural institutions around the city, in awards ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000. (The mayor has repeated this gesture three times; the latest gift was \$20 million.)

The donation blunted criticism about his budget-cutting. But it also sealed the view that he was friendly to the arts.

"The Carnegie gift was very smart," said Gabriella de Ferrari, an New York art critic and curator. "He is there for the art world. And remember, some of the things we do are not exactly uncontroversial."

That, it seems, is part of the appeal.

The mayor of New York is the consummate insider, but Mr. Bloomberg relishes his self-generated reputation as the outsider insider, the person who owes no one anything, who pushes on doors that others had fastened shut. He is fond of boasting about how he started his own company against the advice of others and only after being fired with flourish from Salomon Brothers in 1981. Even his first mayoral campaign began as something of a large citywide joke.

While his life choices have led him to wealth and power, his aides say he is endlessly intrigued with anyone who defies convention in pursuit of some large-scale goal. Mayor Giuliani denounced "Sensation," but Mr. Bloomberg attended its opening reception with Ms. Harris.

Last year, Kate D. Levin, his cultural affairs commissioner, encouraged him to see "The Hard Nut," Mark Morris's postmodern take on "The Nutcracker," at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The off-beat, slightly twisted piece left him riveted. "He'll say, 'It never occurred to me someone could think that way,'" Ms. Levin said. "He was really intrigued."

Some argue that while Mr. Bloomberg may favor established venues, he has been openly hostile to artists plying their wares on the street, even after a court ruling in their favor. "He and his commissioners have continued to harass street artists in every park in New York City," said Robert Lederman, who is president of Artists' Response to Illegal State Tactics. "I realize that Mike Bloomberg is an arts collector that has contributed to many arts institutions but that doesn't translate into money for artists. We believed he would automatically have a great deal of respect for artists, but we have not found that to be the case."

The city's rising fortunes aren't uniformly beneficial to artists, either. As the art market has heated up, so has the real estate market, driving struggling painters, experimental dance troupes and shoestring theater groups further out of the neighborhoods they have traditionally occupied - not just the East Village and Soho in Manhattan, but now Williamsburg and Red Hook in Brooklyn, too. That has been the city's loss as well: during this administration, some artist communities have been forced into exile, reassembling in Jersey City or Poughkeepsie.

"What was so great about New York when I came here 15 years ago was it was still possible for artists to find places to work and live that were affordable," said Randy Wray, a painter and sculpture who lives in Williamsburg, and has moved four times as rents have risen. "For a number of years, graduate students I met around the country told me that they wanted to move to New York, and that seems to be diminishing. I wonder what impact that might have on the New York art world."

As for the art that does capture the mayor's attention, the unifying theme is not school or period, but rather sheer scale.

At his company, Bloomberg L.P., then on Park Avenue, he decided the open area to the right of the elevator banks looked a little bare. After looking at several proposals, he opted for a 20-foot glass work by the artist Michael Scheiner - a sprawling installation that hung from the ceiling and spanned, octopuslike, across a staircase and hovered over the conference tables. The artist worked in the middle of the night for months to install it, and Mr. Bloomberg would check the progress each morning when he arrived at 7.

As a board member of Lincoln Center in 1999, Mr. Bloomberg used his largess and lobbying to get "The Peony Pavilion," a 20-hour classic Chinese opera, to New York after officials in Shanghai refused to allow the performers to leave [China](#).

As mayor, he saw a huge sculpture in the Seagram Building, and decided that the former Tweed Courthouse needed

one too. The result is the 50-foot-tall sculpture by Roy Lichtenstein, part of the artist's series called "Five Brushstrokes."

And visiting Athens in 2002, Mayor Bloomberg was fascinated by the Acropolis, but much the same way he had been with Visy Paper, a recycling plant he toured on Staten Island. It is the mechanics, the feat of engineering, the bureaucratic obstacles that intrigue him.

As for issues that require hours of contemplation, his friends, his aides and reporters can all attest, he is simply not built for them. (He can barely even suffer through the civic duty of Mets and Yankees games, and then only with beer and ample doses of popcorn.)

Mr. Bloomberg attends Broadway shows because that is what mayors do, but has been overheard more than once complaining about it - don't get him started on "Hairspray." "He is more into participation than observation," said his spokesman, Edward Skyler. "That is just the way he is. He would rather be running than watching sports. He would rather be learning Spanish than watching a movie. He would rather be making policy than listening to speeches."

His own art collection includes 19th- and 20th-century paintings, porcelain objects, a Lichtenstein sculpture, and two preparatory drawings of "The Gates," one of them 96 inches tall. "I don't have any more wall space left and I just don't have time," said Mr. Bloomberg during a brief chat last week. "I get home at 11, I am up to run at 5, out by 7. Who has time?"

When it comes to choosing most of the art that decorates the city's landscape - like the five Isamu Noguchi sculptures now on the Gracie Mansion lawn - Mr. Bloomberg relies on the management technique he applies to the rest of governing: he delegates.

"I think he is knowledgeable about contemporary art," said Christo in an interview, "because he is surrounded by people who are knowledgeable about contemporary art."

Ms. Harris, who oversaw Mr. Bloomberg's philanthropy at his company, is the city's unofficial curator, selecting the works the mayor ultimately approves for City Hall, Gracie Mansion, city publications and elsewhere. He has allowed Commissioner Levin - who is married to the sculptor Mark di Suvero - to extend her reach to numerous areas of government.

She helped to develop a zoning policy that let mid-block building owners in Chelsea transfer their air rights to the corner of blocks, a move that left mid-block galleries insulated against rent inflation. Her development of a mandated arts curriculum for public school students is the first of its kind since the city gutted arts education during the 1970's fiscal crisis.

Ms. Levin is also working with the city agency that preserves and develops housing on a program to address the long-standing problem of artists who are being priced out of the neighborhoods they help gentrify.

City agencies have also been instructed to smooth the path for artists to to let weird stuff happen without impediment. Tom Eccles, the former director of the Public Art Fund, a nonprofit group that presents art around the city, remembered a procession from Midtown to Queens to celebrate the temporary movement of the Museum of Modern Art in 2002. "We needed the support of the police department," he said, "and that would have been unthinkable under the Giuliani administration because you weren't given that kind of platform and were not treated with that level of respect."

While posing for a photograph in front of the Lichtenstein sculpture, Mr. Bloomberg mused about when he bought his own far smaller Lichtenstein piece, "one of the pencils." He could not recall when, or from whom. "I think I saw it in a catalog," he said, "no, maybe it was in a gallery. No, it was definitely a catalog."

And then, he was off.