

## WILLIAM DUNLAP AND THE SEARCH FOR AN AMERICAN AUDIENCE

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William Dunlap (1766-1839) was, at one time or another, a dramatist, theatre manager-director, painter engraver, historian, biographer, essayist, novelist, poet and diarist. He was no mere dilettante, but a hard-working professional of some importance in several fields. It was Dunlap's misfortune to make his major contributions in drama, a field neglected by American literary historians, and painting, a field relatively neglected by everyone but art historians. Dunlap's endeavors kept him perennially insolvent in his lifetime; they have brought him only very limited recognition from posterity. He retains his place in histories of American art and drama--the Addison Gallery sponsored a Dunlap exhibition in 1939--but the last fifty years have seen barely five original, scholarly works of importance on Dunlap.<sup>1</sup>

Who was William Dunlap, and why was he important? He was a garrulous, energetic, moralizing, tolerant man, a friend of Cooper and Irving, a brother-in-law of Timothy Dwight, an inattentive student of Benjamin West. He was America's first professional dramatist, writing over fifty performed plays and translations, including America's second professional comedy, The Father; or, American Shandyism (1788). He was associated with New York's Park Theatre for over fourteen years, serving as sole manager-director from 1798 to 1805. During this period, he wrote most of his plays and all of his good ones, including his best-known drama, Andre (1798). Blind in one eye from a childhood accident, he supported his wife and family for much of his life by painting portraits and huge religious exhibition pictures. Well thought of by his fellow artists, he was a founder of the National Academy of Design. Most of his life was spent in these two arts, but he attempted many other art forms, also figuring briefly as a merchant, a publisher and a government official. Among his other works, his Life of Charles Brockden Brown (Philadelphia, 1815), our first professional novelist, is a valuable if unreadable source of material on Dunlap's close friend. Readable, amusing and extremely valuable are Dunlap's History of the American Theatre (New York, 1832) and his History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States (New York, 1834).

This wide experience in arts and letters and Dunlap's extensive acquaintanceships among artists and literary men make Dunlap a figure of significance in our cultural history, and lend interest to his comments on the problems of

the arts in America. He was not a theorist by inclination, but he usually confined his comments to the art he was immediately concerned with at the time. Nevertheless, the arts did face certain problems in common in the period following the Revolutionary War, and Dunlap's writings show that he saw these problems as open to similar solutions. At this time, I would like to examine Dunlap's attitude towards one common problem of the arts of the new nation: finding an American audience.

Today, each artist must "find" his own audience somewhere in the confusion of audiences ranging along the cultural spectrum from High Culture to Popular Culture. Different audiences provide different degrees of financial support, put different pressures on the artist's integrity. The serious artist is constantly tempted to pander to the popular audience. But the artists of Dunlap's generation were called upon virtually to create an audience for their art. This was the generation which established our first professional theatres, making possible the growth of American drama. It was this generation which established America's first art schools and permanent galleries for the education of artists and the improvement of public taste. Public support had to be found for these ventures. It was a difficult task, and many artists fled to England in discouragement. Those who remained found themselves forced to make concessions to popular taste--not for money but for survival.

Dunlap's experience illustrates the hazards faced by the early American artist. In the theatre, he had hoped to uplift the popular taste by presenting superior fare. Instead, he found himself writing frantically to produce new attractions, catering to the masses with plays and spectacles he thought "vile trash," and ending his independent management bankrupt for lack of customers.<sup>2</sup> As a painter, he was forced to travel from Charleston to Montreal in search of portrait commissions. Some of his religious exhibition pictures brought in large fees, but Calvary (1828), the product of three years' labor and designed to be his masterpiece, was a financial failure. He was distressed by those who considered artists automatically immoral or socially inferior. His mature reflection upon the difficulties he had experienced in the arts is embedded in his writings of the 1830's, as the aging artist looked back over his life while preparing to write his histories of art and the theatre.

The first problem was to convince the general public that Americans could produce true works of art. The Revolution had brought a break in the development of native art: independence brought a sudden upsurge of cultural nationalism. Critics demanded that American artists produce a new and original American art.<sup>3</sup> Yet Americans preferred to buy and praise what had been bought and praised in England or France. As late as 1828, James Fenimore Cooper was to complain of "the overwhelming influence of British publications."<sup>4</sup> Similar conditions prevailed in the theatre, where William Dunlap was not above taking advantage of the public's prejudices. His Fountainville Abbey (1795) "was not announced as the publication of an American, and we find in a publication of the day the following remark. 'Can it be possible that

the author thinks that such an avowal would operate against it?' There can be no doubt that he did think so, and no doubt but that such an avowal at that time would have been enough to condemn the piece."<sup>5</sup> His translations from the French and German frequently gained in popularity by being thought importations from English translators, when, in fact, Dunlap had taken only the title and list of characters from the London bill.<sup>6</sup> In 1799, after Dunlap had put forward a series of translations from Kotzebue, the "German Shakespeare," he produced a play of his own, based on Dekker--"and as it was supposed to be one of Kotzebue's, though nothing was said to mislead the public or the performers, it was received with great applause, and extolled as the best of the great German dramatist's productions."<sup>7</sup> In painting, the prestige of England was considered a *sine qua non* for artistic merit.

The native artist faced other problems. Painters, returning to America from European study, imbued with supremacy of historical painting, found little market, at first, for anything but portraits, and many of them were forced to take up sign-painting, teaching or business to keep body and soul together. The theatre returned to the newly independent colonies to find itself hemmed in by restrictive regulations of states and municipalities. To whom should these artists look for succor? "The artist will address his works to the enlightened men who can appreciate their value," said Dunlap.<sup>8</sup> "The fine arts can be relished by none who have not previously attained knowledge, taste and refinement; and in proportion to these attainments is the pleasure the arts impart. . . . The uninstructed labourer in civilized society is nearly as dead to those objects which fill us with delight, as the savage. But the man who reads--who delights in books--the educated man--feels the want of the works of the poet, the painter, the sculptor, the engraver and the architect."<sup>9</sup> This was an appeal to a limited class, the upper class of American society. "The wise and the good" must frequent the theatre, and the painter must look to "the rich man, rich in taste and knowledge, as well as in the gifts of this world."<sup>10</sup> If this class of men did not support the theatre, "the manager must please the vulgar or shut his theatre."<sup>11</sup> The common man of Dunlap's day was best lured by "shameful exhibitions of monsters and beasts, and other vulgar shows," by which the "state was degraded."<sup>12</sup>

These views were forced on Dunlap by harsh experience; a fervent republican, he did not share the elitist views of his brother-in-law, Timothy Dwight. They do not represent a total abandonment of faith in the people; shortly after writing them, he could write Cooper in Europe, advising Cooper to "write more for the million."<sup>13</sup> Certainly, he did not miss the influence of a court aristocracy, which he thought immoral: "But our English ancestors were not yet a nation of republicans. Monarchy was restored--licentiousness prevailed and the state became a sink of profligacy."<sup>14</sup> Experience had convinced Dunlap that the logical audience for American art was one of truly educated individuals from America's business and professional class.

The artist was to turn to this group because it was equipped to take pleasure in serious art, not because it was socially superior. English society set the artist in a class apart from the respectable people who patronized him, and the colonial society had imitated English manners in this respect as best it could. Dunlap detested the institution of patronage with its overtones of "protection." He thought it a survival of "the ages of barbarism," when "The poet, the musician, the painter and the player looked to one ignorant prince or baron for protection from injuries threatened by another. . . . The brute of the good old times, and the fool of the improved modern day, have thought, and would have it thought, that artists are their inferiors."<sup>15</sup> England had retained this arrangement, thinking that "the descendants of the military robbers who conquered the land; of the minions, mistresses, or spurious offspring of their kings . . . should be sought and acknowledged as the necessary protectors of those whose knowledge and skill is now the boast of England."<sup>16</sup> Even worse, England had exported this way of thinking to her colonies, so that David Douglass, "by descent and education a gentleman," had been forced "to lick the dust before a gracious permission was granted" to open a theatre in New York City in 1758.<sup>17</sup>

Dunlap thought this artist-audience relationship wholly inappropriate in the new republic. He was furious that the New York City magistrates of 1785 had behaved towards Lewis Hallam exactly as their predecessors of 1758, looking for a precedent to "the government which their wiser countrymen had overthrown, because it shackled the mind of man and bowed him down to assumed superiority."<sup>18</sup> The assumption of this patronizing attitude on the part of the American Academy of Fine Art, whose stockholders were "honoured with the term patron," helped bring on the secession of artists to form the National Academy.<sup>19</sup> Said Dunlap: "Patronage! degrading word! Only used by presumptuous ignorance--only submitted to by sycophancy." In America, "Every artist who has the feelings of a man, or more especially of a republican man, will spurn from him the offer of patronage, as debasing to himself, to his art, and to his country."<sup>20</sup> The artist who submitted to this kind of relationship was little better than he who proposed it: "Can there be anything so contemptible, as a sycophant who debases the Heaven-imparted talent intrusted to him? . . . Genius is modest, but never suffers itself to be trampled upon. It feels that it belongs to nature's aristocracy, and despises that aristocracy of mere wealth."<sup>21</sup>

In a democratic society, artist and audience stand on the same plane-- "They are equals, bestowing and receiving good. The friend will assist his friends--the man of taste will applaud and aid the artist--the artist will receive and reciprocate;--but in all this there is neither patronage nor dependence."<sup>22</sup> Even if one helps a struggling young artist to get his training in his craft, one does not become a patron; one simply contributes to one's own future satisfaction. This is even more true if one simply pays for the finished product; the man who does so "seeks for it--exchanges a part of his possessions

for it--and is as much obliged as obliging. . . . It is only the ignorant who thinks, in such a case, that he is a patron; and it is only the unworthy who considers himself patronized."<sup>23</sup> In this simple cash transaction, no one is patronized, no one protected. The artist is like any other craftsman: "The agriculturalist, the mechanic, the sailor, the cartman, the sawyer, the chimney-sweeper need no protection. When they are wanted they are sought for--so should it be with the artist; at least, let him be as independent as the last."<sup>24</sup> In a similar analogy, Dunlap compared the artist to a lawyer or a physician.<sup>25</sup>

The commodity which the artist brings to the market-place is, for Dunlap, pleasure. The ideal audience was that capable of appreciating art of the highest type. He believed that art could be used to improve public morals, but he did not hold that moral sentiments alone made good art. As a critic, he expected a work of art to give him pleasure--he dismissed his friend Brown's *Jane Talbot* (1804) as "deficient in interest," and hence not worth discussing.<sup>26</sup> He was not interested in writing closet drama; plays of his own which played badly on stage he filed away as "ineffective."<sup>27</sup> While he would not accept the judgment of the far-from-ideal audience he faced on either his own plays or those of others, he was not too proud to write an occasional pot-boiler. He does not argue that society has a special duty to promote art, and he never argues that its service to morals is an important reason for supporting it. Instead, Dunlap held that art should make its own way in a commercial world.

William Dunlap believed that "The fine arts are all of one family."<sup>28</sup> Very early in life he believed that the "sister Arts" of poetry, history and painting should "join and Mutually assist each other."<sup>29</sup> His scattered remarks on the problems of various arts help us to understand some of the common problems of early American artists. His views are of especial interest, for Dunlap's generation set many of the basic patterns in the new nation, wrestled for the first time with problems which still occupy us today.

Dunlap stands as an early example of the American artist whose political faith in the people is unbounded, but who actively dislikes popular taste in the arts. Despite his fervent republicanism, Dunlap believed that only the educated upper classes had the developed sensibility needed to appreciate serious art.

Dunlap also stands as an early example of the perils of the marketplace. In order to carry on his serious work, he was constantly forced to serve the public what it wanted--accurate portraits, sentimental melodramas. For Dunlap, despising the social connotations of patronage, the marketplace was the only possible choice. On this basis, in his lifetime, the scattered and hesitant artistic beginnings of colonial days found fruition in a complete artistic culture, however thin and provincial we may judge it to have been. After his death, his own great loves, the theatre and painting, were to prosper at the expense of considerable vulgarization. In our own century, the arts

have turned more and more to governments, foundations and universities, which have proved more willing to support uneconomic serious art than the "enlightened men" that Dunlap appealed to.

Dunlap's generation found an audience for the American arts, though not, perhaps, the ideal audience they sought. This uneasy relationship between the American artist and his audience is one of the themes which help unify American Studies. On this question Dunlap's experience and historical importance entitle him to a hearing.

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Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> The most important is Oral Sumner Coad's biography, William Dunlap (New York, 1917). Coad's "The Dunlap Diaries at Yale," Studies in Philology, XXIV (1927), 403-412, concerns diaries since published by the New York State Historical Society (1930). Three other articles deal with details of interest: A. B. Benson, "The Sources of William Dunlap's Ella, A Norwegian Tale," Scandinavian Studies, XIX (1946), 136-43; Mary Rives Bowman, "Dunlap and the 'Theatrical Register' of the New York Magazine," Studies in Philology, XXIV (1927), 413-25; Anna Wells Rutledge, "Dunlap Notes," Art in America, XXXIX (February, 1951), 36-48. Of less interest, but still scholarly, are a 1927 article by Benson, Scandinavian Studies, IX, 239-57, and H. E. Dickson, "A Misdated Episode in Dunlap," Art Quarterly (Winter, 1946), 33-36.

<sup>2</sup> Dunlap, Theatre, 295.

<sup>3</sup> Well treated in Benjamin T. Spencer, The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign (Syracuse, 1957), 25-72.

<sup>4</sup> Notions of the Americans (London, 1828), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Dunlap, Theatre, 137. Bowman argues convincingly that Dunlap himself was the reviewer quoted (see note 1).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 253-54, 297.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 265. Even the actors played better.

<sup>8</sup> Dunlap, Address to the Students of the National Academy of Design at the Delivery of the Premiums (New York, 1831), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Theatre, 67; Address, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Theatre, 277.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 212, 289.

<sup>13</sup> Diary of William Dunlap (New York, 1930), III, 625, entry for 15 October, 1832.

<sup>14</sup> Theatre, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., vi.-vii.

<sup>16</sup> Dunlap, Arts, I, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Theatre, 14.

- 18 Ibid., 59-60.  
 19 Arts, II, 278. See also Address, 17-19.  
 20 Address, 7.  
 21 Ibid., 15.  
 22 Ibid., 11.  
 23 Ibid., 8.  
 24 Arts, I, 17.  
 25 Address, 10.  
 26 Dunlap, Brown, II, 67.  
 27 Theatre, 260.  
 28 Arts, I, 2-3.  
 29 Diary, I, 12--notes made in 1788.

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## WE ARE NOTABLE AND SUBSTANTIVE

(not to say immodest)

"PUBLICATIONS AND PROMOTION. Our media of communication continue to proliferate, and we now have a number of means for specialized purposes. Many of the chapters have excellent newsletters, which are sent to their own members but to other chapter officers as well. One, the Midcontinent American Studies Journal, has become a notable biannual magazine publishing substantive articles and reviews. The national office issued two numbers of the newsletter American Studies, the second, now in the mails, is the subvention of the Wemyss Foundation and costing us nothing. As usual, we have published an American quarterly for the American Calendar--22½ pages this year--for our record of activities and announcements. We have printed and distributed

--from the Report of the Executive Secretary  
 of the American Studies Association for  
 December, 1962

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