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Mellon Dinner, Washington D.C., 4/27/89

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(Smith/Simon)  
April 18, 1989  
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PRESIDENTIAL REMARKS: MELLON DINNER  
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART  
APRIL 27, 1989

Trustees of the National Gallery, Members of the Cabinet,  
Members of the Congress, Distinguished Guests.

Thank you for that introduction, and for your generous  
welcome. And I want to say what a privilege it is to join you  
for this occasion.

In particular, let me say a word about my traveling  
companion . . . I refer, of course, to Barbara. I can testify  
that the Silver Fox wouldn't have missed this evening for all the  
paintings in the universe. After all, it was Andrew Mellon who  
observed that "Gentlemen prefer bonds."

We gather tonight in America's cathedral of the arts. And  
we meet to salute an American art collector, philanthropist,  
financier, and public servant.

In that connection, I want to say a special thanks to Paul  
Mellon. His generosity has helped create this priceless Gallery.  
And he, as much as anyone, will recall how in Herbert Hoover's

final year as President, a whimsical tale gained popular currency.

One day, the story went, Hoover was walking down the street with his Secretary of the Treasury. Suddenly, the President stopped. "Andy," he said, "I came out this morning without a cent in my pocket. Lend me a nickel, will you? I want to call up a friend."

With that, Andrew Mellon paused and reached into his pocket. "Here's a dime," he said. "Call up both of them."

Well, Andrew Mellon was a friend of art. And, today, he is making new friends for art across the United States of America.

We see those friends within these halls. In the eyes of a little girl, entranced by the magic of Degas' [Day-GAHS] Four Dancers. Or the smile of the elderly woman who finds solace in Cole's Voyage of Life. Or the two art students who debate, not always quietly, Jackson Pollock's Lavendar Mist. To them -- to us -- these works span the generations. For art is timeless; it enhances the gentler impulses of mankind.

In an abiding sense, Andrew Mellon embodied those impulses. Yes, he did well -- among our greatest Secretaries of the Treasury; a man of enormous wealth and power. But, more importantly, let us remember: He also did good.

Yes, shy and soft-voiced, Andrew Mellon was modest, unassuming. But few men have done more to make America a better, more decent place.

To this captain of industry, philanthropy spoke of justice, involvement, and love of country. For he believed charity to be among the highest planes of patriotism. Above all, Andrew Mellon knew that we are a nation, and a family. And fifty-two years ago, he donated his collection, and built this building, for us, as members of that family.

Today, more than ever, this collection remains America's family heirloom. And it shows too that in judging art, believe me, everyone's an expert.

W.W. Woolcott rhymed, for instance: "In part I pull no highbrow stuff; I know what I like, and that's enough."

Less lyric, but more acerbic, was Mark Twain. \_\_\_ years ago, he observed, "If the old masters had labeled their fruit, one wouldn't be so likely to mistake pears for turnips."

And, finally, let me recall how a kindergarten teacher once conducted a psychological test. How? By setting her students to work carving soap.

"What are you working on?" she asked one student. "A panda," the child replied. A second girl responded, "Dog." Well, finally, the teacher came to a lad whose work defied description. "What's this?" she asked. "Soap flakes," said he.

See what I mean? When it comes to art, like politics, there's no mistaking our opinions. Well, when it comes to the Mellon Collection, there's no mistaking America's opinion.

Andrew Mellon never lived to see the dedication of this building. But his spirit lives today. It reaffirms America's decency and kindness. And it celebrates what Franklin Roosevelt, dedicating this gallery, termed "the relation between the whole people of this country, and the old inherited tradition of the arts."

My friends, to enhance our country and ennoble that tradition -- this is our continuing mission as Americans. So let us meet it, and thereby honor Andrew Mellon. And let us help art enrich America -- so that America can enrich the world.

Thank you for inviting me, and for this wonderful evening. God bless you, and God bless America.

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