

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Cultural Diplomacy's Constituencies ^[1]

Cultural diplomacy has avid supporters partly because this facet of public diplomacy usually is not controversial and has a high feel-good quotient. Sending an orchestra to China or a dance troupe to Algeria has value because each such venture opens doors and minds. Reflexive resistance to cultural diplomacy is far less than occurs when more blatantly political efforts are undertaken.

Despite the perception that cultural programs constitute the softest aspects of soft power, their impact should not be underestimated. Because cultural diplomacy is perceived as nonthreatening even by many totalitarian regimes (as evidenced by North Korea's allowing the New York Philharmonic to visit in 2008), it can do much to advance the foreign policy priorities of sponsoring states.

In terms of the effects on individual recipients of this kind of diplomatic messaging, the music of George Gershwin and the paintings of Jackson Pollock speak of freedom to those who hear or see them. There is something intrinsically liberating in concerts, exhibitions, and other manifestations of culture. Beyond capitalizing on this innate appeal, the challenge for cultural diplomacy advocates is to expand the constituency for their work. Knowledgeable, committed arts aficionados can be found throughout the world, but their numbers are not large. By going beyond the easily reached audience, cultural diplomacy's impact can be multiplied.

In an earlier life, when I was assistant director of a major American art museum, I learned how important it was to build support for the arts beyond the obvious base. I was in charge of winning a bond election to fund a new museum building, and our polling revealed that among voters who did not themselves care about going to a museum, there was nevertheless strong support for a world-class facility that their children could visit. Our campaign was built upon these findings, appealing to voters to support us for their children's sake regardless of their own feelings about the significance of having a new art museum.

We won the election by a substantial margin and secured the funding needed to build a marvelous new museum, which the public has now enjoyed for nearly three decades. The lesson here for cultural diplomacy officials is to seek ways to broaden the audience to which they appeal, going beyond the "easy" support that can be found for the arts throughout the world and reaching out as well to those who at first may be only mildly or reluctantly interested but who, if convinced, can vastly expand the constituency and impact of global cultural outreach.
