

CIVILISATION IN AMERICA

More than ten years have passed since Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* premiered on public television in the United States, and the perspective of a decade is revealing. In retrospect we can appreciate how much the future of glossy, middle-brow programming—embodied subsequently in the British Broadcasting Corporation's *America*, *The Ascent of Man*, and *The Age of Uncertainty*, among others—hinged on an unheralded British art historian's essay at popular synthesis.

Had he known that his success would beckon a new era in public television, could Sir Kenneth (as he was then denominated) have maintained that even admixture of surprise and aplomb that endeared him to millions of serious-minded Americans? Perhaps the question underestimates the man's acuity while it diminishes the stakes.

It could be that Britain's very role as cultural arbiter of the English-speaking world was somehow at stake—and Clark knew it. Consider the sorry state of affairs in the cradle of Shakespeare, Milton, and Donne. Where Oxford and Cambridge once nurtured great minds, now they spawn wits. The best of them, Tom Stoppard, keeps the West End busy. The rest clutter up television and films with postgraduate silliness.

England the Entertainer—and Edifier. For, if there was little to honor in the present, the hallowed cultural heritage of centuries remained to be transformed into visual images on a cathode-ray tube and exported to the world once ruled by Britannia. The BBC rose to the occasion—not only for the glory of the Realm, but as it turned out for the instruction of the “colonies.” American public television became as dependent upon the BBC for its high-minded programs as the rest of the world upon Hollywood for its popular video entertainment.

The charming television dramatizations of English literature and history can be summarily passed over with the observation that it is surely not Alistair Cooke's U.S. citizenship papers which commend him as the perennial “host” of every imported production. It is, rather, the idea—conveyed as an image of a gentleman reclining comfortably in an overstuffed chair—that only natives of the British Isles can be, really, relaxed and at home with *Culture*. That very image became crystallized

with Kenneth Clark's chatty thirteen-part survey of European civilization since the Fall of Rome.

This is not to suggest, however, that Kenneth Clark had to overcome initial resistance on these shores. The arrival of the series was hailed as if it were a major cultural exchange—which, in a one-way sense, it was. Special advance screenings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and New York University, as well as the National Gallery of Art, drew throngs. "It's the hottest show in town," exclaimed Washington's J. Carter Brown. Not even the White House was immune to the mania: two special showings a week were scheduled in the executive mansion of Richard M. Nixon. Not to be outdone, the United States Senate purchased its own copy of the series, to be shown in the Capitol. In a seemingly superfluous if not misguided gesture, the Xerox Corporation even sponsored an hour-long special on commercial television to signal the debut of *Civilisation* on public television.

The response, when the thirteen 50-minute programs were broadcast, was predictable: large audiences, rave reviews, and a Peabody Award.

But that was not the end of it. Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Xerox provided for the subsequent free distribution of the series to colleges and universities. At the same time, the book which Kenneth Clark had fashioned out of the program scripts was released in the United States, where it worked its way up the best seller lists, finally finishing seventh among all hardbacks in 1971 (just behind *The Sensuous Woman*). Two book clubs also chose to distribute *Civilisation*, and it was eventually released in paperback. Total sales, in all of its published manifestations, reached close to a million copies.

Even more striking than the reception of the programs, perhaps, was the lionization of their creator, the on-camera guide for the entire series. Like any other visiting dignitary, Kenneth Clark was duly interviewed—even on NBC's "Meet the Press"—feted, and honored. After a near-lifetime of popular anonymity, he now became a celebrity drawing crowds of admirers. *The Saturday Review* forthrightly dubbed Clark: "a man for all media," while back home he was elevated to the peerage.

Though scarcely charismatic, the sixty-five-year-old author and curator turned out to be uniquely fitted for the role of the faithful guide on this televised tour of twelve centuries of Western European creativity.

He wore his learning lightly, thinned his scholarship with quiet wit, never hammered his serious points with bombast. Without a certain air of smug self-assurance, to be sure, Clark might not have been able to spice his visual essays with as much personal opinion. But, as it turned out, he could have said anything he pleased. For the program left the distinct impression of a gentleman entirely at home in the palaces and museums of Europe, bestowing a generous favor by permitting us to share the priceless treasures of Western art and learning for which he possessed an attachment bordering the proprietary. The image may have reflected his own experience as a curator—or merely accompanied his British accent. Regardless, in some intangible way, it gave Kenneth Clark a distinct advantage over his audience and somehow gained for him, by the conclusion of the programs, a status resembling that of a high priest of art.

None of which, of course, distracted from his achievement. Nothing like *Civilisation* had indeed ever been seen on television. But Clark's boldness extended beyond the venture into a new medium. Those who dismissed his programs as simply an illustrated history of art had not paid adequate attention. *Civilisation* is that daring rarity—even on the bookshelves—a multi-disciplinary interpretation of the course of Western creativity. The sixth program, "Protest and Communication," concentrates on literature. The ninth, "The Pursuit of Happiness," is, as Clark says, primarily about music. The last, "Heroic Materialism," emphasizes engineering. Television is a visual medium and Kenneth Clark was assuredly an art historian. Raphael and Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Vermeer, receive their due in *Civilisation*, along with Turner and Giotto and Delacroix. But there are also notable encounters with Dante and St. Francis, Erasmus and Montaigne, Mozart and Handel, as well as Voltaire and Shakespeare.

The legacy of *Civilisation* stems not from what its creator included or excluded, however, nor from the sweeping and arguable generalizations he made about movements and epochs. Clark plainly reserved for himself a certain quota of discretion in both regards. The significance of the program lies, rather, in an almost unspoken attitude, a set of unacknowledged but fundamental assumptions about culture, which permeated the series. Despite its episodic structure, *Civilisation* possesses a unity. Kenneth Clark's interpretation of Western intellectual and cultural development traces a single trajectory that can be perceived clearly now from the distance of more than a decade.

As a guide to the Western tradition, Kenneth Clark makes no secret of his own sympathies. In almost his first breath, he adopts the classic polarities of “civilisation” and “barbarism,” and quotes approvingly the words of his master, John Ruskin:

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.<sup>1</sup>

Created objects don't lie: it is in its art, above all, that a society reveals its character. This doesn't mean that civilization is synonymous with art, however. Barbarous societies, too, can produce great works of art. But, by definition, they lack the moral and spiritual values that are the civilized ideal. What distinguishes civilization is the felt need to develop those qualities of thought and feeling which, in Clark's words, approach “an ideal of perfection—reason, justice, physical beauty, all of them in equilibrium” (p. 3). Unlike barbarism, as our host repeatedly insists, civilization requires a sense of permanence and, above all, *confidence*—“confidence in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, confidence in one's own mental powers” (p. 4). Without corresponding words and deeds, art—even great art—is not enough.

The opposite—“energy, strength of will and mental grasp” without art—is worse. “Heroic Materialism” Clark entitles his final program, which opens with the panorama of the New York City skyline. “It took almost the same time to reach its present condition as it did to complete the Gothic cathedrals,” he observes. “At which point a very obvious reflection crosses one's mind: that the cathedrals were built to the glory of God, New York was built to the glory of mammon” (p. 321). Indeed, in the face of the godless, brutal, violent world of modern industrial society, Clark scarcely even acknowledges, let alone attempts to decipher, the *book* of contemporary art. “I am completely baffled by what is taking place today,” he admits—providing infinite comfort to countless viewers. “I sometimes like what I see, but when I read modern critics I realise that my preferences are merely accidental” (pp. 345-346).

That this is more than mere pandering to modern philistinism Clark

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 1.

has already made clear in developing his aesthetic credo in the preceding programs. The interpretations of civilization he presents throughout are traditional—perhaps even archaic. Their effect, as well perhaps as their intent, seems to be to confirm his audience in its prejudices, for example, that Western Civilization was the creation of the Church, the Crusades largely accounted for the Romanesque style, chivalry was unrealistic, and so forth.

Having taken pains to emphasize “how hard it is to equate art and society,” Clark proceeds to enlist art as his guide—or, at least to use works of art to illustrate the history of civilization. By that standard, the preeminent place belongs, of course, to the Italian Renaissance, the centerpiece of his series.

There is nothing whatsoever novel or new in Kenneth Clark’s approach—nothing to detract from the reverence in which the Renaissance is commonly held. He readily expresses his approbation for the nineteenth-century historians who measured civilization by the standards of the Tuscan city-states. “There is no better instance of how a burst of civilisation depends on confidence than the Florentine state of mind in the fifteenth century” (p. 89). Above all, Clark celebrates the Renaissance “discovery of the individual”—the belief in “the dignity of man”—which sustained the great Italian creators and their achievements. His admiration for their artistic masterpieces is as eloquent as it is conventional.

Seen by itself the *David’s* body might be some unusually taut and vivid work of antiquity; it is only when we come to the head that we are aware of a spiritual force that the ancient world never knew. I suppose that this quality, which I may call heroic, is not a part of most people’s idea of civilisation. It involves a contempt for convenience and a sacrifice of all those pleasures that contribute to what we call civilised life. It is the enemy of happiness. And yet we recognize that to despise material obstacles, and even to defy the blind forces of fate, is man’s supreme achievement; and since, in the end, civilisation depends on man extending his powers of mind and spirit to the utmost, we must reckon the emergence of Michelangelo as one of the great events in the history of western man (pp. 123-124).

Nothing, of course, is perfect. Perhaps the civilization of the early Italian Renaissance “was not broadly enough based,” Clark concedes (p. 116). Still, “one can’t help wondering how far civilisation would have evolved if it had been entirely dependent on the popular will. . .” (p. 112). In the eternal struggle between the individual and the masses, then, our host takes his stand foursquare with the humanists. “I believe that almost everything of value which has happened in the world has been due to individuals” (p. 202).

Conversely, much of the destruction in our world can be laid to the multitudes. The great tragedy of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, in his view, is that it unleashed forces “fundamentally opposed to civilisation: an earthy, animal hostility to reason and decorum that Nordic man seems to have retained from his days in the primeval forest” (p. 158). By contrast, the Catholic Counter-Reformation’s great achievement “lay in harmonising, humanising, civilising the deepest impulses of ordinary, ignorant people” (p. 175). As he says repeatedly, Kenneth Clark may not be able to define civilization, but he knows barbarism when he sees it. In contrasting the aesthetics of Catholic humanism and Protestant reform, he finds the poles for his judgment on history.

The rest of Clark’s story falls somewhere between the extremes of the Italian Renaissance and the Northern Reformation—the measured response of the head and the feverish reaction of the heart. There remain some high moments: the seventeenth century appeal to reason and experience was “a triumph for the human intelligence.” But, as Ruskin was one of the few to acknowledge, it also gave license to a new form of barbarism—“the squalid disorder of industrial society” (p. 220). The philosophers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, too, “pushed European civilisation some steps up the hill . . .” until their work was undone by the excesses of the French Revolution and Napoleon (p. 245). The Victorians Clark salutes for their humanitarianism—and condemns for their hypocrisy. Both qualities emerged alongside the misery and degradation of the Industrial Revolution.

At the beginning of the series, Kenneth Clark had stated that its architecture told more about a civilization than anything else it left behind. But now he turns his back on the imposing nineteenth-century public buildings—with their lack of style and conviction. In Clark’s view, the creative impulse of the Victorian era found its outlet in an unlikely field—engineering, producing the bridges and tunnels he admires for their strength and energy. But technology had also un-

leashed the machine, with all of its potential for massive destruction. That prospect tempered somewhat the narrator's ingrown nineteenth-century optimism: "... one can't exactly be joyful at the prospect before us," he concluded (p. 347).

Before signing off on that cautionary note, Kenneth Clark had presented a "summary" of his own beliefs, in the case presumably that some viewer had been dozing during the earlier programs. "I hold a number of beliefs that have been repudiated by the liveliest intellects of our time," he begins disingenuously enough. "I believe that order is better than chaos, creation better than destruction. I prefer gentleness to violence, forgiveness to vendetta. On the whole I think that knowledge is preferable to ignorance, and I am sure that human sympathy is more valuable than ideology" (pp. 346-347). Unexceptionable sentiments: "nothing striking, nothing original, nothing that could not have been written by an ordinary harmless bourgeois of the later nineteenth century," the author later admitted.<sup>2</sup>

But where did Clark's bland formulation leave the modern consciousness? Any dissent from this aesthetics of formalism, this ethics of kindness, seemed condemned to come out on the side of ruin and reprisal. In fact, the host of *Civilisation* was playing unfairly with the issues dividing modernism and tradition. Modern art challenged the very foundations of Victorian complacency. It attacked the same fundamental principles which Clark, like his ancestors, treated as if somehow beyond question. As long as he remained in his circle, one could not fault him for repeating to his friends what he had believed through his long and fruitful life. But, having been transformed by television from a modest museum-keeper and author into an international cultural arbiter, he should no longer have gone unchallenged.

That Clark's approach was sectarian had been clear long before the conclusion of his series. Running throughout the programs like a leitmotif is a distinct attitude toward art and civilization which, regardless of the respectability of its proponent, contains two debatable assumptions: that art is the truest avatar as well as the highest expression of a society, and that the value of art is to be measured in moral rather than conceptual or aesthetic terms. Clark assumes the existence of a reciprocal

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Clark, *The Other Half: A Self-Portrait* (London: John Murray, 1977), p. 222.

relationship between the values esteemed in art and by society. The qualities which he admires in both cases derive directly from his class and epoch and country: order, stability, hierarchy, discipline, moderation, restraint. No wonder he refers to himself as a conservative!

For both his deification of art and his moralizing tone, Clark could thank the Victorian critic, John Ruskin—"the greatest single influence on my mind" (*Self-Portrait*, p. 79). It has been said that no one ever made art so momentous. Ruskin's doctrines had also deeply influenced Clark's mentor, the legendary taste-maker for millionaire art collectors, Bernard Berenson. During the interwar years this viewpoint represented orthodoxy not only for Kenneth Clark but for many art historians and curators of his generation. As John Russell reminds us, they shared a common viewpoint which "ranked each civilization in terms of the art-objects it left behind." Manifestly, they "had no doubt at all that the supreme periods of art had been and gone."<sup>3</sup>

Where then did that leave modern art? If, as Clark maintained, the "dazzling summit of human achievement" had been reached five hundred years ago in Renaissance Italy, then living artists could only mourn that they had been born too late. Judged by the standards of *Civilisation*, the values which modern artists espoused—indeed, their very modernism—condemned them to Clark's scrap heap. How could it be otherwise? Modern art embraced qualities which defied the established values that Clark supported. Stability? Hierarchy? Restraint? Modern art was anything but refined and orderly. It challenged the traditional criteria; it ridiculed the "moral value of art." Modern art—modernism—was nothing if not a repudiation of tradition.

But *Civilisation* afforded modern art no representation, no voice. The most recent artists even to be discussed on the program—Van Gogh and Tolstoy—form a curious duo. Twentieth-century creativity is dismissed with the phrase "the chaos of modern art" (*Civilisation*, p. 345), and the series concludes without even acknowledging the existence and contributions of Matisse and Picasso, Bartok and Stravinsky, Proust and Joyce, let alone mentioning any modern American artists. Worse, Clark neglects to cite the emergence of the modern arts of photography and cinema.

To a great many viewers, what Kenneth Clark had to say—and, significantly, not say—probably seemed beyond controversy. Unques-

<sup>3</sup>John Russell, *The New York Times Book Review*, April 26, 1970, p. 6.



tionably, his deification of dead art also reinforced the traditional American hospitality to imported culture while, by implication at least, abetting our long-standing hostility to indigenous artists and intellectuals. The implication that great art reflects a great society not only glorified the Western tradition at a time of European eclipse, it humbled the United States, the English stepchild, too young forever to boast of its own Old Masters. By thus associating culture with European masterworks of the past, Clark encouraged the same national mood of cultural complacency that endows orchestras, theaters, and museums for the purpose of preserving the classics, and which was destined to make public television into a showcase for BBC celebrations of British civilization.

Television itself had something to do with Kenneth Clark's persuasiveness. *Civilisation* marked the perfect blending of man and medium: Sir Kenneth did not debase himself by taking to the airwaves any more than television rose to new heights. The very seeming ordinariness of Clark's perspective suited perfectly the derivative quality of video programming. Under that combination of chemistry and circumstances, most Americans presumably succumbed to the illusion that Kenneth Clark was speaking in behalf of nothing less than a universally held view of culture.

Almost a century and a half before Kenneth Clark intoned the word *civilisation*, Ralph Waldo Emerson had insisted: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." Declarations of American intellectual and cultural independence, of which "The American Scholar" is only the most notable, are almost as old as the Republic. For generations, American seers have urged a distinctive native art to match our other innovations. Yet, in 1970, a British nobleman effortlessly disarmed the Rebels' descendants. The establishment of Old World hegemony over American public television was accomplished almost without a whimper of protest.

In truth, like so many others, Emerson's call had gone largely unheeded. Sydney Smith's rhetorical query—"In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book, or goes to an American play, or looks at an American picture or statue?"—posed even earlier, had proven more prophetic. Neither growing wealth nor education had done much over the years to discourage Americans from continuing to look

abroad for culture. Indeed, perhaps the easier access to the British Isles and the Continent afforded first by the steamship and later by the airplane only increased the dependence!

Furthermore, ever since the Second World War had made them reluctant global citizens, Americans had grown uneasy under a bombardment of manifestos and manifestations of a "Third World Consciousness." How good it must have been, then, to hear someone praise Western Civilization! To listen to a cultivated individual expound without apology upon the greatness of Italian, French, British, and even German civilization surely brought reassurance. Ordinary, harmless bourgeois sentiments: nothing to offend the sensibilities of his audience. Here was no debunking, no revising, but a genteel restatement of an attitude which had nurtured generations of American school children.

The attitude, in a word, was paternalistic. While everyone would accept the need for feeding and clothing the poor, Clark concedes at one point, we must of course remain forever wary of intemperate popular outbursts. *Noblesse oblige*, not self-determination. In short, don't be too democratic. When we allow the brain to be subordinated to the feelings, or the elite to the masses, civilization totters on the brink of . . . barbarism. Like any good Victorian, Clark has no patience with the romantic primitivism which elevates arcadian Polynesian society: nature is manifestly inferior to civilization as a guide to conduct.

The foundation of this attitude, from all indications, is simply prejudice. Clark gives no more evidence of having grappled with the issues of modern society than of modern art. He professes ignorance of economics—"and perhaps for that reason" believes its importance has been "overrated by post-Marxist historians" (p. 197). "Of course, civilisation requires a modicum of material prosperity," he concedes. But, far more, it requires *confidence* (p. 4). So much for the economic philosophies of history—for capitalism and socialism, Marxism and Keynesianism and all the other modern materialisms. How *civilized* blithely to wave aside the contentious ideologies of our time and crown *confidence* instead! If Kenneth Clark preferred to pretend that the search for a modicum of material prosperity was peripheral, if he preferred to distill all of the dynamic forces of a millenium into *confidence*, who would be rude enough to dissent? After all, it was his *civilisation* he was talking about, not ours.

Therein lay the perennial rub: Americans were condemned to remain the perpetual outsiders. Judged by the standards of nineteenth-century

British scholarship and criticism, American culture would lie forever beyond the pale.

But, as some American had insisted for generations, those standards need not handicap the American creative imagination. If the nationalistic cultural manifestos—from Irving, Bryant, Longfellow, and Emerson to Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman—scarcely created an indigenous audience for American writing, they contributed to an autochthonous literature. Of course, the public might still ignore it, as they did in Whitman's case, or misconstrue it, as in that of Samuel Clemens. Still, as American writers persisted in the effort to distill and articulate the national experience, a distinctive body of writing emerged.

In the visual arts, nothing comparable developed. For a century, despite its substantial achievements in portraiture and landscape painting, American art remained essentially provincial, if not colonial. And if practitioners rested content to be derivative, patrons and collectors could hardly be expected to innovate. Eventually, with the emergence of abstract expressionism and its offspring, New York would become the world capital of art. But that was *modern* art. So, like Kenneth Clark, most Americans barely acknowledged the development, preferring to remain condescendingly aloof and uninvolved.

The issue of American cultural subordination to Europe, fought to its resolution long ago in literature and more recently in art and architecture, is no longer aggravated by Eurocentric university curricula and syllabi, or by libraries, museums, serious theaters, and even film archives—in all of which American creativity is now amply represented. But during the past decade it has once again been raised by public television's capitulation to the British Broadcasting Corporation's tastes and criteria.

A culture compounded of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson and Edith Wharton, Henry James and T.S. Eliot, W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright, of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and William James, Charles Ives and Frank Lloyd Wright, Thomas Eakins and Jackson Pollock, of temperaments as different as Henry Adams and William Faulkner, or as similar as Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr, cannot be dismissed as narrow, shallow, or provincial. In less than two centuries, American ideas and American achievements have won recog-

nition wherever in the world serious discussion and critical thinking take place. While American universities, libraries, and orchestra halls beckon aliens to these shores, the United States exports ideas and art which bring back international prizes. So much for the cultural balance of trade.

Intellectually and culturally, the United States has established its independence and self-sufficiency. Not only in the established fields, but also in cinema and photography—the two modern art forms which lend themselves most intimately to television—Americans have little reason to depend upon foreign imports. Since the invention of the camera, Americans from Stieglitz to Steichen, and Griffith to Welles, have recorded their resourcefulness, imagination, and originality on film.

Isn't it long past time, then, for Americans to shed the remaining vestiges of subordination to British civilization and proclaim their freedom from BBC programming? Only after that initial step has been taken can we hope to see on public television fare which is both cultivated and distinctive.