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### *Usbek to Rhedi in Venice*

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Either you do not think what you say, or else you do better than you think. You left your homeland in order to learn, and you scorn all learning ; you come for an education to a country where the fine arts are cultivated, and you regard them as pernicious. Let me tell you something, Rhedi, I agree with you more than you do with yourself.

Have you quite reflected on the barbarous and unfortunate state into which the loss of the arts would lead us ? [1] It is not necessary to imagine it, we can see it. There are still peoples on earth among whom a passably well-trained monkey could live honorably. He would be about on a par with the other inhabitants : they would not find his mind odd nor his character bizarre ; he would pass just like any other, and even be distinguished by his good disposition.

You say that the founders of empires have almost always been ignorant of the arts. I do not deny that barbarous peoples have been able to spread across the globe like raging streams and cover the most civilized realms with their ferocious armies. But mark this : they have learned the arts, or had the conquered peoples practice them ; otherwise their power would have passed like the sound of thunder and tempests.

You fear, you say, lest someone invent some means of destruction crueller than the ones already in use. Not so : if such a fatal invention were discovered, it would soon be outlawed by the law of peoples, [2] and the unanimous consent of nations would bury that discovery. It is not in the interest of princes to conquer in such ways : they are after subjects, and not lands.

You complain of the invention of powder and bombs ; you find it strange that there is no longer any impregnable stronghold ; in other words you find it strange that wars should today be over sooner than they used to be.

You must have noticed in reading the histories that since the invention of powder, battles have been much less bloody than they were, because there is almost no skirmish any more.

And were there some particular case where an art appeared prejudicial, ought one for that reason to reject it ? Do you think, Rhedi, that the religion which our holy Prophet brought from heaven is pernicious because it will some day serve to confound the perfidious Christians ?

You think that the arts enervate peoples and thereby cause the fall of empires. [3] You speak of the ruin of that of the ancient Persians, which was the effect of their enervation ; but this single example is far from decisive, since the Greeks, who subjugated them, cultivated the arts far more intently than they.

When it is said that the arts make men effeminate, it cannot be by reference to those who apply themselves to them, since they are never idle, and idleness is of all vices the one that most enervates courage.

Therefore it can only mean those who enjoy the arts ; but as in a civilized country those who enjoy the advantages of one art are obliged to cultivate another so as not to be reduced to shameful poverty, it follows that idleness and enervation are incompatible with the arts.

Paris is perhaps the most sensual city on earth, and where there is the most refinement in pleasures, but it is perhaps the one where one leads a harder life. For one man to live delectably, three hundred others must work ceaselessly. A woman got it into her head that she should appear in an assembly in a certain outfit ; from that moment fifty artisans must sleep no more and not have the leisure to drink and eat ; she commands, and she is obeyed more punctually than our monarch would be, because self-interest is the world's greatest monarch.

This ardor for work, this passion to get rich passes from one station to another, from the artisans to the grandees ; no man likes to be poorer than the one he has just seen immediately beneath him. In Paris you see a man who has enough to live on until the day of the day of judgment, who toils without end, and risks shortening his days to amass, he says, enough to live on.

The same spirit spreads to the nation ; all you see is toil and industry : where then is that effeminate people you talk so much about ?

I will assume, Rhedi, that a kingdom tolerated only those arts that are absolutely necessary to the cultivation of the lands, of which are in any case a great number, and that all those are banned that serve only for sensual pleasure and fantasy ; I maintain that that state would be the most miserable on earth.

If the inhabitants had courage enough to do without so many things they owe to their needs, the people would waste away by the day, and the state would become so feeble that the most insignificant of powers would be in a position to conquer it.

I could here enter into a long detail and make you see that the revenues of individuals would almost totally cease, and consequently those of the prince. There would be almost no more relations of abilities among citizens ; that circulation of wealth and that propagation of revenues that comes from the dependence of the arts on each other would totally cease ; each person would draw revenue from his land only, and would draw only precisely what he requires in order not to die of hunger. But as that is not the hundredth part of the revenue of a kingdom, the number of inhabitants would have to diminish proportionately, so that only the hundredth part remained.

Consider carefully how far the revenues of industry go. A holding only produces annually for its master a twentieth part of its value ; but with a pistole's worth of colors a painter will make a painting that will earn him fifty. The same can be said of goldsmiths, wool or silk workers, and all sorts of artisans. [4]

From all this we must conclude, Rhedi, that in order for a prince to be powerful, his subjects must live in the midst of delights ; he must work to procure for them all sorts of superfluities with as much attention as the necessities of life.

*Paris this 14th day of the moon of Chalval 1717*

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[1] This term, by opposition to the expression *fine arts* in the preceding paragraph, also includes what we would call technology or applied sciences.

[2] This *droit des gens* is what we would call international law (see *SL*, I, 3). Yet the "unanimous consent of nations" on which, according to Usbek, this law is based, does not necessarily imply conventions or international treaties, but merely adhesion to the universal principles of human reason. In this sense, the *droit des gens* is akin to natural law, and such is the way it was understood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by theoreticians like Pufendorf, Barbeyrac and Burlamaqui.

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[3] An allusion to the traditional notion that luxury contributed to the fall of the Roman empire. It can be seen from the force of this formula and the following paragraph that the general proposition on the pernicious effects of the arts was hardly new when Rousseau took it up in 1750 in answer to the question posed by the Dijon academy.

[4] In a few lines Usbek sketches a theory of value added : see SL, VII, 4 and XXI, 6. The way he plays on the multiple meanings of the word *art*, assimilating artists and artisans as was commonly done in the eighteenth century, indicates that he places the question of luxury not on the moral and esthetic level but rather on an economic level. It will be noted that Montesquieu, a landowner attentive to the exploitation of his lands, devotes almost no theoretical reflection to agriculture.