Industry: Art Angel? Pepsi-Cola’s “Portrait of America” Art Annual as an early instance of corporate art sponsorship

The idea of “corporate art” or “corporate patronage” is now firmly embedded in the art world, and the borders between the cultural and commercial spheres have effectively been dissolved in the face of converging interests (Rectanus 3, 24). This situation has developed since the first appearance of the idea of “corporate art” in the early to mid 1960s, when corporations more generally became aware of the public relations benefits to be derived from involvement with the arts, and the first corporate art programs and collections began to be developed (Kahan 10-33). Since then, business interventions in the arts have expanded to include collecting art for display in galleries or corporate buildings, sponsorship of exhibitions or events, awarding grants to artists and arts organizations through corporate foundations, or volunteering managerial staff. Nevertheless, it was only in the 1980s and 1990s that the idea of “corporate patronage,” or more properly sponsorship, came to assume its presently seminal role in the functioning of the art world. However, the late twentieth century was not the first time that corporate “patronage” was suggested as having a proper role in the art world. In the 1940s there was a steady trickle of articles in the American art press arguing for Big Business to become the new “art angel” (Grafly “Industry” 46) and assume “the role of patron held by the Church and aristocracy in past ages” (Caspers “Patrons” 5), replacing the perceived to be tax-diminished ranks of private tycoons as the key patron of the arts. It is the intention of this article to examine a case study—Pepsi-Cola’s “Portrait of America”—as a means of exploring why the idea of Big Business as a “patron” of fine artists did not take root in the 1940s. (Figure 1)

A focus on Pepsi-Cola’s “Portrait of America” allows for the re-examination of this corporate art intervention through a somewhat different lens than used previously. In Bogart’s (1995) *Artists, Advertising and the Borders of Art 1880-1960* Pepsi’s venture was discussed within what was, by the 1940s, fairly conventional context of art-as-advertising. For many years, art-as-advertising involved companies either collecting contemporary artworks for reproduction in their own corporate advertising or commissioning contemporary art for such purposes. The use of art to add a gloss of culture to company images went back to the genesis of mass media advertising in the early twentieth century, but became better established in the 1930s with its use by a number of businesses such as the Container Corporation (Allen 1993). However, Pepsi-Cola’s scheme should also be considered in another light. A reason for this is that the original announcement of “Portrait of America” stated that it would not just provide a conventional calendar, but would “afford the artists … an opportunity to submit what they considered their best work of art for judging by a well-recognized and impartial jury” and “give the artists an annual exhibition where their paintings could be seen and bought by the public, without expense to public or painter” (qtd. in McCausland *Work for Artists* 141-142). The latter element of Pepsi’s proposal—a juried art annual—suggests the lens through which to re-examine “Portrait of America.” In particular, Pepsi’s proposal for a juried art annual seems to pre-figure a form of corporate art sponsorship which became significant for the first time only in the 1980s and 1990s: the corporate art award. As Chin Tao-Wu details in *Privatising Culture* (2002) a key element of such late twentieth century art awards, which more usually involved juried exhibitions organized in partnership with well-known art institutions, the presence of a jury was important because it created the illusion that these corporately-sponsored art events were not simply “no more than advertising” (Moir and Taffler 149), but had a “special brand of excellence arbitrated in the public arena” (Wu 161). Pepsi-Cola’s “Portrait of America,” as announced in 1944, seemed to demonstrate these characteristics. There are also some distinct parallels between the rhetoric of the 1940s, when industry was called upon to assume the mantle of “art angel” as Federal art programs were curtailed for ideological reasons, and the neo-liberalist rhetoric of privatization characterizing cultural politics in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, although late twentieth century business sponsorship, and more particularly art awards, is largely seen as successful, Pepsi’s “Portrait of America” was deemed to be a failure, even to the extent it was omitted by Pepsi’s CEO, Walter S. Mack Jr. when he wrote his own autobiography, *No Time Lost* (1982). This raises a number of issues. Was the strategy proposed for “Portrait of America” sound in theory but deficient in execution? Did it measure up against the key characteristics of “corporate art” as developed in the late twentieth century? Was Mack (as main instigator) naïve or ignorant about the possible limits of Big Business being an “art angel” in the 1940s? Why did contemporary artists not respond more positively to the support offered? However, the whys and wherefores of this failure are as illuminating about the central issues of corporate arts support as those of a success.

The first and second “Portrait of America” annual art awards, or “Pepsi Annuals” as they were more often known, are the point of departure for examining the key issues. Both the 1944 and 1945 “Portrait of America” were announced as open to paintings “covering any subject matter that contributes to present a picture of present day America and American life” (McCausland *Work for Artists* 141-142). There were to be twelve prizewinners, including four purchase prizes, which were to be reproduced in a Pepsi-Cola art calendar (print run 600,000 copies) which would be distributed free of charge to museums, schools, libraries, factories and other institutions in the next calendar year. In 1944, a single artist-led jury, headed by well-known American social realist painter Reginald Marsh, selected 150 finalists for exhibition in New York, while a separate jury (five painters, two critics and three museum directors) divided $11,000 prize money among twelve prizewinners, including regionalist Waldo Peirce ($2,500 first prize) and social realist Philip ($1,500 second prize) (“12 Americans” 14). For the second “Portrait of America” in 1945, 150 finalists were selected from 3,270 submissions by two artist-led juries, one for ‘modern’ paintings and one for ‘traditional’ art. A third jury (made up of three painters, a regional museum director and a New York critic) awarded a total of $15,200 to twenty painters including social realist Paul Burlin (first prize) and expressionist Max Weber (second prize) (Boswell “Another Portrait” 3). (Figure 2)

“Portrait of America” initially appeared to have the potential for Pepsi-Cola to achieve what Wu (159) identified as central to the 1980s art awards: to “allow businesses a valuable entry into the Establishment …” and the prestige and influence associated with corporations “act[ing] as if … part of the cultural life of the country in which they operate.” On one level, Mack’s initial 1944 announcement seemed to have this aim in its echo of the language used earlier to promote the necessarily disinterested Federally-organized Art Weeks of 1940 and 1941, which had aimed to encourage “active popular support … in terms of purchase” of contemporary American artists (Franklin D. Roosevelt, qtd. in Berryman 17), and to suggest some wider sense of philanthropic “social contract” (Moir and Taffler 149). More pragmatically, the initial scheme also points to key aims of later corporate art sponsorship, such as “the underwriting of a special event to support corporate objectives by enhancing corporate image” (Javalgi et al. 48), and could be seen as having the intention to “perform public-relations work of enhancing … prestige, and … improve public attitudes toward companies”(Russell-Cobb 10).

When the first “Portrait of America” was presented at the prestigious Metropolitan Museum in 1944 it generated about “as many lines of printed publicity as it would take to run a type line around the mezzanines of the Metropolitan where the selected pictures hang” (Caspars “Art and Industry” 7). *Art Digest* saw the first Annual as “a healthy and encouraging sign of the growing alliance between industry and art, to the mutual benefit of both” (“Portrait of America” 7), while left-wing art commentator Elizabeth McCausland hailed it as “a gain in the popularization of fine art ... a good deal of old style exclusiveness has thus been swept away” (“Pepsi-Cola” 6), reflecting contemporary art world enthusiasm for the potential benefits *for art* of a new relationship between art and commerce. Indeed, it was two New York art world figures who were apparently instrumental in prompting “Portrait of America”: art critic Emily Genauer, who combined generally conservative political values with a belief that steps should be taken to help contemporary American artists reach what she considered to be their rightful public;1 and New York dealer Reeves Lewenthal, director of Associated American Artists Gallery, who since 1934 had promoted links between business profits, public confidence and contemporary American art (Doss 143-45). Both believed, and convinced Mack, that as New Deal public art patronage was being wound down, it was fitting that Big Business take over the role of linking a revitalized American art and the “health” of American democracy, a role previously identified as key to New Deal art patronage (De Hart Mathews 324). Moreover, in making a national tour and sales promotion an integral part of “Portrait of America,” but without charging any sales commission, Pepsi could present itself as altruistically helping contemporary American artists to reach what was then thought to be the main potential market for their art: those living outside the New York area, and who bought art on the grounds of personal taste and not for investment (Robson 219-20), so helping to create a new situation in which “the story of the market for art will have completely changed” (Abell “Viewpoints” 135) as a result of corporate efforts. (Figure 3)

At the time “Portrait of America” was first mooted, it did indeed seem that corporate “patronage” was very much needed. In the early 1940s, demand for contemporary American art was so soft that there was little likelihood of artists making a living from sales of their art (Robson 217-234). In 1940, George Biddle, who in 1933 had lobbied Franklin D. Roosevelt to set up a Government mural painting program, found that out of 100 “most prominent and nationally known American artists” only ten respondents had an income from their art of over $3,000, while even well-known artists averaged annual earnings from art sales of only $1,400. For three-quarters of Biddle’s respondents, Federal patronage equaled the value of all other sales (398-400)*.* Four years later, after the New Deal programs had been terminated, McCausland, having questioned 500 of the nation’s “most distinguished artists,” estimated their annual gross income as $4,150 from all sources. Of this, income from conventional private sales of their art amounted to about $1,200 per annum, while sales to corporations and art-as-advertising comprised some twenty percent of gross annual income, approximately the value of Federal patronage previously (“Afford Art?”18-20). Against this, the value of the prizes offered in “Portrait of America”—such as the $2,500 prizes awarded to Waldo Peirce’s *Maine Swimming Hole* (1939) in 1944 and to Paul Burlin’s *Soda Jerker* (1939) in 1945; or the $2,000 second prize given to Max Weber’s *Colonial Table* in 1945 —were very respectable (“12 Americans” 14; “Painting America” 13). Moreover, the “opportunity for the sale of their pictures in places they had not heretofore reached” via the touring exhibition had had, according to Mack, some success in terms of sales (McCausland *Work for Artists* 143). All in all, although it might be an exaggeration to claim that industry was raising American artists to new levels of “recognition and affluence” (Abell “Industry” 83), private corporations did indeed seem to be taking up some of the slack created by the termination of publicly-funded New Deal art programs. (Figure 3)

Pepsi’s sponsorship, as originally framed, must be judged as, at the very least, a partial success in terms of the typical aims of corporate sponsorship: using artists and art to serve the ends of corporate merchandising and public relations. It must have seemed initially that “Portrait of America” was a good value strategy for Pepsi. Art sponsorship is, and was then, a relatively cheap form of institutional advertising. By the 1946-47 art season the value of the publicity accorded to these art awards, during which time they had been covered in both art magazines and mainstream news periodicals, was estimated by New York dealer Edith Halpert to be worth some $300,000. This compares very favorably to the $35,950 Pepsi disbursed to artists ($21,250 of this prize-money) in the running of its 1947 Annual (Downtown Gallery Records Reel 5499). This was an important consideration because Pepsi’s advertising budget was much smaller than that of its main rival, Coca-Cola (between 1939 and 1945 Pepsi’s budget rose from $600,000 to $4.5 million, as against the $15 to $20 million per annum Coca Cola spent in the 1940s).

If one explores the “whys” of corporate “patronage” further it is fairly simple to relate Big Business support for the arts in the 1940s with the aims underpinning corporate sponsorship in recent years. One issue is that individual corporations or particular sectors, more particularly those businesses seen as more controversial (typically tobacco, alcohol or chemical companies), have been encouraged to utilize the “sacralizing, elevating, and cleansing power of art” (Belk 117) to enhance corporate reputations. In the 1940s, post-Depression, it was not just individual corporations which needed to burnish their reputations with the “halo” effect of high culture, but Big Business across the board needed more generally to “legitimize business power” (Moir and Taffler 151). One way to do this during the War years was to identify private corporate interests with public values and more particularly patriotism. For instance, Standard Oil (New Jersey) began buying and publishing art in the early 1940s after a wartime patents scandal severely dented its reputation in Washington (Marchand 320-326; Leff 1296-1318). Wu notes that a key element of more recent corporate art awards is the suggestion that the businesses concerned “share a humanist value system” with the sponsored arts organizations, and also imply an identification between national values and corporate prosperity (Wu “Enterprise Culture” 31). The call for participants for the first “Portrait of America” had a surely deliberate echo of the publicly-funded “Artists for Victory” show “*America in the War”* (1942): “the artist who today interprets the emotions and experiences of the American people serves not only a cultural but a patriotic purpose”(Landau 45).  Moreover, giving “Portrait of America” patriotic overtones must also be seen within the particular aim of raising Pepsi’s status within the soft-drinks industry, and in particular as an attempt to challenge the claim implicit in Coke’s wartime advertising slogan: “the pause that refreshes *- …* has become a symbol of our way of life” (Prendergast 207). For Pepsi, support for fine art can be seen to have a twin purpose: to soften a somewhat blemished corporate history (the brand had been rescued from bankruptcy in the 1930s), and to subvert Coke’s commercial hegemony by acquiring at least some of the same patriotic connotations.

A key element of Pepsi’s Annuals, the touring exhibitions, fell firmly within the ambit of typical wartime institutional advertising which, at a time when wartime materials rationing meant it was not always possible to produce actual goods, was frequently targeted at a community or “neighborly” level, both to create immediate local goodwill and cultivate a future market for company products (Prendergast 199-207; Louis and Yazijan 56-67). Touring the Annuals to “giv[e] the public an opportunity to know them [the artists] better” must be seen in this neighborly context, for such tours were ultimately determined by which of Pepsi’s bottlers would benefit from some local publicity (Kahn “Bounce II” 40-42). The touring exhibitions were not Pepsi’s only neighborhood initiative: they also organized several community centers; sponsored sixty-one outdoor music concerts and a national softball championship; and set up four neighborhood “clubhouses” for teenagers in the New York area (Pepsi’s corporate headquarters was in New York). Pepsi’s announcement of its intention to set up its “Opportunity Gallery” on 57th Street, the focus of the New York art market, must also be seen in this context, as it was located in Pepsi’s Manhattan Community Center (Alfred H. Barr Papers Reel 2175*).*

This suggests that “Portrait of America” should have enabled Pepsi-Cola to achieve, in the 1940s, what is identified as the key aims of more recent corporate art “patronage” ventures. However, Pepsi’s “Portrait of America” did not really achieve the anticipated outcomes. Indeed, even the generally enthusiastic press coverage of the first Pepsi Annual in 1944 gives some hints as to the issues which would undermine Pepsi’s foray into corporate art sponsorship in the 1940s. In 1944, while praising Pepsi’s idea for an art annual, Peyton Boswell, editor of the relatively conservative *Art Digest* noted that: “General opinion among the critics and along Fifty-Seventh Street is that it is a pretty depressing picture of both life and art in America that this show gives” (“Portrait?” 3). In 1946, art critic Aline B. Louchheim decried the way “most of the miles of painting blurs into a typical indistinguishable mass” and raised the question as to whether “Pepsi-Cola gets its money’s worth” (“Prize$” 71). In 1948, Clement Greenberg complained in the *Nation* that, in light of the “mediocre” and “timid” talent in the show, Pepsi’s Annuals “continue to pay diminishing returns as an effort to promote American art”(O’Brian 174). By 1949 it would seem even Mack agreed, for he announced that Pepsi’s Art Annual (by then renamed “Paintings of the Year”) would cease because “artists did not give us their best efforts”(qtd. in “Editorial: R.I.P.” 3). (Figure 4)

Mack’s complaint that artists did not give their “best efforts” suggests that Pepsi’s art sponsorship had not proved as attractive to living American artists as expected, and despite the demonstrated need for new sources of support for contemporary American artists. One measure of a lack of success in attracting artists is the identities of participants in the Annuals. Although the total number of painters submitting work was consistent over the years (5,000 works by 3,000 artists in 1944 as against 4,739 entries by 2,948 painters in 1947), in the third Pepsi Annual of 1946 210 of the 267 finalists had not submitted previously. In part, this reflected changes in the entry criteria, such as a new rule that submissions could not be more than two years old (introduced after some prizes in the first years went to works which were five or more years old). Moreover, whereas early winners included then very well-known painters such as social realist Philip Evergood *(*second prize, 1944) and veteran expressionist Max Weber (second prize, 1945), the percentage of established artists submitting work and/or winning prizes between 1945 and 1948 declined steadily.

The reasons for contemporary American artists’ lack of engagement with Pepsi’s “Portrait of America”—and the consequent undermining of any potential for success for Pepsi’s art sponsorship—was undoubtedly determined by several issues, some under Pepsi’s control, others not. One bone of contention which Pepsi could have solved itself was the terms under which painters participated in the Annuals, such as the extended period for which works selected as finalists, and thus included in the touring exhibition, were taken out of circulation. Moreover, if artists did sell their paintings via the Annuals, they seem not to have been able to complete sales before the year-long exhibition tour was over (Edith Halpert to Edward Wales Root, Downtown Gallery Records Reel 5499). Even though such sales did not attract any sales commission, at a time when most New York dealers of American contemporary art levied one of 33% (Robson 77-80), the prolonged absence of their work surely disinclined artists with New York gallery contracts from committing their most saleable paintings, despite the chance of their art reaching new publics. To ameliorate this situation, some artists and their dealers asked for a rental fee as compensation. Mack stoutly resisted such demands until the fifth and last Pepsi Annual in 1948, when the change of policy was dressed up as a $100 “prize” for all finalists. Furthermore, prominent New York galleries dealing in contemporary American art were not generally enthusiastic about the scheme, perhaps not surprisingly as it could be seen as competition, and boycotted the award after its first year (Downtown Gallery Records Reel 5499).

Another issue which Pepsi itself could have addressed was the way the Annuals were exhibited in New York. In 1944, when shown at the Metropolitan Museum, the paintings were seen as having been given “the worst hanging they could get” (“Portrait of America” 7). At the Rockefeller Center the next year, the pictures were shown via what Henry McBride of the *Sun* termed “an outrageous contraption … [which] minimized the painting quality of all pictures to an extent it was impossible to judge them” (qtd. in Breuning 8). The presentations of Annuals in succeeding years, when they were shown at the National Academy of Design, seem to have been unremarkable. However, the rather staid image of this institution surely did not enhance the status of exhibiting in Pepsi’s art Annuals. In this, Pepsi’s corporate art sponsorship did not achieve the prestige of the late twentieth century art awards discussed by Wu, or even early twenty-first century collaborations such as Hugo Boss and the Guggenheim Museum, where the “aura” of a high status cultural institution is seen as enhancing both the status of the corporate art award and the sponsor involved.

Some circumstances contributing to the lack of success for Pepsi’s Annual were, admittedly, beyond Mack’s control. If the idea was that Pepsi’s sponsorship would demonstrate how a munificent corporation, with Mack as CEO-patron, could take over as the “art angel” for contemporary American artists from both the state and private collectors, Mack could hardly have foreseen how far New York art market circumstances would change during the mid-forties. As Robson shows (222-26), at this time, after “Portrait of America” had been formulated, the market for contemporary American art was transformed. The art seasons of 1944-45 and 1945-46 witnessed the first ever “boom” in the market for contemporary American artists as a result of the emergence of new collectors (mostly upper-middle-class businessmen and professionals) who prospered during the war-induced economic boom of the early to mid-forties (Louchheim “Picture Boom” 14) and as a result had high levels of disposable income. During the War years, although automobiles and most consumer durables were rationed, luxury goods such as furs and jewelry—and art—were not. As a result, there was significantly more demand for the very American painters who were early prizewinners in the Pepsi Annuals. For instance, realist-expressionist Phillip Evergood (second prize 1944) in the mid 1940s saw his asking prices for larger works rise from about $350 to $1,000. By the middle 1940s, early American modernist Max Weber’s work (second prize in 1945) was reported to be eagerly sought by collectors “at prices that sometimes reach nearly five figures” (Winthrop 84), while large canvases by a range of highly regarded American contemporary painters were regularly on sale in New York galleries for between $1,500 - $5,000 (Robson 223-34). The question of whether America could afford art seemed to have been answered in the affirmative, albeit in a quite unexpected way. Though not all living American artists benefited from substantial price rises, a good proportion did share in the upsurge in demand for younger and thus more modestly priced painters, the very artists Pepsi’s art sponsorship was aimed at.

That painters did not “give their best efforts” can also be seen as reflecting art world skepticism in the 1940s toward the possibility of the benefits of an alliance between art and industry. Running counter to the arguments for collaboration between art and industry were art world fears that business “patronage” would stifle artistic creativity, with the rather programmatic art-as-advertising favored by companies such as Lucky Strike being cited as proof of the dangers. As painter Thomas Hart Benton rather ruefully remarked: “Every time a patron dictates to the artist what is to be done, he doesn’t get any art—he just gets a poor commercial job” (qtd. in Doss 16). Although dealers such as Lewenthal had long promoted links between business profits, public confidence and American contemporary art (Doss 143-145, 155-160), other members of the New York art world continued to have reservations about Big Business as patron. The best known, and most trenchant, expression of art world opposition to corporate support for fine art—painter Ad Reinhardt’s cartoon “How to Look at Modern Art in America” in *PM Magazine* in June 1946—gives a graphic indication of such reservations. However, it was not only avant-garde artists who shared such skepticism. For instance, New York dealer Edith Halpert, who promoted the kind of living American painters Mack’s scheme had in mind, vigorously rebutted Mack’s claims of “philanthropy” as a key aim for Pepsi’s “Portrait of America,” arguing instead that necessarily “interested” corporate art interventions should be avoided by the art world (Downtown Gallery Records Reel 5498). (Figure 5)

With respect to Pepsi’s “Portrait of America,” doubts about big business as a “patron” (with all that implied in terms of altruism and concern for the public good rather than corporate interests) seemed justified when the key principle of an “arm’s length” relationship between competition and calendar was jettisoned. After the second Annual, although the independent jury organized by “Artists for Victory” unanimously awarded first prize to Paul Burlin’s satirical social realist *Soda Jerker* (1939) and fourth prize to Mark Tobey’s *Sale*, Pepsi chose not reproduce these prizewinners in the following year’s calendar, despite initially stating that prizewinners would be used in this way. In light of this, Ralph M. Pearson of *Art Digest* accused Pepsi of bad faith, arguing that if Mack really wanted “the artist to paint something he wants to paint, not for us, but for himself and the American public” (28) then he would have abided by the independent jury’s decision. From the third Annual (renamed “Paintings of the Year”) onwards, although works for the exhibition were chosen by a network of regional juries (which also awarded four artist-fellowships of $1,500) a separate panel, headed by senior Pepsi employees (including Mack himself and the art program director, Roland P. McKinney), was responsible for selecting the prize-winners and potential illustrations for Pepsi art calendars (“Pepsi Cola’s Walter Mack” 129).

This break with the “arm’s length” principle must be seen as ultimately fatal to any chance of Pepsi’s Art Annual achieving the kind of more-than-advertising status which Wu proposes as a crucial element in successful corporate art awards in the later twentieth century. The fact that this decision was taken was surely due to Mack’s failure to recognize that there was a fundamental fault line between the twin aims to “afford the artists … an opportunity to submit what they considered their best work of art for judging by a well-recognized and impartial jury,” and to “giv[e] the public a valuable and worthwhile calendar” (qtd. in McCausland *Work for Artists* 141-142). A calendar would have been a given for any Pepsi sponsorship venture at this time. Calendars were the most widely used means of effecting brand recognition in the U.S. soft drinks trade, where the parent company supplied the bottling syrup to a nationwide network of local bottlers who then distributed the bottled soda to soda fountains or other customers. Mack always saw calendars as playing a key role in raising Pepsi’s profile within the soft drinks industry.In fact, Mack had decided as early as 1941 to initiate a calendar which, though it “might not be unanimously liked, would at least excite enough interest to be more than just a way of telling the date” (qtd. in McCausland *Work for Artists* 240). Pepsi’s first art calendar, in 1942, reproduced historical American art from the Metropolitan Museum’s holdings. The second (1943) featured key historic American paintings from the Corcoran Gallery collection. The third art calendar (1944) was the first to focus on contemporary American art, and featured a selection of contemporary American regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and Peter Hurd put together by Lewenthal. It was only because Mack was apparently not entirely satisfied with this calendar that he decided to follow Genauer’s suggestion that Pepsi sponsor an art award, seemingly seeing this an unproblematic means by which images for future Pepsi art calendars could be sourced. (Figure 6)

The second “Portrait of America” highlighted the gap between the stated aims and the covert brand-building in another way. This was the decision not to reproduce one work in particular—Paul Burlin’s social realist *Soda Jerker* (1939) — in the 1946 calendar. The question must be: why this painting in particular? The reason why Tobey’s *Sale* did not make it to the calendar can perhaps be attributed to the fact that typically corporations have tended to eschew more ‘difficult’ art in their art collections or art sponsorship interventions, even nowadays (Philips and Whannel 107), and the Tobey painting was unambiguously representative of the “modern” rather than “traditional” strand of competition entries. However, the social-realist style of Burlin’s *Soda Jerker* was not dissimilar in style to other paintings actually reproduced in the calendar concerned. The painting’s supposed satirical character can also be discounted as a reason, as other paintings in the calendar also failed to provide a flattering view of contemporary American life or Americans. However, there is another reason this painting in particular might have seemed problematic: its subject matter of the soda fountain. True, Pepsi-Cola, like its rival Coca-Cola, had been developed with the soda fountain in mind, and by the early 1940s the drugstore soda fountain was an institution at the heart of American culture, popular with all ages and social classes. However, by the early 1940s, the soda fountain was not just an icon of the ‘American way of life’, it was increasingly identified with Coca-Cola as the result of Army efforts to supply troops serving overseas with as many home comforts as they could, which included opening soda fountains exclusively serviced by Coca-Cola (Funderburg 143-45). Burlin’s 1939 painting, rather than simply representing “an ironic, decorative mélange … a hell of a place to eat” (Burlin, qtd. in “Soda” 67) might, in 1945, even if only accidentally, subvert the effectiveness of Pepsi’s calendar as institutional advertising. Instead, the emblematic shape held by the central figure—reminiscent of Coke’s six-ounce “hobble skirt” glass—might function as an indexical sign of Pepsi’s great rival, Coca-Cola. Semiotic polyvalence could not be tolerated because Pepsi’s art calendars, rather than being distributed free of charge to museums, schools and libraries (as per early publicity for the award), were in fact circulated by Pepsi’s bottlers in the normal way of brand advertising. (Figure 7)

A further fatal flaw in Pepsi’s art sponsorship was that it was not, as were late twentieth century art awards, “first and foremost a sophisticated marketing offensive *targeted at a specific market”* (my italics) (Wu 162). Other corporate art interventions in the 1940s were carefully targeted, more particularly upon the metropolitan power or professional elites. For instance, Abbott Laboratories, when buying and reproducing fine art in company publications, was aiming at a niche audience of educated medical professionals, while De Beers used paintings in their art-as-advertising to signify a common identity between superior consumer status and their luxury product, diamonds (Bogart 274-6). Pepsi’s metropolitan Annuals, whose composition for the most part reflected so-called “modern” tendencies rather than “traditional” (Greenberg, in O’Brian 42), could expect a metropolitan middle class audience, a public representing Pierre Bourdieu’s zone of “legitimate” taste, those with a level of cultural competence sufficient to make sense of “a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colors and lines … or in other words, to decipher it” (Bourdieu 594).  The problem is that Pepsi was not a niche brand enhanced by the alluring atmosphere and exclusive associations which could be created by sponsorship of art awards, nor one necessarily targeting a restricted public of individuals with “cultural” as well as economic capital.2 Instead it was a mass-market product surely best served by a brand image playing on its ubiquity and democratic credentials. Indeed it was the latter which Mack emphasized in his first years (1938 onwards) as CEO. The most fruitful innovations in Pepsi’s brand advertising in the early 1940s were thought to be a thirty second radio advertising jingle (so successful that it was played over the airwaves 300,000 times in 1941 alone, and sold 100,000 orchestrated copies), aerial skywriting of Pepsi’s logo all the way up the Eastern Seaboard, and the comic strip antics of “Pepsi and Pete” (fortified Popeye-like against life’s trials and tribulations by Pepsi’s economical twelve-ounce bottle) (Kahn “Bounce I” 38-40). It can be argued that, if a comic strip could be considered apt as lifestyle marketing—“an overt demonstration and statement that a company not only gives cash but shares certain attitudes and beliefs with consumers” (Schreiber qtd. in Rectanus 28) — it is surely unlikely that sponsoring contemporary American artists could also be appropriate, or at least not unless the art involved had been carefully filtered to suit mass or “popular” taste.Mack would have done well to note that the advertising industry of the 1940s recognized, and worked to, a division between “class audience” (the upper percentile of the population) and “mass audience” (the rest, with the exception of those not having the minimum necessary for consumption) when designing advertising campaigns (Marchand 64-65). To serve Pepsi’s brand advertising most effectively the calendars surely had to exemplify “popular” or perhaps “middle-brow” taste (Bourdieu 16-18, 56-60).2 In the 1940s this tended to favor the American realism and ‘homely humanity’ of subjects prioritized by 1930s New Deal art patronage, art that depended upon the enjoyment derived from an artwork’s ability to arouse ‘affective’ rather than ‘aesthetic’ emotion. Indeed, it was noted at the time that it was difficult to imagine much of the art being awarded prizes in the Annuals by the “Portrait of America” artist-judges as naturally appearing “in the emporiums where the five cent beverage is on tap” (“12 Americans” 14).

In terms of artistic tastes, Pepsi’s novel idea of a corporately sponsored art award also fell afoul of shifts in the wider art world context for living American artists. On the one hand, there was a marked shift in artistic practice. The period when Pepsi attempted to initiate art sponsorship was paralleled by the fact that the realist and regionalist American styles favored in the 1930s were increasingly rejected as complicit with New Deal social corporatism. Instead, there was a move towards a more avant-garde American art which was increasingly positioned as having the qualities necessary to connote the new centrist (but anti Communist) liberalism of Truman’s “Fair Deal” (Guilbaut 184-194). By 1948-49, key elements of the art world, such as Alfred H. Barr of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, began for the first time to promote identification between artistic modernism and American liberal democracy. Henceforth, abstraction, which by the early 1950s crystallized around American Abstract Expressionism, was to be the key stylistic approach of modern American art. Alongside this shift in artistic ethos, the art world in general, not just individual skeptics, turned its back against the alliance with industry hoped for in the early 1940s. Such collaborations were seen as necessarily inimical to artistic freedom and individual creativity, a view which was largely the orthodoxy until the post-modern 1980s, when the more emollient attitudes toward corporate art sponsorship known today began to take firm root.

Wu argues that recent corporate art awards are by their very nature “instant because their status is achievable overnight ... and equally instantly abandonable once the marketing impetus subsides” (Wu 162). That Pepsi’s sponsorship shared this characteristic is borne out by Mack’s rather abrupt announcement in 1949 that there would be no more Annuals (”R.I.P.” 3). This was followed, in 1951, by the sale of the collection built up since 1944, rather than, as initially promised, donating the paintings acquired from the Annuals to a public institution (Kahn “Bounce I” 42). Indeed, it would seem that Pepsi’s art sponsorship was terminated in 1949 because the “marketing impetus” had subsided. The wider context for war-time corporate ‘social responsibility’ activities was that the then high levels of excess profits taxation encouraged corporations to make as much use as possible of Federal tax provisions, introduced in 1935, which allowed charitable “giving” of up to 5% of gross income to be set against tax liabilities. Similarly, in the 1980s and 1990s, when business sponsorship of the arts came of age, this came against the background of a raising of the tax deductions ceiling from 5% to 10% in 1981 (Martorella 19-21; Stead 215-22). In 1946, excess taxation rates were reduced and, as using charitable tax breaks was no longer deemed quite so useful, corporate “neighborly” activities fell sharply. Furthermore, the general rule that corporate income is a key driver of charitable “giving”—if corporate income goes up, then contributions will grow, if profits fall, “giving” tends also to diminish (Useem 47)—is also important. In the years immediately after the end of the War the United States economy as a whole became less settled, and business profits across the board were not as assured as they had been in war-time, another reason for corporations generally to curtail charitable giving. Another reason why Pepsi’s art sponsorship was “abandonable” was that Pepsi’s profit levels in particular suffered a sharp decline in the last quarter of the 1940s, despite the more general prosperity of the soft drinks trade. Pepsi’s bottlers, “dissatisfied, disillusioned and confused” by the brand’s poor performance (Tedlow 94), forced Mack to curtail spending on public relations activities such as the art calendars. In addition, although the number of art calendars printed annually rose from 500,000 in 1942 to 750,000 subsequently, this masked the fact that the price charged the bottlers for each calendar had been reduced from twenty-five cents to fifteen cents, as they did not prove as popular as Mack had seemingly expected. It can be surmised that the bottlers were much happier with the familiar ‘cheesecake’ calendars conventionally supplied by American soft drink manufacturers, and which Mack had hoped to distinguish Pepsi from in introducing art calendars.

In conclusion, one must return to some of the questions originally posed. What can one say about Mack, as the key agent of the idea for an art award? Was “Portrait of America” deficient in conception or merely in execution? What does comparison with recent corporate art interventions, and more particularly sponsorship in the form of art awards, suggest about “Portrait of America” having any chance of success at the time it was mooted? One factor which might suggest that Pepsi’s art award should have stood some chance of success is suggestion of commonality characterizing both the 1940s and 1980s, more particularly the self-legitimating myth of Big Business as the “true” source of funding for the arts, and an ideologically driven decline in public support of the arts. However, one factor why “Portrait of America” did not really prosper is undoubtedly down to differences between the 1940s and the late twentieth century in attitudes toward business support for the arts on the part of industry. By the 1980s and 1990s, after some three decades of a growing range of “corporate art” activities there was a solid track record to the effect that support for the arts was effective in “provide[ing] a company with extensive publicity and advertising, a brighter public reputation, and an improved corporate image ...“ (David Rockefeller, 1966, qtd. in Rectanus 26). The likelihood of Mack being forced to withdraw from public relations activities such as art sponsorship by his own board would not have happened in the 1980s. What is also important is that by the end of the century the art world had become reconciled to business support , even if not necessarily viewing this “trojan horse” as an unmitigated blessing (Phillips and Whannel 2013). Indeed, the art world had learnt it had to be welcoming. By the late twentieth century monies given by business to the arts exceeded the public funding available via state organisations such as the National Endowment for the Arts, and business support was indispensable to the arts world (Martorella “Art and Business” 17-31; Rectanus 3-58). In contrast, in the 1940s, although there were, as noted above, some promoters of the idea of industry as the new “art angel,” much of the art world tended to share Lynes’s and Halpert’s skepticism that “industry has not taken up the artist because of any high minded notion of its duty to support him or the culture of the nation. It has done so because it has found the artist can be used to serve a function in merchandising and public relations” (Lynes 164). However, the American art world of the 1940s was not yet in need of corporate support in the way it would in later decades; a stance of principled independence still seemed to be a possibility.

Even against these wider trends, Mack, as the key arbiter of the idea for “Portrait of America,” must be seen as having played a key role in its eventual failure to thrive, if only because of the central role which the CEO typically plays in such sponsorship ventures. It is possible that he saw his continuing stress upon “service” as part and parcel of his being a corporate “patron.” In this, he can be linked to recent corporate sponsorship ventures, which frequently seem to mimic private patronage by being determined by a particular company official (more usually the CEO), with said CEOs using arts sponsorship to “legitimize their superiority and assert them as worthy, marking themselves off from those who are merely wealthy and powerful via their appreciation of, and involvement with, high culture” (Di Maggio & Useem “Social Class” 152). It can be argued that Mack saw himself in this role when he insisted on the “philanthropic” role of Pepsi, writing in 1947 that: “We are sincerely trying to be of service to artists in this country and to the public in our art contest …” (Downtown Gallery Records, Reel 5499). However, those who tried to encourage industry to be an “art angel” in the 1940s seemingly made the key error of not recognizing that while public patronage was (indeed must be) relatively disinterested, corporate support for the arts is necessarily a business transaction or an interested investment (Philips and Whannel 4-18). Big Business was never going simply to step into Federal government shoes. Indeed, Mack’s actual actions showed he had not taken the implications of notions of “patronage,” i.e. altruism, on board. It was the decision to abandon the crucial element of an “arm’s length” distance created by juried competitions which fatally compromised any hope of “Portrait of America” earning the “establishment” status Wu suggests was achieved by the art awards of the 1980s and 1990s, and others, such as the more recent Boss-Guggenheim collaboration. In this, Mack—and it was surely his decision—evidently failed to understand quite how radically novel the idea of a corporately sponsored art award was in terms of brand building, nor had he any insight into the fundamental incompatibility between his twin aims of juried competitions (art sponsorship) and corporate calendars (art-as-advertising). The ongoing commitment to this two-headed program, and failure to realize that art interventions, if to be successful, need to be carefully targeted at their publics, ultimately doomed Pepsi’s attempt at corporate art sponsorship to be “ultimately valueless in every sense of the word” (Krasne 5), “broaden[ing], rather than clos[ing] the gap between artist and consumer” (Lynes 167). In the recent past, more self-aware approaches to corporate art patronage have not made the same mistakes, while at the same time being able to depend upon an art world generally more amenable to the idea of privatized culture. However, despite being an ultimately ill-conceived early experiment in business support of the arts, Pepsi-Cola’s “Portrait of America” art award deserves our present scrutiny, both for what it promised and for what it adds to a scrutiny of the role of corporate “patronage” within the realm of the arts more recently.

**Notes**

1. Boswell (“Comments” 7) suggests Mack contacted Genauer in response to an article in early 1944; Kahn claims Genauer contacted Mack. What is certain is that her belief in the importance of supporting contemporary American artists played a key role in shaping Mack’s 1944 proposal.
2. In America, as Di Maggio and Useem (1978) demonstrate (good) taste—rather than becoming the cement for, or expression of, a newly democratized society (as per hopes in the 1930s)—has continued to be a function of Bourdieu’s claim that “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier,” and a signifier of social class and *habitus.* It would seem Mack was correct in the idea that the kind of art winning plaudits in New York was not necessarily the same which would be welcomed in the “5 ¢ emporiums” or homes where Pepsi calendars were intended to hang.

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**Illustrations**

**Figure001.tif**

**Figure 1**: Pepsi-Cola “Portrait of America” calendar page, November1946. Photographed by author from original. Printed with permission from the Estate of Gregorio Prestopino.

Figure002.tif

**Figure 2**: 12 Americans Hit the Spot.” *Art News*, Vol. XLIII, No. 10 (August 1-31, 1944), 14-15. Courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum Picture Library.

Figure003.tif

**Figure 3**: Max Weber, *Colonial Table*, “Portrait of America” calendar page, September 1946. Photographed by author from original. Reproduced by kind permission of PepsiCo Corp.

**Figure004.tif**

**Figure 4:** Pepsi-Cola “Paintings of the Year,” calendar page, April 1948. Photographed by author from original. Reproduction by kind permission of PepsiCo Corporation.

**Figure005.tif**

**Figure 5**: “How to Look at Modern Art in America,” Ad Reinhardt, magazine ill, 31 x 24 cm. Courtesy of Ad Reinhardt Papers, 1927-1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure006.tif

**Figure 6: “**Pepsi –Cola Presents Famous American Paintings,” calendar page, September 1943. . Photographed by author from original. Reproduction by kind permission of PepsiCo Corporation.

**Figure007.tif**

**Figure 7**: Paul Burlin, *Soda Jerker* (1939), as reproduced in *“Portrait of America”* catalogue, 1946 (present whereabouts of original painting unknown). Photographed by author from original catalogue. Printed with permission from the Estate of Paul Burlin.