

ARTS & LETTERS

thropist to find candidates for his pet charity's board of directors.

Rituals learned by opera audiences, such as withholding applause until *after* an aria was completed, added to the general sense of self-esteem. Salting a conversation with such "high-sounding" Italian phrases as *cantina* or *parlando* allowed operagoers to feel superior—a verbal "distancing" technique also used for centuries by lawyers who cited tidbits of Latin. Old New York patricians, McConachie suggests, came to believe that only those "who could get through an Italian opera without a social gaffe" were worthy of acceptance.

New York's masses, shut out of the opera, occasionally expressed their antipathy; an 1849 disturbance at the Astor Place Opera House resulted in a riot that cost 22 lives and led to the eventual closing of the theatre. But the social exclusiveness of Astor Place continued intact in New York's next permanent opera house, the Academy of Music, which opened in 1854. By the time the Metropolitan Opera House opened in 1883, operagoing's prestige in American life was well established.

Harmony and Art

"America's Measure of Mankind: Proportions and Harmonics" by Jonathan L. Fairbanks, in *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* (Winter 1988), Oxford Univ. Press, 16-00 Pollitt Dr., Fair Lawn, N. J. 07410.

Nearly three centuries of American furniture designers, architects, and sculptors were influenced by rules first devised in classical times. Fairbanks, a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, notes that ancient "absolute harmonies" proved to have a lasting effect on American art.

Early in the 18th century, a new awareness of antiquity prompted American craftsmen to obey rules of proportion such as the "golden mean" discovered by Pythagoras. Incorporating classical columns, capitals, and mythical figures, cabinetmakers in New England designed entire chests of drawers in which each element was placed according to complex geometric relationships. Samuel McIntire's carved female figure, "Fame" (1796), has the same proportions as the columns that flank the chest she adorns: Fame's face is one-tenth the length of her body, just as the scrolled capital is one-tenth the height of its column.

Nearly a century later, American sculptors began to examine ancient classical statuary to discover "universal" proportional standards.

But artists could not help noticing that few human beings possessed the ideal proportions of Greek statuary. In Boston in 1865, sculptor Martin Milmore finally resorted to a classically draped cape to render heroic his statue of a Massachusetts governor, John A. Andrew. By the turn of the century, sculptors began to collaborate with "anthropometrists" (such as Harvard professor Dudley Allen Sargent) to formulate new physical ideals based on the measurements of college students. Amid the chauvinism of World War I, Sargent endorsed the white North American woman as the possessor of the most perfectly proportioned figure.

Ideas of human proportional theory have continued to fascinate specialists. But no longer are human bodies seen as "unified aesthetic systems basic to understanding beauty and truth."