

*Arts & Letters***THE RARE ART TRADITION: The History of Art Collecting and its Linked Phenomena Wherever These Have Appeared**

by Joseph Alsop
Princeton/Harper, 1982
691 pp. \$59.95



In all history, argues Alsop, the retired Washington columnist, only five cultures have sustained "art traditions": classical antiquity, the West after the Renaissance, imperial China after the third century B.C., Islam after the ninth century, and Japan after the sixth century. The sine qua non of an art tradition, as Alsop sees it, is the practice of collecting, to be distinguished from mere treasure-hunting or antiquarianism. A culture with an art tradition, says Alsop, must also have a historical sense of, and theories about, art. Its artists must feel an obligation to "innovate" and go beyond their predecessors. It must also sustain art markets (with bloated prices, fakes, signed works, and snobbery) and museums. Alsop's criteria thus exclude the medieval and Byzantine periods; he insists there were no collectors in either period. Equally provocative is his argument that collecting has directly influenced ways of seeing and making art: He points to the Florentine humanist Niccolò Niccoli, a late 14th-century collector who, by urging the new fashion of the "antique" upon his artist-friends Donatello, Ghiberti, and Brunelleschi, helped set the course of 15th-century Italian art.

GRAMMAR AND GOOD TASTE: Language Reform in America

by Dennis E. Baron
Yale, 1982
263 pp. \$19.95

From Noah Webster's 18th-century campaign for a uniform "Federal English" to TV newscaster Edwin Newman's mocking of contemporary misusages, America has had its share of would-be reformers of our common tongue. But these crusades, led chiefly by amateur grammarians, have had little effect. Americans, says Baron, a University of Illinois linguist, have never felt the need for systematic language-planning (such as exists in Norway, Turkey, Israel) or of institutions (such as France's sacrosanct *Académie Française*) empowered to carry out deliberate reform. Benjamin Franklin failed in his effort to establish a phonetic alphabet, intended, among other things, to help poor spellers. Bishop Robert