

*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

Lowth, aiming to "correct" his 19th-century countrymen's lamentable English, succeeded only in securing for his work a short-lived vogue as a college text. Edward S. Gould, in his *Good English* (1876), railed against the introduction of unnecessary "spurious words" such as *leniency* (*lenity*, he insisted, was the only correct English word). Baron doubts that future reformers will fare better. And, indeed, the reader is left wondering whether sweeping language reform, possibly led by a national academy, would really be preferable to the haphazard way in which English has developed over time.

ISAK DINESEN: The Life of a Storyteller
by Judith Thurman
St. Martin's, 1982
495 pp. \$19.95

Her legal name was Karen Blixen, but the Danish writer is known to the English-speaking world by her pen name, Isak Dinesen. She wrote, among other books, *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), a collection of deceptively old-fashioned and stylistically ornate stories, and *Out of Africa* (1937), a memoir in which the author seemed magically to enter the minds of both the humans and animals native to her beloved Kenya. Blixen herself (1885-1962) was, as biographer Thurman shows, a genuine anachronism: In a society (turn-of-the-century Denmark) which valued caution and propriety, she possessed a reckless, heroic view of life. It came from her father, who was himself an author as well as a politician, a traveler, and a swashbuckler. Blixen's love of the wilder parts of Africa duplicated her father's fascination with American Indians, among whom he wandered for a time. She even made living in Kenya a condition of marriage to her cousin, a minor count and a great romancer (who infected her with incurable syphilis). The two immediately moved to the family's Kenyan coffee plantation, where Karen lived and worked from 1914 to 1931 (after her divorce from "Blickie" in 1921, she went it alone). It took a worldwide depression to drive her back home. The cost of Blixen's unconventional life was considerable, to herself and to others: tragic ro-