

US National Standard in Culture

Bill Paley of CBS Rembrant

Source: *The Powers That Be*,
David Halberstram, 1979



Paley had an extra sense about talent, a touch and feel for it. It was all intuition, all taste, there was no way it could be studied or memorized. He could, in 1931, three years after taking over the network, go on a shipboard cruise and by chance hear the early records of a then unknown singer and know instantly that the singer was big, very big, and send back a cable telling his subordinates to sign Bing Crosby immediately.

Some thirty years after he first heard Bing Crosby at the opening night of *Camelot*, Blair Clark, one of his news executives, was absolutely astonished by Paley's sense of the show.

It was as if Paley were always a beat ahead of everyone else in the theater, laughing at the lines and keeping time with the music. Bill Paley's sense of entertainment was so true, he was just that much quicker than anyone else in the audience.

GOD SUYRA: Bill Paley did not ever forget that he was a part of the audience.

Source: *The Powers That Be*—

In the same instant, he could hear it, *understand* it, consider it, and know it was going to work. So that was an advantage, a gift of the gods, an ear totally pure.

He had a sense of taste that was almost equally pure. If he chose to limit the amount of true excellence that he broadcast on his network, it was not from failing to recognize it,

it was rather a shrewd calculation of the levels and the limits of what the traffic would bear at a given time.

It was skill at rationing the number of tasteful things that could be done, enough to sustain the CBS network's carefully orchestrated reputation for excellence.

For despite what he programmed to his fellow Americans during most of his career, Paley's own sense of aesthetics was eerily fine and instinctive. He was the kind of man who could walk into a room and, with precious little formal training, always pick out the finest painting or the most valuable antique in that room. More, he understood not just aesthetics and taste but the value of them, and the limits of that value, that everything in its way had a price tag.

In the forties he had once spent a week in Paris looking for antiques with CBS's correspondent David Schoenbrun as his guide. And when the trip was finished he took Schoenbrun aside to thank him for a wonderful visit, he had after all met only the best people and eaten at only the best restaurants. "David," he had said, "this has been a perfect trip and you have been a perfect host and because of that I'm going to give you a very valuable tip."

He knew Paley had traveled only in the company of the shrewdest and richest businessmen in America.

"Don't buy Matisse's and Picasso's, David," said the Chairman of CBS to the Paris correspondent of CBS, "they've gone too high on the market now. Buy Rembrandt because Rembrandt's are the best. They're the best buy now and they're always going to be great. You remember that and remember that Bill Paley told you so."

Schoenbrun, was annoyed a few years later when he realized that Paley had been right as usual, Rembrandt's had gone up more than Picasso's and Matisse's.

GOD SUYRA: You see what is the ability of Bill Paley to distinguish fine art. And this is an example of the causation of why it was that he of the TY station producers was chosen to be the National Standard.



Matisse



Picasso



Rembrandt