

Tobacco Companies' Gifts to the Arts: a Proper Way to Subsidize Culture?

By NICK RAVO

When the Joffrey Ballet begins its national tour in Denver next week, the name of the largest cigarette manufacturer in the United States — Philip Morris Companies Inc. — will appear on thousands of the dance group's program guides and promotional posters.

Philip Morris bought this prestigious exposure for \$200,000. Company officials said they decided to subsidize the tour because they appreciate art and want to be good corporate citizens. Joffrey officials said they took the money because they need it and few others offer such largess.

Many health and anti-smoking groups, however, say the sponsorship of cultural activities by tobacco companies in general and Philip Morris in particular raises ethical questions. They say such gift-giving is a subtle advertising ploy intended to provide a patina of prestige to corporations marketing a lethal and addictive product.

"The association of Philip Morris in arts and in philanthropy is indeed hypocritical," said a spokesman for the American Cancer Society, Irving Rimer. "The company is engaged in manufacturing a product that has killed thousands, if not millions. The recipients should start to raise very, very serious questions about that association."

Corporate Defense

Executives with Philip Morris, which is based in Manhattan, dismiss such criticism as the product of zealotry. They say their motivation for giving about \$4 million to cultural institutions last year — and millions more since 1958, when the donations began — is more Medicean than Machiavellian.

"Do you take money from banks

that do business in South Africa?" said George Weissman, a former chief executive officer and chairman of the board of Philip Morris. "Where do you stop? It's the same ethical question. Do you stop the Bolshoi from coming here because you don't believe in the Russian system?"

Officials with the Joffrey Ballet and other New York arts groups defend their acceptance of money from Philip Morris and other cigarette companies, donations that represented about 1 percent of the \$698 million contributed by all corporations to cultural institutions in 1985.

"We do not feel that the Joffrey Ballet is advertising to go out and buy cigarettes," said Pennie Curry, executive director of the Joffrey, which has received \$750,000 since 1982 from the company and is hoping for \$200,000 more this year. "We are extremely appreciative of our corporate support. If Philip Morris didn't help us, who would?"

Many Recipients

"One of the things they say about fund-raising and about money is that if you look too closely at it, it's all tainted," said James Kraft, assistant director for development and membership for the Whitney Museum of American Art, one of the recipients of Philip Morris money.

Philip Morris — which has acquired the Miller Brewing Company, the General Foods Corporation and several others in an effort to diversify — is not the only tobacco company that makes donations to the arts. For example, RJR Nabisco of Winston-Salem, N.C., formerly R.J. Reynolds Industries, gave \$1.6 million last year.

No tobacco company, however, can match, either in dollars or in visibility, Philip Morris's sortie into culture. Philip Morris executives estimate

that the company devotes 1 percent of its pretax revenue to philanthropy, and 20 percent of that money goes to the arts.

Besides the Joffrey Ballet, recipients include the Dance Theater of Harlem, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the American Association of Museums, the Morgan Library, the Guggenheim Museum, the Alvin Alley American Dance Theater, the American Ballet Theater, the American Museum of Natural History, Lincoln Center and scores of other cultural organizations.

Ties to the Whitney

The Whitney Museum, Philip Morris officials said, has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in support over the last decade. The museum and Philip Morris declined to give a specific figure.

The most notable evidence of Philip Morris's support for the museum came in 1983, when the company donated the first floor of its new Manhattan headquarters, at 42d Street and Park Avenue, to the museum. The floor is called the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

"There are always reasons why you can't take the money, and you have to weigh whether your mission is valid," Mr. Kraft said. "Philip Morris is not doing something that is illegal or illegitimate."

Melinda Little, the former associate development director for the Dance Theater of Harlem, which has received more than \$100,000 from Philip Morris over the last five years, agreed. "What they are trying to say is, 'We do really nice things as well; we're giving back to the community,'" said Ms. Little, who remains a consultant to the dance group. "It's a public image more than promoting smoking."

Perhaps the most famous and controversial donation by Philip Morris was a \$3 million-plus exhibition of Vatican art treasures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1983. At the inaugural banquet, Terence Cardinal Cooke, then the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York, led a prayer for Mr. Weissman and his Philip Morris colleagues. The benediction prompted a Philip Morris vice president, Frank Saunders, to say, "We are probably the only cigarette company on this earth to be blessed by a cardinal."

More recently, Philip Morris has become entangled in a controversy concerning Lincoln Center because Mr. Weissman, who is the center's chairman, also retains a high-ranking position at Philip Morris as chairman of the executive committee of the board of directors.

Specifically, Mr. Weissman has been accused of using his position with Lincoln Center to promote his company's product. At a soiree last fall, for example, the center — which receives local, state and Federal financing in addition to private patronage — passed out bags of favors containing Philip Morris cigarettes.

Mr. Weissman said that the incident was an "aberration" but that the cigarettes would be supplied again if the event's sponsor requested them. The Lincoln Center vice president for public affairs, Joe McKaughan, added that he saw no problem with the complex handing out cigarettes. He said tobacco, as a promotional device, is no different from chocolate.

Lincoln Center in Ad

Lincoln Center also has been criticized for allowing its name to be used in a newspaper advertisement that required the Surgeon's General warning about the health hazards of smoking. The ad promoted the Marlboro

Country Music Festival, held at Lincoln Center, and Marlboro cigarettes, which are made by Philip Morris.

Mr. McKaughan said he saw nothing objectionable about the ad. "We do it all the time for that company and others," he said.

Mr. Weissman agreed and castigated his critics. "I think it's kind of like McCarthyism with these people," Mr. Weissman said. "They are zealots."

One of those critics is Dr. Alan Blum, founder and president of Doctors Ought to Care, which is based in Houston. Dr. Blum said his group favored placing the Surgeon General's warning on all promotional materials connected with tobacco companies.

"A better warning," Dr. Blum suggested, "would be that this is sponsored by a company that is trying to get you to forget its contributions to the rise of health-care costs in this country."

Tax Legislation

Of greater concern for Philip Morris might be legislation in Congress, sponsored by Representative Fortney H. (Pete) Stark, a California Democrat, that would deny tax deductions to cigarette companies that receive promotional identification in return for donations to arts groups. Mr. Stark's administrative assistant, William Vaughn, said the bill would not hurt arts groups because the cigarette companies "that give because they really want to will still give."

Advertising experts say there are several reasons — besides civic-mindedness, tax deductions and self-promotion — for a company to give millions to art. They cite morale, image-building for recruiting employees and the personal interests of the corporate leaders.

Fred Danzig, the editor of Advertising Age, said he thought Philip Morris focused on art because of the interests of its corporate leaders and "to show that this company has a conscience."

He also said, however, that there was "some rub-off" in a consumer's mind when the company slogan is used as a marketing device. "It's not really advertising; it's sales and promotion," he said. "They are putting their name out just as Mobil does on Channel 13," on public television.

Health Official Backs Evidence

Some 300,000 Americans die each year of cancer or heart disease that can be directly attributed to cigarette smoking, said Robert Hutchings, spokesman for the Office of Smoking and Health in Washington, part of the Federal Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Officials of the tobacco industry have argued that the scientific evidence is inconclusive that cigarette are either physically addictive or cause cancer and heart disease. Mr. Hutchings said, however, that the evidence is "as irrefutable as evidence can be."

"Without question, tobacco harmful," said Tamara Thomas, Los Angeles art consultant who works with corporations though with Philip Morris. "But until Government makes it illegal, I think it is unethical to accept money from them."

That sentiment confounds such as Robert Weymueller, director of the American Lung Association. "I think the people who give the money without any soul-searching," he said, "are contributing to the illusion that these are ordinary corporations."