

1979

Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): Article 01

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Recommended Citation

Biddle, Livingston L. Jr., "Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): Article 01" (1979). *Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979)*. Paper 21.
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Government and the Arts

The National Endowment for the Arts serves as a catalyst bringing other groups together to stimulate cultural progress

LIVINGSTON L. BIDDLE JR. '40



NEA Chairman Biddle

SINCE 1965, when the National Endowment for the Arts was created, the U.S. has witnessed a phenomenal growth in the arts: The number of orchestras has more than doubled; opera companies have increased from 27 to over 50; professional theatres have more than quadrupled; dance companies have proliferated over ten-fold; and more than 200 new museums have come into being. Americans no longer have to go to Europe, as Babbit did, "for a good stiff dose of culture."

This boom did not just happen. It has been the result of cooperative partnerships between city, state, and federal governments; private, philanthropic, and corporate sources of support; and, most significantly, a burgeoning interest in and demand for the arts — in all their varied and diverse forms — by the public.

Before 1965, the government assisted the arts only indirectly. Artists were hired to decorate federal buildings or for such odd tasks as making pictorial reports on new territories or war zones. During the Great Depression, they were put to work under the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) for the sake of economic recovery. Arts projects were scattered here and there among various labor, education, and recreation programs. In Washington, we had the fed-

Livingston L. Biddle Jr. '40, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, is author of four novels and a former director of the Pennsylvania Ballet. As a staff member of the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and the Humanities, he helped draft the 1965 law that set up the NEA.

erally assisted Smithsonian Institution and the National Gallery.

But there was no federal commitment to promoting the arts and their immense benefits, no system for nourishing the whole spectrum of art forms in America and of sharing our cultural heritage with everyone, no recognition of the arts as a labor-intensive growth industry that deserved the government's support. A major reason for this was the fear that government might dominate culture or become an official arbiter of taste and quality.

At the same time, some of America's great cultural institutions were spending more time and energy on just trying to survive than on raising their standards of creative excellence. As a result, many of our artists were unable to develop meaningful careers. The arts were too often considered tangential to life, rather than of central and abiding value. Yet there was growing awareness of their importance.

The challenge, then, was to devise a truly democratic form of support that embraced the concept of non-intervention. Under the leadership of my Princeton classmate Senator Claiborne Pell '40, legislation was drafted establishing a new and independent agency — the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. Among other things, its statement of purpose declared:

A high civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone but must give full value and support to the other great branches of man's scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future. . . . The practice of art and the study of the humanities require constant dedication and devotion, and . . . while no

government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.

Within the National Foundation there are two Endowments — one for the arts, the other for the humanities — each advised by presidentially appointed councils. The 26 members of the arts council are nationally recognized experts, representing over the years many of our country's finest artists and leading cultural authorities. They advise on program guidelines, policy, planning, budget, and make final recommendations on all grant applications. The success that the Arts Endowment has enjoyed is in large part due to the concern and dedication of these private citizens.

The Arts Endowment is sub-divided into 14 program areas (architecture, dance, folk arts, literature, music, museums, theater, etc.) covering all of the major art forms in America. Each program then has 5-10 funding categories reflecting the needs of that particular field. Their guidelines are shaped by panels of specialists in the relevant disciplines, subject to regular review by the council. Each program also has a second panel of equal calibre to review individual applications and make recommendation to the council. The government's main role in this context is the bringing together of these experts.

The NEA was created to support the arts, not to dominate them. With the exception of fellowships to individuals, all grants must be matched. They are incentives, not subsidies. When an arts organization is awarded a grant, it ini-

tiates its own fund-raising campaign, finds new sources of support, recruits friends and patrons, and generates interest. Over the years of our experience, in case after case, the organization comes up with more than the required match. It becomes more integrated into the fabric of the community — ultimately, its most vital source of support. NEA funds accelerate this process.

The NEA began with a bare budget of \$2.5 million and a sweeping mandate to nourish all the nation's arts. In the early days — when I served as deputy to Chairman Roger Stevens — we were able to satisfy perhaps one out of every 100 applicants. Today, with a budget of \$149 million, the ratio is about one to four; there remain many unmet needs in each field. President Carter has recommended a budget of \$154.4 for next year. In a year of austere spending requirements, I feel this is a strong commitment to continued progress.

THE FUTURE of federal funding will greatly depend on how well various arts constituencies unite in expressing their needs. I have been trying to encourage this spirit of "unity" ever since I took office. The major institutions should clearly recognize the value of arts at the community level, and local leaders must in turn recognize the important role of the quality institutions.

Some would suggest a division here between "elitism" and "populism." Comparisons have been made to spread-

ing jam too thin, to raising the pinnacle of a pyramid by building from the base, and even to spreading fertilizer over a whole field and not piling it in one or two spots. "Elitism" is sometimes taken, in the pejorative sense, to mean placing the special interests of the large institutions above those of all the others. "Populism" is sometimes given the pejorative connotation of placing the emphasis on community and local arts activities, allegedly at the sacrifice of artistic quality or of the major institutional representatives of quality.

To me, these definitions are simplistic, semantic exaggerations of our present circumstances. I would like to see them replaced by more constructive meanings: "elitism" should connote "the best," and "populism" should imply "access." Using these terms, in a context of unified purpose, we can reach a combination which emphasizes quality and the desired result of nourishing it and making it more widely available.

The accomplishment of these goals can be greatly enhanced through federal partnership with the states. There are now arts agencies in every state and local arts councils in 1,800 communities. The states' appropriations for the arts have increased from \$4 million 13 years ago to more than \$80 million today. One fifth of the NEA's program appropriations now go to the state arts agencies. This partnership can be given new dimensions as the states make long-range plans; and as we guide the

Endowment toward its goal of making the arts more available across the nation, we depend more and more on the expertise — the knowledge of needs, trends, and priorities — of the states. This sharing in the planning process will strengthen our mutual commitments, broadening public-sector support for the arts and their benefits to our country.

I remember that my senior thesis at Princeton in 1940 dealt with the so-called "Novel of Purpose" in the 19th century and with the social reforms that were suggested in a variety of writings. Those novels served as catalysts, and their impact was substantial. Catalyst is a key word in describing the NEA's role in the development of the arts. A catalyst works through a partnership with other elements, to encourage, to engender, sometimes to inspire. The novels I studied back in those earlier years accelerated a process that had lasting consequences. As a catalyst, the NEA can provide an accelerating force for cultural progress. Today there is a growing demand for the values of the arts. A recent Harris poll found that 93 percent of the people think the arts essential to their lives. The NEA's goal is to bring those people together — to catalyze their relationship.

In my first year as chairman, I have sought to make the NEA increasingly responsive to the needs and diversity of the arts it serves. Besides strengthening the partnership structure, we have begun working more closely with other federal programs which are placing new emphasis on the arts: with the Office of Education to involve the arts more in the educational process; with the International Communication Agency to encourage greater appreciation of our artists abroad; with HUD to demonstrate how the arts can better become a focal point for the revitalization of deprived urban areas, and a source for renewal of the human spirit.

In 1782, John Adams wrote: "I must study politics and war, that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture." Today we are realizing the goals of the founding fathers, demonstrating the logical direction of a society based on freedom. The heirs of America's achievements in science and technology are now turning to the abiding and enriching qualities of the arts. □

The Princeton Art Museum's acquisition of The Mocking of Christ by Anthony van Dyck inspired the exhibition "Van Dyke as a Religious Artist," which was aided financially by the National Endowment for the Arts. The painting was a gift of the Charles Ulrich and Josephine Bay Foundation through Col. C. Michael Paul.



Princeton Art Museum