Design Arts: National Academy of Design (1994): Correspondence 01

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February 22, 1995

The Honorable Claiborne Pell
Russell Senate Office Building, Suite 335
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

As President of the National Academy of Design, I write on behalf of the Academy's 428 artist members to urge you to strongly oppose the proposed cuts and possible elimination of the federal cultural agencies -- the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute for Museum Services.

To tell you about our organization, the National Academy of Design is one of the nation's oldest cultural institutions. The Academy was founded by artists in 1825 to further the appreciation of the fine arts in America, and today fulfills that mission through the activities of a museum, a school of fine arts, and an honorary association of artists. The National Academy Museum is home to one of the finest collections of American art in the country and presents a rich assortment of special exhibitions, lectures and public programs that attract almost 50,000 visitors annually. The Academy's School of Fine Arts offers over fifty studio classes in painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, taught by some of New York's most accomplished artists, to almost 700 students each year.

While the National Academy of Design relies principally upon support from foundations, corporations, and individuals to meet its annual operating expenses, federal cultural agencies have provided important funding for special projects that serve a wide public, but which may be difficult to fund from other sources. And, because NEA funds must always be matched by other funders, these awards play a critical role in stimulating private contributions that are so very important to all arts organizations.

Much public attention has been directed toward a small number of federal awards for exhibitions or performance projects that some perceive as controversial. Yet, in fact, the vast majority of federal grants support high calibre arts projects that appeal to and benefit a broad segment of the American public. For example, this spring the National Academy Museum will present an exhibition of 85 outstanding 19th-century American landscape drawings and watercolors from its own collection and that of its neighbor, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. Most of these beautiful works -- by some of America's favorite artists such as Frederic Church and Winslow Homer -- are virtually
unknown to the public. This exhibition -- which also will travel to Detroit and Fort Worth -- will share with people around the country a selection of breathtaking views of the American landscape, as rendered by her own artists. A grant from the NEA helped the National Academy to organize this exhibition, to produce its catalogue, and also to provide programs that will enable seniors and inner-city children to visit and enjoy this exhibition.

Another often overlooked area where NEA funding plays an especially critical role is in the protection and preservation of our nation's cultural heritage. Several years ago, for example, the National Academy Museum received an NEA grant in partial support of a survey to determine which works in our exceptional collection of American paintings were in need of conservation treatment. The Academy now has a proposal pending before the NEA for funds to perform conservation treatments on several important 19th-century works -- by noted American masters such as Jasper Cropsey, John Frederick Kensett, Thomas Hicks, and Worthington Whittredge -- that were examined as part of that survey. Conservation projects of this kind are tremendously important to current and future generations of Americans, yet they are of interest to only a limited number of foundations and corporations. Here, again, NEA conservation grants help to stimulate private matching funds that might not be available otherwise, thus ensuring the preservation of America's artistic treasures.

These are only two instances in which support from the NEA can increase the American public's access to and enjoyment of its national cultural legacy. Other federal arts programs enable museums and arts groups to go into our nation's schools to introduce youngsters to the visual and performing arts; they help rural communities to establish arts centers that all can enjoy; they preserve historic papers and buildings, or document the changing cultural traditions of America's diverse ethnic communities; they enable visual and performing artists to develop new works; and they do so much more. In short, they celebrate and share with Americans the very best that American culture has to offer. There can be no more equitable distribution of America's cultural riches than through the programs of these federal cultural agencies, which have proven themselves to be so very successful for so many years.

As a sculptor who has devoted his life to the making of art, and as a Member and President of the National Academy of Design, I can attest to the tremendous potential of the arts to educate, to inspire, to edify, and to effect change. I conclude by urging you to take a stand to support a strong and continued federal role in funding for the arts in America.

Sincerely yours,

William King
President