Reauthorization: S. 2724 (1990): News Article 02

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"USA TODAY hopes to serve as a forum for better understanding and unity to help make the USA truly one nation."
—Allen H. Neuharth
Founder
Sept. 15, 1982

Peter S. Prichard
Editor
Cathleen Black
Publisher

John Seigenthaler
Editorial Director
Thomas Curley
President

DEBATE

Shield the arts from political censors

Amateurs are masquerading as art critics. They don't know art, but they know what they don't like.

From Congress to the clergy, these amateurs insist that they know what bad art is. Not surprisingly, bad art turns out to be any art they don't like.

What they don't like, they don't want you to support. They want no government money to go to "objectionable" art. They want to tell you what is acceptable.

Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina, the Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association, the writer across this page, and others don't like work like Robert Mapplethorpe's and Andres Serrano's. Last year, a handful of photographs in their exhibits, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, raised a ruckus.

That was all the evidence the critics needed to convict the NEA of funding obscenity. That was all they needed to demand restrictions on all government funds for art.

These critics say they support good taste, but they really support censorship. They use smear tactics and misleading ads to convince people that the NEA is in business to fund filth unfit for public consumption.

But very few NEA projects — 10 or so images out of a million funded — have aroused any controversy. That hardly qualifies the endowment as a smut peddler.

Most NEA funding goes to projects that wouldn't get the attention they deserve without public money.

► Like the Newport, Ore., arts center that teaches creativity to latch-key kids.
► Like Jack Kritzer, a poet in Sioux Falls, S.D., who teaches fourth-graders to appreciate poetry.
► Like the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' exhibition of 120 Renoir paintings, many never seen before in the USA.
► Like Ray Hicks of Banner Elk, N.C., an eighth-generation backwoods storyteller who may be the last of his line.

The endowment already restricts its grants to artists or works that have "artistic merit." That means that obscenity is out automatically, since the Supreme Court has said that obscenity has no artistic merit.

That standard is high enough to satisfy most of us. It's high enough to satisfy President Bush.

How many of us would have embraced Picasso as a genius? Or Walt Whitman? Or Michelangelo? Probably very few. They were all reviled for blasphemy or obscenity.

Most of us look at the unfamiliar with suspicion.

We can learn to appreciate great art. But to do that, we have to be exposed to it. Fewer of us would be exposed to art in its many forms if the government didn't encourage it.

The art censors would like to restrict it to what's popular and uncontroversial. If they had their way, a Jackie Collins would get money, but a James Joyce wouldn't have. More elevator music, less Mahler.

In making those choices, the NEA should be careful to balance its responsibility to the public with the artist's right to free expression.

Even a good eye can mistake garbage for greatness every once in a while.

But if the amateur art critics have their way, the risk is that they'll toss out greatness as garbage.