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Federal Advisory Council to the Arts, United States Arts Foundation: Hearings (August 1962): Speech 08

Sterling M. McMurrin

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Statement by
Sterling M. McMurrin
United States Commissioner of Education
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare
Before the Special Subcommittee on the Arts
of the
Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare
Wednesday, August 29, 1962
10:00 a.m., EDST

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate this opportunity to appear before the Special Subcommittee on the Arts to present the views of our Department on proposed Federal legislation to encourage the arts.

At the outset, I should like to make clear that we urge enactment of a bill along the lines of S. 741, which would establish a Federal Advisory Council on the Arts. A similar bill, H.R. 4172, has been favorably reported by the House Committee on Education and Labor.

President Kennedy, in his Message of February 6, 1962, relative to an educational program, recommended enactment of legislation to establish a Federal Advisory Council on the Arts in order that "thorough and sympathetic consideration" might be given to appropriate Federal contributions to the advancement of the arts. The President, in making this request, said:

"Our Nation has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. We are justly proud of the vitality, the creativity, and the variety of the contemporary contributions our citizens can offer to the world of the arts. If we are to be among the leaders of the world in every sense of the word, this sector of our national life cannot be neglected or treated with indifference.

Yet, almost alone among the governments of the world, our Government has displayed little interest in fostering cultural development."

In 1955, President Eisenhower recommended similar legislation and said, in his State of the Union Message of that year:

"In the advancement of the various activities which will make our civilization endure and flourish, the Federal Government should do more to give official recognition to the importance of the arts and other cultural activities."

The several bills before your Committee are concerned with providing a means by which the Federal Government would display its interest in fostering cultural development. This interest is fundamental, involving both the preception of American life and culture in other countries of the world and the cultural opportunities of our own citizens. The national interest in artistic and cultural development has been discussed fully in the last few years in the course of Congressional committee hearings on proposed legislation. It has been pointed out that such factors as the longer life-span and the greater leisure time enjoyed by our citizens increase their needs and opportunities for personal enjoyment of the arts. The obvious impact of American culture abroad also has been emphasized. The need for assessment and coordination of the large variety of Federal activities that affect the arts has been stressed repeatedly. Rather than cover these important and valid points again, I prefer to dwell on the importance of the arts to education.

In my judgment, we tend to think of education much too narrowly. Upon reflection it is apparent that education neither begins nor ends with formal classroom instruction. It is a lifetime process. For the sake of convenience and order, formal instruction is neatly divided into subject-matter compartments, yet education itself cannot be subdivided so conveniently because

it involves the relating knowledge in every field of learning and experience. The truly educated man may be less than complete in his understanding of a major facet of human experience, but he cannot be wholly ignorant of it. Therefore, to neglect the arts or to neglect the sciences in our process of learning is to defeat the basic purpose of education.

In the same sense, we tend to think of creative ability in terms that are far too narrow. A successful attempt to orbit our earth with a manned satellite is more than a magnificent technical achievement, because the technology itself is the result of many achievements of the creative imagination. Creativity, as we are beginning to realize through research findings, whether in the arts, science, or other fields of endeavor, is the manifestation of the same fundamental ability -- the ability to relate previously unrelated things.

When considered in terms of the fully educated person and the full enrichment of a culture, the arts and the sciences are seen to be inseparable. The course of intellectual history shows quite clearly that great civilizations have produced both great art and great science; in general these have flourished or declined together. Our real concern, surely, is to establish conditions that are favorable to the maximum cultivation of the creative talents and energy of our people. The basic role of the arts in nurturing this creative ability is everywhere evident. This is one more compelling but often neglected argument for the Federal Government's acting to encourage the arts in appropriate ways. Needless to say, the arts are of value in any society for their own sake. Surely, the life of any society ultimately must be judged in part by its artistic ability, its artistic creations, and the quality of its aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, as the Congress recognizes, the eventual strength and survival value of any culture is intimately related to the character of its arts, as it is related to its science and technology. It is not likely that any national

culture will survive that does not produce great art, great music, and great literature. A free art is one of the surest guarantees of a free society.

You will be interested in knowing that recently we established in the Office of Education a Cultural Affairs Branch within the Bureau of Educational Research and Development. This new Branch will give focus and direction to our large concern for education in the arts. During the past year the Office of Education has given serious consideration to the status of the arts in education and we are now developing the groundwork for a program that should result in an increased emphasis on the arts in education.

The establishment of a Federal Advisory Council, as proposed by S. 741, would be of very great assistance to the Office of Education and to every other interested Federal agency. The Council would provide a desirable means of assessing existing Federal activities in the arts, of studying the needs of the arts in detail, and of giving expert consideration to proposals for defining a proper Federal role in the arts. A number of proposals for additional Federal programs, for instance, are found in the other bills now before your subcommittee, each of which would be an appropriate matter for study by the Council.

Therefore, we view the establishment of the Federal Advisory Council as a desirable beginning in the development of Federal action to encourage the arts. Two successive national administrations have endorsed this measure and it has enjoyed strong bipartisan support in the Congress. We are extremely hopeful that such legislation will be enacted this year.

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