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Leisure and the Arts

The Arts Endowments: Battling Over the Muses

By MANUELA HOEFTSCHOFF
New York

The winds of change whirling around Washington have not bypassed the two agencies set up in 1965 to stimulate and nurture the arts: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Noble goals, lofty visions generated their formation. The enabling legislation, for instance, argued that "a high civilization does not limit its efforts to science and technology alone, but must give full value and support to other great branches of man's scholarly and cultural activities."

To that purpose, the NEA has supported dance, theater, music, and the visual arts, while the NEH has focused on scholarly activities, archival support, library programs and the educational underpinnings for certain art exhibitions. Congressional support for both agencies has increased steadily. The NEA has moved from $2.5 million in 1966 to $159 million this year. The NEH's current budget is $151 million.

During that time, the number of major symphonies and opera companies has doubled, resident theaters have quadrupled and professional dance companies have increased tenfold. Endowment monies rarely account for more than 5% of any major institution's budget, but supporters of NEA and NEH argue that they helped stimulate this remarkable cultural growth.

Fair damsel art's Rubenesque proportions have been scheduled for a hefty trim by the administration and budget. President Reagan's budget seeks to cut the Carter NEA proposal by half for fiscal 1982 and to $37 million by fiscal 1983. The NEH is also targeted for a 50% cut. Whether the administration will indeed get the full cut will be determined in the next few weeks as the bills make their dubious ways through the House and Senate.

The cuts are the largest slated for any agency. One is left pondering such questions as: Was this an accident? Is the administration signaling the phasing out of federal funding? And who will pick up the tab if the arts are left? Is yes?

The administration's position on the arts can hardly come as a surprise. No one remembers Mr. Reagan's governorship in California for its Medici-like splendor. Mr. Reagan himself earned his living in a commercial, not a state-supported, art form. Still, the President's platform did include the hope that "We could see a steady annual increase.... There is no question that the arts enhance the quality of life and that this is something virtually everyone seeks."

Difficult budgetary decisions precipitated the change says Aram Bakhshian Jr., a special assistant to Mr. Reagan for the arts and humanities. "Given defense requirements and a wide range of mandated entitlement programs that couldn't be touched, the administration was left with a relatively small area in which cuts could be made. The endowments were part of this comparatively small area and in addition were federal programs whose appropriations had been mushrooming over the past decade."

Yesterday, the White House formed a task force to study the possibility of fusing the two endowments into a super-agency probably modeled on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a quasi-public agency that funnelled monies to public stations. (CPB, too, is scheduled to deflate by 40% by fiscal 1986.) The shape of such an agency is still foggy but it would apparently be disbursing monies directly to state arts institutions after certain major institutions like, say the Metropolitan Opera, Actor Charlton Heston, a member of the task force and a close friend of the President, is rumored to be a prime contender for the part-time presidency. (His name is also mentioned in connection with the NEA, should it survive.)

Disbanding the endowments would require an act of Congress and the question remains whether the disbursement of funds to state agencies would really bring more excellence and discipline to the arts. Arguably this method might dilute standards instead.

Even conservative critics of the endowments have argued that judicious pruning and goal-redefinition are all that is needed. A "Mandate for Leadership" report released by the Heritage Foundation contains a chapter on the endowments, prepared by a study group led by Michael S. Joyce of the Olin Foundation. Says Mr. Joyce in a recent conversation: "We did not argue for the dissolution of the agencies. But we did determine that the NEA had focused too much on entertainment and that the NEH had confused humanitarianism with the humanities."

To avoid elitism, a pejorative term begun to be used, the arts have been labeled "art-friendly corporations," and the question now is whether any corporation will have the courage to attempt such a task.

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million in fiscal 1983. Many claim this has been an especially efficacious program, instrumental in setting up endowments and wiping out deficits. A challenge grant of $750,000 to the New York City Opera, for instance, recently triggered $4.2 million in private donations—way beyond the necessary amount.

The fear that cutbacks might taint the arts as frills in corporate boardrooms—which have only slowly gotten used to the idea of considering them life-enhancing—was voiced by retired Army Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin, who also spoke at the committee hearings last March. Drawing on his experience as a corporate board member he said: "I think corporations will see it as a lack of interest on the part of the government and a reason not to contribute."

The Reagan administration, of course, argues that the best thing it could do for the arts is to reduce the inflation rate, and it would be hard to disagree in principle. Some observers in Congress also think that most of the proposed cuts may be restored in the budget process. But the Reagan proposals have a savage edge to them that is perhaps more worrisome to arts supporters than the immediate dollars-and-cents questions. In the last dozen years or so, a valuable cultural fabric has been woven from public, private and foundation sources. Surely, in a country that spends $600 per capita on defense and 70 cents per capita on federal funding of the arts, we can afford to think twice before risking a tear in that fabric.

No work of art is worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier, said Bismarck. History has said otherwise. Nations tend to be remembered by their buildings, art and literature. The arts and humanities connect us with the past and extend us into the future. In coming weeks, options and possibilities should be carefully weighed.

Ms. Hoellerhoff is the Journal's arts editor.