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Leisure and the Arts

The Arts Endowments: Battling Over the Muses

By MANUELA HOELTERHOFF

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 Office of Management and Budget. President Reagan's budget seeks to cut the Carter NEA proposal by half for fiscal 1982 and to \$97 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 arduous 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 answer 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 Medic-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 Bakshian Jr., a special assistant to Mr. Reagan for the arts and humanities. "Given defense re-

quirements 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 funnels 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 councils after funding 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 disbursal 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 contained 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 during the Carter years, the endowments undoubtedly became the muses of all too many. Some programs edged uncomfortably into the social rehabilitation category (art in jails, little dance groups whose prime function is to keep minority kids off the streets). Many also feel that the NEA has become unduly fascinated by baskets and pottery. One of the great pages in the 1980 tome documenting the House Subcommittee on Appropriations records Sidney Yates (D., Ill.), the witty chairman of the committee, listening with awesome patience as some NEA staffers wailed about the problems of cataloging Estonian weaving designs (the weavers were either dying off or having heart attacks).

But one can also and more easily point to commendable funding programs that

have often helped turn fledgling dance, theater, symphony and opera groups into thriving companies, and assisted artists and writers with year-long grants. Art shows of substance, if not glitter, have been aided by enthusiasts at the NEH (the Los Angeles County Museum's Russian revolutionary exhibition, for instance). Seed money to develop projects often permits institutions to approach corporations for further funding.

Says Congressman Frederick Richmond (D., N.Y.), with Mr. Yates one of the most vocal arts advocates in Washington: "For many people the Tutankhamun show was one of the great art experiences in their life. . . . It would not have come about if Joseph Duffey (chairman of the NEH) hadn't loosened up funds to determine the availability of the objects and possibility of the show."

It is the administration's belief that corporations and private patrons will offset the proposed cuts and also that federal largesse has preempted corporate giving. Mr. Heston, for instance, has said that "It is time to look for private patrons of the arts, just as Michelangelo did." In fact, Michelangelo had few private patrons and relied largely on papal and state patronage. And the passage of time since the days of Carnegie and Frick, along with the progressive income tax, has reduced the number of potential patrons who can fund a new opera production or run a museum out of their pockets.

Judging by figures released by the Business Committee for the Arts, corporate sponsorship does not appear to have been pushed out by federal monies. In 1967 business contributed about \$22 million to the arts. Last year the sum was about \$435 million—greater than the combined endowments. These expenditures, say leaders of various art-friendly corporations, have been encouraged, not hampered, by the endowments.

Frank A. Saunders, staff vice president at Philip Morris, for instance, offered the following comments at appropriations subcommittee hearings held in the Senate and House last March: "As it happens few businesses are adventurous, few boards of directors are prepared to stake company money on creative, speculative art forms. But when given the stamp of approval by the National Endowment, such new art does have a chance in the boardroom, and given that chance of support has a chance to survive, to grow, and to enrich contemporary America."

One way private, corporate and federal support have been linked in the past is through the challenge grant system set up during the Nixon administration which invites institutions to meet federal grants with new monies on a three to one basis. But the NEA expects to cut this program back from \$13.45 million this year to \$2.5

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. Hoelterhoff is the Journal's arts editor.