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Leisure and the Arts

The Arts Endowments: Battling Over the Muses

By Manuela Holterhoff

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 Rubensian 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 the NEA and NEH? If the Arts Endowments: Battling Over the Muses 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 Congresswoman Frederick Richmond (D., N.Y.), with Mr. Yates one of the most vociferously 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. Duffey, 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 Caravaggio 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, says leader of the anti-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 before 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 forms do 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 one-to-one basis. But the NEA expects to cut this program back from $13.45 million this year to $2.5 million.
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.