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Must Art Be Useful? Must It Be Sweet?

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... grain of American independence, the tradition of self-reliance that seems so often to tie into populism. But that very populist instinct often contradicts what art strives to do, which is not to coddle but to challenge. Great art is rarely created with popularity in mind, and when it manages to achieve tremendous appeal, it is often nothing more than a miraculous accident.

Surely the saddest aspect of this moment is the way in which the arts establishment, to fight the political opposition it faces, has been forced to retreat into a position of defending the popularity of art and denying its challenge. Jane Alexander, the earnest and determined chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Arts, has labored mightily to convince Congress and the voters that the endowment is spreading sweetness and light throughout the country, that art is bringing happiness to all who are touched by endowment grants.

But the Republicans are not so quick to buy this, and maybe they are right. They know the arts at their most vital are something other than sugar-coated candy. The arts often undermine, they often seek to be subversive to established orders, and the opposition to the endowment wants to protect the country from this evil, or at least make sure that government funds play no part in propagating it. Picasso may be easy to swallow now, but he wasn't in 1910. Why should our tax dollars support the next crazy radical to come down the pike?

The ultimate paradox is that now, at a time when public interest in the arts is greater than ever, the arts establishment has come to promote what is fundamentally an anti-intellectual view of culture, while the right-wing opposition operates from a more sophisticated view. The opponents of the endowment who complain loudly about the homoerotic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe or the urine-drenched crucifix of Andres Serrano, hostile though they may be to any esthetic messages in these works, are actually more accepting of the notion that art consists of ideas and not merely pretty pictures, that it is more than entertainment and that it often seeks to challenge society's standards.

The arts establishment, engaged in the act of trying to protect the economic interests of cultural organizations and institutions that depend on masses of people attending, has increasingly been blurring the line between art and entertainment. These supporters of the arts endowment increasingly see culture in terms of what is consumed, not in terms of what is created. How else to explain their willingness to abandon to the other side the very view of art that they should be holding most dear, a recognition of art as creativity and challenge.

Today, as advocates attempt to save the endowment by portraying art as democratic, accessible and unthreatening, it is left to their opponents to see it in terms of creativity, and to admit the tremendous, terrifying power that art at its most intense can possess.