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Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 09

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Q and A

Endowment For Arts Seen Doing Well

Livingston Biddle, new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, previously served as staff director of the endowment's authorizing subcommittee and deputy chairman of the group in its infancy. He was interviewed by Washington Star Staff Writer Phillip M. Kodis.

Question: *There has been criticism that there is a growing politicization of the arts and the humanities. Is that the case?*

Biddle: No, I would disagree with that. I think that going back in time, we should recognize that when this legislation to create the two endowments was enacted, the arts and humanities were placed within a governmental structure. I equate the words political and the political process with the process that runs our government and our democracy. Therefore, I would suggest that the arts have been increasingly in the mainstream of our political process and our democratic process since the enactment of the legislation. I look upon that as a strength rather than a weakness. In the National Council on the Arts, we have 26 private citizen members. We have the private citizen panelists who are really responsible for making the recommendations to the council on matters relating to support of the arts and on grant applications. We have a very comprehensive restriction against the government ever involving itself in the personnel matters or the policy decision matters of grantees. So I think that with that philosophic base for the law, the word "politicization" used to mean improper pressures from government is not a valid concept.

Q: *You've watched the endowment closely over the past eight years. How do you think it's turned out? Has it been on the whole well run, do you believe?*

A: I think it's been very well run in general. I think that perhaps there are improvements to be made, but I think both Roger Stevens and Nancy Hanks have done an excellent job. I equate that job both with the development of the arts in the country over the years since the endowment has been in existence, and the dramatic increase in both the number of institutions and the funding for those institutions at local, state and private citizen levels. I think over the years, the matching provision of the law has been extremely valuable in making the government serve as a catalyst for developing the arts. I also think that over those years there's been a gradual increase in the receptivity of the program on the Hill. I think we began at a time when the arts legislation was often subject to ridicule, and we have reached a level where the program is now generally received with acceptance and accord. I think the next step will come when we reach a level of real enthusiasm.

Q: *There are still some who say that federal funding of the arts is in fact an improper use of taxpayers' money, that it should not go to an activity that is of benefit to a minority of the population. Do you have any qualms about that?*

A: I can answer that in two ways. One level of answer is that art institutions now all over the country are recognizing that the private philanthropy and non-federal money simply cannot provide the necessary funding to sustain and develop a vital cultural life. In the early days, for example, the nation's orchestras looked askance at this whole idea of federal support and said it wasn't really necessary. But now I think there are virtually no organizations in the country in any arts area which have not seen that the National



LIVINGSTON L. BIDDLE JR.
Improvements needed

Endowment for the Arts and its activities and its offer of help, its ability to help, is not an important part of the national cultural picture. Then also, I think, philosophically, we have come a very long way in the measuring of a new kind of sense of partnership between government and the private community, so that this whole endeavor has taken on added dimensions. I think that we are on a springboard now for future growth, but I think that we have come a very long distance in a relatively short time.

Q: Some people say that the endowment was established as a foundation and should operate primarily the way a foundation operates. Others say it's a federal agency, using federal funds and it must be subject to the same accountability that other federal agencies are subject to. You help write most legislation that establish the endowment, how do you feel?

A: I think it must remain accountable to the government just as any other governmental agency. I think that is proper and it goes back to what I was saying that the fact the arts are really in the mainstream of our governmental process. I would not like to see them in some other area. I think that the Democratic process is benefited in great measure by both the arts and the humanities and they represent, perhaps better than anything else, the grace, the wisdom and the beauty of our country.

Q: How are you going to widen access to the arts without a huge infusion of federal funds, much greater than at present?

A: I think we look at the long term here. We see that the arts over the past 10 years have developed in a dramatic manner. I'm sure we're all familiar

with the rapid increase in the number of orchestras, which almost doubled. The number of opera companies has doubled. The number of resident professional theaters has increased four times. The number of resident professional dance companies has increased by sevenfold. I'm optimistic about this development, because I think we can find new ways of bringing quality in the arts out to larger numbers of people. One method is through touring, which we all know is expensive. Another method is by developing the indigenous product at home. I think inevitably this is going to be a developing area of concern. I think that as more people learn the values of the arts, as more people feel that the arts are personally rewarding to them in the sense of greater imagination, a greater sense of awareness, a greater feeling that there is beauty available in their lives, then I think those people are going to attach a developing sense of priority on the values of the art and that they are going to increasingly express that feeling to their government.

Q: Grants to individual artists have received a small part of Endowment funds in the past. How do you feel about increasing the proportion of Endowment funds that go to individual artists?

A: I think that individual artists are really the keystone of the whole program and that we have to clearly see that there are many artists who do not work in an institutional area. My wife is a visual artist, I used to be a writer. We work in solitude and are not part of an organization. If artists who paint or write or sculpt, who work outside of a framework of an organization are to be helped, often that is best done through an individual grant. Others have recommended that the arts endowment entirely fund its individual grants through a second or third party. But I think that as we look at this whole question we must think how best to make individual grants in each of the areas.

Q: A recent Rockefeller report on the arts and education called for moving the arts to the center of educational activities, educational programs. Should the endowment have a role in this sort of effort?

A: I think the endowment should have a developing role in education but I'm not convinced that it should have a primary role in this area. I think the endowment has an expertise to offer in the arts that should be taken advantage of. But here we get into areas where intergovernmental, interagency cooperation can well provide some new answers. And I'm thinking about better cooperative efforts with the Office of Education and with the National Endowment for the Humanities