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Pell Explores Abstract Painting

Art Grants Favoritism Debated

Special to The Journal-Bulletin

Washington—Is the government rewarding the avant garde artist at the expense of the solid, but less sensational, professional?

This question absorbed the interests of two senators, three art experts and the chairman of the National Council on the Arts yesterday.

In the process they debated the merits of abstract versus representational art, whether or not all modern art is garbage, whether Andrew Wyeth is an abstract painter and whether or not the arts council was being properly impartial in its grants.

But the real question—Is all abstract art necessarily avant garde and is all representational art necessarily dull?—never was resolved.

The discussion took place during hearings of the Senate special subcommittee on the arts and humanities on a bill to amend the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965.

Its three-year fiscal appropriation ends next summer and the arts endowment, under the chairmanship of Roger Stevens, is asking for an open-end appropriation which would allow it to ask Congress for as much money as it requires.

Asked how much that was, Mr. Stevens said that the arts endowment needs 140 million dollars—a long jump from its current 5-million-dollar appropriation.

Similar hearings on the bill have been held by a House subcommittee, plus a joint

House and Senate hearing, earlier this month.

The financial needs got second billing as Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-RI, and Sen. Ralph Yarborough, D-Tex, concentrated their attention on 60 arts council grants to artists which, it was claimed, have rewarded the abstract artist and ignored the representational one.

When Senator Pell endeavored to discover how many artists of each persuasion got grants, Mr. Stevens refused to commit himself to labeling them, with the comment, "After all, Andrew Wyeth does not consider himself a representational painter."

The senator then offered his own rough rule of thumb: "You can tell," he suggested, "whether or not the art is representational by whether or not you know when it's right side up."

Finally, Mr. Stevens conceded that 75 per cent of the grants are going to nonrepresentational painters.

Senator Pell's opening round was succeeded by a blast from Frank C. Wright, president of the Council of American Artist Societies, who said that he represented 20,000 artists. None, apparently, is way out or mod.

"We can't blame newspaper reporters for getting good stories out of chimpanzees that try to paint like a man," Mr. Wright said. "But men who paint like chimpanzees should not be given awards of public funds. Many citizens have confused news value with artistic value."

Charles Cunningham, direc-

tor of the Art Institute of Chicago, gave a dignified general statement for the defense. His main point was that artists often speak their own language and that the paintings one generation vilifies are frequently bought at inflated prices by the next.

It all seemed to mystify Senator Pell, who appeared grateful for a copy of "What Is Modern Painting?" offered by Mr. Cunningham. "I think I had better read it," he said with a laugh.

"The bill does say that no one style should be preferred over any other," Senator Yarborough said. "I hope that this standard will be followed."

"We will keep these instructions in mind," Mr. Stevens replied.

Los Angeles Times/Washington Post News Service