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November 23, 1977

War breaks on the arts front

By VERA GLASER

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON — A refined but intense war is going on in the art world as Livingston L. Biddle, Jr., a Philadelphia aristocrat, takes over his new job as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The battle rages over the government's arts dollars — whether the millions should go for "elitist" or "populist" projects, and whether, as some charge, the arts are being "politicized."

Biddle is a tall, urbane figure with neat pepper-and-salt sideburns and mustache, whose job automatically makes him a major influence on American culture.

He pooh-poohs the fuss as "semantics," but he told President Carter recently that he hopes to foster "a new spirit of unity" in the U.S. arts community.

"Those who suggest the arts should be outside the political process," Biddle says, "don't really understand what is involved here. If our people decide tomorrow that it is more important than science or road building or war, the arts would get more funding."

Mrs. Joan Mondale, wife of the Vice President and the Carter administration's most visible arts advocate, calls the ruckus "temporary. When an administration changes, people involved in things as sensitive as the arts and humanities are a little apprehensive as to the way the (arts) Endowments are going to go. It's only natural," she says.

Biddle offered a glimpse of his future plans and peacemaking efforts in an interview in his Georgetown living room.

Surrounded by paintings, heirlooms, and oriental antiques bought by his father on a round-the-world yacht trip, it was a little surprising to hear the button-down Biddle in his dark suit and striped tie describe himself as an "evangelist."

But a lifetime of immersion in the arts, personally and publicly, has given Biddle at 59 the credentials

to direct the National Endowment, and a sense of missionary zeal creeps through when he speaks of it.

In 1965 Biddle wrote the legislation creating the Endowment, which will funnel \$115 million into the arts this year. He has served as its deputy chairman and Congressional liaison officer. Until his recent appointment as chairman, he was staff director of Sen. Claiborne Pell's (D. R.I.) subcommittee on education, arts and humanities.

Biddle has written four books, two of them best sellers. With his wife, painter Catharina Baart Biddle, he spends at least two evenings a week, sometimes every night, at Kennedy Center cultural events. A son is in architectural school and a daughter studies drama.

Biddle comes to his job as America is riding the crest of a culture wave. An arts explosion many attribute partly to the work of his predecessor, Nancy Hanks.

This year the Endowment will disburse an all-time high in grants to painters, sculptors, musicians, photographers, and architects, as well as to companies that produce ballet, theatre, opera, and orchestra music.