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## Arts and Humanities: Background (1975-1995): Speech 04

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**Jane Alexander, Chairman  
National Endowment for the Arts  
Testimony before the  
U.S. Senate Committee on  
Labor and Human Resources  
Washington, DC  
January 26, 1995**

Thank you Madame Chairman, Members of the Committee. I am pleased to be able to speak to you today about the National Endowment for the Arts.

Sixteen months ago, I left my acting career because I thought I might be able to contribute to the agency that had given so much to me as a young actor -- and to many others like me -- through its support of non-profit theaters throughout the country. Theaters that made possible the careers of our major playwrights, actors, directors and filmmakers today. The handful of theaters in 1965 has grown to 430 because of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Today the question before you is whether the agency should continue to exist. I come not to bury the Endowment but to praise it.

When I came into office, I was disturbed by the image the public and some members of Congress had of the agency. I wanted to know just what the Endowment was funding and how people felt about it, so I journeyed to all 50 states and Puerto Rico and to over 130 towns and cities. I met with thousands of Americans at dozens of town meetings. I visited schools, arts institutions, festivals, media centers. What I learned is that people care very much about the art that is going on in their communities and were grateful for the NEA's involvement. The most prevalent question was how they could sustain or fund their arts organizations.

In the little town of Wamego, Kansas, I learned we had helped fund the restoration of the only extant murals from the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. They are now at Wamego's renovated Columbian Theatre, and the people there are so proud to have them.

In Detroit's inner city, I sat in on a class where an Endowment-supported artist taught drama to high school kids. They performed an adapted version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," partly in street language, partly in iambic pentameter. These kids had never experienced Shakespeare before, but they were so rewarded by this experience that next year they'll do Shakespeare straight, because they think he writes better.

In Indianapolis I broke ground on the city's new Arts Garden an extraordinary piece of architecture which will serve as a resource center for the arts for anyone coming to visit the city; in Chattanooga, Tennessee, I thrilled to Irish American fiddlers, Cajun Zydeco and Hawaiian dancers at the National Folk Festival.

All these varied projects are made possible through the National Endowment for the Arts. My journey allowed me to see America in the making and it made clear to me that art is not one thing, but many different and wonderful things. The Arts Endowment isn't a subsidy for the elite. It's for the folks I met from Tacoma to Canton to Council Bluffs -- ordinary people trying to make a better life -- people who understand that the arts improve their schools, renew the spirit of their communities, and that the Endowment speaks to the soul of who we are as individuals and as a nation.

There are many ways we serve this broad spectrum that is American culture. We support arts education, community development, arts in underserved areas. And yes, we support our big institutions -- our national cultural treasures -- that preserve and promote the best art and open their doors to young and old. We support individual artists who capture in paint or in words the essence of our time. I want to disabuse any notion that the arts are for a limited portion of Americans. The arts are for everyone.

I do not believe that the taxpayers I met in towns and cities large and small begrudge the 64 cents each year that the Endowment costs them. Sixty-four cents: the price of two postage stamps a year! Our small investment reaps enormous returns.

The Endowment, in fact, more than pays for itself. We operate sort of like venture capital for the arts. Our fiscal year 1995 appropriation is \$167.4 million. For every federal dollar we award, we leverage an average of \$11 in other public and private monies -- in some communities it's higher -- that arts organizations must raise to complete their projects and sustain their institutions. That's an investment record even Wall Street would envy.

The non-profit arts industry generates an estimated \$3.4 billion in federal tax receipts yearly -- from all those associated with the organizations we help support.

Over one million Americans make their living as artists or in arts-related activities.

The quality of life is improved in cities where arts institutions exist. Downtown areas are revitalized. The economic impact of the arts is palpable because businesses and tourists are attracted, as is the development of hotels, restaurants and transportation services. It's happening in big cities like Pittsburgh, Indianapolis and St. Louis and in smaller towns like Abilene, Texas.

Our basic mission is to fund the best art in the country. For thirty years, the Endowment has done that -- with very few exceptions. Forty of over 100,000 grants awarded have caused some people some problems -- that's .04 percent. Better than Ivory Soap. Again, a record some might envy.

But how do we improve that record? By and large, our advisory panel system works very well. In the past few years, a lay person has been added to each of our 100 panels. We seek always to expand the search for panelists so that all geographical regions are addressed, in addition to ethnic and aesthetic diversity.

I have instituted a number of changes in the agency:

First, in response to budget reductions, I have eliminated all the Endowment's subgrant programs, except those that are made in conjunction with state and regional arts organizations. I did not think it was appropriate to continue funding third-party organizations which in some cases could not meet our panels' criteria and which had significant overhead costs.

Second, we have streamlined by clustering five of our discipline-based grant programs into two groups -- Music, Presenting and Opera-Musical Theater and Visual Arts and Museums -- in an effort to reduce our administrative overhead and respond to the National Performance Review.

Third, I have ensured that interim reports are filed before grantees draw down the full measure of their grant awards.

Fourth, I have tightened scope change procedures to ensure that all grantees' projects conform to the parameters of their applications.

Finally, I am working with the National Council on the Arts -- our board of directors -- to strengthen their participation in the grants review process.

I have undertaken these measures to give the taxpayers a better accounting of their contribution to the arts.

Even as we tighten our belts and make our reforms, we are encountering some people who say that the Federal government has no legitimate role in support of art.

All great nations support the arts, because they are vital to a society's well-being. Future generations will judge this era by our national commitment to culture. In creating the Endowment in 1965, the Congress wisely noted, "An advanced civilization must . . . give full value and support to scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future." The reason for a National Endowment for the Arts is that government believes that creativity, imagination and inquiry are essential to a strong and free society.

Some argue that the private sector would replace lost funds. In fact, corporate support for

the arts has been in decline this past decade. Many high quality arts organizations, despite the fact of greater levels of earned income, are running deficits. They work tirelessly at fundraising, exploring every possible option. Taking away the Federal "seed" money will not encourage private funding to grow, but just the opposite as private funders seek to address even broader social needs.

Another myth is that the states are better suited to support the arts. Endowment grants are a matter of national prestige, for ours is a national competition based on excellence and merit. The prestige of getting a grant from the Endowment is often critical in leveraging additional resources from the private sector. Our grants to the states encourage state legislatures to provide additional funding. By the way, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, which represents the state arts agencies, is on record as opposing any change in their current percentage share.

The Endowment is uniquely positioned to support projects that benefit the country as a whole and to help Americans share their diverse cultures with one another. We are a leader in arts education, international exchange, accessibility for those with disabilities, research, arts and technology. We provide the model for programs like folk arts apprenticeships, and our grants to individual artists provide national recognition that often sends their careers in motion. Our Literature Program, for example, has awarded fellowships to writers who have gone on to win in the past five years, 21 of the 27 National Book Awards, National Book Critics Circle Awards, and Pulitzer Prizes in fiction and poetry.

Only a strong Endowment can help other federal agencies use the arts for national purposes such as education reform, crime prevention, and economic development. The states realize that we have created a delicate balance in the partnership among local, state, regional and federal arts agencies. When one brick in the building is pulled, very often the whole structure will fall.

What would be lost if the Endowment ceased to exist?

The world would question our country's commitment to culture. Many state legislators would find it easy to shut down state arts agencies and cities may do the same with local arts agencies. Private funders might turn their attention and resources to other concerns. Many community arts organizations which don't have access to private funds would cease to exist. Arts education programs could wither on the vine.

Some individual artists would never make it. One has to wonder whether Oscar Hijuelos would have won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love were it not for his fellowship from the Endowment. Or if Rita Dove would now be U.S. Poet Laureate without the start she received from us and our support of the small presses in which she is published.

But if the Endowment were not reauthorized, the biggest losers would be the American people.

Madame Chairman and Members of the Committee, when I talk about my priorities for the Endowment in the coming year and beyond, I always begin with the children. I think of the children I have met in New Mexico, in North Dakota, in West Virginia whose imaginations have blossomed through the arts. These children are not the so-called elite. They are our best hope.

Arts education is a priority. The restoration of learning the arts in our schools is critical. Beyond the intrinsic value of arts education which defines who we are, where we have been, and where we'll go, countless studies that show that the arts make happier and better students. The latest study from the College Entrance Examination Board showed that those who studied the arts scored 31 to 50 points higher than the national average for the math and verbal sections. Arts education that begins in pre-school like Head Start should not end upon graduation, but continue throughout life.

Another priority is increasing public-private partnerships to maximize the value of our investment, particularly partnerships with great national organizations like the YMCA.

Another goal is promoting good design in industry, in housing, in U.S. products to increase America's competitive edge.

We want to help arts organizations harness the power of the new technologies and provide access for all Americans to the cultural content of the NII.

And another basic goal of ours is to connect people with the culture in their communities. In that regard, one of the most important and exciting projects we wish to pursue is what I call "The Millennium Project." As you know, the turn of the millennium in the year 2000 will be celebrated all over the world, and the U.S. should take the lead.

How do we celebrate the year 2000? More football games on TV? Two-thousand balloons for every household? A giant birthday cake in every town?

The way we acclaim the occasion is through a celebration of who we are, as a nation and as a union of states. In other words, through the arts and humanities.

The Millennium Project will award the best of the visual, literary and performing arts in each state and invite these artists to come to our Nation's Capital in 1999 and 2000 to perform and exhibit their work, so that all may see the best of art in America. We want to document and boast of the heritage of all of our states.

And if any century in the history of art belongs to any nation, the 20th century is the American century for art. Generations to come will long take note not only of our achievements in science and technology, but they will remember 20th century America for:

Dance, from Isadora Duncan to Martha Graham to Twyla Tharp.

Literature, from Wallace Stevens to William Faulkner to Toni Morrison.

Design, from Stanford White to Frank Lloyd Wright to I.M. Pei.

Filmmakers, directors and actors from Buster Keaton to John Huston to Spike Lee, from Lillian Gish to Kate Hepburn to Cicely Tyson.

Jazz, from Jelly Roll Morton to Louis Armstrong to Winton Marsalis. Our traditions in gospel music, bluegrass, in the blues.

Playwrights, from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams to Wendy Wasserstein.

Painters, from Winslow Homer to Georgia O'Keeffe to Jackson Pollack.

From the back porch fiddler to the first violin of our world-class orchestras, from the university art professor exploring the latest technology to the kindergarten teacher explaining complementary colors, from the grandmother passing along the secrets of weaving to the granddaughter discovering new patterns -- we have much art to celebrate.

The National Endowment for the Arts is uniquely positioned to marshal all of the forces to celebrate American art at the dawn of the millennium. We have the resources, the leadership, the partnership to make it happen, to let the American story ring out. That's how we'll celebrate our birthday in the year 2000.

When all else fails and disappears, art endures. Perhaps you read about the discovery recently in a cave in France of the paintings created thousands of years ago in the Ice Age. Primitive man felt the need to capture forever the stirring of his imagination, to tell his story, to show through art his soul's reflection of the world. We feel that same impulse in our souls. It is essential for our nation not only preserve our culture, but to nurture that impulse to create, to understand, to imagine. At the beginning of the new millennium, we do not hide our art in the darkness of the caves, but bring it to all people so that all may dream and hear the story and see the reflection of our world. The National Endowment for the Arts plays a small but catalytic role in helping all Americans experience the rare and enduring wonder of art. I ask that you continue to support what is good for the spirit of our nation. Thank you.