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11-30-1977

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Phillip M. Kadis

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Recommended Citation

Kadis, Phillip M., "Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 16" (1977). *Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979)*. Paper 38. https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_II_28/38

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Liv Biddle, Facing Excedrin Headache No. 1

The arts endowment: Will it become a pain?

By Phillip M. Kadis
Washington Star Staff Writer

Livingston L. Biddle Jr. wanted the job. He announced early for it. Gave other candidates and folks in the arts and culture bureaucracy ample opportunity to hurl their harpoons before President Carter made his choice.

Now he's got the job — one that his predecessor, Nancy Hanks, once described as the best job in the world. Today, a swearing-in at the White House and a Corcoran Gallery reception studied with arts sparklies (Isaac Stern, Billy Taylor, Ed Villella, James Earl Jones, Robert Rauschenberg) formally acknowledges that he is the new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The event is, for the record, pure ceremony. Vice President Mondale administering the oath. A brass quintet from the National Symphony Orchestra at the Corcoran, along with the Evelyn White Chorale, and speeches by Stern, Taylor, Gilbert Hartke of Catholic University and J. Curtis Hinton of the D.C. Commission on the Arts. But Biddle actually took the oath of office three weeks ago so he could have legal authority to administer the grant-making agency prior to today's ceremonies.

HE DECIDED, THEREFORE, to be reflective about the investiture, to wax philosophical at his swearing-in.

He quotes de Lamartine and likens the work of art to an event "of great personal significance" during which time is momentarily arrested and the individual becomes "fully attentive," open to a new perspective. He invites his audience to reflect, too.

And well he might. For it only takes a moment to realize that the "best job in the world" could become a colossal headache.

Biddle knows he has taken over an institution that is suddenly engulfed in a tide of rising expectations, a victim in large part of its own success. It is no longer the almost intimate organization it was when he served as its first deputy chairman. The kind where his desk was in an "orange crate" and where the re-



— Washington Star Photographer Willard Volk

Livingston Biddle in his office overlooking the Kennedy Center.

sponse to his request for an actual desk was met with "a larger orange crate."

The annual budget is no longer \$8 million, as it was 1967 when he left to help design a new arts curriculum at a then-evolving Fordham University liberal arts college at Lincoln Center in New York City. A decade later, it is \$115 million, a 14-fold increase. To match that growth rate, the endowment budget would have to reach \$1.6 billion in the next 10 years. And that's what may send Biddle to the Excedrin bottle in short order.

THE RAPID GROWTH was partly a reflection of what was happening to the arts throughout the country. But the unprecedented burgeoning of the arts was partly the result of carefully targeted stimulus by the arts endowment. The endowment, under Nancy Hanks and Michael Straight, also nurtured the growth of state and community arts agencies that were useful in lobbying Congress for more funds (from 125 com-

munity agencies 10 years ago to more than 1,000 today with combined budgets of \$50 million). State arts agencies were formed in every state as units of the state government.

Like topsy, the number of different categories in which grants were made grew to more than 120. Applications began to spill over the 20,000 level. The staff rose from a handful to 200 persons, and that seemed inadequate.

FOR A LONG TIME, the natural stresses and strains of such growth were alleviated by the ever-increasing budget. As the rate of growth slowed down in the past three or four years, competition for a share of the endowment pie became more intense.

The state and community arts chickens came home to roost. They formed national organizations. Demanded a greater voice in determining how endowment money was to be spent.

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BIDDLE

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Not long ago, the established arts organizations — museums, symphony orchestras, theaters, dance companies, etc. — followed suit. Fearful that pressure from the quasi-governmental state and community groups would channel endowment money toward second-echelon institutions at their expense, they banded together to gain more clout. The same is true of ethnic groups and women.

Within the endowment, infighting over the budget among directors and staff of the broad program areas (architecture, dance, literature, music, visual arts, media arts, etc.) grew more fierce. Bureaucratic jargon proliferated as they fought a paper war of contesting proposals.

The National Council on the Arts, the endowment's presidentially-appointed advisory body, was becoming more assertive, tired of the accusation it had become a rubber stamp. Complaints were growing that the whole grant-making process had become too cumbersome, too laden with red tape. The American Film Institute wanted a longer leash, or none at all. During the past 13 years, the endowment had amassed invaluable data about the arts in America, but it was all in file cabinets instead of computers and almost impossible to get to with the available staff.

ADMINISTRATIVE STREAMLINING of the endowment was hampered partly by the reluctance of Hanks to delegate authority until the last year or two of her second four-year term, and partly by Straight's fundamental lack of interest in the grind of daily administration.

Biddle was acutely aware of all these problems when he sought the post. He had returned to the endowment in 1975 for a brief stint to set up a Congressional liaison office for

The Star, Washington, D.C.
November 30, 1977
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Hanks and the endowment. Before and after that he kept a close eye on the endowment from Capitol Hill, as the Senate staff man on the arts and humanities.

Still, he wanted the job. He had drafted the legislation setting up the arts and humanities endowments faithful as he could be, given the political realities of Capitol Hill, to a private vision of what the endowments should be — the vision of a

man who knew the arts best as a writer, a novelist. Now, he would have the opportunity to round out his career as the head of an institution he helped to build from the foundation upwards, a unique national experiment in government stimulation and support of the arts.

So it was a good time to reflect, to "drop anchor and pause for one single day," as the poet said. Tomorrow, the aspirin.