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Art and Scholarship in a Democracy

Representative John Brademas played a two-day stand in New York City earlier this month, part of a national tour to churn up support for a White House conference on the arts and the humanities in 1979. The settings were appropriate: for the humanities, the New York Public Library; for the arts, the Juilliard School at Lincoln Center. Public officials, artists and scholars came forward to support the idea of a conference and to suggest the subjects that it might cover.

As an expression of national support for American accomplishments in art and scholarship, a White House meeting could be useful and invigorating. A certain amount of self-celebration would be forgivable. This country has long since cast aside its reputation as a den of Philistines; our universities, symphony orchestras, dance companies, museums are models to the world. Yet many citadels of the arts and the humanities are in dire financial trouble. Without Federal assistance, most will not be able to grow and some may not survive. A White House conference would have to give priority to their urgent needs.

As the New York City hearings indicated, however, there promises to be stiff competition for Federal grants in the months ahead. Ethnic groups want special recognition. "Nontraditional" groups want recognition. Art educators want recognition. And recognition in this context means money. Already, a percentage of the Federal appropriation for the arts and humanities is set aside for distribution according to geographical criteria.

The calls for assistance by diverse groups throughout the nation are heartening, to a point; although the phrase has gone out of fashion, people evidently still want to do their own thing. The danger is that in seeking to satisfy too many interests, the main Federal benefactors—the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities—which will distribute \$230 million this year, will dissipate their resources on marginal efforts while truly professional individuals and organizations are left to suffer.

A White House conference could serve the cause of our national treasures if it came to grips with the problematic role of the arts and the humanities in a democratic society. The work of the scholar, the composer, the performer must always be "elitist" in the sense that it can only be done well by a very few in any generation. Its merit cannot be measured by popular vote; best sellers are not usually the books that last. Art and scholarship require support—from corporate gifts, public contributions and tax funds—precisely because they cannot survive unassisted in the marketplace. And their failure to survive should be unthinkable.

The Government's role, as Ronald Berman, the former chairman of the Humanities Endowment, has put it, is to bring "the best to the most." Even where "the most" is a minority, the eye of the endowments must be fixed unblinkingly on the best. Any conference that helps the nation to appreciate that fundamental point would be welcome.