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Penn President Chosen For Humanities Agency

By IRVIN MOLOTSKY

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 8 — The Clinton Administration has selected Sheldon Hackney, the president of the University of Pennsylvania, to be the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, a White House official said today. The choice of the 59-year-old Mr. Hackney, an outspoken advocate of freedom of expression, had been expected for several weeks.

As the university president, he defended the decision of the university's Institute of Contemporary Art in 1989 to present an exhibition of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, which had been called obscene by some members of Congress.

The official announcement of the appointment will be made on Friday, the White House official said. It will then be subject to confirmation by the Senate.

A Political Mirror

The selection of Mr. Hackney continues the practice of assigning the nation's highest governmental post in academic scholarship in history and philosophy to an individual with strong political views that reflect those of the Administration in office.

Two conservatives, William J. Bennett and Lynne V. Cheney, headed the Humanities Endowment during the Ronald Reagan and George Bush Administrations, while Joseph D. Duffey, who had been the chairman of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action, led it during the Jimmy Carter Administration.

Though the selection of Mr. Hackney had been expected, the announcement had been delayed, said Congressional aides and academic leaders, so that the choices for related positions could be made at the same time.

Those selections, for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute for Museum Services, are expected to go to at least one woman and a member of a minority group. The White House had sought to introduce all three together, as a confirmation of President Clinton's pledge to have a Government that looked like the nation.

On the Arts Endowment

Though no one at the White House returned telephone calls to comment on the matter, a Congressional aide said today that the White House had decided to go ahead with the appointment of Mr. Hackney but was either still undecided on the arts endowment appointee or reluctant to submit a nomination for that contentious post who might create a stir in Congress and jeopardize the Administration's domestic program.

Mr. Hackney, who was not in his

office on the University of Pennsylvania campus in Philadelphia and could not be reached, could create a stir himself on Capitol Hill. His nomination is likely to provoke opposition from conservative Senators, like Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina. Mr. Helms led a group of senators who maintained that the Government should not have supported exhibitions of the works of Mr. Mapplethorpe, whose pictures included homoerotic images of men as well as still-lives of flowers and portraits of children.

Mr. Hackney addressed that view in a 1990 speech in which he backhandedly thanked Senator Helms, "without whose help we would have less incentive to address the subject of academic freedom today."

The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington had canceled its presentation of the Mapplethorpe show, which was financed in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, and Senator Helms had introduced an amendment to reduce arts endowment spending because of the exhibition.

In the speech, at the Wolf Trap Conference on Academic Freedom

An outspoken advocate of freedom of expression.

and Artistic Expression, Mr. Hackney said: "The University of Pennsylvania must support its Institute of Contemporary Art, the creator of the Mapplethorpe show with the aid of a grant from the N.E.A. and must do whatever it could to prevent any political damage to the N.E.A. or to the general condition of artistic or academic freedom in the United States."

Senator Helms was in North Carolina today during the Congressional recess and his staff did not return calls seeking comment on Mr. Hackney's nomination.

The selection was praised by others, including Senator Claiborne Pell, the Rhode Island Democrat who is the chairman of the subcommittee that is to act on Mr. Hackney's nomination. Senator Pell called him a "distinguished educator and an excellent choice" for the humanities post.

Mr. Hackney, who was born in Birmingham, Ala., has written extensively about the South in the 1960's, including a book "Populism to Progressivism in Alabama."