
Livingston L. Biddle Jr.
Endowment: A Seed That Grew

Questions about the appropriate role of the federal government in support of the arts have been raised in recent months, and public debate about such issues is of great value in formulating sound public policy, especially in view of the administration's need to deal with economic problems in an effective way.

However, some misconceptions have entered the discussion of late, as suggested in two recent editorials in The Washington Star.

One such notion, in simple form, is that federal assistance has resulted in a reduction in private and non-federal public support for the arts.

The Star, thoughtfully, has cast some doubt on this assumption in recent editorials, but does not appear to have fully comprehended the basic mission of the National Endowment for the Arts established at its creation in 1965. That mission is to serve not as a substitute for others, but as a fundamental catalyst for the continuing development of private non-federal support for the arts. That task was given to the endowment precisely because the private and non-federal sector, alone, was not adequate to the challenge.

The mission is totally different in concept and execution from an endowment program, such as The Star in part suggests.

Remarkable Success

The endowment now receives more than 20,000 applications for help each year despite stringent eligibility requirements. At present, with a budget of $15.6 million, it is able to fund one quarter of them.

Only the very best survive intense competition, and the judgments are made not by federal bureaucrats, but by private citizens expert in the many arts forms involved. That process is key to the mission.

How successful is this mission? To my mind, it has succeeded beyond the most optimistic prophecies. The Star has mentioned the 20-fold rise in corporate giving to the arts in 15 years. Here are other examples:

- State appropriations for the arts through state arts agencies totaled $7.6 million in 1966 for all states. Today, the total is more than $110 million.
- Community arts agencies now support the arts with an estimated $150 million annually. At the endowment's birth, few such agencies existed. Now there are more than 7,000.
- During the 10-year period prior to the endowment, contributions from the private sector for the arts and culture declined more than three per cent from an estimated $976 million to $585 million, according to figures compiled by the American Association of Fund-Raising Council. Its most recent figures (for 1979) show that private American philanthropy has grown to an annual total of $2.5 billion.

Can it be that the corresponding growth of the endowment and of private and non-federal support for the arts is sheer coincidence? The evidence leads to the opposite conclusion. Particularly since the endowment was established with the purpose of stimulating private initiative which would continue to be the principal source for support of the arts. Particularly since previous to the endowment's creation, the arts were alive only in limited areas of our nation.

Endowment grants must be matched by private and non-federal monies on a ratio of up to 3 to 1. These ratios have been dramatically exceeded as the agency's catalytic mission has grown in strength, and—moreover—have encouraged thousands of private philanthropies to contribute to the arts.

The arts in America have been growing in tone, number, and in excellence for a decade and a half. Almost all arts organizations—large and small—survive and develop in part due to the healthy spirit of the arts. The arts' contribution to the social and economic life of the nation must be considered essential.

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Livingston Biddle Jr., this page left.

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