Arts and Humanities: Background (1975-1995): Note 02

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Nov. 8, '93

Personal Notes
for Jane
From Liv

Sorry for the typing. My secretary is named Biddle and never did learn to type perfectly, but can go at high speed!
To enhance knowledge and appreciation of the Values of the Arts throughout the Country...

Long ago, when the American Council for the Arts (ACA) was growing in NYC under founder pollster Lou Harris, I told him he was an organization, still in search of a mission -- which he didn't especially like to hear -- but we were good friends, and we worked closely together on sharpening ACA's function.

I continue to think that ACA, while admirable in many ways, could better fulfill its basic advocacy purpose. I've suggested in the past to Milton Rhodes, the ACA president, that he consider a series of symposia, meetings, etc., which -- to simplify -- would have as their theme:

ASK NOT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR THE NEA...
ASK WHAT THE ARTS (AND THE NEA) DO FOR YOU...

In the past, so often symposia have been organized and arranged around questions of funding adequately needs in the arts. This is, of course, important -- but the same subjects and the same message are so often central; and the same people tend of deliver it, discuss it, analyze it, write papers on it, compile statistics. The message of arts needs is pretty well articulated and documented... So, I'm suggesting a series of gatherings -- on a kind of town-meeting formula -- where local and small business people spoke, and the local citizenry described with personal examples how the arts can change a community. Schools, teachers, parents, parents of developing artists can be involved. There's a wealth of material here (reflecting my own experience in a most underprivileged Hispanic community in Houston, Texas, where the director of a small art center just evolving told me that his group had discovered that physical well-being (the counteracting of drugs, poverty, homelessness) was not in itself enough, and that "Something Special was needed for the Human Spirit." Words I'll always remember... And that, therefore, his group had turned to the Arts... With remarkable results both for adults, and children... The emphasis on personal testimony on what the arts can do for you would be refreshing. The communities would be selected as models... Many exist in the files... The above Houston example came long ago from AB Spellman...

In my day I worked with Affiliate Artists, a group bringing artist- "Informants" into small communities, especially in the South. The artists were hosted by local chambers of commerce, opening doors to new friends. The artists would perform and explain their work. They were exceptional ambassadors. The program is described in my book (Page 473). Richard Clark in New York is still heading this group, and may have been in touch with you.

These two concepts, joined and well-implemented, could certainly SPREAD THE WORD on the special values of the Arts in our society. I'd envision the funding coming from a Foundation, not from NEA.
II EXCELLENCE... THE ARTS OF MERIT...

As we know the NEA was established not just to support the arts but to support and enhance EXCELLENCE... The colloquy between Sid Yates and Roy Goodman at the meeting underscored this fundamental. The standard of NEA approval and assistance is based, above all, on artistic merit. Indeed this is the overriding criterion.

I've long advocated a special National Council address to the subject of artistic excellence, so it can be more clearly delineated aesthetically by the country's and thus the world's leading artists — so many over the years serving on the Council, beginning with Isaac Stern's day. (You might glance at his Foreword to my book, IX.)

I'm convinced excellence can be defined so that it emphasizes, particularly, the artist and the special dimension artistic talent provides for subject matter. I've been working on this concept since the conflagration of Mapolethorne. Trouble is, or was, that NEA leaders of the time told me that the whole problem was blown out of proportion, and would disappear. They were not too well acquainted with the ways of Congress, and I feel the high ground was lost.

I once explained my thoughts on this subject to Paul Wieck, one of our most distinguished journalists (at our party.) He has recommended to me that perhaps I should form such a group of experts, to discuss matters of excellence and responsibility and accountability to the tax-payer, and freedom of expression, and rulings made by the courts.

If the best artists had joined in harmony earlier, I think much grief could have been avoided, and the initiatives would have stayed with the NEA. The group I envisioned would have been in the NEA family. Paul feels that an independent group would have compelling advantages. I see some disadvantages in that approach.

But I think Artistic Merit should be a point of particular focus, in view of Sid's statements, and indeed the NEA mission, and in view of the need to recapture the high ground — so that critics can't say the Endowment is disregarding public dissatisfaction, and is acting with a full and renewed sense of Responsibility...

Let me know if you think an independent group would be helpful...
EDUCATION... AND THE ARTS...

The Yates-Simpson presences were wonderful.

For Education, I recommend a similar approach — initially with the Council involved. It seems to me that, just as during my time, they were pleased by the higher profile they had of involvement at your first time of being Chair.

For Education and the Arts, I'd recommend Sec. Riley with Sen. Pell and Pat Williams, of Montana... the key House leader on Reauthorization, and a strong believer in the vital role the arts can play in Education. Pat's staff leader in this area is an old colleague of mine, Rick Giroux. Through Rick I helped Pat in the days of his bitter reelection campaign, when he went out of his way to defend the Arts, and gained from his enemies the nickname of Porno Pat. He was able to win, and is of great courage and commitment.

If you haven't so planned, I think it would be good for you to visit with him soon, and perhaps map out the above idea... or some of it, and then with Sen. Pell and the Secretary.
DESIGN...

How about a Design presentation to the Council with preliminaries taking place with you and under your jurisdiction? As sequel to December Design Meeting.

I met recently Roger Johnson, the new Administrator of the General Services Administration, who was eager to talk about GSA and the Arts, past history and present potentials. We had dinner with Roger and his wife. He's -- natch -- a fan of yours.

I think, with you and he, fostering plans, design and the GSA could be linked. As you know the chief involvement there has been with Art in Public Places, a full-fledged partnership in my time when Jay Solomon was Administrator. I think Roger would be a great ally. You might want to meet with him early on.

All bases should, of course, be covered, as was discussed at the Council meeting, but I would like to see you keeping the initiative and developing the agenda.

As you know, there are many players, more than in my day, and large amounts of funding in various areas. Others will be trying to take over. Resist. Keep the initiative.

Another thought in this regard... The National Building Museum could do with a sense of expanded mission. It's run by Robt. Duemling (married to a cousin, a former DuPont (Louisa) who was once the wife of Jimmy Biddle, former head of the Natl. Trust for Historic Preservation.) I think Bob Duemling would respond well to a new kind of partnership with NEA... And I'd envision the Museum doing a major exhibition on Excellence in Design, that could reflect on home soil some of the advances being made abroad in exhibits we saw depicted at the Council meeting.

If there's to be that kind of Exhibition, resist the requests that could be made for Endowment funding, except perhaps in small degree. The Amer. Inst. of Architects, and others, should be the funders; for better design is in their best interests... It's an opportunity for business partnerships...

Incidently, Roger Johnson told me that he was aware of some lack of communication and old-time friendly liaison between GSA and NEA. Personalities, he seemed to suggest, could be a cause. You might want to have a look.
COUNCIL COMMITTEES...

The Council -- as in my day -- is eager for greater challenges, and greater involvement.

This a good sign of vitality. I started a number of Committees, which Nancy Hanks had not done... and they were very helpful, even though a lot more time had to be allocated to the activities.

I recommend reasonably small committees of the Council -- and only those members assigned who express a particular interest -- and ability. I take it that Bill Strickland wants two committees, one on Congressional Affairs, one on Design. Proliferation is to be considered; and sometimes the Chairman can fulfill the apparent need for a Committee by taking action herself -- or himself. But Council involvement is a precious and helpful asset always.

So are Inter-agency / department partnerships. They are complex -- but to have the Endowment serve as a catalyst stimulating attention to the values of the arts throughout government -- and with leadership -- is a wonderful goal; for it expands funding, without invading the NEA's limited resources.
It seems a good time to think of new/old goals in this regard.

You might want to review the so-called "Today" programs Joe Duffey and I developed. They relate to pages 445-57 of my book. They cost NEA very little in funding, but they were a huge catalyst for outside funding, chiefly from business interests, our own and also to a large measure those abroad -- i.e., with the programs for Belgium and Japan, with the NEA/NEH funds many times multiplied.

The arts should be our finest ambassadors, and they are. Thought could be given to selecting a country abroad that would be of particular value to us now, and call it a pilot for the future.

I would think you and Joe Duffey and especially Sheldon Hackney might want to take a new look at all this... with the idea that a small investment can return itself many times over, not only in funding but in results good for the USA.