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Biddle, Livy: Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (1977-1979): News Article 26

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Funding for the arts

Columnist James Kilpatrick asks the value of the National Government for the Arts (NEA) and has posed the question, "What is the federal government doing in the arts business?"

His conclusion that it is a waste of taxpayers' money ("Artists, writers and composers should make it on their own, or not at all") was a hastily drawn, one-sided picture of the arts.

His line of thought helps imprison millions of Americans behind a television screen because they cannot afford or have no access to quality entertainment.

The real problem is that the government still doesn't take enough interest in the arts.

If NEA "wasted" $6,000 sponsoring an experimental art project that Kilpatrick didn't appreciate, it was pittance compared to the billions of dollars allotted to so-called covert operations in foreign countries.

If we are willing to spend billions to promote death and destruction, then we have a moral obligation to use a fraction of that to inspire life.

Furthermore, public funding for the arts, which is not new, contrary to that columnist's Constitutional reference, is a valuable training ground for young aspiring writers, composers, artists.

Thousands of future politicians, business people and journalists are gliding through college on national scholarships and grants. If we offer these students the privilege of a higher education, how can we deny the dancer or filmmaker his chance for a career, simply because it lies outside the conventional classroom?

Here in Wisconsin (which ranks 47th in the nation for arts funding), the federally funded CETA program has opened many positions for unemployed artists. Thanks to CETA, thousands of people in every part of the state enjoy quality entertainment free.

Children who had never heard of mime and adults who hadn't been to a play in years participated in free workshops and performances.

Unless an artist becomes famous in this country, he is looked upon as a second class citizen who doesn't deserve serious consideration. It is time to wake up and recognize this nation's most valuable resource. — Eliot Niles Gross, Spring Green.

U.S. Subsidies For Artists Supported

The Oct. 21 Press article by James J. Kilpatrick, "Must U.S. Subsidize The Arts?", raised the fundamental question: What is the government doing in the arts business?

Recall, if you will, that Pittsburgh artist LeAnn Wilchusky received a $6,000 grant from the National Endowment to film rolls of crepe paper as they were dropped from an airplane.

Back in Washington, Sen. William Proxmire decried the use of federal funds to support such "artistic flings" and awarded Ms. Wilchusky his Golden Fleece of the Month.

The logical extension of such an argument, according to Mr. Kilpatrick, is that the government shouldn't even be involved in the arts business. The gist of his argument is this.

from Article 1 through Article 7 and find not one shred of authority for Congress to spend the people's money in the arts business.

In defense of the arts, I offer the following points.

1. Sen. Proxmire and Mr. Kilpatrick have set themselves up as infallible judges of art. But are they qualified to judge the work of Ms Wilchusky or, for that matter, the works of any artist?

Consider, for example, the plight of an aging artist who plans to create a work of art using only a pair of scissors and pieces of construction paper. Would the artist obtain a grant from the National Endowment if its rules were held by the likes of these gentlemen? Not of his most brilliant works with these very tools in the late 1940s.

Mr. Kilpatrick argues that Congress has not a shred of authority to appropriate people's money to the National Endowment. If we strictly interpret the wording of the Constitution, we find that Congress has no authority to provide for a standing army, fund the Louisiana Purchase, or support the farming community, either. Yes, only by stretching the general welfare clause to its utmost limit can even a tenuous rationalization be found for these expenditures.

Having said something about why the government is involved in the arts business, the question becomes academic: What is Mr. Kilpatrick doing in the journalism business?

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