The Arts Will Thrive Without the National Endowment for the Arts

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The death knell is sounding for the National Endowment for the Arts. The agency's federal appropriation in 1996 fell by one-third, from about $150 million to about $100 million, and its appropriation may be cut again or even eliminated. The NEA is not only anathema to cultural conservatives, libertarians, evangelical Christians, and even a good number of artists. It is also likely to lose key political support as President Bill Clinton and other Democrats resolve to keep moving toward a balanced federal budget without compromising Medicare, Medicaid, education, or the environment.

But the end of the agency's federal funding need not prove cataclysmic for the arts in America. Artists, arts organizations, and their supporters have many strategies at their disposal for maintaining the vitality of the arts in a post-NEA era. And in any case, the importance of federal grantmaking to the arts has been greatly exaggerated.

**Two Forms of Support**

The NEA currently contributes to the arts in two ways: direct funding and less tangible, indirect services. Nowadays direct funding consists almost entirely of cash awards to arts organizations and event sponsors. (As of 1996, grants to individual artists were eliminated, except for creative writers, jazz greats, and masters of folk crafts.) NEA-financed music ensembles, dance festivals, museum exhibitions, and the like undoubtedly face a period of sacrifice and uncertainty, and there will be some casualties. But their prospects are far from hopeless.

The NEA also renders indirect, noncash benefits and services through its peer-review panels. Their judgments can stimulate funding from other sources and identify certain artists and organizations as more deserving than others. In this realm of power-by-imprimatur, the judgment process would, in fact, probably work better if it were decentralized and used to spur greater involvement by funders.

**Favoring Elite Establishments**

To understand the reasons for optimism, it is necessary to assess the true nature of NEA spending priorities. The NEA's largesse regularly benefits the great established urban institutions and smaller local organizations of long-standing reputation. The NEA has also funded, less dependably, dozens of marginal artistic groups, some of which claim to depend on NEA funding for their survival. As a rule, the larger institutions will overcome the NEA's decline easily, but the smaller ones need not suffer if they heed certain examples set around the country.
One might not know it from the political controversies that have attracted public attention, but the NEA has always favored the most venerable—and richest—cultural establishments over the esoteric, the shocking, and the avantgarde. A survey of funding patterns in 1985, 1990, and 1995 clearly reveals this preference. The Metropolitan Opera in New York City has been the single largest recipient of NEA funds, with annual grants between $800,000 and $900,000. Typical grants for other high-profile beneficiaries range from $200,000 to $350,000, awarded year after year and now incorporated into annual budgets. In theater, by far the biggest ongoing grants go to the major presenters and training centers, such as the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts ($305,000, on average, in 1985, 1990, and 1995), the Center Theater Group of Los Angeles ($251,000), the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis ($274,000), and the Yale Repertory Theatre ($167,000).

In the museum world, the consistent winners are big-city institutions: Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco. In dance as well, the NEA has heavily favored the most established organizations. The Dance Theatre of Harlem, for example, averaged $303,000. Nearly all other troupes with six-figure grants bear the names of modern American legends: Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, Twyla Tharp.

This preference for elite establishments should not be surprising, since it is usually the larger, wealthier institutions that have the staff and resources to put together winning grant proposals. The higher the grant amount, the more this pattern holds true. The NEA's differential treatment of arts institutions confirms economist Friedrich Hayek's dictum that centralized authority inevitably favors the rich and well-educated because they have greater access to the sites and protocols of power. NEA support for music in the state of Pennsylvania at the height of the NEA's prowess in 1985 emphatically illustrates this. Grants that year overwhelmingly favored the Philadelphia Orchestra and Pittsburgh Symphony, which received $290,000 and $280,000, respectively. All the remaining grants that year—to 28 Pennsylvania musical organizations—totaled $301,000.

Tiddlywinks

At first blush, six-figure grants to our most revered institutions may appear difficult to replace, and the potential damage from cuts quite dire. But on examination it is hard not to reach the opposite conclusion. The NEA's largest grants are tiddlywinks to the big players in American culture.

- **Music.** Take the leading example, the Metropolitan Opera. Using conservative estimates, its annual $875,000 dependency could be made up by raising the price of tickets, which already cost $125 and up, by $1.50. For the Philadelphia Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony, and other great American orchestras, a hike in ticket prices of less than $2 would replace any shortfall in NEA funds. The Boston Symphony Orchestra received only $300,000 of its $47 million operating budget from the NEA in 1996—less than 1 percent of the total, or 40 cents per ticket sold that year for BSO, Boston Pops, and Tanglewood Festival concerts.
- **Museums.** The Art Institute of Chicago has received about $325,000 a year from the NEA, but this is only 1 percent of its budget. The Walker Art Center of Minneapolis received 3.3 percent of its budget in 1995 from the NEA, down from 8.2 percent in 1985. The importance of federal support has declined as individual gifts, foundation grants, and investment income have risen.
- **Dance.** Although modern dance began as an esoteric experiment, performances now enjoy broad popularity with American audiences. If raising ticket prices is a less feasible solution to looming financial shortfalls, modern dance should have a good chance of winning corporate support. According to a recent analysis reported in the Chronicle of Philanthropy, corporate giving to the arts, especially in the once-generous financial services sector, has drifted away.
from symphonies and arts associated with the wealthy; it now focuses on causes with more popular appeal. Modern dance, seeking corporate support in this new environment, can cite its origin in the United States and its roots in our cultural diversity as well as its popularity.

- **Theater.** The major outlets for professional theater face huge challenges as well. Robert Brustein, one of the foremost trainers of new theater talent, writes in *Theater* magazine that "as funds dry up for the arts in this country, and theater grows increasingly estranged from younger audiences, there is no question that the marketplace will play a larger and larger role in the non-profit future." For Brustein and most other theater people, the marketplace is no talisman of artistic excellence, driven as it is by consumer taste and capitalism, which tend to impinge on artistic freedom and dilute quality in favor of popular appeal. But there are ways that commerce could be enlisted to sustain live theater.

Hollywood, for example, has been 20th-century America's great patron of actors, as well as of writers from William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald onward. That patronage must be expanded if fresh talent in acting, screenwriting, and production is to continue to flow into studios from the far-flung theater world. Theater and cultural critic Frank Rich of the *New York Times* urges "people who run movie studios, many of whom have talented executives who came out of the non-profit theater world or the non-profit film world, to put something back in [by] training non-profit theaters to market better."

In fairness, some actors and producers have used their money to create opportunity in their field. One of the principal beneficiaries is the University of Southern California, which boasts the Steven Spielberg Scoring Studio and two buildings erected by producer and director George Lucas. Actor John Ritter endowed a Town and Gown Scholarship; Jack Nicholson an acting award. James and Nony Doolittle, L.A.'s leading theatrical producers, created a fund to assist recent USC graduates making the transition to professional acting.

But considering the huge fortunes involved, Hollywood moguls and stars could do much more to assure the long-term health of the professional stage—and amateur stage, for that matter—perhaps through such existing professional societies and philanthropies as Actors Equity, the Shubert Foundation (which Brustein praises), and the National Corporate Theater Fund....

**Philanthropy for Writers**

Ideally, the decline of the NEA will usher in an era of imaginative philanthropy. In this regard, we can glean mixed lessons from the support that has historically been available to creative writers. Every year since 1985, 10 or so young authors—novelists, poets, and essayists with one or two books to their credit—receive a phone call out of the blue from the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation. The Whiting Writers’ Awards, currently $30,000 each, are enough to stake frugal writers to at least one highly productive year on whatever projects they wish, no strings attached. (The NEA awards to writers are lower—$20,000 apiece—and require an elaborate application process that favors those skilled in bureaucratic ways.)

A second model of support for needy writers once came from the initiative of the late poet James Merrill. With income from his Merrill Lynch inheritance, he established the Ingram-Merrill Foundation with an active, voting board. From the late 1950s until his death in 1995, when the foundation spent itself out of existence, struggling writers could apply for small or large cash grants. Merrill set an admirable and imaginative example of generosity that other artists of means can well follow, especially if they want a shield between their friendships and their philanthropy, as Merrill did.
Long before the growth of Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs, the cause of creative writing was furthered by a few thoughtfully envisioned philanthropies for writers in universities. The American playwright Avery T. Hopwood bequeathed a sizable trust for creative writing awards at the University of Michigan in the 1920s, when Robert Frost was writer-in-residence. According to Nicholas Delbanco in *Speaking of Writing: Selected Hopwood Lectures*, more than $1 million in prizes went to student writers in the award's first 60 years; about $45,000 is now given annually. Beyond encouraging young writers, the legacy has attracted more endowed awards, helping to create a literary environment that supported W.H. Auden, Robert Hayden, Theodore Roethke, and others since. The Wallace Stegner Fellowships at Stanford University, endowed by the Jones family in 1945, have also long sustained emerging writers, including Scott Turow, who recently endowed a writing fellowship in honor of his Stanford teacher Richard Scowcroft....

**What of the Future?**

It is impossible to predict with confidence what will happen to arts philanthropy in a post-NEA world. Critics of government programs in general claim that public spending tends to discourage private support. Critics of the NEA in particular contend that it stepped in to fund arts programs previously supported by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. And as Alice Goldfarb Marquis shows in her excellent history, *Art Lessons: Learning from the Decline and Fall of Public Arts Funding*, federal involvement in the arts in the 1960s did spring from the initiative of a few influential foundations and studies by affiliated scholars.

Federal support may well have allowed Ford and Rockefeller to move on to other ventures, but the last 30 years have hardly lacked for gifts to the arts, the multibillion-dollar Getty Trust foremost among them. (Its annual expenditures run well ahead of the NEA budget.) H. Ross Perot donated the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center, an acoustic wonder that houses the Dallas Symphony, in honor of his friend and business associate. Successful artists have pitched in (listen up, Hollywood) to establish the Krasner-Pollock, Warhol, Gottlieb, and Mapplethorpe foundations. In St. Louis, E. Desmond Lee paid off his city symphony's multimillion-dollar debt to the state of Missouri. In Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, Barbara E. Newington recently established the Newington-Cropsey Foundation on the site of her great-grandfather Jasper Francis Cropsey's restored art studio. The foundation exhibits Hudson River School and new figurative painters, operates an atelier for apprentice sculptors, and publishes *American Arts Quarterly*, a journal devoted to movements in architecture, sculpture, and painting that challenge the orthodoxies of late modernism and postmodernism.

Dozens of other examples could be listed, but imaginative supporters of the arts will need to look beyond philanthropy. The arts must embrace their own commercial potential and disregard the embarrassment of lingering elites. Museums now realize a good portion of their income from gift shops and restaurants and from facilities rentals. Orchestras get a healthy take from sales of their recordings. Critics rightly snipe at the "malling" of museums, where posters, gewgaws, and nouvelle cuisine distract attention from the paintings, and at the commercialization of classical music, which plasters comely young soloists on CD covers. But the more art lovers—and artists—that emerge, the more likely it is that fresh commercial approaches will appear. All this will be in keeping with the American way of art. New experiments by young New York artists, who are using makeshift spaces and temporary storefronts to show their work, may herald a shift toward a less intimidating art marketplace.
The NEA's Leverage

It is often argued in defense of the NEA that private and nonprofit supporters of the arts have come to rely on the authority of an NEA grant in making their own award decisions. The process works like this: The NEA's panels of experts in, say, dance or creative writing or sculpture give the nod to a certain troupe, small press, or exhibit. Then a private foundation or local agency decides it may safely favor an application from the same group—and spare itself the expense of evaluating the proposal. Some arts administrators say they spend more resources applying for an NEA grant than the grant itself is worth, simply because they need the grant as "leverage" with other funding sources. NEA Chairwoman Jane Alexander claims that NEA grants generate other support at a rate of 12 to 1, making a $10,000 NEA grant worth $120,000. More conservative estimates run as high as 7 to 1 and as low as 3 to 1—still significant leverage.

The NEA's leverage can be seen as a welcome asset bestowed upon arts organizations, but it can just as easily be read as a device for self-aggrandizement. The process gives the NEA a vastly disproportionate role in deciding what and who gets the advantage, and it has a strong centralizing and professionalizing effect. According to some observers, this undermines the health of the arts themselves by divorcing them from local, nonexpert constituencies, people who enjoy the arts but have no professional stake in them. NEA critic Laurence Jarvik recently argued in Common Sense in favor of decentralized mechanisms of judgment. "Patrons," he notes, "would have to take fuller responsibility for their own decisions—and local arts groups would have the freedom to consider the tastes of the local communities they serve without regard to the opinions of a federal agency." Without debating too deeply the wisdom of concentrating cultural power in government-appointed bodies, the question arises: How can the work of expert advisory panels be replaced or otherwise performed?

The answer is surprisingly simple. The panels have doubtless saved money for foundations and other arts supporters large and small, who will soon have to retain their own judges to evaluate the applications they receive. Yet the portion of the NEA budget set aside for professional panels is minuscule. In 1995, the NEA spent $924,000 on panelists' honoraria and travel expenses; in 1996, after budget cuts, $476,000. These figures account for only about 0.5 percent of the annual NEA budget.

Other Options

Several options suggest themselves for replacing the judging services rendered by the NEA, some resembling the old system, others quite different. Centralized arts organizations already exist in all the fields adjudicated by NEA panelists; many of them already have panels that make awards to individuals and organizations. In the field of writing, these include the PEN American Center, the Academy of American Poets, the Poetry Society of America, and Associated Writing Programs. In music, they include Opera America, the Center for Contemporary Opera, the American Symphony Orchestra League, and the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians. Composers have the National Association of Composers and the Composer's Theatre. Drama is well-endowed with prizes and professionally well-organized under the National Critics Institute, National Corporate Theater Fund, and the New York Drama Critics Circle, which confers important awards.

All these organizations and at least a dozen more can—or already do—impanel experts from their own
ranks, as can the larger museums and universities. Further, the Getty Trust, the MacArthur Fellows Program, the Guggenheim, and other prominent philanthropies currently appoint their own judges. In metropolitan areas where artists and arts professionals are abundant, local talent could offer to certify the value of artistic work under consideration for funding, thereby cutting travel expenses. By and large, panels of this sort would resemble the old NEA methodology of centralized expertise and elite professionalism.

But this isn’t the only model. Interesting arrangements could arise from a proliferation of judging mechanisms. Let a thousand flowers—or judges—bloom, from small self-selected groups to regional consortia, from impresarios to ad hoc committees, from local patrons to democratically elected bodies, each variously set up to review public art commissions, individual grant proposals, theater-aid packages, endowment campaigns, and the like. These alternative models would take advantage of Americans’ penchant for voluntary associations and reverse the controversial rise of elite expert culture in the arts. If judging systems were opened up, if interested lay persons enjoyed more than token status in the evaluation process, it is conceivable that support for the arts would actually broaden.

A Lesson from History

Finally, we need to remember how little American art has ever originated from government grants. Except for sculpture, where 19th-century heroic statuary by the likes of Augustus Saint Gaudens and Anne Whitney came from public commissions, virtually all our best music, literature, painting, dance, and theater sprang from unexpected or unpromising corners. This happened, as the historian Neil Harris notes, in a new nation that lacked traditional European sources of patronage: a state church, a monarch, an aristocracy. For a long time, artists were itinerant figures, painting portraits and homesteads, staging plays and operas, giving recitals and readings, accumulating a tradition of hardship and irreverent individualism that persists in cultural memory—and reality—to this day.

Important painters as often as not drew their inspiration from and worked outside the urban centers, from the Rocky Mountain and Hudson River painters in the 19th century to masters in the 20th: Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton in the Midwest, O’Keeffe in the Southwest desert, Winslow Homer in coastal Maine, Andrew Wyeth in Pennsylvania. Regionalism not only defines a large portion of American art history; it also helps account for the exciting resurgence of landscape and realist painting today, itself partly a reaction to the tiresome domination of abstraction and conceptualism in major art centers and schools. In this historical context, the demise of the NEA as a powerful centralized authority may augur well for American painting.

Much—perhaps most—of our best work in literature and music in this century has come from outside the centers of money and prestige. The South, our least literate region, gave us great writers like William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Zora Neale Hurston, and John Kennedy Toole. African Americans broke through poverty and race barriers to create the world’s most influential music in this century: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker, Ella Fitzgerald, Leadbelly, Muddy Waters, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Jimi Hendrix.

If most of the artists I have cited here—and there are dozens more—hailed from unexpected places and stations and faced real struggles, most also got along pretty well or actually prospered. Far from suffering
from the Van Gogh syndrome—that tragic complex of poverty, neglect, mad genius, and sexual
dysfunction—artists in American history present us with conflicting examples of stalwart individualism and
courtly charm, business acumen and hopeless profligacy, indifference to the judgment of established
critics and eager pursuit of honors from professional societies. In the twilight of the National Endowment
for the Arts, it is the stalwarts, the pertinacious, entrepreneurial, independent spirits—and those with the
vision to help them—who stand the chance of advancing the cause of American Art.

Further Readings

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