

## Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 137: Subsidies to the Arts: Cultivating Mediocrity

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### Executive Summary

There is always conflict between government and artists, and no one knows it better than the East and Central Europeans. Vaclav Havel's plays were banned in Prague, as were the novels of Milan Kundera. Hungarian novelist George Konrad fought the "state supervision" and "state prizes"(1) that were corrupting his native literature. Members of the Polish punk-rock band Dezerter were in and out of prison because they insisted on playing songs that the authorities had not sanctioned.

Fittingly, at the same time that Czechs and Hungarians and Poles are throwing off tyranny's shackles and liberating their artists, the National Endowment for the Arts, the U.S. government's ministry of culture, is coming under sustained attack for the first time in its 25-year existence.

Three recent and highly publicized grants have blotted the NEA's reputation. The first was a grant of \$30,000 to Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, sponsor of a traveling exhibition of photographs, some of them homoerotic, by the late Robert Mapplethorpe. The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., canceled the Mapplethorpe show in order not to offend the NEA and jeopardize future funding. "It was never an aesthetic decision," explained then-director of the Corcoran, Christina Orr-Cahall. "I have great respect for Mapplethorpe's work. . . . It was the federal funding."(2)

The second grant was to Andres Serrano for an exhibit that included a photograph of a plastic crucifix immersed in a jar of the artist's urine. Inelegantly titled "Piss Christ," Serrano's image enraged many Christians, who charged that the NEA was subsidizing blasphemy and mockery of their faith.

The third disputed grant went (via the conduit of the New York State Council on the Arts) to a Manhattan theater called The Kitchen, which sponsored "Post Porn Modernist," a performance by Annie Sprinkler, star of blue movies. While masturbating on stage, Ms. Sprinkle sardonically noted, "Usually I get paid a lot of money for this, but tonight it's government funded."(3)

The Mapplethorpe, Serrano, and Sprinkle grants prompted several members of Congress, notably Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), to seek restrictions on the kinds of art eligible for NEA subsidy. A modified version of the Helms amendment was finally enacted; it bars the endowment from funding work that is "obscene, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."(4)

The debate over the restriction was spirited but maddeningly oblique, for it begged a very basic question: should the NEA even exist? Should we learn the lesson of the erstwhile Soviet bloc--that art and politics don't mix?

## **Death or Pollyanna?**

The Founding Fathers never envisioned federal sponsorship of the arts; notes of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 do not even mention the possibility of such aid. The first direct federal subsidization of artists occurred in 1935, through the Federal Art, Music, Theater, and Writers projects of the Works Progress Administration. The emphasis was on relief rather than art; "the people who ran the project," recalled artist Meyer Wolfe, "took just about everything--some really bad work." (5) At its peak in 1936, the WPA had 45,000 artists, writers, actors, and musicians on its payroll.

Although sold as a Depression palliative, the WPA's creative projects had an ancillary purpose: the coopting of artists. Audrey McMahon, who helped conceive the Federal Art Project, explained: "Artists, men of talent and of highly sensitive natures, men who form part of a large group which might easily, under adverse and difficult conditions, become a distinct social problem, have not only been kept from final distress, but their gifts have been directed into the channel of public benefit." (6) (If only the Czech regime of Communist Milos Jakes had thought of that!) The FAP worked almost too well: its artwork was frequently partisan, pro-New Deal propaganda. Thousands of potential "social problems" churned out orthodox little plays and paintings, until widespread protest by rural and anti-authoritarian members of Congress virtually shut down the project in 1939.

Efforts to resurrect the FAP as a bureau or cabinet department met with hostility from many artists. In 1944, asked what he thought about a federal bureau of the fine arts, painter John Sloan responded, "Sure, it would be fine to have a Ministry of the Fine Arts in this country. Then we'd know where the enemy is." (7)

The first party endorsement of a proto-NEA came in the 1948 platform of the Progressives, whose platform called for the establishment of a "department of culture." The Progressives had many decent and well-meaning followers, but the party hierarchy was dominated by members of the American Communist party. Predictably, American Communists were enamored of the "socialist realist" artists lionized by Stalin; the Progressives viewed art as a means to "the growth of democracy and the preservation of peace." (8) Art, to the Progressives, had political utility; if cosseted and fed, artists could be of great use to the powers-that-be. One is reminded of Robert Frost's observation that in socialist states, the subsidized artist faces a choice between "death or Pollyanna." (9)

Variations on the department of culture plan were considered by Congress throughout the 1950s. However lofty the preambles, those bills usually imagined the arts as so many high-brow H-bombs, valuable weapons in the cold war. The following excerpts are representative:

The Soviet drive in the fine arts field finds the U.S. at present without a counter-offensive. (U.S. Advisory Commission on Educational Exchange, 1952)

Do you not agree that in the Cold War, that the sooner we can implement a program of selling our culture to the uncommitted people of the world as a weapon, the better off we are? (Rep. Frank Thompson, D-N.J., 1954)

We can't afford to do less than the Russians in this field. We'll lose our shirts if we do. (Rep. Frank Thompson, 1956)

The new look in the policy of the Soviet Union might be said to be a shift in the continuing cold war from the arena of armaments and potential armed aggression to penetration into lands by economic and cultural campaigns accompanied by propaganda against the United States for its laissez faire attitude toward the arts. (Sen. Herbert Lehman, D-N.Y., 1956)(10)

And on and on it went. Music, verse, fiction, the theater: the cold war was opening an aesthetic front. Books and symphonies and plays were sent into Senator Lehman's "arena" to contend with the Russians. As though a department of culture was going to vanquish Tolstoy!

Many real artists opposed the creation of a federal arts bureau. The American Artists Professional League, the National Sculpture Society, and the American Symphony Orchestra League feared the regimentation that Soviet bloc artists had suffered. ASOL executive secretary Helen M. Thompson worried that musicians "might become mere pawns in a centrally managed, nationalistic program whose control could be so buried in bureaucracy as to give little hint of its ultimate purpose."(11) Sculptor Wheeler Williams told a congressional committee, "The true artist is perforce a rugged individualist and does not want to be kept poodle by the government with dilettante experts as nursemaids."(12)

Underground artists, particularly the Beats, also opposed the merger of art and government. Painter Larry Rivers warned, "The government taking a role in art is like a gorilla threading a needle. It is at first cute, then clumsy, and most of all impossible."(13) Lawrence Ferlinghetti--poet, publisher, bookstore owner--ridiculed "cooperating poets and publishers"(14) who tied themselves to a federal tether. Ferlinghetti's City Lights imprint stamped any number of challenging works, including Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," which San Francisco authorities sought to ban as "obscene" in 1957. "They just won't let you be," lamented Ferlinghetti's Bay Area compadres, the Grateful Dead; many avant-garde artists have learned that lesson the hard way, in the courts, with the First Amendment as their paladin.

### **The Restoration of Mankind**

Sen. John F. Kennedy was inclined to agree with the Rivers-Ferlinghetti position, but the awesome responsibilities of the presidency changed his mind.(15) The Democratic platform of 1960 endorsed "a federal advisory agency to assist in the evaluation, development, and expansion of cultural resources,"(16) and from the first President Kennedy vigorously courted artists. Mark Rothko, Arthur Miller, and Robert Lowell were among those invited to the inauguration. A series of dinners honored cellist Pablo Casals, composer Igor Stravinsky, and polymath Andre Malraux. As JFK's friend Gore Vidal put it, "He knows the propaganda value of artists and he has . . . tried to win them over."(17) (One who was not winnable was William Faulkner, who turned down an invitation to dine with the Kennedys. The White House, said Faulkner, was "too far to go for supper.")(18)

A 1961 strike by the American Federation of Musicians against New York City's Metropolitan Opera proved a godsend to advocates of government-subsidized entertainment. Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg was called in to arbitrate the dispute; in his settlement, Goldberg noted the Met's \$840,000 debt and called for Washington to help close that gap. Spake the New York Times: "If the United States is going to insist that the Metropolitan carry on as a cultural institution that the nation cannot afford to lose, it should provide the opera with a subsidy."(19) (No one heard Montana singing for a solvent Met, or Kentucky or Maine or Arizona. By "United States," the Times meant Washington, D.C., and New York City.)

President Kennedy subsequently appointed August Heckscher, director of the Twentieth Century Fund, as his special consultant for the arts. A 1963 Heckscher report, *The Arts and the National Government*, laid the groundwork for subsidies to the Met and other elite institutions. The assassination of President Kennedy stalled arts policy, but not for long. Although President Johnson was not expected to be overly sympathetic to the Heckscher report, an election loomed, and a memo from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was most persuasive. Federal subsidy of the arts "can strengthen the connections between the Administration and the intellectual and artistic community," JFK's aide wrote the new president, "something not to be dismissed when victory or defeat next fall will probably depend on who carries New York, Pennsylvania, California, Illinois and Michigan."(20)

President Johnson saw the light. The National Council on the Arts was created in 1964; one year later, on September 29, 1965, the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities was born.

The foundation was bipartite: it contained the National Endowment for the Humanities, which was to promote "scholarship in the humanities," and the National Endowment for the Arts, which was to dispense public moneys to state agencies, nonprofit institutions, and individuals to promote these vocations:

music (instrumental and vocal), dance, drama, folk art, creative writing, architecture and allied fields, painting, sculpture, photography, graphic and craft arts, industrial design, costume and fashion design, motion pictures, television, radio, tape and sound recording, the arts related to the presentation,

performance, execution, and exhibition of such major art forms, and the study and application of the arts to the human environment(21)

The NEA's appointed chairman would serve a four-year term; he or she was to be advised by the 26-member National Council on the Arts. The states were encouraged to set up their own arts agencies; by 1974 all 50 had done so. Twenty percent of the endowment's appropriation trickled down to the states, though of late the wards have grown bold, and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies has floated a plan to boost their share of the loot from 20 to 60 percent.

The NEA's budget for FY 1966 was \$2.5 million; it rose to \$7 million annually for the next three years and then spiraled upward under the Nixon and Carter administrations, reaching \$158 million in FY 1981. The first budget of the Reagan years trimmed the NEA's appropriation by 10 percent, but the endowment is resilient and has many congressional friends; in FY 1990 it consumed on all-time high of \$171 million.

Even its most ardent supporters concede that the NEA's purpose was not--and never has been--clearly defined. "Paste the problem on the wall and throw government money at it,"(22) scoffed social critic Paul Goodman, ever the wise iconoclast, as the legislation was wending its way through Congress.

Yet hopes were high. Rep. Frank Horton (R-N.Y.) averred that "this measure proposes nothing less than the restoration of man."(23) A slightly less chiliastic NEA statement of mission promised "to foster the excellence, diversity and vitality of the arts in the United States."(24) But how was that to be done? Hadn't a healthy, vibrant, rambunctious American literature developed without any help whatsoever from Washington? Wasn't American popular music heard 'round the world? Hadn't American movies become the dominant cultural influence in Western Europe? Didn't modern art and regionalism, abstraction and realism, flourish here?

Congress disregarded, not for the last time, a dictum of the first aesthetician of the Republic, Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Beauty will not come at the call of the legislature. . . . It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up between the feet of brave and earnest men."(25)

### **Why Do the Heathen Subsidize?**

In his memoir of NEA chair Nancy Hanks, her deputy Michael Straight posed--and never adequately answered--a question that challenges the endowment's very existence: "Why should all of our taxpayers support activities that only a small minority of taxpayers enjoy?"(26)

Take art museums, a favorite NEA beneficiary. Eighty- four percent of art museum visitors have attended college; less than a third of the entire population has. Blue-collar workers constitute 47 percent of the workforce but just 7 percent of the art museum audience. African-Americans, 12 percent of the population, make up one-half of 1 percent of the clientele.(27) High-school dropouts are three times more likely to "never" visit an art museum than are college graduates.(28) Newsweek columnist Robert J. Samuelson calls subvention of the arts "highbrow pork barrel":(29) an income transfer from middle-class taxpayers to affluent museum goers.

Edward C. Banfield, author of *The Democratic Muse*, a book-length meditation on government and art, has written: "The art public is now, as it has always been, overwhelmingly middle and upper-middle class and above average in income--relatively prosperous people who would probably enjoy art about as much in the absence of subsidies."(30)

Economist Dick Netzer, an advocate of government subvention, concedes that subsidies have "failed to increase the representation of low-income people in audiences."(31) Taste, not money, is the obstacle to an integrated, variegated clientele; admission to most art museums costs about half what a movie ticket does. A visit to a Hank Williams, Jr., concert or a rap show suggests that rural, working, and African-American people are willing to pay handsomely for entertainment.

Alas, it is the wrong kind of entertainment, at least from the perspective of the arts establishment. So the benighted taxpayer is forced to subsidize those cultural expressions deemed worthy by soi-disant experts. (The great Iowa curmudgeon H. R. Gross made that point, archly, when he proposed an amendment to include pinochle, squash, and poker among the arts eligible for NEA funding. When his proposal failed, he ruefully observed, "There is another art

that is not recognized in this bill . . . the art of picking the pockets of the taxpayers.")(32)

In the British TV series "Yes, Minister," Sir Humphrey Appleby declares, "Subsidy is for art, for culture. It is not to be given to what the people want. It is for what the people don't want but ought to have. If they want something, they'll pay for it themselves."

Such paternalism was a common sentiment among the NEA's aristocratic founders, but more ignoble motives can't be discounted. Edward Banfield and artist Richard Kostelanetz, among others, have noted that America's first family of philanthropy, the Rockefellers, were indefatigable advocates of a national arts ministry.

Creating a federal bureau of culture was Nelson Rockefeller's pet project as a special assistant to President Eisenhower; as governor of New York, he sired the State Council on the Arts, the first of its kind. John D. Rockefeller III supervised the drafting of the Rockefeller Panel's 1965 report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, which foresaw a "vital function" for Washington in promoting culture. A follow-up report in 1977 was sponsored by the NEA in conjunction with the Ford Foundation, the J. D. Rockefeller III Fund, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Rockefeller Foundation. It, too, envisioned Everyman as (an involuntary) Maecenas. And Nancy Hanks, NEA chairwoman from 1969 to 1977, the dynamo under whom the endowment blossomed (or bloated, depending on one's viewpoint), had been a longtime Rockefeller employee.

The Rockefeller brothers were among the nation's most munificent arts patrons, and they devoutly wished humble taxpayers across this land to join them. John Q. Citizen was to be allowed (actually, required) to assist the Rockefellers and their compeers in supporting the Metropolitan Opera, the Museum of Modern Art, and other temples of high culture. Coincidence or not, artist-critic Richard Kostelanetz has noted that "public funding of large arts institutions had taken private philanthropy off its increasingly expensive hook."(33)

Fortunately, art museums are, by and large, independent of state. Subsidies from all levels of government account for only 15 percent of the operating budgets of American arts institutions.(34) A staggering \$6.4 billion is donated annually to cultural organizations from private and corporate sources.(35) Greater attention--or less indifference-- to standard business practices would ensure the survival of all but the most unpopular museums. (William D. Grampp examines museum profligacy and recommends belt-tightening measures in his recent book, *Pricing the Priceless*.)

Curators needn't lower their lofty standards to survive. They needn't admit Danielle Steele or Peter Max or 2 Live Crew to Parnassus. But what if . . .

Banfield asks us to "imagine a museum that, because it must live on its earnings, is constantly searching for ways to give viewers what they will pay to see."(36) (To many art administrators, that prospect is truly nightmarish: Elvis on black velvet at the National Gallery!) Imagine a museum that followed novelist Frank Norris "far from the studious and the aesthetes, the velvet jackets and the uncut hair . . . straight into a *World of Working Men*, crude of speech, swift of action, strong of passion, straight to the heart of a new life, on the borders of a new time."(37) Imagine a museum that did not see its purpose as forcing cultural spinach down our vulgar throats. Imagine a museum that served as muse, inspiring its visitors, respecting the extraordinary capacity for discernment of the most ordinary Americans.

Elite museums in this country were founded and thrived on the patronage of well-heeled philanthropists. The rich, to use a biblical inversion, will always be with us; so will philanthropy. A populist museum, by definition, will attract an audience large enough to make subsidy unnecessary. Museums celebrating regional or particularistic culture are, properly, the concern of local communities and governments. Where, pray tell, does the NEA fit in?

## **Alms and the Man**

Washington Post book critic Jonathan Yardley has wondered: "Why should the struggling young artist be entitled to government subsidy when the struggling young mechanic or accountant is not?"(38)

Let's take a specific case. In 1972 poet Erica Jong received a \$5,000 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship to revise a novel she was writing titled *Fear of Flying*. Ms. Jong was a teacher and published poet from an upper-middle-class background. She was "struggling" only in the way that all artists struggle: trying to make sense, to give form to her

creation. The appurtenances of writing--pencils, paper, a typewriter--she could easily afford. So why did the NEA give her \$5,000? What philosophy of government makes an advantaged woman like Erica Jong eligible for state subsidy? (39)

Just what is it about the act of writing (or painting or acting) that requires federal support? Why should the Treasury dole out thousands of dollars? How do such alms help?

The closest approximation to an answer came from the popular novelist E. L. Doctorow. Addressing the House Appropriations Committee in 1981, Doctorow said, "An enlightened endowment puts its money on largely unknown obsessive individuals who have sacrificed all the ordinary comforts and consolations of life in order to do their work." (40) Artists, in that view, are monomaniacs, driven dedicated people who make a conscious choice: art over security. Epic poems over a new carburetor. Symphonies over canopied beds.

That is an entirely honorable way of life. But wait . . . Doctorow denies that any choice must be made. He wants to abolish the risk and privation that dog almost all artists, particularly during their apprenticeships. "Starving artists" are to be plumped up by taxpayers. No need to sacrifice: as the yuppie beer commercial puts it, "You can have it all." The likelihood that pampered artists will turn complacent, listless, and lazy seems not to bother Doctorow. (It may be worth noting that in 1989 Doctorow was anointed the official New York State Author, which honor carries with it a \$10,000 check underwritten by the taxpayers of New York State.)

You can't beat the hours, Sinclair Lewis said of the artist's life, but as for the money . . . Jacques Barzun, a harsh critic of individual grants, describes "a life of solitary toil and repeated disappointment, of problematic reward and fitful success. . . . It is a test of endurance, willpower, and maniacal faith in oneself." (41) You can't buy perseverance with \$5,000 grants; poverty is nothing to one who has faith.

The NEA and its acolytes have a curious attitude toward artists. Agency administrators are bureaucrats, not belletrists, and artists--no, Artists--intimidate them. Lacking confidence in their prosaic selves, they defer to panels of "experts" and never, but never, challenge an artist to defend his work. Nancy Hanks, NEA chair under Presidents Nixon and Ford, was the quintessential cowed apparatchik. Her deputy, Michael Straight, remembers a grant application from an artist who proposed to "make a loop tour of the Western U.S., dripping ink as I go, from Hayley, Idaho, to Cody, Wyoming." Mystified, Straight requested elaboration. The applicant, a subaltern explained, was in the tradition of "the great painter Marcel Duchamp, who, when he moved to New York City, brought with him a bottle labeled 'Paris Air.'" Straight was unimpressed. The aide then recalled "a highly regarded Italian painter who bottled his own excrement and sold it for a splendid price as Excrement of the Artist." Straight despaired. Nancy Hanks approved the grant. (42) The shrouded Cult of The Artist--sage, mantic, inscrutable--had triumphed over common sense.

On the other hand, an NEA program like Arts in Education assumes that artists are selfish greedheads, mercenary in their civic mindedness. The much maligned AIE spends over \$5 million annually to send artists into the schools to speak to students and show them what an honest-to-goodness artist looks like. (The kids would probably rather see Madonna, but that's another story.)

Banfield and others, including art historian Laura H. Chapman, have criticized AIE for "us[ing] the schools to solve the unemployed problems of artists." (43) But AIE is disturbing for another reason: can't artists donate their time to the schools? (Like businessmen in the much praised Junior Achievement program.) A neighborly artist would speak, without recompense, to community groups: to the Friends of the Library, the Ladies Literary Circle, painting classes in high schools, prisoners, whoever. Many artists and writers--communitarians, believers in the regional promise--already do so. They are citizens of place; to cash a check from Uncle Sam would cheapen their acts of citizenship. (That is not to say that an artist must donate his talent. The early career of Grant Wood in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, illustrates how an artist can be nurtured, spiritually and financially, by the community he loves.)

Sage, mercenary, and finally schmoozer: the successful NEA supplicant must also display the skills of grantsmanship. He must fill out mind-numbing forms; he must kowtow to those who sit in judgment of his application; he will, if he is an adept at this art, glad hand (in a dignified way, of course). Such behavior is what intelligent figures within the NEA's ambit complain about most frequently.

George Garrett, the acclaimed novelist and man of letters who has served on the NEA's Advisory Literature Panel, comments, "Once (and whenever) the government is involved in the arts, then it is bound to be a political and social business, a battle between competing factions. The NEA, by definition, supports the arts establishment."(44)

Sometimes the politics are glaring and rancid, as in the 1979-80 Literature Program, an orgy of cronyism that was laid bare by Hilary Masters in the Summer 1981 Georgia Review. Salutory reforms have since diminished the most egregious partisanship, but as George Garrett says, when government dispenses booty, politics will always be involved.

What galls many outside observers are the sanctimonious ooziings that pass for defenses of the NEA. Taxpayer objections to the endowment are dismissed as "philistinism." When a novelist's animadversions appeared in the Wall Street Journal, NEA chairman John Frohnmayer called his critic's ideas "sinister." (45) And when all else fails, the arts establishment falls back on that last refuge of the pork barreler: modesty. "Uncle Sam spends less on the NEA than on the Stealth bomber or the Export-Import Bank," the ministry's guardians protest, "so leave us alone and go hunting for fatter boondoggles."

Yes, the NEA is a drop in the budget bucket. Yes, military bands employ more musicians than all the major symphony orchestras combined. (Perhaps, as the Department of Defense reassesses its mission, it could turn John Philip Sousa over to the private sector.) But the NEA will never write a great book, compose a timeless symphony, or paint in sublime hues. Only the single man or woman, animated by what Jack Kerouac called "the unspeakable vision of the individual," can create. The government arts bureaucracy, Larry Rivers's fumbling gorilla, is, even at its most benign, superfluous. As the insurgent publisher Eric Baizer said, "No great poet has ever been produced by a Washington backroom deal."(46)

### **Bringing Culture to the Dust Bowl**

The oddest ostensible purpose of the NEA is to promote the arts in smaller cities, in the great unmuseumed vastitude of Middle America. I say "odd" because New York City legislators emphasized that mission. Sen. Herbert Lehman looked out his Manhattan window and saw "an aesthetic dust bowl across many of our states."(47) From Harlem, Rep. Adam Clayton Powell viewed "cultural dust bowls"(48) west of the Hudson. The NEA was to bring civilization to those outposts. (Nevertheless, we dust bowlers were not to be trusted with our own culture; of the 24 members of the first National Council on the Arts, appointed in 1965, 17 lived in New York City, Washington, or Los Angeles.)

Exactly how federal tax dollars--doled out in Washington by a centralized bureaucracy--could uplift the provinces, no one really knew. The brilliant heyday of regional writing in the United States spanned the last 25 years of the 19th century: Sarah Orne Jewett of Maine, Edward Eggleston of Indiana, Hamlin Garland of Dakota, Joseph Kirkland of Illinois, Mary Wilkins of Massachusetts, Harold Frederic of upstate New York, all flourished without Uncle Sam's patronage. In painting, Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton led a muscular regional movement in the 1930s, without bending knees and tipping caps to Washington. Besides, regionalists have always viewed the East Coast Establishment as the enemy. If art was to thrive in Kansas City, Benton believed, then Kansas City must cultivate it.(49)

The NEA's arrogance is breathtaking. Provincial artists do not need eleemosynary or elevated advice from Big Brother. Every state and section of this country has its own indigenous and particular cultural tradition, a product of hundreds of years and thousands of dedicated artists. Those traditions evolved without any "help" from Washington; the last thing our vibrant sectional cultures need is the cookie-cutter uniformity and political correctness that are bureaucracy's signet.

Senator Lehman and Representative Powell were more parochial than they wanted to admit. Instead of sparking a healthy regionalism, NEA subsidies have imposed New York City's version of culture on the provinces--an act more stultifying than edifying.

Small-city museums have used federal moneys to purchase works "mostly from New York City artists," Edward Banfield writes, "which create[s] problems of political geography." He concludes, "The real reason for the passage of the act and for the making of appropriations year after year was, and is, to benefit special interests, especially the

culture industry of New York City."(50)

That is no surprise. For all its vaunted "regional-ism," the FAP of the 1930s served much the same function-- to "provide an outlet for New York City art and the progressive culture it embodied,"(51) as art historian Helen Townsend has written. Claire S. Chow notes that "New York City became a major center of activity while many other parts of the country were virtually untouched by the Federal Theater Project."(52) (In our century, Mississippi has arguably produced more major writers than New York City. Yet I am unaware of any proposals to reverse the flow of culture.)(53)

The NEA has been more patronizing than patron to the towns and villages of Middle America. An example: in 1969 NEA grantee George Plimpton, editor of the *American Literary Anthology*/2, confounded observers by paying \$1,500 for a poem by Aram Saroyan consisting of the single misspelled word, "lighght."

When an assistant to an Iowa congressman asked Plimpton what Saroyan's poem meant, the editor replied, "You are from the Midwest. You are culturally deprived, so you would not understand it anyway."(54) We are subsidizing superciliousness; taxpayers are mulcted and then mocked, and if they complain, it is "good old-fashioned American small town hysteria,"(55) in one NEA staffer's phrase.

### **Taking the King's Shilling?**

One NEA publication declared, "Direct support for the individual writer is almost non-existent. Financial aid is necessary to buy time for them to write."(56) That is nonsense, a bureaucrat's fancy: without government, no one will paint or write or sing again!

Tell it to William Faulkner. "The writer doesn't need economic freedom," said the bard of Yoknapatawpha County. "All he needs is a pencil and paper. I've never known anything good in writing to come from having accepted any free gift of money. The good writer never applies to a foundation. He's too busy writing something."(57)

Faulkner was echoed by John Updike: "I would rather have as my patron a host of anonymous citizens digging into their own pockets for the price of a book or a magazine than a small body of enlightened and responsible men administering public funds."(58)

Michael Mooney, in *The Ministry of Culture*, writes of the difficulty the NEA has had in breaking dancers to the government bit. They're always going off on their "own to form experimental dance companies, on the spur of the moment, without tapping the national capital for research and development funds."(59) Indeed, the best dancers seem wholly indifferent to the NEA:

Edward Villella continued to dance with the New York City Ballet for the same \$100 per performance he was paid before all the national programs began because Villella loved to dance. Just as farmers believed that farms were not for buying and selling, but for farming, great dancers wanted to dance whether or not they were employed for the night as minor officials of the government. No matter what the patrons of dance told each other at intermission, the coins they showered on the stage for the performance had no effect upon a dancer's feet. In the magic fleeting instant when beauty appeared, the amount approved for national grants was irrelevant.(60)

An additional danger of state sponsorship is tersely rendered by the maxim: he who takes the king's shilling becomes the king's man. That is Lawrence Ferlinghetti's gravamen. In a letter to Stanley Kunitz, then-Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, Ferlinghetti wrote: "I'm still concerned with the symbolic importance of a poet lending his talent to any branch of the government. . . . Guilt by complicity, as I learned it chez Camus, is I'm afraid still to be reckoned with."(61)

That principle was upheld by poet Robert Lowell, who in 1965 turned down an invitation to read at the Johnson White House. "Every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments," (62) Lowell explained. The artist who accepts the honors and emoluments of state becomes a "state man," in George Konrad's phrase. He has sold his birthrights-- freedom and independence--for a mess of pottage.

An indignant article by Grace Glueck in the New York Times unwittingly revealed another insidious danger of subsidy. An NEA grant is "highly important money," she averred, in part because "it confers prestige."(63)

Is it really the place of the federal government to "confer prestige" upon an artist? What kind of artist would accept the "prestige" that a government body would confer? Certainly not the rebel spirits or pathfinders we like to imagine artists to be. Herman Melville spurned an invitation to join the New York Authors' Club; Sinclair Lewis turned down the Pulitzer Prize; Ernest Hemingway, cussed ornery independent, grumbled, "A writer is an outlyer like a Gypsy. . . . If he is a good writer he will never like any government he lives under. His hand should be against it and its hand will always be against him."(64) Those men didn't need "prestige" of the sort attached to an NEA grant.

In 1963, when IRS agents raided the Living Theatre, a temple of the avant-garde, guiding lights Julian Beck and Judith Malina doughtily challenged the intruders. "Art Before Taxes," they proclaimed. Dramatists, critics, and theatergoers rallied to their defense. Donations poured in; one benefactor secured Beck and Malina and company a new stage. A couple of misguided souls suggested that government--the cause of the Living Theatre's demise--should step in with a subsidy. To confer prestige, you know. The legendary Paul Goodman set them straight. "Artistically," Goodman lectured, "official support of new theatre would in all probability be positively damaging."(65)

And unnecessary, as any rock and roller could have told Beck and Malina. Rock and roll receives not a penny of NEA money; yet it thrives, not only the formulaic rock heard on the radio but vital, roots rock played in small clubs in every nook and cranny in America. The spirit is democratic, open, Whitmanesque even. The punks of the late 1970s had a slogan--DIY, or "Do It Yourself." They did not ask the cultural establishment for a handout, or even a place to play. They founded their own clubs, bought secondhand guitars, paid the bands out of the gate proceeds, recorded in cheap studios, and disseminated tapes through and wrote themselves up in hand-stapled little magazines. Many of those bands were from small and medium cities; they sang of local concerns; they were "regionalist" in the best sense: R.E.M. from Athens, Georgia; The Rainmakers from Kansas City, Missouri; Red-Headed Stepchild from Elba, New York; Human Switchboard from Cleveland, Ohio. They made music that will last . . . and they did it themselves, did it themselves, cooperatively, in the American grain.

## **Conclusion**

One of the angriest, most despairing broadsides against the NEA was leveled by the writer Richard Moore. His stinging critique, published in 1980, still pierces:

It isn't just that the money we give to artists is being wasted. It's doing positive harm. An arts bureaucracy has grown up in the last few years to formulate the applications, select the judges, and give the right sort of ballyhoo to the recipients. There is no other way for such a system to work. And there is no way to make such a system honest. But supposing that it is honest, it cripples nevertheless. Only mediocrity can destroy art. And in every bureaucracy, mediocrity luxuriates. Where do the judges come from? The writers' union, of course. The solid citizens of art who have enough of a reputation to be chosen and nothing better to do than such hackwork. And they will reward those who are like themselves. They will constitute a self-perpetuating and endlessly stultifying organization that will ensure the banishment of all true talent to madness and outer darkness. Precisely that, I suspect in the depths of my heart, is the true purpose of such a system: to stamp all creativity out of a society which has grown too brittle to endure it. (Moore's emphasis)(66)

American artists do not need a ministry of culture. Our writers and painters and dramatists and musicians have flourished when government has ignored them. We don't want subsidy. We don't want censorship. We just want to be left alone.

## **Footnotes**

(1) George Konrad, *Antipolitics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), pp. 214-15.

(2) Quoted in "Sex, Politics, & Religion," *Common Cause Magazine*, November/December 1989, p. 22.

- (3) Dana Rohrabacher, "Shield the Taxpayers from Funding Trash," USA Today, March 27, 1990, p. 10A.
- (4) Grace Glueck, "Border Skirmish: Art and Politics," New York Times, November 19, 1989, p. H1.
- (5) Quoted in Helen Townsend, "The Social Origins of the Federal Art Project," in *Art, Ideology, and Politics*, ed. Judith H. Balfe and Margaret Jane Wyszomirski (New York: Praeger, 1985), p. 276.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 268.
- (7) Russell Lynes, "The Case against Government Aid to the Arts," New York Times Magazine, March 25, 1962, p. 84.
- (8) Terry Lynn Cornwell, "Party Platforms and the Arts," in *Art, Ideology, and Politics*, pp. 247-48.
- (9) Quoted in M.E. Bradford, "Subsidizing the Muses," in *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 103.
- (10) Quotes from Gary O. Larson, *The Reluctant Patron* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 102-23.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- (13) Quoted in Alvin Toffler, *The Culture Consumers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), pp. 188-89.
- (14) Neeli Cherkorski, *Ferlinghetti* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), p. 208.
- (15) During the campaign, Kennedy said, "I do not believe federal funds should support symphony orchestras or opera companies, except when they are sent abroad in cultural exchange programs." Quoted in "The Candidates and the Arts," *Saturday Review*, October 29, 1960, p. 43.
- (16) Cornwell, p. 248.
- (17) Gore Vidal, "Writers and the World," in *Homage to Daniel Shays: Collected Essays, 1952-1972* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 215.
- (18) George Garrett, "Art Is Always Political When the Government Starts Giving Grants," *Chronicles*, June 1990, p. 19.
- (19) Quoted in Larson, p. 158.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- (21) National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, Pub. L. 209 (20 U.S.C. 952), Sec. 3B.
- (22) Paul Goodman, "A New Deal for the Arts," in *Creator Spirit Come! The Literary Essays of Paul Goodman*, ed. Taylor Stoehr (New York: Free Life, 1977), p. 125.
- (23) Quoted in Larson, p. 197.
- (24) National Endowment for the Arts, *Five Year Planning Document: 1986-1990* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 379.
- (25) Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Art," in vol. 2 of *Emerson's Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), p. 342.

- (26) Edward C. Banfield, *The Democratic Muse* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 72-73.
- (27) William D. Grampp, *Pricing the Priceless* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 57-58.
- (28) "Americans on Art," *Washington Post*, May 13, 1985.
- (29) Robert J. Samuelson, "Highbrow Pork Barrel," *Newsweek*, August 21, 1989, p. 44.
- (30) Banfield, P. 7.
- (31) Dick Netzer, *The Subsidized Muse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 20.
- (32) Quoted in Larson, p. 216.
- (33) Richard Kostelanetz, "The New Benefactors," *Liberty*, January 1990, p. 60.
- (34) Kevin V. Mulcahy, "The NEA as Public Patron of the Arts," in *Art, Ideology, and Politics*, p. 335.
- (35) *Congressional Record*, July 12, 1989, p. H3638.
- (36) Banfield, p. 188.
- (37) Frank Norris, "Novelists of the Future," in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1903), p. 210.
- (38) Jonathan Yardley, "The NEA Debate, Derailed by Drama," *Washington Post*, April 9, 1990, p. C2. Los Angeles painter Laura Main has the same misgivings. "Everyone takes a risk in choosing a certain career path--why should artists be exempt? Relying on the government to sponsor art work . . . is to me no more than subjecting yourself to the fate of a bureaucratic lackey." Letter to the author, June 29, 1990.
- (39) Contrast Erica Jong, who could not finish her book until the taxpayers ponied up \$5,000, with Thomas Wolfe, who roared, "I have at last discovered my own America, I believe I have found my language, I think I know my way. And I shall wreak out my vision of this life, this way, this world and this America, to the top of my bent, to the height of my ability, but with an unswerving devotion, integrity and purity of purpose that shall not be menaced, altered or weakened by any one." Quoted in David Herbert Donald, *Look Homeward* (Boston: Little Brown, 1987), p. 397.
- (40) E. L. Doctorow, "Art Funding for the Artist's Sake," *The Nation*, July 4, 1981, p. 12.
- (41) Jacques Barzun, "A Surfeit of Art," *Harper's*, July 1986, p. 48.
- (42) Michael Straight, Nancy Hanks, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1988), pp. 288-90.
- (43) Banfield, pp. 134-35.
- (44) Garrett, p. 20. In this article, Garrett mentioned a friend of his, a North Carolinian, who "has just turned down a \$40,000 lifetime achievement grant from the NEA. Not because he didn't need the money--he has precious little. But because he has long been an outspoken critic of individual grants, and meant it, and did not wish to betray his principles." Now that is integrity.
- (45) John E. Frohnmayer, "Real Artists Often Need Handouts," letter to the editor, *Wall Street Journal*, June 6, 1990.
- (46) Quoted in Michael M. Mooney, *The Ministry of Culture* (New York: Wyndham, 1980), p. 323.
- (47) Quoted in Larson, p. 123.
- (48) Quoted in Banfield, p. 59.

(49) Regionalism must arise locally, from native soil. It cannot be dictated by a remote capital. Hamlin Garland, our greatest regional theorist, affirmed, "I am a Western man; my hopes and ambitions for the West arise from absolute knowledge of its possibilities. I want to see its prairies, its river banks and coules, its matchless skies, put upon canvas. . . . I want to see the West supporting its own painters and musicians and novelists. . . . To imitate is fatal. Provincialism (that is to say, localism) is no ban to a national literature." Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols* (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1894), pp. 30-31.

(50) Banfield, p. 198.

(51) Townsend, p. 287.

(52) Quoted in Netzer, p. 55.

(53) Chronicles editor Thomas Fleming has frequently made this point.

(54) Quoted in Straight, p. 158.

(55) Larson, p. xv.

(56) National Endowment for the Arts, p. 217.

(57) Malcolm Cowley, ed., *Writers at Work* (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 125.

(58) John Updike, *Hugging the Shore* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. 868.

(59) Mooney, p. 280.

(60) *Ibid.*, p. 279.

(61) Quoted in Cherkorski, p. 208.

(62) Quoted in Larson, p. 210.

(63) Grace Glueck, "Art on the Firing Line," *New York Times*, July 9, 1989, p. H9.

(64) Quoted in Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1986), p. 277.

(65) Goodman, p. 125. Goodman took a typically quirky position. He strongly opposed NEA-type bureaucracies, but he did favor a tax on mass communications, proceeds of which would be distributed to dissident cultural organizations.

(66) Quoted in Hilary Masters, "Go Down Dignified," *Georgia Review* (Summer 1981): 244.