

Should Government Fund the Arts?

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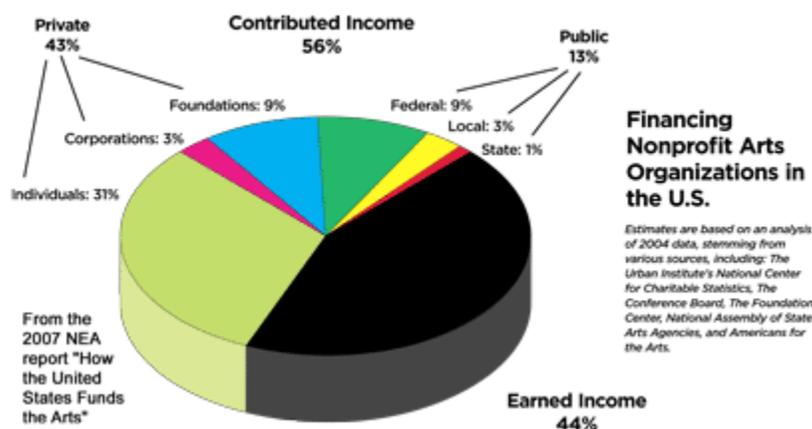
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There is a lot of debate these days about government support of the arts, most of it revolving around efforts by some newly-elected members of Congress to restrict or even eliminate federal funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). There is nothing new about this effort by political conservatives; this has happened to some extent the past few times they have come into power. But it seems to be even more spirited this time around.

There appear to be three prime motivations for eliminating government arts funding:

- There are those who believe government should be limited to very specific functions., e.g. law enforcement and military defense. They prefer everything else be left to the individual, including artistic expression.
- Some find certain artistic subject matter offensive – from a religious or moral perspective – and would like to restrict or dictate the types of projects the government funds. They prefer their taxes not go to support something they personally find objectionable.
- Others simply lack an appreciation for the arts and fail to see the value of such an investment.

Thirteen percent of all U.S. arts funding (national, state and local) comes directly from government sources. Budgets for the NEA and CPB, combined with the Smithsonian, Institute of Museum and Library Services, National Endowment for the Humanities and National Gallery of Art, are approximately \$1.6 billion. This pales in comparison to a country like France that, while having one-fifth our population, has an arts budget of over \$4 billion. Why are the arts being singled out for cuts amidst a U.S. budget in the trillions?



Given the relatively small percentage our government currently spends on the arts, is it really worth the hassle? Administrations move on every few years, and arts support twists in the winds of political change. The arts are all about freedom of expression and governments are in the

business of regulation. Government support seems to be as symbolically important for its sanction as for its economic impact. Would we not be better off kicking the federal government to the curb?

There are several commonly stated reasons in favor of government support of the arts:

- The majority of people are not knowledgeable about and do not appreciate the arts, so the government must step in to keep the arts alive.
- The government should help make the arts available to all.
- The arts make us better humans and therein improve our society.
- The arts are a good investment and can help promote economic growth.

If the arts improve our lives, our civic interaction, and are a good economic investment, why do so many arts organizations struggle? What can lawmakers do to improve this situation? There is only one answer – get at the root of the problem and emphasize arts education.

The current role of government funding, and all other non-earned income donated to arts organizations (foundations, corporate and private donors), appears to be to keep things afloat in the face of decreasing arts awareness and appreciation. If we can agree arts education is vital to our continuing development as a species and our overall quality of life, why do we not begin immersing our children in artful activities from Day 1, and then sustain this until they fly the nest? The current level of arts education in public schools is at bare minimum, and this is especially true throughout the elementary level, where minds are most fertile for creative learning.

If we did this one simple thing, significantly raise the level of arts education in grades K-12, there would be no need for government subsidy. The arts would exist naturally in the mix of commercial choices, and could compete favorably.

But what about science and math, you ask? Are we not falling behind the rest of the world in these areas? There is no argument regarding the need to learn math and science, especially in this age of technological advancement. However, if we overemphasize math and science, are we not neglecting the right brain?

Some educators in China, which leads the world in science and math achievement scores, are increasingly critical of their own system for its lack of emphasis on creativity and independent thinking. “What the Chinese are very good at doing is achieving short-term goals,” says Jiang Xueqin, deputy principal of Peking University High School, affiliated with Beijing’s Peking University, known as the “Harvard” of China. “They’re good at copying things, not creating them.”

The arts free young minds to explore the unknown, to express their emotions, to improve communication, to learn how to solve problems. Life in the 21st century moves at mind-boggling speed. We need to develop adults who can quickly tap into their creativity, adjust to changing

conditions, and find solutions. Our current public education system falls woefully short in this regard.

Even our own venerable Harvard University is looking at the arts to freshen and reshape its curriculum. Drew Faust, president of Harvard, discussed this in a recent interview published by the Huffington Post: “We have focused on integrating the arts – the practice of the arts, not simply the appreciation and critique of the arts – into our undergraduate teaching. So we are exploring many innovative dimensions, including the introduction of art-making into many General Education courses.”

It is the “doing” that is key – the making, the shaping, the gesture, the craft. And it is through doing that students live their courses of study and incorporate them into their minds and their muscle memory, and carry that foundation with them throughout their lives. Educate children in the arts, and as adults they will be better citizens, better at whatever career they choose, and much more likely to support the arts as individuals. Then the government can focus on what it does best: regulate.