

## Culture in U.S.: four more years

President Obama has won the 2012 election and will be remaining in office for another four years. From an arts advocacy standpoint, Obama was clearly the favorable candidate for government arts funding.

Mr. Romney and other Republicans have repeatedly announced their intentions to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and other arts-centric institutions, as a symbol of their desire to decrease government spending. For example, Mr. Romney's running mate, Paul Ryan, included the elimination of the Institute for Museum and Library Services in his budget that was approved by the Republican-majority House of Representatives. During campaigning, jokes abounded about Big Bird and other popular Sesame Street characters whose existence depend on the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Surely, the complete elimination of federal arts agencies would have an emotional and intellectual impact on the American arts community. When Sam Brownback, the Governor of Kansas, eliminated funding for the Kansas Arts Commission, there was a national reaction. Every state in the U.S. has an arts agency and this was the first actual elimination to result from political campaign promises. The Kansas Arts Commission received less than \$700,000 each year from the state government, but it received funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and other agencies that matched state-sponsored moneys. The Governor's attempt to save 0.005% of the total state budget resulted in a loss of more than \$1.2 million in grants to Kansas artists.

After a very public advocacy campaign, Governor Brownback agreed to include \$700,000 in the next year's budget for the Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission, a new agency that combined the former Arts Commission with the state's film agency. In the end, Kansas artists may have less government grant funding. However, in the symbolic war for arts funding, the arts advocates won the Kansas battle.

How would the Kansas story translate to the federal level? Similarly, the debate is mostly symbolic. Funding for national arts-centric institutions is virtually insignificant to the \$37 trillion federal budget. For instance, the NEA's requested budget of \$154 million is somewhere around 0.000004% of the overall federal budget.

While President Obama is a vocal supporter of the arts, he actually decreased the NEA's budget in his first term— along with almost every other federal agency, including the Department of Defense. He is expected to approve the NEA's 2013 budget proposal, which is a \$9 million increase from the previous year. Even a modest increase is good news for arts supporters, but, in general, the President is maintaining the status quo.

The status quo remains that federal government funding does not make a big impact on most American arts organizations. An NEA grant is often more valuable as a stamp of approval than in monetary value. Many small organizations cannot even afford the time and human resources required for the extensive NEA grant applications, nor the similar reporting requirements for those lucky enough to win the grants. Organizations in certain locations may receive county or city grants, partially subsidized by matching NEA funds, but those grants, too, are a small percentage of most organizations' overall budgets.

As with an NEA grant, the value of these federal arts institutions lies in their symbolism. If a President and Congress vote to eliminate federal arts institutions, it is a signal to citizens of the importance of the arts in American life. If Americans are thereby persuaded that the arts are not important to their life, they will likely visit fewer museums, buy fewer opera tickets, and donate less money to arts organizations. Because U.S. arts organizations do not receive much government funding, they are very much dependent upon individual donations and ticket sales.

Numerous American arts organizations have shut their doors or declared bankruptcy since the economic collapse of 2008. Those that are still functioning have had to make cuts and adapt to the economy's effects on donations, ticket sales, and grants from non-government entities.

In some respects, though, Americans have turned to the arts to help them interpret or cope with hardships caused by the economy. Those that are no longer able to support their favorite arts organizations through patronage or donation are, often, still supportive in mind and heart. This aligns with an overall resurgence of local community spirit in recent years. If a national wave of anti-arts morale comes about, the outcome would undoubtedly be more closures, bankruptcies, and even more decreases in arts education for schoolchildren.

Arguments exist for and against President Obama's arts policies. At this moment in history, it seems that the President's most realistic and valuable strategy for supporting the arts is one of spirit and vocal support. We have that now in President Obama, and we will wait to see if financial support will follow as the economy recovers.



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