

Robert Hughes

“A Loony Parody of Cultural Democracy”

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Robert Hughes is art critic for *Time* magazine. In the following article, Hughes argues against Jesse Helms’s Amendment 420 and defends government funding for the arts.

Senator Jesse Helms, that noted paleo-conservative, has taken up the cudgels against that most distinguished and useful vehicle of patronage in American cultural life, the National Endowment for the Arts. Neoconservatives want to keep the NEA because they would like to run it. Paleos like Helms don’t greatly care whether it exists or not; if attacking it can serve a larger agenda, fine.

Last year NEA money totaling \$45,000 was used by the Corcoran museum for an exhibition by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and by an Institution that gave an award to the artist Andres Serrano. One of Serrano’s pieces was a photo of a plastic crucifix immersed in the artist’s urine—a fairly conventional piece of postsurrealist blasphemy, which, though likely to have less effect on established religion than a horsefly on a tank, was bound to irk some people. Mapplethorpe’s show was to contain some icy, polished and (to most straights and one surmises, at least a few Republican gays) deeply repulsive photos of S and M queens doing this and that to one another.

As soon as the dewlaps of Senator Helms’ patriarchal wrath started shaking at its door, the Corcoran caved in and canceled Mapplethorpe’s show. Unappeased, the ayatollah of North Carolina proposed a measure that would forbid the NEA to give money to “promote, disseminate or produce” anything “obscene or indecent” or derogatory of “the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion or non-religion” which, taken literally, comprises image or belief of any kind, religious or secular.

In effect, this would make the NEA hostage to every crank, ideologue and God botherer in America. A grant for an exhibition of Gothic ivories could be pulled on the grounds that the material was offensive to Jews (much medieval art is anti-Semitic), to Muslims, (what about those scenes of false prophets in hell with Muhammad?), or, for that matter, to atheists offended by the intrusion of religious propaganda into a museum. A radical feminist could plausibly argue that her “nonreligious” beliefs were offended by the sexism of Rubens’ nudes or Picasso’s *Vollard Suite*. Doubtless a fire worshiper would claim that the presence of extinguishers in a theater was repugnant to his god.

In short, what the amendment proposes is a loony parody of cultural democracy in which everyone becomes his or her own Censor. Clearly, Jesse Helms has no doubt that the NEA he punished if it strays from what he fancies be the center line of American ethical belief. The truth, of course, that no such lone exists—not in a society as vast, various and eclectic as the real America. Helms' amendment might have played in Papua, where a government spokesperson defended the banning of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* on the grounds that "our people traditionally set much store on dreams and hallucinations. But in the U.S., no.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the NEA is not a ministry of culture. It does not commission large works to reflect glory on the state, or set firm policy for other institutions. Its \$169 million budget is tiny—less than one-third the projected price of one Stealth bomber, or, to put it another way, only ten times the recent cost of a single painting by Jasper Johns. The French government spends three times the NEA's budget music theater and dance alone (\$560 million in 1989). German government spending on culture runs at around \$4.5 billion, repeat, billion, a year.

The extreme conservative view is that support of the contemporary arts is not the business of government. Never mind that quite a few people who were not exactly radicals, from Rameses II to Louis XIV and Urban VIII, thought otherwise and thus endowed the world with parts of the Egypt, the Paris and the Rome we have today. New culture is optional—slippery stuff, ambiguous in its meanings, uncertain in its returns. Away with it! Let the corporations underwrite it!

The fetish of supply-side culture was one of the worst legacies of the Reagan years. Though the Great Communicator was frustrated in his attempt to abolish the Endowment in 1981, he made sure that more government money went to military bands than to the entire budget of the NRA. Oom-pah-pah culture to fit a time of oom-pah-pah politics. After all, who could say that the arts needed support outside the marketplace at a time when star orchestra conductors were treated like sacred elephants and the art market was turning into a freakish potlatch for new money?

Conversely, why bother to support what market Darwinism seems to condemn to obscurity? "I have fundamental questions," Helms grated, "about why the federal government is supporting artists the taxpayers have refused to support in the marketplace."

But this was exactly what the NEA was created, in 1965, to do—and it was the wisest of decisions. Lots of admirable art does badly at first its rewards to the patron are not immediate and may never come. Hence the need for the NEA. It is there to help the self-realization of culture that is not immediately successful.

Corporate underwriting has produced some magnificent results for American libraries, museums, ballets, theaters and orchestras—for institutional culture, across the board. But today it is shrinking badly, and it requires a delicate balance with government funding to work well. Corporations' underwriting money comes out of their promotion budgets

and—not unreasonably, since their goal is to make money—they want to be associated with popular, prestigious events. It’s no trick to get Universal Widget to underwrite a Renoir show, or one of those PBS nature series (six hours of granola with bugs copulating to Mozart). But try them with newer, more controversial, or more demanding work and watch the faces in the boardroom drop. Corporate is nervous money; it needs the NEA reassurance as a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. Our problem, despite conservative rant, is too little government support for the arts, not too much. Even if we had a ministry of culture to parade the roosters, we would still need the NEA to look after the eggs.

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