

Robert Samuelson

“Highbrow Pork Barrel”

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Mr. Samuelson is a columnist who writes regularly for national publication. He is the author of *The Good Life and Its Discontents* (1996). In the following article, Samuelson argues that federal funding for the arts should be ended.

I once suggested that Congress consider creating a National Endowment for Rodeo. The proposal's point was to show that rodeo subsidies are as worthy as "art" subsidies. Going beyond the irony, I urged abolishing the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). This prompted the usual fan mail. One reader speculated that my cultural tastes ran to watching women's mud wrestling. Suppose they did. Should government then subsidize what I consider art?

The recent furor over allegedly obscene art financed by the NEA has only confirmed the wisdom of my view. Genuine art is about self-expression. It flows from individual imagination, ingenuity, joy and rage. By definition, it is undefinable. Standards are always subjective. In a democratic society there is a permanent conflict between artistic freedom and political accountability for "art" supported by public money.

Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, is correct when he says taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for art that most Americans find offensive or indecent. (The current cause célèbre: a picture of a crucifix floating in urine, funded by an NEA grant.) But Helms's critics are also correct when they decry censorship and warn against government imposing standards of conformity and respectability. There's an easy escape from this impasse. Get government out of the arts. Then artists could create without fear, and congressmen would have no cause for complaint.

Now I was not born yesterday. I know that the chance of Congress erasing the NEA is about one in 25,000. But we can at least see it for what it is—highbrow pork barrel. By this I mean that the NEA spends public monies to pay for what are basically private pleasures and pursuits. I do not mean that no good comes from these grants. But the good goes primarily to the individual artists and art groups that receive the grants and to their relatively small audiences. Public benefits are meager.

There's a serious issue here, as political scientist Edward Banfield has argued. What are the legitimate uses of national government? Our federal government is the mechanism by which we tax ourselves to meet collective national needs. Subsidizing "art" fails this

elementary test. It does not meet an important national need. Neither do subsidies for “good” television or the “humanities.”: the missions of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Suppose someone actually proposed a National Endowment for Rodeo with a \$169 million budget, which is the 1989 budget for the NEA. Grants would go to individual rodeo riders (“to foster riding skills”) and to rodeo shows (“to make rodeos more available to public”). Questions would arise. Why do rodeo riders and fans merit special treatment? Do they create some public benefit?

It’s considered uncouth to ask similar questions of public support for opera, sculpture, painting or television. But, of course, the questions apply. Grants from the NEA go mainly to individual artists or arts organizations. In 1998 the new York Philharmonic received \$286,000; the San Francisco Opera got \$330,000; the Denver Center for Performing Arts got \$75,000. There were grants of about \$10,000 each to 55 small literary magazines, and 89 sculptors got grants of about \$5,000 apiece.

What justifies the subsidies? The idea that our artistic future depends on federal handouts to free artists from commercial pressures falters on two counts. It overlooks the complexity of creative motivation and ignores the corrupting influences of government grantsmanship. Herman Melville did not need an NEA grant to write; Winslow Homer did not need an NEA grant to paint. Art consumers benefit from the NEA, because their ticket prices are indirectly subsidized. But these are mainly higher-income people who deserve no subsidy. In 1987 only a quarter of the public attended opera or musical theater, reports pollster Louis Harris. But half of those with incomes exceeding \$50,000 attended. Museum and theater attendance reflect similar income patterns.

Public-television subsidies are also highbrow pork barrel. On average, public TV draws about 4 percent of prime-time viewers. The “MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour” receives the largest grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), \$4.3 million in 1989. It’s a superb program, but what public purpose does it serve? Can anyone claim there isn’t enough news? My guess is that its audience consists heavily of news junkies, who read newspapers and magazines, and watch CNN. The program doesn’t inform the uniformed but better informs the well-informed.

No great (or even minor) national harm would occur if Congress axed these cultural agencies. Museums wouldn’t vanish; the NEA provides a tiny share of their funds. Neither would public television stations; they rely on the CPB for only about 11 percent of their money. The CPB’s children’s programs with distinct instructional value could be moved to the Department of Education. In any case, “Sesame Street” would survive. Oscar the Grouch and his pals are a tiny industry appearing on toys and clothes.

Some arts groups would retrench, and others would die. Many would find new funding sources; in 1987 private giving for cultural activities totaled \$6.4 billion. The great undercurrents of American art would continue undisturbed, because they’re driven by forces—the search to understand self and society, the passion of individual artists—far

more powerful than the U.S. Treasury. And the \$550 million spent by the three main cultural agencies could be used for more legitimate public needs: for example, reducing the budget deficit or improving Medicaid.

As I said, this won't happen. The obscenity tempest probably won't even provoke a serious examination of government and the arts. Arts and public-broadcasting advocates case any questioning of federal financing as an assault on the Temples of Culture by the Huns. Like all groups feeding at the federal trough, they've created a rhetoric equating their self-interest with the national interest.

Most congressmen accept these fictitious claims because Congress enjoys the power and, on occasion, finds the agencies useful whipping boys. It's a marriage of convenience that, however dishonest, seems fated to endure.

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