

NATIONAL REVIEW

Separate Art and State

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For many of the same reasons that we demand a separation of church and state As the husband and stepfather of accomplished artists, I take art very seriously. It is, in the words of President Kennedy, “close to the center of a nation’s purpose and a test of the quality of a nation’s civilization.”

But for all that, Donald Trump is absolutely right in his desire to defund the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). According to its supporters, without the NEA, art in America would cease to exist. They have a point. Absolutely nothing can happen in this country unless the federal government funds or mandates it. Without Washington we are a wasteland.

After all, the NEA wasn’t established until 1965, and before that there was hardly an American artist to be found. Well, except maybe people like Edward Hopper, Georgia O’Keefe, John Singer Sargent, Edmonia Lewis, Charles Sheeler, Mary Cassatt, Winslow Homer . . . The NEA’s budget is a paltry \$138 million. By contrast, private philanthropy contributes more than \$17 billion every year to support for the arts. Ticket and merchandise sales bring in another \$12.7 billion.

In fact, government sources at all levels, federal, state, and local, contribute less than 4 percent of arts funding. What supporters of the NEA are really complaining about is a lack of funding for art that they like. The boobs and illiterates out there in Trumpland can’t be expected to understand or support “real” art. How could they possible fund art worth viewing? If you want to know why we are saddled with a President Trump, that attitude goes a long way toward explaining it. — ADVERTISEMENT — But doesn’t government funding provide an imprimatur of approval that can be leveraged for additional support? Perhaps.

But that’s exactly why the government should not be in the art-funding business. The government shouldn’t be in the business of approving or disapproving any type of expression. Art is deeply personal. It touches the core of our being, and helps form our outlook on the world, even our fundamental belief systems. That is one reason why authoritarian regimes have long sought to control art, repress it, or use it for propaganda.

For many of the same reasons that we demand separation of church and state, we should want the separation of art and state. It is more difficult to speak truth to power when power pays your bills. It is true that the NEA's ability to withhold funding based on content has been limited since the Supreme Court's decision in *NEA v. Finley* (1998).

But that doesn't mean that the NEA doesn't pick and choose guided by prejudices and preconceived notions. Even when its decisions don't reflect politics or a particular worldview, it's funding can be determined by the artistic vogue of the day — abstract or avant-garde art, performance, minimalist, video, you name it, rather than figurative art or realism in general — as has been the trend over the last few decades.

Like other viewers and consumers, I have my own preferences and biases about types of art I like. The government shouldn't. Nor should we count on the NEA to nourish new artists or those trying to challenge the art establishment. Following a series of embarrassments in the 1990s, the NEA stopped funding individual artists.

Today, its money goes to arts organizations and programs that have their own built-in rigidities. In many ways, the NEA simply rubberstamps the artistic status quo. That's ultimately bad for the arts and artists. If we truly care about art, we should want the government to keep its hands off. Federal spending on the NEA is little more than a drop in a vast ocean of red ink. It is hardly the most egregious use of taxpayer money.

But it is a prime example of how government distorts and corrupts nearly everything it touches. If we truly care about art, we should want the government to keep its hands off. There are many reasons to be disappointed with Trump's spending cuts. They don't actually cut spending, for example, but just shift it around. But if this latest budget proposal starts a serious debate about finally eliminating those programs that the federal government should never have gotten involved with in the first place, it will have performed a valuable service.

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