

# Stop Funding Artistic Circuses

Since the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities were founded in 1965, their appropriations have grown from \$2.5 million each to \$158 million for the arts and \$151 million for the humanities. The two agencies have become a major cultural force.

They have done some fine things during these 15 years. The Endowment for the Arts has financed museum exhibitions and catalogues that would have been impossible without it. The Endowment for the Humanities has aided educational programs connected with exhibits, and the editing of documents like the Adams Papers. Yet both agencies have also been sailing dangerously off course. With the appointment of new directors by the Reagan Administration, there is a chance to change more than personnel.

The aims and standards outlined in the original legislation have been steadily compromised. Grants to artists, writers, composers and scholars have become minimal. The Endowments' programs are increasingly used to serve social and political policy first. More and more grants are dispersed according to geographical and ethnic formulas.

The N.E.H., for instance, has stretched the concept of humanistic research to pay for classes in films on the struggle of women office workers to improve their lot. The Expansion Arts Program of the N.E.A. — described as “a point of entry” to minority, blue collar and rural cultures — plainly has more political than esthetic significance. Such policies undermine the mean-

ing of arts and humanities. They should be reversed.

A report on the Endowments prepared for the Reagan Administration by the Heritage Foundation, and the recent report of the Rockefeller Foundation's Commission on the Humanities, agree: the focus should be on arts and humanities programs in the elementary and secondary schools as well as on support for leading cultural institutions. In short, de-emphasize artistic circuses, reaffirm quality and competence.

The argument against “elitism,” which has been used to justify the current trend, is misleading. To suggest that excellence is an unworthy standard attacks the essence of art and scholarship. It serves only to cover up the politicization of programs. They are not being misused for heavy-handed propaganda; the American way is more benign. Democracy gives everyone a piece of the action and the ideal is to elevate all. But the effect is to level all, and to turn levers for excellence into patronage.

It is not possible, politically, to spend every endowment dollar on only the worthiest projects; to get approval for spending a dollar on excellence may require spending another 20 cents on some compensating “political” objective. But at the moment, alas, 40 cents, 80 cents — more and more every year — is being spent unworthily. Such wastefulness gains a spurious respectability as it becomes entrenched.

The answer is not to eliminate the Endowments, or to cut their funds, but to redeploy them.