

## IMPROVING THE CLIMATE FOR CULTURE

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*“The World leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation’s high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit.”*— NATIONAL FOUNDATION ON THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES ACT OF 1965

How do we measure the health of the arts? Economic data are available, but, as with all economic indicators, are subject to wide dispute. Leading cultural indicators simply do not exist, and the hodgepodge of measurables that are available—sales figures for books and recordings, Nielsen and Arbitron ratings, box-office receipts for theater admissions and the like—raise as many questions as they purport to answer.

Invariably, matters of taste come into play in these discussions, along with distinctions between the nonprofit arts and the entertainment industry, between “high” and “low” culture, between allegedly “uplifting” pursuits and seemingly “mindless” diversions. Because most of us have passionate opinions concerning the art we enjoy, assessments of the current state of American culture are particularly risky, and consensus, unlikely.

What we should be striving for as a nation seems much clearer—in conception, at least, if not in attainment. Congress in the Arts and Humanities Act,

which created the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, stated:

*The practice of art and the study of the humanities require constant dedication and devotion. While no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.<sup>1</sup>*

Regardless of one's feelings about public arts patronage, few would dispute the importance of fostering a *climate* conducive to the creation, presentation, and enjoyment of art. Even as the pendulum swings inexorably in the direction of smaller government, there is general acceptance of the importance of the arts to American life. Few would disagree, certainly, with James Michener's recent "open letter" to elected officials in *This Noble Land: My Vision for America*: "... Whatever you do," the popular novelist advises, "encourage the public to support art programs in schools, facilitate art festivals in the countryside, and establish the image of a nation that loves and respects the arts, for that is one of the hallmarks of a first-rate civilization."<sup>2</sup>

The best means of achieving those hallmarks are not nearly so apparent. Nor, unfortunately, are we apt to spend a lot of time pondering such questions. Our cultural climate receives nowhere near the attention that the meteorological climate does. Flaws in the "aesthetic environment," (aside from occasional attacks on the real and imagined excesses of popular culture), are much less likely to make the evening news than problems in the natural environment.

Remarkably, ever since the *Saturday Review* gradually faded from the scene in the mid-1970s, the country has lacked a major, national publication devoted to the arts.<sup>3</sup> Niche-market journals cover the various disciplines quite effectively (but none with a readership anywhere near the top 100 general circulation periodicals,

<sup>1</sup> USC 20, ch. 26, subch. 1, sec. 951 (2) (7).

<sup>2</sup> James A. Michener, *This Noble Land: My Vision for America* (New York: Random House, 1996) 203.

<sup>3</sup> Diana A. Chlebek, "Saturday Review," in *American Mass Market Magazines*, ed. Alan Nourie and Barbara Nourie (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 457.

### *Improving the Climate for Culture*

however), while the major news weeklies give scant, often superficial, coverage to the arts. Commercial television long ago abandoned even a pretense of serving the arts comprehensively, and while there are more news programs on television than ever before (or programs masquerading as news), the closest thing to cultural affairs programming is the promotional fare of *Entertainment Tonight*. On cable, neither the Arts and Entertainment Network nor the Bravo Channel, which relies heavily on British imports, provides a regular forum for living artists. Nor do they attempt to address contemporary issues in the arts. Public television has done its part to fill the void, but its three-percent share of the broadcast marketplace severely limits its impact.

Aside from an occasional headline, then, announcing what appears to be a purely isolated problem (with the local theater company announcing a large deficit, the symphony orchestra musicians going out on strike, or the museum cutting back its hours), most Americans are blithely unaware of the conditions of the nonprofit cultural sector, or the extreme financial pressures under which most arts organizations operate. Nor do the problems of the individual artists who make it possible for these organizations to exist at all rate even an occasional headline, with low wages and chronic underemployment all a part of the “hidden subsidy” that helps keep the arts afloat. Such alarms have been sounded in the past, to be sure, most notably in the 1960s with the release of groundbreaking economic studies by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects* (1965), and William Baumol and William Bowen’s report for the Twentieth Century Fund, *Performing Arts—The Economic Dilemma* (1966). But after three decades of furrowed brows and stiff upper lips, the nonprofit arts seem destined to live a precarious existence in this country.

Part of the mission of the National Endowment for the Arts is to help improve the material conditions for the cultural climate and to encourage “freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry.” Through its grantmaking and leadership, the Endowment assists nonprofit arts organizations and artists, and through its position as a national convener, the agency strives to bring these issues to greater public attention.

The American Canvas initiative attempted to focus on the challenges that must be overcome if the cultural climate is to improve. Over the course of a year-long series of meetings in communities as diverse as Los Angeles, Columbus, Salt Lake City, Miami, San Antonio, and Charlotte/Rock Hill, more than 150 panelists convened, representing a broad spectrum of interests, from business and education

to social services and civic affairs (see Appendices A&B for a list of participants). They informed this report and helped frame the course of action for improving the climate for culture in the 21st century. By its very nature, a dialogue with hundreds of participants is fragmentary and disjointed, but certain ideas and concerns rose to the top in city after city. Together with our own research and additional dialogue in town meetings these past four years with arts and civic leaders from around the country, this report is the next step in the dialogue and outlines our central concerns and recommendations for moving forward.

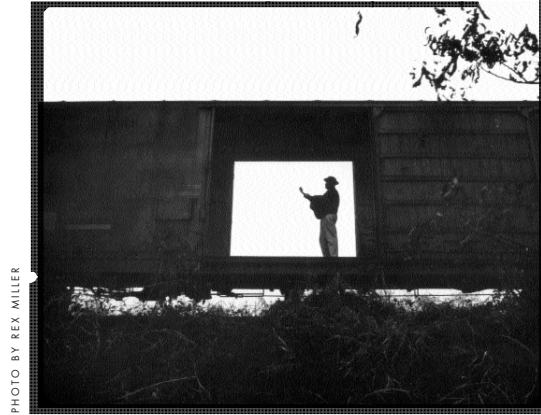
**TRANSMITTING OUR CULTURAL LEGACY.** What kind of cultural legacy will we leave behind? How inclusive will it be? How varied in form and substance? Will our children be prepared, in any case, to appreciate that legacy? Can we afford to entrust this task to the ever-more-dominant commercial sector, which, however impressive its profits, tends to regard its products as interchangeable, ultimately disposable parts of popular entertainment?

*Cultural legacy*, in short, a term that invites the kind of ceremonial prose normally reserved for solemn occasions, presents real problems that won't be solved by mere heartfelt sentiments and lofty intentions alone. Rather, the process of retaining key elements of our culture and ensuring their safe passage into the future demands a more rigorous examination of the existing climate for the arts, and of the conditions in which artists and arts organizations are forced to operate today. Some art forms lend themselves more readily to preservation than others, some lack the institutional clout and access to capital that such preservation requires, while still other forms of expression, the subject of contention and debate today, are anything but assured of a receptive audience in the future.

As surrounded as we are by myriad forms of arts and entertainment, the number of strikingly original American voices that find themselves so far from the cultural mainstream as to be virtually silent—in music and literature especially, where popular forms of the mass media threaten to overwhelm all others—is staggering. At the heart of these contradictions, as John Sullivan, executive director of the Theatre Communications Group pointed out at the final American Canvas meeting in Washington, DC, is the tension that exists between private gain and public responsibility, a tension we've begun to acknowledge in the natural environment, but one that we still tend to gloss over in the aesthetic. We do so, Sullivan suggests, at our peril.

“What all of this is about,” he explains, “is driving the not-for-profit culture into the marketplace, so that there are no distinctions, so that all of our ideas

*Improving the Climate for Culture*



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Organizations like the Delta Blues Education Fund keep the blues alive through programs and workshops in Mississippi schools.

are shaped by the marketplace... We need enclaves where ideas are not driven by capital, we need not-for-profit enclaves where ideas emerge for other purposes than the advancement of capital.”

THE EVOLVING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE. For better or worse, and probably more than a little of each, the “infrastructure” of the nonprofit arts in America is currently undergoing a number of changes. Not always fully understood even when it works, the system is now straining under shifts in public and private support, increased competition for income, and an aging audience base, all of which raise concerns that cannot be ignored. More encouraging, perhaps, but equally complex, are issues surrounding the identification of new revenue streams for cultural programs, tapping “nonarts” funds in the public sector, or relying on new and closer ties with the commercial interests in the private sector. Not all of these avenues are attractive to an arts community that has enough on its hands merely attempting to stay afloat. But none of these issues can be skirted, particular-

ly since it has become apparent that merely maintaining the status quo is neither desirable nor even possible.

Among the more important lessons of the American Canvas is the recognition that the administrative and fiscal practices that served the nonprofit arts so well during their ascendancy over the past three decades will not necessarily prove as effective in the new century. If nothing else had changed, the sheer increase in the size of the arts community since the establishment of the Arts Endowment in 1965 would have made for a much different, much more competitive environment. And when ever-more-pressing social problems, from AIDS to homelessness to drug abuse to race relations, are factored into the equation, each demanding attention in a context of deficit reduction at the federal level and balanced budgets in many states, it is little wonder that the soaring growth curves that the arts achieved in years past have proved impossible to sustain.

So, too, have the many new opportunities that have arisen in recent years added to the complexity of the cultural landscape. From the belated recognition of America's cultural diversity to breakthroughs in technology, the variety of new options for cultural programming has contributed to the rapidly changing context of the arts in America. The closing years of the 20th century present an opportunity for the reexamination of the structural underpinnings of the nonprofit arts and for speculation on the development of a new support system: *one based less on traditional charitable practices and more on the exchange of goods and services*. American artists and arts organizations can make valuable contributions—from addressing social issues to enhancing education to providing “content” for the new information superhighway—to American society.

As the new century dawns, artists and arts organizations can “make the year 2000 a national celebration of the American spirit in every community,” as President Clinton has suggested. But the real challenge, and the reason why a reexamination of the nonprofit arts infrastructure is so important, is an even greater one: to offer an alternative to conglomerate culture, to make those millennial celebrations look less like the half-time show of the Super Bowl, a triumph of American marketing, and more reflective of the true depth and variety of our culture, a triumph of American creativity.

AMERICANS AND THE ARTS . It is also necessary to look at the “demand side” of the equation, to examine the individual and interpersonal implications of our art beyond the institutional inventories and attendance statistics by which we

*Improving the Climate for Culture*

traditionally measure our achievements. Central to the American Canvas process was the need to reassess the varied relationships Americans have with the arts. Many of the panelists, having worked directly with the public in their daily activities, were able to offer a clear sense of the fundamental challenge that confronts the arts community at the close of the 20th century.

Sad to say, many American citizens fail to recognize the direct relevance of art to their lives. The product of an educational system that at best enshrined the arts as the province of elite cultures and at worst ignored the arts altogether, some people understandably view the arts as belonging to someone else. “Most...people,” as William Wilson of Brigham Young University expressed it in the Salt Lake City forum, “if you talk to them about art, they’re going to say, ‘Art belongs out there. That’s not part of my life.’” Failing to acknowledge their own expressive activities as part of the full spectrum of the arts, many of these Americans are apt to look with suspicion at an “arts world” that seems alternately intimidating, incomprehensible, expensive, alien, and, thanks to the generally poor job that the mass media have done in covering the arts, often disreputable. “We need to make people aware of how the arts fill their lives if we want their support,” suggested glass artist Kate Vogel at the American Canvas forum in Charlotte.

*...I believe it all comes back to the inability of people to view themselves as a part of the arts. Our challenge will be helping people to know us and feel a part of us. We need to take down the barriers. To win over our adversaries we can begin by taking art off the pedestal. It is the feeling of being separate from art that brings the opposition. We must find common ground with those who oppose us, knowing that we won't agree on everything, but there will be some areas where we can work together.*

The American Canvas forums uncovered a vast reservoir of strong conviction concerning the integral role that the arts can play in the lives of all Americans. Realistically, not all of the themes to be addressed in this context are positive, but even the less fortunate trends—the tendency for publicly supported art to find itself embroiled in controversy, for example, or the inability of many younger Americans to see beyond the dominant popular culture that literally engulfs them—can be used to the arts’ advantage. As the American Canvas participants made clear, the arts:

Express our values and aspirations, giving voice to beliefs and sentiments that cannot be communicated as effectively in any other language.

Reflect our diversity, providing a neutral ground on which Americans can learn more about one another.

Bring us together, fostering celebration rather than confrontation and offering a means of exploring what each of us, regardless of background, has in common.

Embody family activities and values, lending an element of stability and offering a shared experience to which all members of a family can contribute.

Encourage active participation rather than passive observation, an opportunity for self-expression and personal achievement in the face of a popular culture which tends to reduce all expression to a homogenizing common denominator.

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The spirit of Creative America has spurred us to say  
and write and draw what we think, feel and dream.

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. . . to celebrate through dance, in songs, in paint  
and on paper, the story of America: of who we are,  
where we have been, and what we hope to be.

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HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY. Just as the arts loom large in the lives of many individual Americans, so can they exert an equally profound influence on our communities. The sense that art is firmly entrenched at the margins of many American communities is the result of a variety of factors. The arts community itself bears a measure of responsibility for the marginalization of the nonprofit culture. In the course of its justifiable concern with professionalization, institution-building, and experimentation during the 60s and 70s, for example, the arts community neglected those aspects of participation, democratization, and popularization that might have helped sustain the arts when the political climate turned sour.



### *Improving the Climate for Culture*

Some civic leaders view cultural activities as *amenities* engaged solely in aesthetic pursuits, rather than *necessities* to the health of community life.

Fortunately, the American Canvas forums offered an abundance of evidence from both the cultural and civic sectors suggesting that the arts can indeed play a central role in the lives of our communities. The legacy of the future may have a more common, if no less valued, profile. Included will be the art that is woven through the social fabric, that contributes to the quality of life, fosters civic pride and participation, stimulates the economy and attracts tourists, revitalizes neighborhoods and addresses social problems. Great works of the past won't be excluded from this tapestry—the \$60 million in revenues generated by the Cezanne exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art last year is evidence of the power of past masters—but the new cloth of culture will be much more of a quilt, joining a vast array of new patterns that range from folk, vernacular, and popular expressions, to social, political, and experimental works.<sup>4</sup>

Some will bewail, no doubt, the alleged lowering of standards that permits these new forms to enter the “inner circle” of culture. Others will look askance at the utilitarian aspects of art—the “culture of therapeutics,” as critic Robert Hughes puts it—that is expected to solve social problems, stimulate the economy, improve the young, and otherwise serve the common good. But in 1997, it hardly seems necessary to debate this point. In a perfect world, to be sure, we might expect the arts to justify their claim on the public purse and the private largesse on the basis of their intrinsic worth. Such justification, after all, is more a matter of translation than of transformation, expressing the value of the arts in terms that civic and corporate leaders—and the average citizen, for that matter—can more readily understand. But a Bill T. Jones who addresses social issues in his work is no less a choreographer, nor Henry Louis Gates any less a historian for tending to the present as well as to the past, and all of us, in fact, are the beneficiaries of their extraordinary efforts.

<sup>4</sup> The vagaries of cultural statistics will be addressed more fully in chapter 3, but the \$60 million figure for the economic impact of the Cezanne exhibition, supplied by the Philadelphia Museum of Art itself, appears to be an uncharacteristically conservative estimate. One study recently claimed that the exhibition generated \$17.5 million in admission and sales of peripheral items, and that the city of Philadelphia received another \$122.6 million in tourist expenditures. Tom Cszasz, “The Spectacular Blockbuster Supershow: A Phenomenon of Museum Culture,” *New Art Examiner* (Dec. 1996-Jan. 1997):25.

ARTS AND EDUCATION. The cultural legacy that is carried into the next century will count for little if the arts audiences and participants of tomorrow—our children and their children—are ill-prepared to receive, understand, and actively share in that legacy. Serious and systematic arts instruction appears to be the exception rather than the rule for most students. Arts education, in fact, appears to be as imperiled as the arts institutions that need new audiences. Thus along with gaining an overview of the current state of arts education, it is useful as well to rehearse the basic arguments that will prove crucial in seeing that the arts are included in the more general curricular reform movement directed at the graduating classes of the next century. Among those key arguments, according to participants in the American Canvas forums, are the following:

The arts are important as a subject in themselves.

The arts enhance the study of other areas of the basic curriculum.

The arts are relevant to the acquisition of vocational skills.

The arts contribute to family unity and growth.

The arts offer skills that will be useful as we move further into the Information Age.

The arts serve those with special needs, including those who are in danger of falling through the cracks of our educational system.

Here again, the act of translating the value of the arts is called into play, and purists will complain about the ground that is given up in this struggle to wedge a modicum of art instruction into an already crowded K-12 curriculum. But in this area, at least, the issue seems even clearer, and the stakes even higher: to make certain that the arts, in the face of a back-to-basics juggernaut that seems bent on reducing education to a list of academic essentials and dispensable extras, do not wind up in the latter column.

THE ARTS AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS. Few developments in recent memory have received as much fanfare—or raised as many eyebrows—as the Information Superhighway. The last thing the arts community in America needs right now, surely, is another set of problems to deal with, and without question the moving target that is the Internet represents another set of problems. Nevertheless, the convergence of once-independent sectors that is now underway on the digital frontier suggests a new world that the nonprofit arts cannot afford to ignore. As broadcasters and cable operators, telephone companies and publishers, hardware and software manufacturers, and other commercial interests close ranks in their

*Improving the Climate for Culture*

efforts to determine how Americans will one day receive their news, entertainment, and personal communications, the nonprofit sector must also make clear what it can offer to—and what it has a right to expect from—a system that will almost certainly be commercially driven.

The implications of the emerging telecommunications system, both as a means of reaching the public and as a potential new arts delivery system, will figure largely in the cultural climate of the next century. But while the headlines proclaim a new digital era in which everyone will have access to everything, the fine print is much more cautious, suggesting that the new delivery platform of the 21st century may ultimately prove as hospitable to the nonprofit arts as cable television and commercial broadcasting proved to be in the 20th—which is to say not very hospitable at all.

Having examined these five areas, the “philosophical underpinnings” of our cultural climate today, and doubtless raising many more questions than it answers in the process, this report will turn to more practical considerations, touching first on some of the new approaches that are already underway in the arts community. There are many examples that might be cited, responses to the new conditions, new problems, and new opportunities facing the nonprofit sector, by artists and arts organizations across the country. A few of these will be highlighted here, but the vast majority will necessarily spill over into other forums, including the Endowment’s own Web site ([arts.endow.gov](http://arts.endow.gov)). These examples, in any case, represent what the leaders of the arts community are already doing to meet the challenge that President Clinton issued in his most recent State of the Union Address:

*I'd like to make one last point about our national community. Our economy is measured in numbers and statistics. And it's very important. But the enduring worth of our nation lies in our shared values and our soaring spirit. So instead of cutting back on our modest efforts to support the arts and humanities, I believe we should stand by them and challenge our artists, musicians, and writers—challenge our museums, libraries, and theaters. We should challenge all Americans in the arts and humanities to join with their fellow citizens to make the year 2000 a national celebration of the American spirit in every community, a celebration of our common culture in the century that is past and in the...new millennium so that we can remain the world's beacon not only of liberty but of creativity long after the fireworks have faded.*

While the arts community welcomes such a challenge, the task of celebrating the American spirit, of ensuring the safe passage of our cultural legacy into an uncertain future, demands the active participation of many others as well. Thus this report, in the spirit of the “Calls to Action” that the American Canvas committee issued on 30 January 1997 (see Chapter 9: The Challenge to Act), includes a series of challenges of its own, directed at civic leaders, the corporate sector, the entertainment industry, the mass media, parents, and individual citizens alike, and designed to build on the efforts that the arts community has already begun.



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Jazz legend Lionel Hampton is presented the National Medal of Arts by President and Mrs. Clinton. These awards recognize the contributions to our nation by master American artists.

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Lula Washington, a choreographer and dancer active in working with young people in Los Angeles when she is not on tour, spoke at the American Canvas. “We come together, we have a wonderful conversation. It gets put in a book. We go away. It gets on a shelf or on a videotape and there it sits. So what? We are still where we left off at. We have to be more active,” she insisted, aiming

*Improving the Climate for Culture*

her advice squarely at the artists, administrators, and audience members in attendance, but with pertinence for the entire arts community. “We have to be more vocal...Everybody here’s got to be charged to do that. I mean, we cannot stop here.”