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National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): News Article 10

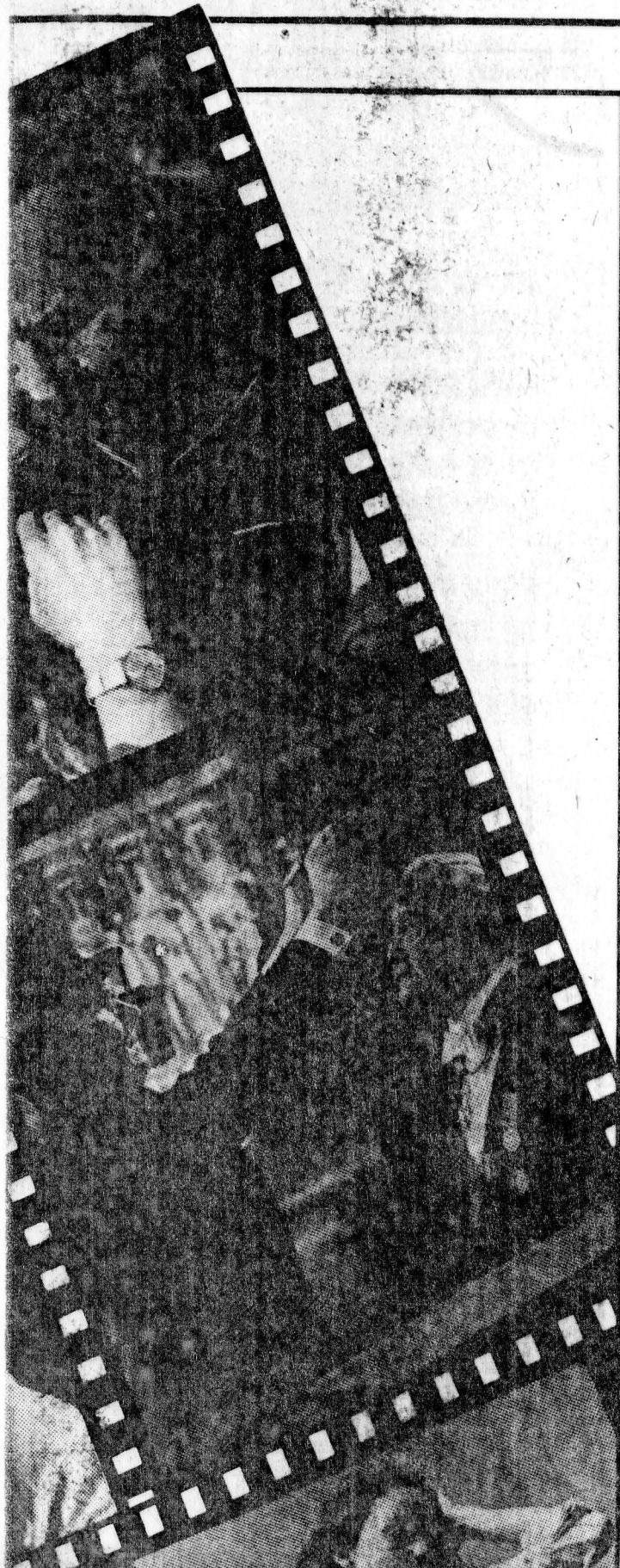
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Needy Arts: Where Have All The Patrons Gone?

By WALDEMAR A. NIELSEN

Devotees of the arts, as they pursue their interests, now find themselves increasingly pursued by indefatigable fund-raisers. At every turn — at the museum door, between the acts at the ballet, even at home in the mail and on public TV — the cup is rattled, the hat passed. More than annoying, this solicitation raises deep questions about the sustenance and even survival of some of our finest cultural institutions.

Whatever became of Lady Bountiful? In the good old days, benefactors such as Mrs. August Belmont, Otto Kahn, Henry Higginson and others made this form of harassment unnecessary.

But no more. Today in New York City, the disappearance of the great private patron is felt with a special concern since the strike which has closed the Metropolitan Opera has raised the possibility that a costly settlement may establish a pattern of increased expenses throughout the arts, and thus may force arts institutions to be far more dependent on solicitation than ever before.

The answer to the question of what happened to the major private patrons contains the story of the explosion of culture and the evolution of American philanthropy over the past half century.

The patron of the arts — once so important in the cultural life of the country — has now been replaced by professional strategists and mass fund-raising campaigns. One obvious reason is that because of the growth in number and scale of arts organizations it is now almost impossible for any benefactor single-handedly to make a major difference. But another less valid explanation that has gained currency is that the ranks of the super-rich have been decimated by the ravages of Federal income and inheritance taxes.

The facts about who owns what in the United States are largely hidden; no one knows precisely what is contained in those vast and shadowy storage caverns of wealth, namely the trust departments of the major United States banks (not to mention certain foreign ones). But there is ample

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recession deepens and the competition for Government funds intensifies. To date, the Endowment has been an agency not only well run but run with flair.

But this happy situation must almost inevitably erode. Programs in the arts confront any bureaucracy with a maximum of the kinds of decisions for which it has the maximum distaste, namely those which require discriminating choices to be made on the basis of non-objective, non-quantifiable criteria. Pressures from claimants plus the principles of modern management will drive the Endowment and its satellite state arts councils as well in the direction of fixed formulae in the allocation of funds — formulae relating to geography, audience size and ratios of subsidy to institutional earnings.

The prospects for politicization are as worrisome as those for bureaucratization. No American Government could get away with outright manipulation of the arts for totalitarian purposes, as has happened in the Soviet Union; the tradition of assertive diversity in the American body politic provides very strong bulwarks against that. But any program of Government aid to the arts has always been vulnerable to ugly outbursts of unprincipled

political opportunism — for example, the destruction of the WPA's Federal Theater Project in New Deal days by a witch-hunting House Committee; the successful demand by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950's for a purging of U.S. Information Service libraries overseas of "subversive" literature, and the powerful effort by the Nixon White House to politicize the programming of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Less dramatic but even more damaging could be the creeping advent of an "official culture," as has happened in several Western European countries as a consequence of supporting the arts with Government money. By an insidious process, bland traditionalism and conformist official standards gradually penetrate the cultural atmosphere.

In the United States culture, ever since Jacqueline Kennedy, has become politically stylish. Leaders in the arts are increasingly drawn to Washington to bask in the glamour of the national capital, to consort with prominent public figures and to press their claims for public funding. Perhaps the arts in America will be immune to the blandishments to which officially subsidized art elsewhere has almost universally succumbed. But perhaps not; the trends in any event will bear watching.

Lady Bountiful is indubitably long gone. It is time, therefore, for the arts, as far as their financial affairs are concerned, to put away such myths and address the following realities, both harsh and hopeful:

First, times are going to be lean, at least for the next few years. Inflation hits the arts and arts organizations hard, and recession tends to hit them hard as well.

Their income from gifts and grants may well decline; and the notion that mass audiences can be created by "outreach" programs and the like to make the turnstiles of high culture spin and the coffers fill is fine in theory but unlikely to pay many bills in practice.

Second, Government, with all its promise and its dangers, is destined to be a progressively greater factor in the life of American art. It is to be hoped that corporate and individual gifts will be available in sufficient volume to provide a protective mix of funding, but that will take unrelenting effort.

Third, such subventions as are received will tend to go mostly for keeping the machinery of culture turning — paying the rent, maintaining the buildings, meeting the demands of the trade unions — but not for nourishing the creative roots. Insofar as the artists are benefited, it will be the establish-

stars who will take off the cream. The best things that will be done for the benefit of the aspiring playwrights and composers and the struggling young dancers, artists, actors and musicians will in the future as in the past not come from the supposedly "targeted" grants for the arts but from the shotgun social welfare programs of Government, above all, unemployment benefits.

Fourth, whatever happens, funding for the high arts will never be "adequate." The more the money available, the more troupes and theaters and companies will be formed. This Malthusian, or rabbits-and-lettuce, phenomenon is a considerable element in the putative present crisis of the arts. (Between 1968 and 1978, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, the number of major opera companies grew from 27 to 45; professional symphony orchestras from 58 to 110; professional dance companies from 10 to 70, and legitimate theater companies from 12 to 50.) At any level of activity, there will always be a wide band of starvation at the margins.

Finally, on the other hand, there is cause for rejoicing as well as for chagrin. The American system for financing the arts through patchwork (and this in the end may be its primary virtue) meets the most fundamental tests — freedom, diversity, excellence and vigorous new creative growth.

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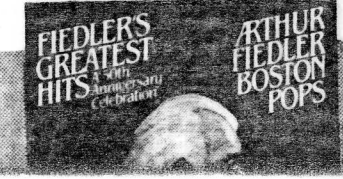
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