

Introduction

Even though it wasn't the first time in American history that the federal government had been involved in support of the arts, the establishment in the 1960s of the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities marked a special moment in the cultural life of America. Within a short time, with this extra incentive, those states that did not already have state arts agencies developed them.

As if this activity would not cause enough change in the arts support systems, community fronts were changing as well. As history tells it, the focus for dramatic change amid a proliferation of arts activity in the past 15 years has been in the cities, towns, and rural areas throughout America, bringing new levels of awareness and participation, of involvement and advocacy.

A new type of agency, the community arts council, with roots laid some 20 years before, started to take hold in every conceivable setting. It, too, was not a new concept, but one simply given impetus by the events. Why? Partly to collate and to coordinate some of the activities of the total arts community whose strengths and needs, as a whole, were greater than those of its individual parts; partly to service those needs (most especially the ones of the newest members); and partly to link arts interests to the interests of the total community in every possible way. Sometimes with grace and subtlety, sometimes with impact and power, the councils have played an important and increasingly recognized role in the communities. They

have laid the groundwork for change in some interesting ways that are new to the arts. The clues for methods and processes for achievement are in other fields, such as education, health, welfare, and government itself.

The issues that have faced arts councils are many; the ways in which councils have responded are even more diverse. The “typical” arts council, like a butterfly, is not easily netted. The minute we think we can describe *the* prototype, we meet a different kind in a different community, functioning perfectly well and successfully.

The examples in this book are gathered from research gathered from the first 30-odd years of the arts councils’ existence. For every example today, there may be other prime examples tomorrow. There have been well-known festivals in Oklahoma City and Baton Rouge sponsored by the arts councils of those cities, stable municipal agencies in the Far West, and well-run private councils in many of our communities in the past that are not mentioned. That does not mean they are not as good as others; the proliferation of particular activity does not allow mention of all.

For example, although everyone knows that there is a history of support for the arts in New York City, and that New York City has a department of cultural affairs and several arts councils, this book has examined the scene in other communities of the United States. The special histories of the arts institutions and organizations in New York City, and of the support of them, have been and will continue to be the subject of separate reports and books.

Because of the nature of the community arts council, it will survive with community leadership and a willingness to weather hard evaluation so that it is flexible and timely. Those rhythms are oriented by the values of a city in a given time — its economic health and priorities. If the economic health is seen to include the arts, the council’s work will be more highly valued. The private boards or public commissions must take a stance on issues with the vision and creative support that keeps symphonies going or theater doors open. However, this is the challenge of the community council movement.

This book is, in part, a synthesis of profiles of agencies and a discussion of some of the issues that are facing them, based on interviews with those who have been involved.

The facts have been gathered in a moment in time at the beginning of the 1980s; they do not stand still for the currency of a publication. The majority of interviews were done during the years 1980 and 1981; therefore, cognizance of the possibility of “datedness” has been paramount. Facts and figures serve as a background for trends — which are more important than old figures. All development seems slow, but the span of time seems short. It has been saturated with change at an unprecedented pace in this field. The relentlessness and vigor challenge the most energetic manager.

The total implication for communities of the New Federalism is unclear as 1983 budgets are being implemented. In the arts areas, where the final federal budgeting for 1982 was cut about 10 percent after projections far more devastating, 1983 is the year in which cuts of new dimension and impact will be felt. What is clear is that communities will have important decisions to make about priorities. The thrust of a community's volunteer commitments will affect the arts as every other nonprofit effort does. What are the coordination efforts needed in this framework?

The book is an attempt to draw some conclusions that should be of interest to citizens of every community. It would be difficult to be an isolationist about the impact of the arts over the past 15 years. The goal of the book is to bring to greater public awareness current issues involving communities and the arts. Until now, documentation has been scant — mostly in the form of research studies and articles for professional consumption.

Those who have encouraged the writing of the book have seen a wide-ranging audience for whom it might be useful and/or interesting. Included are students of the arts and arts administration; the professionals in the field managing arts organizations of all sizes; legislators on all levels; boards and civic groups responsible for and responsive to the needs of the cultural nonprofit sector; business persons; social historians; and members of the general public, who have come to accept the arts as more a part of their daily lives than ever before.