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THE ROLE OF STATE ARTS AGENCIES IN THE PROMOTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARTS ON THE PLAINS

ROBIN S. TRYLOFF

*A healthy artistic climate does not depend solely on the work of a handful of supremely gifted individuals. It demands the cultivation of talent and ability at all levels. It demands that everyday work, run-of-the-mill work, esoteric and unpopular work should be given a chance; not so much in the hope that genius may one day spring from it, but because, for those who make the arts their life and work, even modest accomplishment is an end in itself and a value worth encouraging. The pursuit of excellence is a proper goal, but it is not the race itself.*¹ Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia

Prime Minister Whitlam's elegant defense of government support for the arts has a particular resonance in the relationship between America's National Endowment for the Arts

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(NEA) and the fifty-six state arts agencies (SAAs) affiliated with it. The NEA has remained tightly focused on the pursuit of excellence but has delegated public arts policy at the state level to the SAAs, which set excellence as a goal and proceed to cultivate artistic ability at all levels. The following discussion traces the SAAs of three plains states, Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota, through three stages of development in their near quarter century of existence.

CREATION OF STATE ARTS AGENCIES

Each SAA was created through either enabling legislation or by executive order, which prescribed the basic purposes of the agency. In some cases the legislature cited specific duties—the Nebraska Arts Council's enabling legislation outlines four areas of responsibility. Others merely describe general legislative intent—the Kansas Arts Commission's powers and duties are summarized in two sweeping statements. The mandate for the South Dakota Arts Council is truly eloquent:

The South Dakota Legislature, being aware of the impact of culture on a stable economy,

desires to stimulate, encourage, and give recognition and assistance to the fine arts which, in order to grow and flourish, depend upon freedom, imagination and individual initiative. While the development of the fine arts has long been considered a matter of local concern, there is a need to unify and coordinate these forces on a state-wide basis. The fine arts, the creative spirits which motivates [sic] them and which they personify, are an essential part of this state's human resources. The best interest of the state and its people requires that artistic expression in all its forms be disseminated for everyone else to see, appreciate and enjoy in order for our cultural and economic progress to be sustained and given impetus.²

Whatever the language, the responsibilities of the SAA fall into three general categories: 1. to promote an awareness of the arts and of the value of the arts to the public at large; 2. to develop art with both monetary and technical support to artists and arts organizations in the state; 3. to make the arts accessible to the broadest possible segment of the people of the state. Each state developed a diverse set of programs and services to correspond with the three general areas of responsibility.

In the late 1960s, the SAAs found that the needs were great. The plains SAAs responded with pioneering programs and services. They helped to create arts organizations and discovered the wealth of cultural resources in their states. Because their region was characterized by small populations separated by great distances, the Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota councils quickly identified accessibility as a critical issue. Since most of the artistic resources were located in the larger cities or in college or university communities, the state arts agencies established touring programs and other outreach activities as the primary method for reaching rural audiences. During 1968 and 1969 the touring assistance program of the Kansas Arts Commission helped sponsor performances by the Kansas University Theatre for Young

People, an exhibition by the Kansas Artist-Craftsman Association, and many other arts events in dozens of communities of all sizes.³

Promoting the cultural assets of the state was another hallmark of the 1960s. The plains states in particular were eager to let the rest of the country know that they had rich cultural and artistic resources. Thus, the South Dakota Arts Council in 1967 sponsored a mural on the fence enclosing the Kennedy Center construction site in Washington, D.C. The public nature of the mural and its association with an important new national cultural site increased awareness by both American and international visitors of the arts in South Dakota, while the South Dakota artists were pleased to have such a public display of their art in the nation's capital.⁴

Arts development in the 1960s was broad based. The very nature of SAA programming and services helped to identify and stimulate increased demand for the arts. An interest in assessment of state arts needs naturally followed. The Nebraska Arts Council decided to begin by surveying the state's existing resources. It found that in fiscal year 1966 a total audience of almost two million—more than the entire population of the state—had participated in the work of nearly five hundred organizations actively involved in the arts, generating an economic impact of \$1,330,887. In 1967 the Council published a series of recommendations for the state, emphasizing the importance of live performing arts events, of the display of original works of art, and of the development of touring programs.⁵ The late 1960s was a time of experimentation, innovation, and discovery for SAAs on the Plains. These early efforts laid the foundation for the next stage.

PERIOD OF GROWTH

In the 1970s the arts movement was characterized by tremendous growth in the size of audiences, the number of artists, the number and size of arts institutions, and, naturally, in budgets. Congress soon realized that the NEA's limited budget was grossly inadequate to serve

arts needs across the country. To address this problem through the network of SAAs, in 1974 Congress amended the NEA's authorizing legislation to require that a minimum of 20 percent of the NEA's program funds be granted to SAAs and regional arts organizations. In fiscal year 1974 each state's grant totaled \$150,000, six times the size of the start-up grants the NEA had offered state governments in 1966.⁶

This entitlement style of federal funding placed a shared responsibility on the NEA and the SAAs in carrying out federal arts policy goals, thus initiating the federal-state partnership role that continues today. As Roy Helms, former executive director of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies put it, "While the National Endowment has focused on funding the arts where they are, the state arts councils have been left with the responsibility of developing the arts where they are not."⁷

"Developing the arts where they are not" is an apt description of SAAs in the 1970s. The agency inventories had not only found where art was but also a great deal about what was lacking in the arts in the plains states during the late 1960s. These findings convinced the legislatures to appropriate generous increases in funding. From fiscal year 1970 to fiscal year 1980, Kansas increased its state arts appropriation by 300 percent, South Dakota by 700 percent, and Nebraska by 3000 percent.⁸ In the 1970s, as the SAAs in the Plains focused upon development of their cultural resources, they centered their efforts on financial support of community arts activities and organizations, arts education projects, funding of arts organizations and institutions, and the provision of technical assistance.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of this developmental period was the dramatic growth of the local arts agency movement. When the SAAs began to emphasize taking the arts to rural communities during the 1960s, they quickly discovered that they needed local organizations to present the arts. Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota all devoted substantial financial and human resources to the development of local arts

agencies but Kansas developed the strongest network. In 1973, nine local groups formed the Association of Community Arts Agencies of Kansas. The Association received strong financial support from the Kansas Arts Commission and in 1988 had sixty active agencies.⁹

During the 1970s the SAAs also realized that their early concerns with accessibility were closely linked to promotion and development. While they worked at establishing a network of presenters, they also made the arts institutions more accessible to the presenters or even helped create new arts organizations. The Nebraska Theatre Caravan was a product of this effort to increase accessibility. Established in 1976 as a partnership between the Nebraska Arts Council and the Omaha Community Playhouse, the Theatre Caravan remains Nebraska's only professional theatre company devoted expressly to touring. During its first, six week season, it performed in thirteen Nebraska communities. In fiscal year 1988, it toured twenty-seven Nebraska communities and eighteen other states during an eight month season.¹⁰ Accessibility also meant more than removing geographic barriers. Because the federal government made funding available for serving special constituencies such as prison populations, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and persons of color, the SAAs sought out ways to reach these groups. In the Plains, many of the resulting special programs focused on Native American artists and populations.

As SAA programs, services, and constituencies expanded, the importance of promotional efforts became more apparent. States instituted events such as Governor's Arts Awards ceremonies and undertook such marketing tools as economic impact studies. In 1979, the South Dakota Arts Council joined forces with the Foundation for the Arts in South Dakota and the South Dakota Advertising Federation to produce a particularly effective arts awareness campaign. It featured a poster titled "Creative Expressions Make Lasting Impressions" and carrying the message:

Insights are born in the sharp clarity of an individual perception, captured in the moment's spark of vision. The understanding is shared through creative expressions from music to mime. A quality of life is experienced anew, with a heightened awareness. The ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary and a lasting impression is made.¹¹

As the 1970s drew to a close, the tremendous growth in the arts was at its zenith. The decade had witnessed dramatic increases in federal and state support for the arts, allowing the SAAs to nurture and cultivate what already existed and to create mechanisms and assist institutions where needed. Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota each had a strong network of presenters plus strengthened or newly created major arts institutions. The next decade would bring a different phase of public support for the arts on the Plains.

STRENGTHENING OF RESOURCES

By 1980, the central United States no longer needed to feel defensive about its culture and could engage in some booster-like crowing:

The Midwest truly represents what's BEST about the American experience. Its people embody enduring values and a reputation for hard work. Combined, these factors are nurturing a creative renaissance in our region, a rebirth that's apparent in business, education, and government, as well as in the arts.¹²

The number of artists, art institutions, and other non-profit arts organizations proliferated during the 1970s. While the labor force in professional and technical occupations increased by 40 percent during the decade, the artist labor force grew by 46 percent. In the Plains the artist populations increased even more radically, expanding by 77 percent in Kansas, 94 percent in South Dakota, and 95 percent in Nebraska.¹³ By the end of the 1970s, a solid foundation of artistic resources had been estab-

lished and growth had peaked. The necessary institutions, networks, and support systems were in place. As a result, in the 1980s the focus of the SAAs changed from increasing the number of artists and organizations to strengthening and stabilizing existing artistic resources.

Programs and services throughout the last decade have concentrated on the further development of resources and on encouraging arts organizations to seek support from other sources. SAA grants provide general operating support to arts organizations while challenge grant programs seek out new funds to match the state monies. Nebraska's Year-Long Program Grants provide ongoing funding while its Local Government Incentive Grants encourage city and county governments to support the organizations as well. South Dakota's Challenge Support Grants "assist in the development and expansion of arts organizations." And Kansas supports operating costs in the arts through its Basic Program Grants, Community Arts Development Grants, and Challenge Grants.¹⁴

Accessibility still revolves around the need to unite audiences and art resources. Accordingly, the South Dakota Arts Council has created "Excursion" grants that provide non-profit organizations with matching funds to help transport local audiences to South Dakota Arts Council funded events in other towns.¹⁵ Promotion has become even more important in the 1980s. SAAs have joined with other organizations to emphasize their common goals and to broaden their public support. While these efforts still aim to heighten the art awareness of the general public, they frequently add a second component such as the need for public-private partnerships in supporting the arts or the link between tourism and the arts.

The economic hard times of the mid-1980s dampened the spirits of members of the art community on the Plains. In response the Nebraska Arts Council launched a statewide image campaign to generate renewed optimism in the arts community, to promote support for the state's artistic resources, and to update the image of the Nebraska Arts Council itself. The Union Pacific Railroad and Nebraskans for the Arts

provided full private funding. Governor Robert Kerrey kicked off the campaign by unveiling the Nebraska Arts Council's new logo, which appeared on a promotional poster that was distributed statewide. At the same time the Nebraska Arts Council began "After Hours with the Arts," an annual event held in November, on the first day of National Arts Week. Intended to encourage audience members and businesses to increase their support for the arts, "After Hours" opens the state's arts organizations to the public free of charge.¹⁶

The stabilization of artistic resources in the Plains sets the stage for the next phase of state government support for the arts. SAAs are now beginning to turn their attention to thematic issues, starting with arts education. Encouraged by a separate NEA grant program, the SAAs are working with their state departments of education toward establishing the arts among the basic subjects in the school curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Over a period of a little more than two decades, the role of the SAA in the Plains has evolved from creator and catalyst to cultivator and mentor to stabilizer and strengthener. About twenty years ago, the SAAs in Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota, with total budgets of less than \$50,000 each, set out to promote, develop, and increase access to the arts in their states. They succeeded in stimulating an extraordinary growth in the arts. In 1988, with budgets totaling more than \$1,000,000 in Kansas and Nebraska and close to \$700,000 in South Dakota, they are embarking on ventures, such as the arts education movement, designed to change the very nature of our culture.¹⁷

The evolution of the SAAs all over the country has caused a concurrent evolution in the federal-state relationship. While the NEA was the impetus for the creation of many SAAs and initially controlled them, the relationship moved toward partnership as the SAAs matured. The NEA's budget has grown from \$2.5 million in fiscal year 1966 to \$167.7 million in fiscal year 1988, while legislative appropriations

for the SAAs nationwide have increased from \$2.7 million in fiscal year 1966 to \$244.9 million in fiscal year 1988.¹⁸ Collectively, SAAs now provide 46 percent more support for the arts than does the NEA, and they play an increasingly important role in the development of national public arts policy.

In sparsely populated states, such as those of the Plains, federal support, primarily channeled through the SAA, remains a significant source of funding. As the agent for NEA, the SAA retains a high profile and determines the priorities for federal funding to the state. For example, the NEA's share of \$504,300 was 47 percent of the Kansas Arts Commission's budget in fiscal year 1986. All NEA grants to organizations or artists in Kansas in the same year totaled only \$157,825.¹⁹

As the federal-state system now exists, the NEA provides direct support primarily for the country's largest and most established arts institutions and for a small, select number of individual artists. To the SAAs falls the challenge of nurturing, developing, and maintaining the broad spectrum of artistic resources found in American culture today. The SAAs in Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota have met the challenge, focusing on excellence while creating a healthy artistic climate at all levels. The arts councils and arts commissions, together with the almost universal availability of the television and the automobile, have succeeded in making the arts accessible to virtually everyone across the vast sweep of the Great Plains.

NOTES

1. Gough Whitlam, 1979, quoted in Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), n.p.

2. Nebraska Revised Statutes, Article 3, Section 82-312; Kansas State Statutes, Article 52, Section 74-5204; South Dakota Arts Council, *Decennial Report 1967-1977* (Sioux Falls: South Dakota Arts Council, 1978), p. 5.

3. "Kansas Spurs Cultural, Artistic Growth," *Topeka State Journal*, 2 February 1970.

4. South Dakota Arts Council, *Decennial Report*, p. 2.

5. Nebraska Arts Council, *The Nebraska Arts Council: A History* (Omaha: Nebraska Arts Council, 1977), p. 5.
6. James Backas, *The State Arts Council Movement* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1980), p. 6; National Research Center of the Arts, Inc., *Study of State Arts Agencies: A Comprehensive Report* (National Research Center of the Arts, Inc., an affiliate of Louis Harris and Associates, 1976), p. 340.
7. Larry Briskin, *Arts and the States: A Report of the Arts Task Force National Conference of State Legislatures* (Denver: National Conference of State Legislatures, 1981), p. 85.
8. National Research Center of the Arts, *Study of State Arts Agencies*, p. 34; National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, *Annual NASAA/ACA Survey of State Appropriations* (Washington, D.C.: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1980), p. 3.
9. Sharon Tally, Finance Officer, Association of Community Arts Agencies of Kansas, telephone interview with author, January 1988.
10. Nebraska Arts Council, *New Directions* (Omaha: Nebraska Arts Council, 1977), p. 3; Greg Morales, Company Manager, Nebraska Theatre Caravan, telephone interview with author, January 1988.
11. South Dakota Arts Council, *Five-Year Report, 1978-1982* (Sioux Falls: South Dakota Arts Council, 1983), p. 4.
12. Arts Midwest, *Arts Midwest Annual Report* (Minneapolis: Arts Midwest, 1988), p. 3.
13. Research Division of the National Endowment for the Arts, Report No. 16, *Artist Employment and Unemployment, 1971-1980* (Washington D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1980), p. 9; Research Division of the National Endowment for the Arts, Research Division Note No. 3 (27 April 1983), p. 3.
14. Nebraska Arts Council, *1988-89 Guide to Programs and Services* (Omaha: Nebraska Arts Council, 1988), pp. 8, 9, 11; South Dakota Arts Council, *Guide to Programs FY 1987-88-89* (Sioux Falls: South Dakota Arts Council, 1987), p. 18; Kansas Arts Commission, *Kansas Arts Commission Grant Guidelines, 1988* (Topeka: Kansas Arts Commission, 1988), pp. 4-5.
15. South Dakota Arts Council, *Guide to Programs FY 1987-88-89*, (Sioux Falls: South Dakota Arts Council), p. 26.
16. Nebraska Arts Council, "After Hours with the Arts," flyer (Omaha: Nebraska Arts Council, 1986).
17. National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, *Annual Survey of the State Arts Agencies Legislative Appropriations Fiscal Years 1987 and 1988* (Washington, D.C.: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1987), p. 2.
18. National Endowment for the Arts, *1965-1985: A Brief Chronology of Federal Involvement in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1985), p. 17; National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, "Legislative Memorandum," (Washington, D.C.: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1988), p. 2; Backas, *State Arts Council Movement*, p. 4.
19. National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, *State Arts Agency Profile 1987* (Washington, D.C.: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1987), p. 3; National Endowment for the Arts, *Grants by State/City/Program for Fiscal Year 86* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1987), pp. 296-302.