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EDITORIAL

Poets, Painters, and the Future of Science

The congressional debate on funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has rightly alarmed the artistic community. It has, however, provoked little reaction in the scientific community; this is most troubling. Why are scientists so blasé about a serious threat to the very existence of a program that provides major funding for intellectual work? Surely there are good reasons for the scientific community to be concerned about artistic funding?

I frequently find myself arguing on behalf of support for scientific research. The common-sense verities my administrative colleagues and I deploy are familiar. Scientific research is vital to our economic future, providing business and industry with needed intellectual materials. Governments that invest in research will thrive; those that do not will struggle. Universities need to collaborate with business and industry to benefit the economy and for their own advancement. Thus, in making the case for science, we rely largely on the sound assumption that funding research will yield a positive financial return on investment over the long run.

With these arguments in hand, we usually are able to provide a strong rationale for funding science. But in failing to respond to threats to the arts, we expose an inherent weakness in our case for science. By relying so heavily on economic justifications, what are we saying, by implication, about the merits of curiosity-driven science, about the value of scholarship whose sole aim is discovery and enlightenment? And by extension, if economic development is the primary argument for the support of research, where does that leave the arts and humanities? In crafting our case for science, we may well have helped create a political environment that undervalues intellectual and creative work for its own sake.

The timid reaction of the scientific community to the perilous position of the NEA is not only disturbing, it is shortsighted. The gap between the scientific and artistic communities appears to have widened to where little mutuality of interest seems to exist. If for no other reason than enlightened self-interest, scientists need to speak out on behalf of artists.

The epistemological and cultural distinctions between the scientific and artistic worlds notwithstanding, two common themes link them: a desire to establish new ways of understanding the world and a keen interest in pursuing one's work even when it defies accepted theories. Indeed, we reserve our greatest accolades for those scientists and artists who pursue these objectives most successfully. Unfortunately, it is precisely such practices that are under the heaviest attack in the NEA funding debate.

Daniel J. Boorstin, one of our most talented and popular historians, distinguishes scientists from artists by labeling the former as "The Discoverers," the latter as "The Creators."* Apt descriptions. But philosophers and practitioners of science alike argue that the scientific process is, at its core, a highly creative act. The "context of discovery," as distinct from the "context of verification," is, in many ways, an act of creation. Indeed, the most important discoveries challenge the status quo, leading to the creation of new theories and explanatory models.

The most politically charged elements of the NEA debate revolve around a distrust of those who confront artistic traditions and who propose new ways of envisioning the world. If we as a society are unwilling to support creative and artistic endeavors that challenge the status quo, is it much of a leap for us to refuse to fund controversial basic science?

Those who are willing to extinguish the NEA are willing to eliminate the major funding source for hundreds of programs that bring the arts to the public at large as well as support a wide range of scholarly activities, and they are willing to do so because of their concern over a very small number of controversial works. To draw the obvious parallel, imagine if, in reaction to a handful of controversial research projects, there came serious proposals for the elimination of the entire National Science Foundation. Inconceivable? Perhaps. The divide between art and science does not seem to me to be so great that the attacks on the NEA could not be extended easily to any intellectual work—artistic, humanistic, or scientific—where the economic payoffs are not obvious and the results are occasionally contrary to popular views or values. Scientists need to worry about poets and painters because they work toward the same end, simply with different intellectual tools.

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*D. J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (Random House, New York, 1983); *The Creators* (Random House, New York, 1992).