

TRANSMITTING OUR CULTURAL LEGACY

“In the long history of man,” President Johnson declared at the bill-signing ceremony for the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, “countless empires and nations have come and gone. Those which created no lasting works of art are reduced today to short footnotes in history’s catalog. Art is a nation’s most precious heritage, for it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves, and to others, the inner vision which guides us as a Nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”¹

Sherri Geldin, executive director of the Wexner Art Center, raised this issue at the initial American Canvas forum in Columbus, and in one form or another it came up at all of the regional meetings. “...The legacy of ancient cultures that remains on the planet today,” Geldin observed, “is pretty much only what those cultures created in the way of the arts and architecture and literature and music. . . . Very little that has come down through the ages has not in some way filtered through something that we can all identify as the arts.”

¹ *Public Papers of the President, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1966) 1022.

Questions of “legacy” today, admittedly, are apt to turn on more practical considerations, including the size of the federal deficit we’ll bequeath to our grandchildren, or whether Social Security, Medicare, and other 20th century investments will still be paying dividends in the 21st. And yet it was not without reason that Congress, 25 years after the arts and humanities bill had been signed into law, added the following declaration:

To fulfill its educational mission, achieve an orderly continuation of free society, and to provide models of excellence to the American people, the Federal Government must transmit the achievement and values of civilization from the past via the present to the future, and make widely available the greatest achievements of art.²

That conjunction of “past, present, and future” is no mere rhetorical conceit. For it is the peculiar nature of a cultural legacy that all three perspectives are brought into focus at once: an understanding and appreciation of works, beyond the popular expression of the moment, that have withstood the passage of time; a means of presenting that material to contemporary audiences; and a vehicle for preserving and transmitting it, finally, to the audiences of tomorrow.

Overlooking for a moment the difficulties inherent in the first two transactions—reaching a consensus on works that warrant preservation, and finding suitable venues to keep them alive and vital—the presumption of future audiences for work that may have struggled for attention in its own time is a hazardous one. The audiences of the next century, the children of today, are currently engaged in a 13-year educational odyssey (the 82 percent fortunate enough to complete that journey, that is), and that process generally gives the arts short shrift.

As audiences for the arts age, and as popular culture becomes ever-more-popular among the very young, the possibility of an unfortunate irony presents itself: even if the greatest works of our time are preserved—everything from the *Concord Sonata* to a Clifford Brown solo, from *Appalachian Spring* to *Angels in America*—what if the audiences of the year 2097 lack the background or the inclination, or even the patience, to come to terms with such works?

² USC 20, ch. 26, subch. 1, sec. 951 (2) (11).

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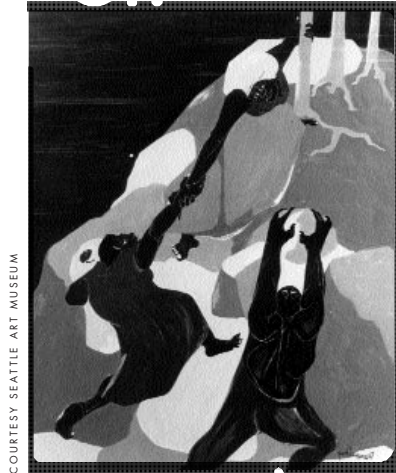
“Art is not self-evident nor of necessity immediately enjoyable,” August Heckscher warned in an essay he wrote for President Eisenhower’s Commission on National Goals in 1959. “It requires in the spectator an effort of the spirit and of the mind, sufficient to put himself in harmony with a vision other than his own.” Hecksher’s contention asks us to align ourselves, for the moment, at least, with the vision of another, is a useful reminder of the shared responsibility that is often overlooked: the audience’s obligation to meet the artist half-way, penetrating the social and cultural context from which a given work of art may spring, and of the arts presenter’s obligation to assist the audience in making that journey. Not all art is easily grasped, immediately gratifying, or even necessarily pleasant. The satisfaction and sense of fulfillment that result from coming to terms with a work of art and experiencing its resonance in our own lives, is a form of pleasure and intellectual challenge simply unavailable elsewhere.

Merely preserving works of art is no guarantee that our cultural legacy will turn out to be anything more than a time capsule full of curiosities for subsequent generations. How do we ensure the transferral of a cultural legacy to the children of the next millennium?

Two parts of this puzzle will be addressed in later chapters: (1) the arts education that will prepare audiences of the future to appreciate the art of the past; and (2) the nonprofit infrastructure that helps sustain cultural traditions today, independent of the market forces more concerned with promoting new items of entertainment and diversion than with preserving past achievements. However, more remains to be said of the nature of “legacy” itself.

Consider four examples referenced above—Charles Ives, Clifford Brown, Martha Graham, and Tony Kushner—typical of artists that most would agree deserve a place in the cultural legacy of 20th-century America, although they are by no means representative of the full range of American achievement in the arts. They offer merely a hint of contemporary works still to be discovered, of the cultural traditions yet in formation as the make-up of American society itself continues to evolve, and of new forms that are just beginning to emerge from the cauldrons of art and technology. Moreover they represent forms in which authorship is easily assigned, overlooking the countless cultural artifacts and expressions that spring from a collective aesthetic—from the functional to the festive, from basket-weaving and saddle-making to mariachi bands and Balinese gamelans.

Yet the four artists in question are sufficient to raise many of the issues that must be confronted before the transmission of our legacy can be ensured.



“A Foothold on the Rocks” by American painter Jacob Lawrence is part of a series of work around the theme of African American struggle for equality and recognition.

Visions of the cream rising to the top, of the best and the brightest of our artists eventually receiving their due and winning both critical and popular acclaim bear little resemblance to the experience of most artists in America. For ours is a country that often values celebrity over substance, and is often none too kind to its celebrities either. The genuine artistry of celebrities like a Pavoratti or Meryl Streep is widely acknowledged, and the public reveres movie and popular stars, but as quickly as status and celebrity may be attained, it can just as quickly disappear.

“ARE WE THE DINOSAURS?”

Charles Ives’s *Piano Sonata no. 2* (Concord, Mass., 1840-60), more commonly known as the *Concord Sonata*, is an acknowledged masterpiece, typical of the groundbreaking work in polytonality and rhythmic invention with which the Connecticut composer was fully engaged at the turn of the century. Yet several

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decades elapsed before the work of this great composer was first performed in public, an extreme but by no means atypical example of what American composers must regularly endure. Ives was 72 when his *Third Symphony* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1947, in fact, as he belatedly received a small measure of the public recognition he deserved. His considerable body of work (well over a hundred orchestral, chamber and choral works, and some 150 songs) would finally stand a much better chance of having a life of its own.³

If Ives survives today (with no less than 80 recordings of his works in print, and regular live performances), and if he seems ensured of an audience, however limited, in the next century, what of his contemporary, Carl Ruggles (1876-1971), or artists like Henry Cowell (1897-1965), Harry Partch (1901-1974), and Conlon Nancarrow (1912-), American originals all who followed in his path?⁴ And what of the hundreds of composers living today, who labor in near-total obscurity? If they can't get a hearing for their works now, beyond campus recitals, performances in "alternative spaces," and independently produced CDs, what chance do they have to become a part of our legacy?

Joe Celli, veteran "new music" composer, performer, and concert producer, sees a mixed picture in this regard. "What has happened in recent years," he explains, "is a diminution in the number of places and 'spaces' and opportunities for live performance, and an acceleration, actually, of the ability to create recordings specifically for the electronic media. It tends to be a confluence of both the availability of high technology of a very superior quality to what we had just 10 or 15 years ago, and composers feeling much more comfortable producing works in that manner." The contemporary composer, in other words, can now produce their own

³ Vivian Perlis, *Charles Ives Remembered: An Oral History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974) 153.

⁴ The existence of a composer's work on recordings is only one measure of endurance, and the availability of these recordings in the marketplace is quite another. Of the composers cited, in addition to some 80 recordings of Ives's work in print, there are 6 featuring works by Ruggles, 24 by Cowell, and 8 each by Partch and Nancarrow. (As a point of comparison, there are over 40 pages of Mozart recordings listed in the most recent Schwann catalog.) *Schwann Opus 8*, no.2 (Spring 1997). But heaven help the consumer beyond the big city who wishes to sample the work of these twentieth-century American composers. The largest record store in Washington, DC, for example, offered 25 titles by Ives, none by Ruggles, 2 by Cowell, and 4 each by Partch and Nancarrow. CD Now, the largest purveyor of CDs on the Internet (cdnow.com), provided a useful list of works in print, but had only 16 Ives, 2 Ruggles, 1 Cowell, 4 Partch, and 4 Nancarrow recordings available for purchase.

works in their own studios, with digital recording and editing software that places much more control in the hands of the creator. These composers are also benefiting from another technological development—electronic cataloging systems, available to retailers nation-wide—that is helping to break the distribution log jam that has long frustrated the vast majority of artists not associated with major record labels. “Even though you’re not going to find our discs in most stores,” Celli explains, “these stores have the ability now to at least know where to get those discs if someone comes in to order them.”⁵

There would doubtless be a lot more of those orders if the music received more exposure in the media, both print and broadcast, and although eventually the Internet may help in this regard, right now Celli is not optimistic about the prospects for the contemporary artist. He cites the decline of college radio, once the bastion of a free-wheeling aesthetic that found room for all manner of recorded sound, as one example of shrinking opportunities for alternative voices. “What has happened over the last 15 years is that the big record companies have begun to understand the power of college radio,” says Celli, “and they have very clearly co-opted this whole medium. There are, certainly, exceptions, but what was previously known as ‘new music’ or ‘alternative music’...has been co-opted by major labels, where it basically means commercial music that hasn’t been successful yet. ...It’s almost difficult for us to even define ourselves any longer, in terms of who we are. ...I mean, who are we? Are we the dinosaurs?”

“THE WORD ‘JAZZ’ HAS BEEN PART OF THE PROBLEM”

Clifford Brown, a black trumpet player who died in 1956 at the age of 25, reflects yet another legacy issue, typical of those artists whose sphere is not the concert hall, the museum, or the university but other less sanctioned arenas. In Brown’s case it was the nightclub, but it could have been the church, the community center, or the front porch—wherever people gather to make art. Unable to enter the closed ranks of “classical” artists, nor sufficiently popular to have much of an impact on the commercial marketplace, most jazz, folk, and traditional artists find themselves caught between the two worlds of high art and mass entertainment.

⁵ Taking matters into their own hands, 14 independent labels, including Celli’s own O.O. Discs, have formed a consortium to market their alternative works both on- and off-line. The consortium can be reached at CDeMusic, 116 North Lake Ave., Albany, NY 12206 (www.emf.org/cde_frontdoor.html).

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On the surface, at least, such artists fail to measure up to the standards of either realm, falling short of both the rigorous, formal training and technical precision of so-called serious music, and of the mass appeal and box-office clout of truly popular culture. Judged according to their own standards, however—for an expanded cultural legacy does not imply the abandonment of critical standards—the finest examples of these non-mainstream forms clearly distinguish themselves. In ingenuity, improvisatory powers, emotional impact, and the sheer ability to transform often modest raw material into striking aesthetic statements, the best of jazz, folk, and ethnic traditions stand among the finest achievements of American culture.

Clifford Brown is a case in point. By all accounts a brilliant soloist (and a sufficient number of recordings survive to document the trumpeter's genius), Brown's career may have rivaled that of Dizzy Gillespie or Miles Davis had he lived. More likely, though, the trumpeter's orbit would have been constricted to less lofty realms, joining Fats Navarro, Kenny Dorham, Art Farmer, and Booker Little as largely overlooked masters of the instrument, unlikely to claim their rightful place in the cultural legacy. Not until the spectacular rise of Wynton Marsalis, whose triumphs in both jazz and classical music are unprecedented, did the doors of mainstream culture (and the front doors, at that) swing wide open in acceptance of jazz.

Marsalis's recent Pulitzer Prize for *Blood on the Fields* heralds good things to come, certainly, but it is also a reminder of where we were not so long ago. In 1965, the board of the Pulitzer Prize had a similar opportunity to honor one of the masters of jazz, and it balked at the chance. The three-person music jury recommended Duke Ellington for a special citation, in recognition of the "vitality and originality of his total productivity" over the previous four decades. The full board thought otherwise and rejected the recommendation, prompting two of the three music jurors (*The New Yorker's* Winthrop Sargeant and *Newsday's* Ronald Eyer) to resign in protest.⁶ Ellington, characteristically poised, was as unflappable: "Fate doesn't want me to be too famous too young."⁷ Several weeks later, back on the road with his band for a series of one-night stands, Ellington reflected further on the Pulitzer debacle: "...I'm hardly surprised that my kind of music is still without, let us say, official honor at home. Most Americans still take it for granted that European music—classical music, if you will—is the only real respectable kind. . . .

⁶ Theodore Strongin, "2 Pulitzer Jurors Resign in Protest," *New York Times* 13 May 1965: 39.

⁷ Howard Klein, "Ellington Denied Pulitzer Citation," *New York Times* 5 May 1965: 49.

The word ‘jazz’ has been part of the problem. It never lost its association with those New Orleans bordellos.”⁸

The 35-year-old Marsalis, whose roots are in New Orleans, conjures up a far more distinguished image, and his popular acclaim and his commitment to working with children in educational settings augur well for the future of the music. But the real test will come, not with the predictable lionization of Marsalis, but with the recognition of the countless pioneers and prophets of jazz to whom his music is so thoroughly indebted. The trumpeter himself is doing his part through his work with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, a repertory ensemble devoted to the performance of classic jazz compositions of the past and present.

“We need the kind of shared commitment that can
only come from a citizenry convinced that each person
shares in our cultural heritage...”

WILLIAM IVEY, DIRECTOR, COUNTRY MUSIC FOUNDATION

Happily, Lincoln Center is not alone in expanding its cultural offerings. The programming of many of the country’s major arts institutions has become considerably more varied and reflective of the diversity of American society itself. Although dismissed by some critics as affirmative-action aesthetics, a mere pandering to “political correctness” and ultimately a divisive force in American society, such multicultural (or, more accurately, culturally-specific) programming surely has more to do with our increasingly diverse society—and with our increasingly catholic tastes—than with sectarian politics. No one ever complained about America’s politically correct cuisine, and yet the transformation of our culinary landscape, from the days not so long ago when ethnic food meant chop suey, pizza, and an occasional taco, has been nothing short of remarkable. The arts in America are finally catching up with this trend, and if the movement seems “political” and

⁸ Nat Hentoff, “This Cat Needs No Pulitzer Prize,” *New York Times* 12 Sept. 1965: VI-64.

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unsettling to some of its critics, that's only because artists, particularly those who have been waiting in the wings for so long, tend to be more outspoken than restaurateurs.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of the musical ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock and cultural commentator, in an essay aptly entitled "Battle Stancing," traces support for multicultural programming and culturally specific organizations that began to emerge in the late 60s:

Our efforts helped shape these funding initiatives. ... Now when the decisionmakers in the arts councils, the foundations, or the endowments get together, they at least ask the question 'What are we going to do about minorities?' They wonder about ethnic representation. But they don't do this because they got up one morning and discovered that we are a part of their society; they ask these questions today because we forced this agenda.

That "agenda" was easier to accommodate in the decade of the 70s when support for the arts was increasing dramatically in both the public and private sectors. More recently, in the face of cutbacks at the federal level and with generally more competition for arts support overall, the climate is less favorable to some forms of pluralism. "No sooner had our efforts begun to result in funding for more complex cultural constituencies," Reagon adds "than the mainstream institutions themselves began to maneuver to take over the very resources we had, through our lobbying efforts, created. Now when we send proposals, we find ourselves in competition with them."⁹

Thus it may be the increased competition for support, as much as the nature of the art itself, that has fueled many of the controversies over multiculturalism of late. As historian and cultural activist John Kuo Wei Tchen points out, "...we need to understand that pluralism, or this ideology of inclusiveness, has always been premised on the pie getting bigger. In an essentially zero-growth economy that is simultaneously becoming more diverse and more unequal, doesn't the

⁹ Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Battle Stancing": To Do Cultural Work in America," in *Voices from the Battlefield: Achieving Cultural Equity*, ed. Marta Moreno Vega and Cheryll Y. Greene, (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1993) 78.

rhetoric of pluralism get stretched precariously thin?”¹⁰ Judging from the sometimes heated reaction within the arts community itself, the patience of some of the participants is getting stretched thin, too.

The politics of pluralism aside, from the audience’s standpoint, there are more forms of expression to choose from than ever before. One indication of the broadening of America’s cultural palette is the expanded seasons of such major institutions as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Smithsonian Institution, all of which have established repertory ensembles to perform the neglected masterworks of jazz, and where folk and other traditional forms are also increasingly featured. In a survey of performing arts presenters nationwide, in fact, folk or traditional music ranked third in a list of ten types of music most frequently presented.¹¹

At once the well-spring of the field and its basic mode of operation—passing both forms and content from one generation to the next—the folk arts legacy is generally not one that has been addressed by the major institutions that help keep other, more formal traditions in the performing and visual arts alive. “Because the folk arts are normally defined as those traditions which are passed on informally through time within a particular community,” observes Elizabeth Peterson in *The Changing Face of Tradition*, “we tend to characterize traditional artists as practicing outside of institutional settings. We think of them as ‘non-joiners.’”¹²

At the national level, a handful of major institutions have looked after the folk and traditional arts for several years, including the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, and the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies at the Smithsonian Institution. A private organization, the National Council for the Traditional Arts, has been at this task even longer, producing and presenting touring folk arts programs for over 60 years. Efforts such as the Fund for Folk Culture, supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Programs for Regional Folklife

¹⁰ John Kuo Wei Tchen, “Rethinking Who We Are: A Basic Discussion of Basic Terms,” in *Voices from the Battlefield* 7.

¹¹ *1995 Profile of Member Organizations* (Washington, DC: Association of Performing Arts Presenters, 1995) 11-22.

¹² Betsy Peterson, *The Changing Face of Tradition: A Report on the Folk and Traditional Arts in the United States* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 1996) 68.

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Centers, in which seven regional centers received over \$10 million in support from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund between 1991 and 1995, have been fostering a more systematic approach to the nation's folk legacy.¹³

Still, by its very nature, the folk arts field remains disparate and decentralized, and the question of preserving its legacy, indeed, of protecting its lifeblood, remains a vital one. A 1991 study of the field revealed that more than 85 percent of the folk artists surveyed teach others their art, often without compensation, and a majority consider "identifying and motivating the next generation of artists" to be a priority.¹⁴ Since 1985, that process has been aided immeasurably by the NEA-sponsored State Apprenticeship Programs, part of a larger folk arts effort at the Endowment that has awarded some 3,700 grants totaling nearly \$60 million since its inception in 1978.¹⁵ More than 2,600 apprenticeships have been sponsored by state folk arts programs over the past twelve years. "Traditions covered," writes Susan Auerbach, author of a study of the program, "range from Hispanic santos carving in Colorado to African American quilting in Mississippi and from Franco American fiddling in New Hampshire to Hmong wedding songs in Oregon, with crafts dominating the list." A majority of apprenticeships, she notes, have gone to people of color, with American Indians (20 percent), Asian-Americans/Pacific Islanders (15 percent), Alaska Natives (7 percent) especially well represented. But numbers alone cannot measure the importance of apprenticeships to the folk arts field. Auerbach concludes:

¹³ The Fund for Folk Culture offers support and technical assistance for gatherings and conferences that bring together folk artists, tradition bearers, folk cultural specialists, and others engaged in the preservation of grassroots cultural traditions. For more information, contact the fund at P.O. Box 1566, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Regional folklife centers participating in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund program include Cityfolk (Dayton, OH), City Lore (New York), Philadelphia Folklore Project, Northwest Folklife (Seattle), Texas Folklife Resources, Vermont Folklife Center, and the Western Folklife Center (Elko, NV).

¹⁴ Peterson, 40.

¹⁵ Part of the Office of Special Projects from 1974 to 1977, the Folk Arts program was incorporated into the Heritage and Preservation Division in 1996. "The Program's most far-reaching impact," writes Elizabeth Peterson, "...may be its initial emphasis on creating a nationwide infrastructure of folk arts programs in partnership with state arts agencies and other organizations across the country. Through this strategy, the Folk Arts Program established an effective means for reaching decentralized and diverse constituencies representing many artistic traditions in rural and urban areas throughout the country." Peterson, 56-57.

The impact of apprenticeship programs reverberates well beyond the artist team and the official grant period. Artists often continue working together. ... Communities gain well-trained practitioners, articulate spokespersons, and new organizations like the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance. Perhaps most importantly languishing art forms that might otherwise die with their last practitioner gain a new lease on life.¹⁶

“...THE LEAST DOCUMENTED OF ART FORMS”

In many instances, though, not even broader acceptance or institutional clout ensures one a secure place in the cultural legacy. Martha Graham was one of the most respected American choreographers, and *Appalachian Spring* of 1944 stands as a singular achievement in the performing arts, but dance is a field that by its very nature is ephemeral. Often lacking even the recordings that help keep musical traditions alive, a given work in dance demands special handling if it is to remain extant, a heretofore cumbersome and expensive process that until recently was the exception rather than the rule.

A new venture SAVE AS: DANCE is designed specifically to reverse that trend, and in its formal, collaborative aspects, it may serve as a model for what will become increasingly necessary in other fields: targeted, well funded efforts to lift particular art forms out of the largely untended stockpiles of American culture into the more specialized arenas of preserved, archived, and “contextualized” works. Just as efforts are underway to transfer America’s film heritage from disintegrating nitrate stock onto more durable and accessible media, and as “brittle” books are being digitized and made much more widely available in the nation’s library system, so will specific efforts on behalf of other art forms be needed—both to rescue given works from unjustified obscurity or neglect, and to document and preserve these works in a context that will allow both artists of today and audiences of tomorrow to understand and appreciate them.

“Dance has been the least documented of art forms,” explains Andrea Snyder, director of the National Initiative to Preserve American Dance (NIPAD), based at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

¹⁶ Susan Auerbach, “Investing in the Future of Tradition: State Apprenticeship Programs,” in Peterson, 24, 26. For additional information of the apprenticeship programs, see Auerbach, *In Good Hands: State Apprenticeship Programs in Folk & Traditional Arts, 1983-1995* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 1995).

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Dancers from Lula Washington Dance Theatre, located in South Central Los Angeles, in performance. SAVE: AS DANCE is an initiative to document and preserve this art form.

“By facilitating the documentation and preservation of dance, we hope not only to spur artistic activity, but also to increase people’s appreciation of dance as central to human activity.” Launched in 1993 with the help of support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, NIPAD has awarded over \$1 million in grants for the documentation of a wide range of dance styles, “from Merce Cunningham’s ‘Torse’ to the court dances of Cambodia, the African-Puerto Rican Bomba, and the dances of the Tonawanda Band of Seneca Indians in upstate New York,” according to a report by Jennifer Dunning in the *New York Times*.¹⁷ Such choreographic pioneers as Daniel Nagrin, Bessie Schonberg, Erick Hawkins, and Doris Humphrey are all being recorded on videotape, thanks to NIPAD-funded projects.

¹⁷ Jennifer Dunning, “An Invitation to Step Into a Formidable Future,” *New York Times* 9 Feb. 1997: H-12.

More recently, in conjunction with the UCLA National Dance/Media Project, NIPAD is managing the SAVE AS: DANCE initiative, encompassing a broad range of documentation and preservation activities that includes cataloguing existing materials, preserving deteriorating films and videos, making new audio/visual recordings, and exploring innovative ways to use new media for both creating and disseminating dance works. Awarding larger grants to fewer projects, SAVE AS: DANCE will extend the leadership role of NIPAD and its partner at UCLA by developing model projects, assembling a national advisory body to serve as a “think tank” on documentation, and convening a national conference in 1998 to explore the most advanced techniques and concepts in dance documentation.

Administrators and historians in other fields would do well to consider adopting this kind of systematic approach to the legacy of other art forms. “Dance has at last reached the stage that literature reached with the invention of the printing press,” observes Judith Mitoma, founder and director of UCLA’s Center for Intercultural Performance in the Department of World Arts and Cultures. “The emergence of so many new technologies enables us to document anything we want. But if we do not use these tools to save our dance history—and to make it more accessible and exciting for the public—Americans will never fully appreciate the contributions of dance to our culture, or be inclined to support it in the future.”

“...THESE GUYS ARE DEAD ON ARRIVAL”

And yet there is still more to the cultural legacy than that: even if we manage finally to catch up with the cultural trailblazers like Charles Ives, to honor the unheralded like Clifford Brown, and to rescue the various endangered species of the arts from vanishing altogether, there remains the matter of content—of *conflict*, in fact—involving works that deal unflinchingly with some of the thornier issues of our time. Ours is often a culture of contention, and artists are frequently in the front ranks of those asking difficult questions, exploring difficult terrain.

Such was the case with *Angels in America*, the 1993 theater sensation that continues to reverberate through American culture to this day. With seven Tony awards and a Pulitzer Prize to its credit, it’s difficult to recall a more widely acclaimed work than Tony Kushner’s two-part opus. Writing in *The New Yorker*, for example, John Lahr called the first part, “Perestroika,” a masterpiece, suggesting that “not since [Tennessee] Williams has a playwright announced his poetic vision

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with such authority on the Broadway stage.”¹⁸ Robert Brustein, meanwhile, judged *Angels’* second part, “Millennium Approaches,” to be “the authoritative achievement of a radical dramatic artist with a fresh, clear voice,” and *Newsweek’s* Jack Kroll called both parts “the broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time.”¹⁹

But it’s never quite as simple as that, and one need look no further than the work’s subtitle—A Gay Fantasia on National Themes—to understand why. For included among our “national themes,” unfortunately, are intolerance, homophobia, and a fear of diversity and “otherness” which lead to fear and anger. Worse still, sometimes even civic commissions lash out.

That’s essentially what happened in Charlotte, NC, in 1997, when the Mecklenberg County Commission, on the strength of a five-to-four vote, raised tyranny of the majority to new heights by withholding \$2.5 million in county funds earmarked for the Arts and Science Council of Charlotte/Mecklenberg County, vowing to allocate that money directly to arts groups according to its own, more restrictive, criteria. The Arts and Science Council, whose overall budget is around \$11 million, had supported the Charlotte Repertory Theatre in years past, and it was this company that had presented, amidst much controversy in the spring of 1996, *Angels in America*.

Initially targeting the Arts and Science Council for “recognizing and supporting homosexuality,” the county commissioners finally settled on a resolution that barred public funds from supporting groups that present “perverted forms of sexuality,” or that “promote, advocate or endorse behaviors, life styles and values that seek to undermine and deviate from the value and societal role of the traditional family.”²⁰ However general the language, the commission’s specific intentions were laid bare during the course of its deliberations. “As far as I’m concerned, these guys are dead on arrival,” explained one commissioner, in reference to the Charlotte Repertory Theatre. “If they don’t know they’re the walking dead now, I suggest they get a clue pretty quick.”²¹

¹⁸ John Lahr, “The Theatre: Earth Angels,” *The New Yorker* 13 Dec. 1993: 133.

¹⁹ Robert Brustein, “Robert Brustein on Theatre: Angels in America,” *The New Republic* 24 May 1993: 29; Jack Kroll, “Heaven and Earth on Broadway,” *Newsweek* 6 Dec. 1993: 83.

²⁰ “County Strikes at Arts Council Over Gay Play,” *New York Times* 3 Apr. 1997: A17.

²¹ *Charlotte Observer* 3 Apr. 1997.

Ironically, what began as an effort to target a specific group may spill over into other areas, including arts education. Nearly half of the funds that were headed to the Arts and Science Council, some \$1.2 million, was destined for Spirit Square, the city-owned theater that is being converted into an arts education center. Also jeopardized by the county commission's action is the arts council's partnership with the school district, which was planning to use *The Wizard of Oz* to teach reading, math, writing, and art skills. Some commission members who voted against the resolution expressed their opposition to seeing the commission itself becoming the arbiter of taste in matters of arts funding (a view shared by some 85 percent of county residents in a *Charlotte Observer* poll), and may decide to eliminate arts funding altogether.

The battle in Charlotte is typical of debates underway elsewhere, concerning the responsibility of the public patron, especially in resolving the conflict between national standards and local politics, between First Amendment freedoms and public accountability. The Charlotte episode is also a not-so-subtle reminder that there is no "sure thing" when it comes to matters of art. Kushner won't be silenced by a county commission, of course, but other artists might not be so fortunate. Writers such as Bernard Gordon and the late Hugo Butler doubtless had higher aspirations for their work in the 1950s, and certainly could not have predicted what 1997 would bring: an effort, tragically belated, to restore their names to film projects on which they were forced to use pseudonyms during the era of blacklisting in Hollywood.²²

"... OUR COLLECTIVE MEMORY ..."

These four examples outline the complex nature of our "cultural legacy," discussions of which ran through many of the American Canvas forums, if not directly in frank discussions of the danger of losing vital parts of our cultural past, then obliquely in subtle undercurrents of doubt concerning the financial health of the nonprofit sector and the concomitant risk of losing sight of both the past and the future in the daily struggle to survive in the present.

Participants in the American Canvas forum in Charlotte tackled the question of the legacy head on, stressing the need, in particular, to define that legacy in

²² Bernard Weinraub, "Blacklisted Writers Win Credits for Screenplays," *New York Times* 3 Apr. 1997: B1.

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terms sufficiently broad to embrace the full extent of American culture. For William Ivey, executive director of the Country Music Foundation, legacy is “that part of the past we intend to keep for the future.” Ellen Lovell, former executive director of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, agreed, citing “our collective memory,” which runs the full gamut from personal identity and language to songs, crafts, even historic districts that we collectively agree to protect from the ravages of time (or the rapacity of developers, which can be equally destructive). The key, Lovell observed, is *authenticity*. Many American Canvas forum participants, including George Rivera of the Poeh Cultural Center and Museum north of Santa Fe (celebrating the Tewa-speaking Pueblos) and Dorothy Jenkins Fields of Historic Overtown (the turn-of-the-century segregated community that later became a thriving center of African-American culture in Miami), offered examples of efforts to preserve authentic examples of our collective history. Commercial re-creations of the past, it was generally agreed, be they Hollywood evocations of days gone by or quaint theme-park villages, ultimately prove to be hollow experiences, in comparison to the real thing.

The commercial sector, even in the eyes of those who operate in that arena, comes up short as the protector of our cultural legacy. According to Michael Greene, president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and a participant at the Los Angeles forum, a decidedly public perspective, maintained at the federal level, is needed to direct the effort of preserving the past. “We have to have a federal presence to really think in the longer view about where our society as a whole is going,” Greene declared. “...[A] national consciousness has to always be there in some form or fashion to understand that the mercantile, commercial aspects of art have nothing to do with the legacy, necessarily.”

It’s not that nothing worth saving emanates from the commercial sector. On the contrary, one of the greatest strengths of American culture, and a primary reason for its vast appeal abroad, is the imagination and boundless energy of our popular artists. One need only point to the body of recorded music in this century, or the classic films of Hollywood, to recognize the importance of this sector. Yet the entertainment industry, more concerned with dividends than with any legacy it might leave, does not have a distinguished record in preserving its past, beyond those items, anyway, that continue to have a value in the marketplace.

“...THE PEOPLE HERE ARE REAL”

Whether or not one shares Greene’s faith in federal action in this area, the belief that cultural preservation should represent a collective effort, rather than strictly a business proposition, seems undeniable. As William Ivey, who has dedicated his career to the study and appreciation of country and western music, expressed it in Charlotte, “We really need the kind of shared commitment that can only come from a citizenry convinced that each person shares in our cultural heritage, and that they have a stake in it, and it’s important to our society, and that it is as vital as the air we breathe.” It is the responsibility of the present generation, added Joe Wilson, executive director of the National Council on the Traditional Arts, “to preserve and transmit our historic culture, and to do so in a way that both encompasses the breadth of that culture and builds the kinds of alliances that are needed to keep that legacy alive.”

Unilateral efforts to preserve the past, whether for commercial gain or for purely altruistic motives, are not likely to succeed. Wilson offered the example of Lowell, Massachusetts, a one-time mill town that has managed both to recapture its past and to revitalize its present in the form of an annual arts festival that attracts more than 200,000 visitors annually to a town of less than half that size. But none of this happened overnight.

Lowell’s own legacy is one of both triumph and travail, as the city harnessed the power of the Merrimack River and its many canals to win some of the initial battles of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, only to witness the eventual closing of its cotton mills early in the next century, as the center of textile manufacturing shifted to the Southern states. “Lowell had a bad reputation throughout the region,” Wilson recalls. “It was the kind of place, if you wanted to insult your girlfriend, you told her you were taking her there on a date.”

The city’s renewed self-confidence came slowly, and the arts and culture played a central role in the rebuilding process. First came the small ethnic festivals, literally hundreds of them over the years, drawing on the rich cultural diversity that has long distinguished Lowell, home to no less than 52 distinct ethnic groups. While many of these groups, including the Irish, French Canadian, Portuguese, and Greeks, trace their roots in Lowell back to the flush times of the nineteenth century, more recent arrivals, including over 25,000 from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, found their way to Lowell because of upheaval in their homelands.

The city’s self-image got another boost when it finally came to terms with its own past, when it began to celebrate rather than shun, in other words, both the

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peaks and the valleys of its own heritage. At the heart of this new outlook was the Lowell National Historical Park, created in 1978 to proclaim the city's role in the Industrial Revolution, and which transformed neglected mill complexes, gatehouses, power canals, and other erstwhile relics from Lowell's past into a living museum of industrial history.

In 1987, finally, Wilson's National Council on the Traditional Arts (NCTA) selected Lowell as the site for its National Folk Festival, a 63-year-old movable feast of the traditional arts and crafts that spent three years there (1987-89) before moving on to Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Building on the momentum of that event, and drawing on the city's own storied past, the city launched its own festival, which celebrated its 10th anniversary last year as the largest free festival of its kind in the country. A partnership of the city, the National Historical Park, the Festival Foundation, and Wilson's NCTA, the Lowell Folk Festival has grown in popularity every year. The city itself spends some \$60,000 on the event every year, although that figure would swell to over \$100,000 if all of the volunteer labor were factored into the equation. "It's money that is well spent," according to Ed Trudel, operations director of the city of Lowell. "The public relations the city gets from this event cannot be measured it's so great."

Judging from the popular reaction—visitors from all over New England and the East Coast descend on Lowell the last weekend in July—Trudel's accounting is accurate. "I thought it was an old-time mill town that was all run down," a visitor from Charlestown, MA, told the Lowell *Sun* last year, "and I've heard about drug problems and things like that, but it's like a garden. It's just gorgeous." The man's wife was equally impressed: "... the people here are real. It's such a nice mix of people, it restores your faith in America. I know that sounds sappy and very 'American Pie,' but it's really true."²³

"... WE REALLY NEED TO START WORKING TODAY FOR TOMORROW"

Sappy or no, that couple from Charlestown captured the essence of what these kinds of cultural programs, from the smallest downtown arts festival to such massive undertakings as the Lowell event, attempt to do: "to provide us the means," as

²³ Laura Doyle, "Record crowd savors Folk Fest sights, smells, sounds," *The Sun* (Lowell, MA) 29 July 1996: 8.

Anna White of Young Audiences of Indiana said at the Columbus American Canvas forum, “to express and preserve our cultural heritage, and to respond and work with those who have lost the sense of pride and hope in our communities today.” The Lowell Folk Festival embodies that very process, retrieving elements of our varied cultural past, bringing them alive in the present, and helping to ensure, along the way, that Irish step dancing, Andean music, Laotian handicrafts and other traditions will live into the future.

Like the curiously intricate concept of legacy itself, such efforts as SAVE AS: DANCE and the Lowell Folk Festival have as much to do with the future as they do with the past, although in our preoccupation with not letting the latter slip through our fingers, we sometimes lose sight of the future, failing to account for the current generation of artists who, given half a chance, might one day contribute to our cultural legacy. The Dayton-Hudson Foundation’s Ben Cameron raised that very issue at the Columbus forum—“The complete question is how do you preserve the achievements of the past while still recognizing the aspirations and ambitions of a rising and incipient generation.”

“We have to support the developing artists of today, in order to have a legacy tomorrow,” National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Jane Alexander pointed out in Charlotte, “because you think about composers who, on average, do not reach their peak of fame or production of their works until 50 years after their death. So, we really need to start working today for tomorrow.”