

Time to Grant Art its Independence

By David Boaz

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What do art, music and religion have in common? They all have the power to touch us in the depths of our souls. As one theater director said, “Art has ... the power to sustain, to heal, to humanize ... to change something in you. It’s a frightening power, and also a beautiful power. ... And it’s essential to a civilized society.”

Which is precisely why art, music and religion should be kept separate from the state.

Government involves the organization of coercion. In a free society, coercion should be reserved only for such essential functions of government as protecting rights and punishing criminals. People should not be forced to contribute money to artistic endeavors that they may not approve, nor should artists be forced to trim their sails to meet government standards.

Government funding of anything involves government control. That insight, of course, is part of our folk wisdom: “He who pays the piper calls the tune.”

Defenders of arts funding seem blithely unaware of this danger when they praise the role of the national endowments as an imprimatur or seal of approval on artists and arts groups. We don’t need any more fights over controversial exhibits. And we can thank our lucky stars that Kentucky’s Creation Museum is private or we’d have a major political battle over that.

We should note that the National Endowment for the Arts’ budget is about 2 percent of the total spent on the nonprofit arts in the United States. The rapidly growing crowd funding platform Kickstarter expects to direct more funding to the arts in its third year of operation than the NEA does.

The American Founders knew that the solution to the wars of religion was the separation of church and state. Because art is just as spiritual, just as meaningful, just as powerful as religion, it is time to grant art the same independence and respect that religion has: the separation of art and state.

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