



Meeting the Moment Insights

Political Interference and the Future of America's Cultural Institutions

Most Americans want the freedom to enjoy and learn from the works of art of our choosing, whether it be books, plays, movies, museums, or music and dance performances. The creative arts are among the primary ways that we hear each other's stories. They help us to understand and preserve our history. They inspire the imaginations of young people, assuring them that they can accomplish whatever they dream. The arts bring people together as nothing else, in joy, in grief, and in celebration.

This is also why authoritarians fear and work to suppress free expression. In Russia, members of the punk group Pussy Riot were imprisoned for performing a government protest song. For years, citizens of Soviet countries risked imprisonment to experience the spiritual freedom of American jazz, broadcast by Voice of America. In contrast to Russia and other dictatorships, the founders of our country established freedom of expression as one of our most sacred rights, protected by our Constitution.

In addition to bringing us together, the arts also make a significant contribution to our economic well-being. As Mary Grant, President of the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, recently stated in a *Forbes Magazine* article, "the arts strengthen communities and economies, contributing as much as \$1.2 trillion to the US economy...."

For us to have the freedom to experience whatever form of art we choose, our artists must have freedom to create these works, without limitations on what the public is allowed to see and hear. As revealed by the backfired attempt to censor comedian Jimmy Kimmel, most Americans do not want censorship.

Recent Attempts to Restrict Artistic Freedom

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

The non-profit and nonpartisan Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts has historically operated as a revered national arts organization, hosting thousands of annual performances that include stand-up comedy, Broadway plays, hip-hop concerts, symphonic music, and dance. In its role as an education hub for the arts, it also brings together students and teachers from across the country.

Shortly after his inauguration, President Trump denounced "woke" programming at the Kennedy Center and removed members of the Board of Directors who had been appointed by his



predecessor. Installed in their place were partisan appointees who then appointed the President as Chair of the Board. Since these changes were made, the *Washington Post* reports that ticket sales at the venue have plummeted, subscription sales have decreased, and some artists have cancelled plans to appear because of the politicization of the venue.

The National Smithsonian Museums

The Smithsonian Institution operates a group of 21 beloved national museums, including the National Museum of American History, the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Zoo, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Smithsonian has traditionally been operated as a non-partisan, independent organization, administered by its Board of Regents. It is not a part of the Executive Branch that reports to the President, but it relies on federal funding.

In August of 2025, the White House sent a letter to the Smithsonian Institution stating that eight of its museums must submit their current and planned future exhibits to the White House for a comprehensive review and then remove within 120 days any content the White House views as objectionable. In an Executive Order dated March 27, 2025, President Trump objected to what he described as the Smithsonian's "race-centered ideology" or "ideologically driven" content.

The Cancellation of Thousands of Grants Made to Arts Organizations Nationwide

The National Endowment for the Arts, (NEA) was created in 1965 to provide access to the arts to people across the country, rather than only in affluent communities that can afford to support the arts with private donations. As NEA grants were distributed, museums, theatre, music, and dance companies bloomed across the country. Actress Jane Alexander, a former NEA Chair, recalls her delight in seeing an NEA grant recipient, the Heartwood Dance Company, performing in a coal mining town high in the Appalachian Mountains.

Soon after the inauguration, the new administration sought to bar NEA grant recipients from using federal funds to promote "diversity, equity and inclusion", "gender ideology" and other concepts the administration sought in Executive Orders to ban.

These requirements were immediately challenged in court as violating the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of expression. In early February of 2025, the new management of the NEA cancelled a grant program which prioritized underserved groups and communities, including ballet programs for disabled children in Maryland and a Native American artist-in-residency program in North Dakota. The NEA has also sent notices to thousands of arts organizations across the country, withdrawing or cancelling grants that had already been made. Arts organizations losing grants included theatre companies presenting works by African American



artists August Wilson and Zora Neale Hurston, and the Great Plains Theatre Commons in Omaha, Nebraska.

The cancellation notices stated that the NEA was updating its grantmaking policies to focus on “creativity as prioritized by the President”.

What We Can Do to Preserve Our Freedom of Artistic Expression

We all have the power to preserve our freedoms by our everyday actions, particularly in joining together with others who are doing the same. There is enormous power in free expression, which is why authoritarians seek to suppress it.

People can protect free artistic expression by:

1. Attending and supporting arts presentations that include those that current governmental officials are seeking to restrict and defund. A California museum which recently lost its federal grant reported that the community “showed up in record numbers” to support its “Routed West” exhibition of 20th century African American quilt making.
2. Donating to arts organizations, particularly those which have had federal arts grants rescinded, or are presenting stories you want to learn.
3. Supporting artists and organizations who are protesting government restrictions. For example, artists nationwide have organized a series of Fall of Freedom protest events to resist governmental efforts to restrict the arts. Similarly, Smithsonian Museum supporters have taken cellphone photographs of exhibits that governmental officials are now restricting, to ensure that the exhibits can be installed again in the future.
4. Supporting public officials who will stand against governmental control and restriction of the arts and who will protect free expression.

We must stand with our cultural institutions to protect the stories that are uniquely American and, in so doing, preserve our history.