



OP-ED

Retreat from the global

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On May 22, 2017, Donald Trump released his budget proposal for the coming fiscal year, one that would entirely eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Public Broadcasting Service. Right-wing media such as the *National Review* gave the proposal full support, arguing that “The Left should stop whining about the NEA and NEH and, instead, do something productive: They should fight for President Trump’s tax-cut plan”. The *National Review* even had the audacity to note how beneficial a tax cut would be for the wealthy: “Hollywood and Broadway artists and executives would see their top rate sliced from 39.5 percent to 35 percent. Major media companies such as Time Warner and NBCUniversal would see their corporate taxes drop from 35 percent to 20 or, even better, 15 percent”. No mention, of course, of Trump’s base, the working poor, who would not benefit from this tax reduction. Or of artists. Or of art historians. Even without the proposed eliminations, the US spends less on arts than just about any civilized nation on earth. To give an example, the combined budget of the NEH and NEA is somewhat less than \$300 million or 0.008% of the federal budget. By contrast, the Vienna Opera alone receives almost \$65 million in state subsidies, and then there’s Salzburg and the Vienna Philharmonic just in the realm of music. Add to that art museums such as the Kunsthistorisches, and the total Austrian budget for arts and culture comes to EUR 436 million, about \$500 million. That’s Austria: a country whose GDP is 1/53rd that of the US (if this humanist is calculating accurately). Or let’s go to an even more extreme example, India, the country where I focus much of my research. Its GDP is, not surprisingly, higher than that of Austria’s but significantly lower than that of the US. Still the budget of India’s Ministry of Culture for 2017 amounts to the rupee equivalent of \$390 million.

OK, just because one country, even most countries, invests more heavily in

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the arts than the US does, does that mean we should, too? That sort of argument feels like one I encounter in all too many fellowship proposals: No one has ever investigated this before, the proposer argues, and I (*sotto voce*) say “I understand why; not everything is worth investigating”. But I want to distinguish between that and the role of the arts and humanities in a society that too often takes creativity as a fringe activity, a luxury that we don’t need, that sees education as career preparation without recognizing the danger of visual illiteracy, that sees only science, technology, engineering and math as valuable to society and a legitimate part of academic enterprise. I am as much driven to discover as any scientist, and while I, a cancer patient, am ever so grateful for my oncologist’s devotion to research, I am equally grateful for my primary care physician, like my oncologist, a professor at the University of Minnesota, who requires his medical students to take an art class, recognizing the role of creativity in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. And, ultimately, I believe my research is as valuable to humanity as that of any scientist or engineer.

But I think there’s more to the retreat from support of the major national agencies that fund the arts and humanities. I see it as a retreat from the world, part of a much larger agenda of looking inward and denying connections with humanity around the globe. My sensitivity to this was raised when India’s Prime Minister Modi campaigned for office with the slogan “Be Indian, Buy Indian”. In other words, consumption of foreign goods was anti-national. Trump, too, campaigned on a promise to disentangle the US from a global network of trade and climate agreements, as if the US should, or even could, function as an entity independent of the rest of the world. To me, as to most American academics, that is a frightening prospect, so interlinked are our intellectual and social lives with colleagues globally. I take pride in the commitment of the Getty Foundation’s Connecting Art Histories initiative and the reach of the College Art Association to expand its international membership and provide services to art historians across the globe.

I wonder, however, if we art historians, by the very nature of our research,

live up to the challenge of those initiatives, or if we retreat to domestic isolation as the Trump administration would have us do. I can understand that colleagues in countries with emerging art history focus almost exclusively on their own national art. The resources to do that are there, locally, and they need to present their national art to the world consciousness. But for the rest of us, I wonder about the extent to which we abet isolationism. Our discipline is, for the most part, constructed around national narratives, ones often further confined by a time period, as if that time period were a naturally and independently existing entity rather than a construct of cultural historians. We too often forget that artists, even in pre-modern times, functioned in a deeply interconnected world, often traveling to distant places and drawing inspiration from a visual world that knew no national or dynastic or linguistic boundaries. So where are we today? With a Venice Biennale in progress that presents art confined to national pavilions, with a discipline that adheres to divisions of time and space, and with our own research foci that encourage parochial thinking. Let me use this opportunity, then, to advocate recognition that the visual worlds we study are profoundly interconnected. Without that recognition – actively manifest in our own research and writing – we risk promoting the sort of national isolation that is so abhorrent in today’s political world. And, I would add, the arts are essential to an understanding of our own multi-cultural societies and the globally interconnected world in which I fervently hope my children and grandchildren will continue to occupy.

