

The Art of Giving: Feeding Our Minds and Souls



By Judy Belk

I was ten years old when I saw my first live professional arts performance and—although I didn't know it at the time—it was also my first encounter with the tremendous reach and power of strategic philanthropy.

The performance was Georges Bizet's *Carmen*; the venue was the National Theatre in Washington, DC. I sat there totally mesmerized by the salty Carmen as she flirted and teased poor Don Jose leading to the opera's tragic emotional ending. The set, the costumes, the music, and the singing all transported me to another world. It was also at that moment that I became a lifetime lover of the theatre. In preparing us for the performance, my elementary school music teacher, Mrs. Lewis, (remember those days when public schools had fully funded arts programs?) briefed us on the music and libretto. More importantly, she made sure that we understood that our visit to the theater was made possible by the generosity of a local philanthropist, who wanted to share her love of the opera with students who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to experience it.

As I reflect on the difficult economic times facing both the arts community and the philanthropic sector, it's hard not to notice how much of my own personal life and our

society have been enriched by the collaboration of generous donors and dedicated artists.

Even when times are good, supporting the arts is often viewed as an indulgent or unnecessary use of vital funds. This sentiment can even be found among the most committed funders of the arts. So, during tough times, especially in the current recession, the pressure mounts considerably on donors. They must battle with a guilty complex when questioning whether to use their limited dollars to support the arts in the face of so much human suffering. The voice inside many donors' heads repeats questions that sound like this: How can I support the arts when there are so many other "real" problems facing our world? Climate change, racism, poverty, war, disease, human rights violations: Where do the arts fit in?

The real question is *where doesn't art fit in?* Can we really imagine a world without music, theatre, literature, and the visual arts? Tommer Peterson, the Deputy Director of Grantmakers in the Arts, cautions donors from viewing arts funding as an either/or decision. "Pitting cultural organizations against social needs is missing the big picture. Arts and culture enrich our spirit, increase our understanding of both our differences and similarities, while enhancing our creative spirit and core democratic values."

Still not convinced? Even the most results-oriented funder would be interested to know that there is a plethora of studies documenting the impact and exposure of the arts ranging from enhanced physical and mental well-being, improved academic performance, violence prevention and creative problem solving, as well as creating a more accepting and inclusive society.

If you pick up any newspaper or publication which covers the nonprofit sector, you will find an endless stream of doom and gloom stories. Whether the story is covering the shattering impact that Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme had on a countless number of foundations and donors or the freezing up of funds in major corporations' charitable giving accounts, the news is not good. However, even with the current economic woes, there are bright spots on the

horizon for the arts community and its supporters. Here, at Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, in just the past eighteen months, our donors allocated more than \$32 million to arts and cultural organizations around the world.

One of our largest initiatives is The New York State Music Fund, which was established by the New York State Attorney General in 2005, as a result of the settlement of charges alleging misconduct by recording and broadcasting companies. To date, the fund has awarded just over 400 grants totaling more than \$35.7 million to support an array of contemporary music efforts across the state. One of the Music Fund's grantees, New York City-based ArtsConnection brings world music and jazz into public schools through training programs, professional and student performances, and family events in schools located in low-income areas of Crown Heights and the South Bronx.

Several of the family foundations we support are also among the most avid and innovative funders of the arts. The Sidney E. Frank Foundation has made a leadership grant to L.A. Theatre Works to support in-studio recordings of important works of dramatic literature. These recordings will be distributed widely to students and the public through school classrooms, libraries, iTunes, radio broadcasts, CDs and other public outreach venues.

The BayTree Fund is a major supporter of the HeyDay Press and Institute, which promotes a diverse roster of writers, poets, and other storytellers whose voices would otherwise not be heard. A recent HeyDay book focused on the history of Allensworth, California, a small community in the Central Valley that flourished in the early 1900s as a self-sustaining community settled by African-American families who had fled the segregated South.

On the national level, there is also reason to be encouraged.

From all indications, President Obama is and will continue to be a friend to the arts community, both in substance and in symbolism. An early hopeful sign includes the highly visible inclusion of an Inaugural Poet, Elizabeth Alexander, in the Inauguration ceremony. And it's also always a welcome sign of change when a world leader

is spotted carrying a copy of Derek Walcott's collected poems.

On the policy side, it was great news to note that an official Arts transition team was put in place to advise the new administration and that \$50 million was initially earmarked by the House Appropriations Committee for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as part of the proposed economic recovery package. An even more telling sign of the times is the call from political figures, educational leaders and respected journalists for a cabinet-level-position in the new administration to represent the Arts and Culture—a move which has sparked a spirited public discourse!

Leaders in the arts community are also hopeful. Among them is Susie Medak, Managing Director of The Berkeley Repertory Theatre in California and current president of the League of Resident Theatres, which represents 80 of the largest nonprofit theatres in the country. "This is the first president in history who has gone on record promoting an aggressive arts platform, and that has put



us on equal footing with the importance of technology, science, human services and environmental polices. He gets it. The arts are an integral part of society and have to be supported."

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Funder Resources:

- **Grantmakers in the Arts:** Grantmakers in the Arts is a membership organization whose trade is discourse on ideas about arts philanthropy within a diverse community of grantmakers. Members include private, community, corporate, and family foundations, as well as public sector grantmakers, regranteeing organizations whose primary purpose is arts grantmaking, and individual donors who give through eligible organizations. Especially relevant to grantmakers and the current economy is a new paper they recently published and that can be found on their website, entitled: "Economic Turmoil and Change."

<http://www.giarts.org/>

- **Americans for the Arts:** Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America. With 45 years of service, they are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts. Their offices are located in Washington, DC, and New York.
<http://www.americansforthearts.org/>
- **Arts Action Fund:** The Arts Action Fund is a 501(c) (4) nonprofit membership organization created by Americans for the Arts, the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing arts in America. Launched on October 4, 2004, it seeks to engage citizens in education and advocacy in support of the arts and arts education.
<http://www.artsactionfund.org/>

