

# Jordan's Argument for the Arts Lives On



*Almost 20 years after former Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan delivered a keynote address to the American Council for the Arts, her words continue to resonate and remain current in light of our state's economic struggles. We have often used Jordan's words in our advocacy efforts and hope that you will find inspiration in her perspective on the importance of raising up the arts during a time of economic crisis.*

**W**e are properly positioned in time to begin a new cycle. Optimism is in the air. And this is not a time to be shy. One way to guarantee that this sense of hope will not be lost is to act on it now.

If your interest, concern, involvement, or passion is the arts, you are probably somewhat reluctant to speak too loudly at this moment. With all the rhetoric of budget deficits and sacrifice perhaps you feel it would be somehow sacrilegious to talk about the arts. Wrong! The arts are an integral part of our lives and have often been pivotal in reinvigorating our national spirit.

Indeed, the primary thesis of my remarks is that the arts, instead of quaking along the periphery of our policy concerns, must push boldly into the core of policy. The arts are not a frill. The arts are a response to our individuality and our nature, and help to shape our identity. As a young student in a class at Laguna Gloria Art Museum in my hometown of Austin, Texas, wrote, "Every feeling comes out on my paper and in my drawings."

I submit to you that the arts can be the validation of the American dream. We heard President Clinton in his address to a joint session of Congress speak about renewing our economy so that the American dream can be a possibility for everyone. No one disputes that a healthy economy is part and parcel of the American dream. But it is our job to teach empathically that the arts are more than just the decorations on that dream.

And what precisely is the American Dream? It is: "We are one people." *E. Pluribus Unum*. The Latin phrase on the great seal of the United States translates as "one from many." We need to reattach "pluribus" to "unum"—the many to the one.

The arts can help us painlessly to articulate and showcase our oneness. The arts have no pigmentation. The American Dream

has survived many attacks from our deadliest war to Rodney King. That's a long stretch. To borrow a phrase from William Faulkner, "I remain confident it will continue not just to survive, but to prevail over the attacks from extremists of every ilk."

Assimilation was never the goal of the diverse ethnic groups in America. Inclusion without discomfort is now and ever will be the goal. Maybe one day we will be comfortable enough with each other to drop the hyphens. There should be no hyphenated Americans. The idea of a melting pot was and remains a myth. Universal inclusivity is not a radical idea.

What is there that can transcend deep differences and stubborn divisions? The arts. They have a wonderful universality. Art has the potential to unify. It can speak in many languages without a translator. Art does not discriminate. It ignores external irrelevancies and opts for quality, talent, and competence. Let me quote again from the children attending the class at the Austin museum—children who could not have attended without scholarships. When asked if they were surprised at what they and their classmates had made, they responded, "Yes, because I didn't

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expect to see some of the things I could do," and "Yes, I was surprised that all the art works turned out great." Again, art unifies; it does not discriminate.

There is no reason, patrons of the arts, to apologize for beauty. But it is important in this time of economic worries to articulate what is obvious to each of us—that art does more than stimulate and please the senses. The arts, in the words of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, are integrally related to the U.S. economy and contribute to our nation's wealth, competitiveness, and growth. A contribution to the GNP of almost six percent comes from the arts—more than food, apparel, chemical, and refining

industries combined. These figures don't include the direct economic impact of increased tourism and revitalization of downtown urban areas. Nor do these figures speak to a vital part of the American dream: the arts provide a passage out of poverty for thousands of economically disadvantaged individuals. Professional sports may capture the imaginations of impoverished young people, but the arts provide the careers that can lift young men and women out of poverty.

And why is it that the arts can work this economic magic? It isn't magic, it's common sense. There is a direct relationship between the arts and self-esteem, a value which forecloses destructive tendencies. That is, you cannot feel good about who you are and where you are and simultaneously want to destroy your neighborhood.


I have just echoed the thoughts of

Jacques Barzun, who in the 1973 Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, declared that "art is power." He said that art "influences the mind, the nerves, the feelings, the soul" and that it "can fight material and spiritual evils and can transmit the ideals of a community now living, long past, or soon to be born." The arts are a multi-generational communicator.

In order for the arts to live up to the ambitious agenda I have prescribed, we must be more than distant observers and appreciative spectators. We need to seek a permanent place in public school curricula for arts education. I commend the *New York Times* for its articles titled "Missing Muses." Those articles point out that art classes teach the very qualities educators believe can reinvigorate American schools—analytical thinking, teamwork, motivation, and self-discipline. As an ele-

mentary teacher in Austin said, "It doesn't matter if the child is a genius or a slow learner: fine arts is where every child can succeed."

The arts deserve a higher place in American public policy agenda. Sondra Myers, the cultural advisor to Pennsylvania's governor, recently wrote: "We must wake up to the realities of our rich cultural resources and make the case for the integration of culture into public policy."

We must—to borrow a phrase from the 1960s—seize the moment that has been handed to us. We are embarking on the first movements in a new cycle in American history. We have just completed a cycle during which the arts survived, but only by scratching and clawing to hold the gains of the previous cycle. It is up to us to lead the way. We must be sure that our President and the Congress—and the American people most of all—understand that the arts can lift us all up. 

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