

COMMUNITY/ARTS DEVELOPMENT: WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

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“History does not refer merely, or even principally...to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities and our aspirations.”¹

CONTEXT

I’ve always paid attention to words, definitions and meanings. Think about prepositions. Take “for,” “of,” “by,” and “with,” for instance, often used carelessly and, in arts administration, too often interchangeably. We probably have all said, “arts for everyone!” but think about the two very different meanings of that phrase.

Meaning #1: John D. Rockefeller 3rd chaired a seminal panel² on the performing arts in the 1960’s. Author Michael Straight quotes Mr. Rockefeller’s introduction to the report: “The arts are not for a privileged few but the many...” but then Straight says:

“... he and the panel feared that government support would in time lead to the substitution of mediocrity for excellence in the performing arts. It was a latter-day expression of the Edwardian view ... that democracy was a fine idea; too fine to be left to the people as he found them.... In that same spirit the Rockefeller Panel held that the arts were ‘for the many’ but could not be entrusted to the many.”³

Meaning #2: Robert E. Gard of Wisconsin was writing about arts development in the 1960’s as well. His worldview was quite different, although he, too, believed that the “arts are for everyone.” Contrast this with the Rockefeller perspective:

“In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone.... As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people and in the places where the people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves.”⁴

Two distinct meanings.

The perspective of art *for* people, is an important one, but it tends to be reasonably well documented. The other perspective is equally important, but harder to research, for it often appears within stories about community development movements. So let me focus on that.

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: URBAN

¹ Baldwin, James, “White Man’s Guilt,” *Ebony*, volume 20, August 1965, page 47. Note: This quote is often—mistakenly—said to be from *The Fire Next Time*. Thanks to librarian Patrick Muckleroy, Western State College, for tracking down the correct source.

² Rockefeller Panel Report, *The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects*, McGraw-Hill, 1965.

³ Straight, Michael, *Nancy Hanks: An Intimate Portrait*, Duke University Press, 1988, p. 80-81.

⁴ Gard, Robert E., *The Arts in the Small Community*, University of Wisconsin Extension, 1969, p. 4.

Where to start? I could mention that communication through dance, art, graffiti, music, and story is the way that countless cultures affirm who they are, describe the news, transmit knowledge and ways of doing things to the next generation, and evaluate their progress as a culture. Or I could mention that in ancient Athens, citizens had to take an oath which included the pledge to leave their city more beautiful than they found it. Or that in early New England, there were community beautification programs which probably foreshadowed the creation of the Boston Public Arts Commission in 1890. Or that there were community improvement societies – neighborly discussion groups– which foreshadowed the Chautauqua and tent Chautauqua movements and arts tours throughout America.

But to me the really fascinating stories start in the early 20th century. It was a time of great social ferment. W.E.B. DuBois was writing about race, segregation and cultural liberation. Scholar Cornel West believes that DuBois found art essential for intercultural dialogue, creating “an atmosphere and context so conversation can flow back and forth and we can be influenced by each other.”⁵ Still, DuBois realized that intercultural communication couldn’t be meaningful until all of the groups in the conversation had awareness of, and pride in, who they were. In one speech he said,

“We must come to the place where the work of art ... is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment. And we are going to have a real and valuable and eternal judgment only as we make ourselves free of mind, proud of body and just of soul to all men.”⁶

At the same time that DuBois was writing, the Settlement House movement was well underway; 400 had been established by 1890. A Settlement House was a community center offering services primarily to new immigrants from Europe, although there were also houses created to help African American migrants from the south. Many of them included galleries, painting and dance classes, and theater groups. At the same time, some like Hull House in Chicago held special nights for certain cultural groups to remind themselves of their cultural roots; and Hull House founder Jane Addams believed that showcasing cultural arts could be a way to address intercultural animosity. The Junior League was founded by privileged young women with a social conscience to support the work of the settlement houses; we’ll come back to the Junior League in a few minutes.

Pageantry grew with the social reform movement, and the American Pageant Association was founded in 1913, at roughly at the same time as the National Child Labor Committee or the NAACP. One of its aims was reforming American life; Indeed, a paper presented at a sociology conference in 1914 was entitled “Municipal Pageants as Destroyers of Race Prejudice.” But the other aim was artistic. Today the word “pageant” may connote superficial spectacle; not so, a hundred years ago. Those choreographers, musicians, and playwrights felt that in merging social reform, the arts, and community ritual, they were on the cutting edge of contemporary art-making.

An introspective process had been undertaken in Boston in 1909. Committees studied conditions of public health, religion, business, labor, immigration, parks, education, prisons, and more. Representatives of each committee sat on the “Boston 1915” super-committee whose goal was to find a way to institute significant improvements. The committee decided that a pageant could be useful, and they found a young playwright, Percy MacKaye, to coordinate the effort, synthesizing findings and issues of the many committees into a grand, engaging show. It involved, literally, hundreds of ordinary people (“Middle-class young people from the Curry School of Expression performed as Dust Clouds and Disease Germs alongside immigrants from Hale House, who depicted Flames....⁷). The organizers believed that working together would lead to intergroup communication, a better understanding of collective issues, and a new commitment to working together to solve them.

⁵ West is quoted in Applebome, Peter, “Can Harvard’s Powerhouse Alter the Course of Black Studies?” *New York Times*, November 3, 1996.

⁶ *The Crisis*, Vol. 32, October 1926: pp. 290-297; downloaded from <http://www.webdubois.org/dbCriteriaNArt.html>

⁷ Prevots, Naima, *American Pageantry: A Movement for Art & Democracy*, UMI Research Press, 1990, p. 30-31.

MacKaye was also invited to do a pageant in St. Louis in 1914. The number of participants of “The Masque of St. Louis” was staggering, although few African-Americans were involved. Participants included a 100-piece orchestra, a 500-voice chorus, and a total cast of 7,000. There was outdoor seating for 43,000. This pageant was coupled with a national Conference of Cities. The conference, whose theme was the democratization of art in city life, addressed topics from “Folk Dancing in America” to “People’s Orchestra” to “Municipal Recreation: A School of Democracy” to “Humanizing City Government.”

Perhaps the big idea of pageantry can most clearly be summarized by three successive chapter titles of Glassberg’s *American Historical Pageantry*: “The Place Is the Hero.” “Community Development Is the Plot.” “To Explain the City to Itself.” Or, more poetically, it is summarized by playwright Percy MacKaye: pageantry reflects “the half-desire of the people not merely to remain receptive to a popular art created by specialists, but to take part themselves in creating it; the desire, that is, of democracy consistently to seek expression through a drama and the people, not merely *for* the people.”⁸

EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY: RURAL

And what was happening in rural areas? Pageantry was not strictly an urban phenomenon. In 1914, “The Social Center Pageant” was presented in the tiny town of Sauk City, Wisconsin. “Sauk City’s Pageant was a celebration of that city’s decision to fully adopt the... school as [its] Social Center [and] to fully adopt the structure in which the Principal of the school became the official ‘Civic Secretary’ of the community.”⁹

1914 was an important year in rural America, for Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, creating the federal Extension Service. Of the ten objectives of the Extension Service—such as advancing the educational and spiritual needs of rural people - almost all invited a creative, artistic response. *The Arts Workshop of Rural America*, published in 1937, studied the surge of rural art-making throughout America, and described many Extension Service workers as, in effect, circuit-riding community arts developers.

“The story of the cultural contributions of the Rural Arts Program of the Agricultural Extension Service has never been fully told.... These activities are deeply rooted in the soil.... Over wide areas farmers are interested now in opera as well as in corn and hogs We are accustomed to hearing the voices of the little-theater groups in cities and larger towns.... We are not so accustomed to the new voices now making themselves heard from the plains, the prairies, and the mining communities, and from little, remote places in the mountains.... They are the voices of men and women who have struggled through drought, thaw, drifts, impassable roads, dust and hail storms; who have fought grasshoppers, chinch bugs, and rust.”¹⁰

As we explore the art-making encouraged by the Extension Service, we meet remarkable people. At North Dakota State University, Alfred Arvold, who worked there from the 19-teens to the 1950’s, urged his students to create performance from the life they knew, and to see creativity as part of a whole life that included sports, food-making, beautification (his drama students planted lilacs along the road from Fargo to Grand Forks every spring), conversation, and democracy. Indeed, in the attic above the theater, Arvold created a replica of the interior of the cabin where Abraham Lincoln was born, and after a show, the audience would be invited upstairs to join the cast in a meal and a discussion of issues important to them.

At Cornell University at about the same time, Alexander Drummond, whom I mentioned last night, mobilized farmers and homemakers to write and produce plays.

And at the University of North Carolina, Frederick Koch was urging the people of North Carolina to write “folk plays.” He stimulated the writing of hundreds, if not thousands, of plays by “ordinary Americans,” addressing the meaning of their lives and their communities. He believed that the American dramatic renaissance, befitting

⁸ Prevots, Naima, p. 87.

⁹ Drury, Gwen, “The Wisconsin Idea: The Vision That Made Wisconsin Famous,” online at <http://www.ls.wisc.edu/documents/wi-idea-history-intro-summary-essay.pdf>, downloaded 1/3/12, p. 57.

¹⁰ Patten, Marjorie, *The Arts Workshop of Rural America*, Columbia University Press, 1937, p. 3-4.

a democracy, would be “intensely local, drama as many-sided and as multi-colored as are the peoples of our American states.”¹¹ The folk plays ranged from stories of rural mountain life to stories of life in a Durham slum to stories of racial injustice.

PROGRESSIVE POLITICS AND ARTS

Last night, I talked about how the Wisconsin Idea, exemplar of the Progressive movement, provided a framework for arts development. Indeed, one University of Wisconsin president, Glenn Frank said in the 1920’s, “There’s a gap somewhere in the soul of the people that troops into the theater but never produces a folk drama...The next great dramatic renaissance in America will come when the theatre is recaptured from the producers by the people, when we become active enough in mind and rich enough in spirit to begin the creation of a folk drama and a folk theatre in America.”¹²

I should also mention Dean Chris Christensen, of the College of Agriculture. He believed that an agricultural education must include poetry as well as farming techniques, and to this end in 1936 he hired an artist-in-residence who could help farm people express their creative visions. Said to be the nation’s first artist-in-residence— in an agricultural college, no less! - John Steuart Curry’s job was to assist anyone who wanted to paint, to capture and communicate their personal vision. Soon there were scores of rural artists “painting what they knew,” everywhere in the state . It was so successful that Gard was invited to Wisconsin to do the same thing with writing and playwriting. I told you last night about the extraordinary surge of writing everywhere in Wisconsin as a result. He went beyond only assisting nascent and established writers. In 1953, he hired sociologists and survey researchers to help understand why people participate in the arts, and all of his work foreshadowed what we now call “arts and....” activity, as arts groups work with schools, businesses, health care, religious institutions and so many more. Ahead of his time.

THE 1930’s

No doubt such artists as Gard, Koch or Curry, concerned about communities, had been influenced by the ferment and big ideas swirling around during the 1920’s and 1930’s, which had to do with justice, or self-determination, or cultural soul-searching. Diego Rivera, one of Mexico’s great muralists, was commissioned to create murals in several American cities; his political beliefs and painting ignited tremendous controversy. Also during this time, though for just a brief moment, the assimilation policy for Native Americans - that had led certain educators to say that the purpose of the Indian schools was to “kill the Indian... but save the man”¹³ – was changed, perhaps as a result of work from the American Indian Defense Association, and “children learned through the medium of their own cultural values.”¹⁴ Well, for a little while. The Harlem Renaissance was in full swing, and Langston Hughes championed racial consciousness and a new African-American aesthetic. People of all cultures were exploring political ideas that challenged the status quo. Foundations were being laid for the civil rights movement.

The Roosevelt years saw the Works Progress Administration. It wasn’t an arts development or a community development program, but a work relief program that employed thousands of writers, designers, artists, musicians, actors, circus artists and vaudevillians. But it had arts & community development impact nonetheless. The public saw professional caliber shows, often for the first time, via the Federal theater; over 1,200 plays were produced; there were over 1,000 performances per month.¹⁵ There were plays and puppet shows that toured to rural areas and to Civilian Conservation Corps camps; shows in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Yiddish; culturally-specific shows; new versions of classics such as Orson Welles’

¹¹ Frederick Koch, quoted in Patten, Marjorie, *The Arts Workshop of Rural America*, Columbia University Press, 1937, p. 6.

¹² Frank, Glenn, quoted in Gard, Robert E., *Grassroots Theater: A Search for Regional Arts in America*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1955, p. 95.

¹³ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/projects/2013/native-american-education/history-of-american-indian-education.html> downloaded 9/5/2016

¹⁴ http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=aief_hist_1930 downloaded 9/5/2016

¹⁵ Adams, Don, and Arlene Goldbard, “New Deal Cultural Programs: Experiments in Cultural Democracy,” 1986, 1995, <http://www.wgcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html> p. 9.

“MacBeth” set in the Caribbean with an all-African-American cast; traditional versions of classics as well as new scripts; issue-based skits of the “Living Newspaper” which didn’t shy away from topics like lynching or the poll tax; a radio theater; a theater for the blind in Oklahoma, and the Negro Unit which employed over 500 African American actors. The Federal Music Project, similarly, performed works by contemporary African-American composers, featured all-black casts in some operas, sponsored African-American concert bands in a host of cities, and preserved and recorded African-American folk music as well as traditional Anglo music in Appalachia.

Important to mention is the network of community arts centers created by the Federal Art Project—100 of them in 22 states.¹⁶ The director of the Federal Art Project said, “The core of the community art center idea is active participation, doing and sharing, and not merely seeing....”¹⁷ Perhaps the best-known of these centers was the Harlem Community Arts Center, operating 1937-42. Painter Elba Lightfoot reflected:

“We just felt that the Black minority so endowed with talent and creative energy needed an arena for itself. It was imperative that we had an outlet of our own. If we hadn’t the means to make ourselves heard, we would never have been able to assume any responsibility of our own toward weaving the fabric of Black history.”¹⁸

Adams and Goldbard note that the New Deal arts projects took “responsibility for our cultural commonwealth. They took on the task of recording history—including many parts otherwise deemed too painful or embarrassing to mention.”¹⁹ Some said, however, that this referred primarily to African-American culture. Anthony Garcia, playwright and adjunct professor of Chicano Studies, noted that: “Apparently the WPA and Alan Lomax missed the Mexicans.”²⁰ Elsewhere he suggests that this absence of cultural documentation may be a result of a strong attempt by Mexican-Americans to assimilate into American society.

A teacher in New York City was well aware of all this as she observed the students in her classroom struggling with their cultural identities—and those of their classmates. Rachel Davis-DuBois wrote in 1943: “Political democracy—the right of all to vote—we have inherited though we do not as yet practice it perfectly. Economic democracy—the right of all to be free from want—we are beginning to envisage and to plan for more courageously. But cultural democracy—a sharing of values among numbers of our various cultural groups—we have scarcely dreamed of. Much less have we devised social techniques for creating it.”²¹

Perhaps in parallel to growing cultural self-awareness, there was a growing awareness of community identity. And, given the growth of the economy after World War II, it wasn’t so far-fetched for communities – especially mid-sized communities - to start wanting the cultural amenities that urban areas had. A young musician in Quincy, Illinois, started a community chamber orchestra and then the Quincy Society of Fine Arts to encourage cultural growth and coordination. And – re-enter the Junior League! – the League of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, decided to focus on building local culture. They brought in Virginia Lee Comer – the Junior League’s Senior Consultant for Community Arts – in the mid-1940’s to help them. Out of this work in Quincy and Winston-Salem was born the first two community arts councils in 1949. The idea caught on like wildfire, and by 1955 there were 56 such entities; a decade later, when the National Endowment for the Arts had been created, there were some 450. The arts councils banded together into a service organization called Community Arts Councils, Inc. (the precursor to Americans for the Arts) and were a huge player in the push to create the National Endowment for the Arts.

¹⁶ Adams, Don and Arlene Goldbard, p. 8.

¹⁷ Finkelstein, Hope, , “Augusta Savage: Sculpting the African-American Identity,” M.A. Thesis, The City University of New York, 1990, p. 33.

¹⁸ Finkelstein, Hope p. 33.

¹⁹ Adams, Don and Arlene Goldbard, p. 11

²⁰ Garcia, Anthony, e mail to Maryo Ewell, January 3, 2012.

²¹ Davis-Dubois, Rachel, *Get Together Americans: Friendly Approaches to Racial and Cultural Conflicts Through the Neighborhood-Home Festival*, Harper & Bros., 1943, p. 5-6. The term “Cultural Democracy” is said by James Bau Graves, http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=5051, to have first been used in Julius Draschler’s *Democracy and Assimilation*, 1920

I'll close with a few of the questions this raises for me:

- Is the apparent tension of arts “for” the people and arts “of and by” the people real? What does it mean for our work? Is our goal to meld the two ideas into a single idea? Or is it a both/and situation? Or will community arts remain a sort of stepchild in the arts ecosystem?
- I keep hearing people say, “Well, it’s not great art, but it sure is great community process.” How does the arts world move beyond this and develop an aesthetic that fuses excellence in both?
- How do we find a good and sharable language that helps us describe and correctly evaluate community arts?
- Where do arts organizations fit into the mix?
- What does it mean to be of a culture? Of a place?
- What does it mean to have a voice?
- Why does our field not know about, and use, our very rich past as we design a very rich future? Or is it a field at all?

Well. The next pieces of this story are the rise of cultural institutions – especially since the birth of the NEA – and the proliferation of community arts activity especially as a result of the Civil Rights movement. I'll pass the microphone on to Diane Mataraza, and thence to E'Vonne Coleman.