

CONGRESS OF ARTS IN MICHIGAN: A preview of the White House Conference

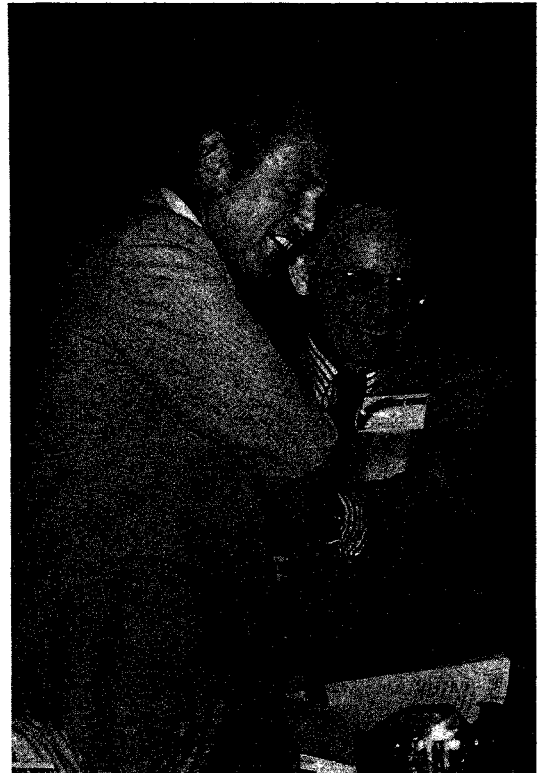
From 15 through 17 June, the First Michigan Congress on the Arts took place in Detroit's Renaissance Center. The Congress, organized and sponsored by the Michigan Council on the Arts, holds a particularly important place in the development of national arts thinking and policy in the light of the forthcoming White House Conference on the Arts. Many other states will be looking to Michigan as they begin to plan and organize the congresses and conferences to be held in each of the 50 states prior to the major national conference.

The Congress agenda was established by six pre-Congress Sessions held in various locations around Michigan during the eight months preceding the Congress itself. The Sessions were organized around major themes which provided specific issues to be sent to Detroit. The areas of concern were **Improved Resources, Arts in Education, Marketing the Arts, Pursuit of Excellence, Advocacy for the Arts, and Communication in Arts.** The Council invited resource persons, interested citizens, and concerned arts professionals and arts activists to each of the Pre-Congress Sessions to develop a series of issues and resolutions on which the final Congress would be able to deliberate.

At the same time as the Congress, a Celebration of the Arts took place in Detroit during which a plethora of activities were available, ranging from the sale of ethnic foods to concerts of chamber music, from a parade of the St. Andrew's Society pipe and drum band to an arts and crafts festival. Two highlights of the celebration were the Celebratory Sculpture built in Hart Plaza by Detroit artist Jim Pallas—an enormous arch of tethered balloons on a specially constructed net, designed and installed with the assistance of the Aesthetic Research Center group of Kansas City—and an appearance by comedian and arts activist Pat Paulsen, who is a Michigan resident.

OPENING SESSION

The Congress opened with greetings from E. Ray Scott, the modest, courtly Executive Director of the Michigan Council. Scott's comments were brief and to the point, expressing an interest in the issues to be brought before the Congress and thanking the delegates for their commitment and participation as well as thanking the staff which was responsible for the immense effort of organizing the project. (Other speakers during the day were left to point out Scott's outstanding contributions to the arts: as founding Director of the Council, guiding it from infancy to its current eminent position as a wealthy, active organization second only to the New York



Governor William Milliken Greets E. Ray Scott, MCA Director
State Council on the Arts in the size of its budget and services.

Richard Richards, Assistant Director of the Michigan Council for Expansion Services, then gave a Congress overview and introduced the Pre-Congress Session reports.

The Welcoming Address was delivered by State Senator Jack Faxon, whose career in the Michigan Senate has been characterized for its outspoken and long-term support for the arts. Faxon's speech was a thoughtful and joyous valedictory for culture and against kitsch, sprinkled with quotations from the classics and delightfully witty statements. In discussing the relationship of culture to some hobby activities, Faxon pointed out that more people preferred to enjoy the quiet comfort of the ballet and the art gallery than to trudge, weary and bone-damp through the woods while hunting wildlife. In suggesting that as much concern be given to the arts in state budget planning as is given to fish and game interests, he noted that nevertheless, in financial terms, "the Pendleton jacket goes a lot farther than the

tutu." One delegate was later heard to comment that perhaps the solution would be to get in on the ground floor of the Pendleton tutu industry.

FIRST GENERAL SESSION

Robert Nulf, Assistant Director of the Michigan Council for Development Services, explained Congress process and procedures. The highlight of the session was an address by Michigan Governor William G. Milliken.

Milliken's enthusiastic, supportive speech outlined the progress and growth of the arts in the state since the inception of the Council when he was a legislator and a close friend and colleague of Ray Scott. He pointed with pride to the increased budgets of the council and affirmed his support for further growth and development. Milliken himself has had much to do with the increase in council appropriations from \$250,000 to \$5,000,000 during his tenure in office. As the current chairman of the National Governors' Association, he has been recently responsible for the creation of a Governors' Arts Task Force to study the state arts programs and the ways in which each state can work to develop and further the arts in the United States. Milliken is clearly aware that the "arts provide services which were never intended to provide profit," but that public and private partnership and government support for the arts create a very definite wealth of experience and ideas for all citizens. In stating that "the arts challenge our senses, whether we struggle to create a new writing or painting, or whether we are appreciating what others have created," Milliken made clear that as an individual and as a public leader, he has engaged in and benefited from the creative process of that challenge.

ISSUE HEARINGS

The Congress then began its major task: the issue hearings which were to deliberate on, refine and state the resolutions which were to come before the Congress for final action. Out of the six Pre-Congress Sessions—and a seventh, special Pre-Congress Session focussed on Michigan's large and remote Upper Peninsula—came a large number of resolutions. These resolutions, when passed by the Congress, were to be directed toward agencies ranging from the legislature to the Michigan Council as well as to municipal agencies or specific arts or civic organizations as expressions of the interest and wishes of the citizens of Michigan in relation to the arts.

Since it would have been impossible to have brought the extremely large number of resolutions before the entire body for lengthy debate and refinement, each logically-related series of resolutions were sent to an issue hearing where those concerned with specific issues could voice their opinion and vote to modify, clarify or otherwise refine—or accept—each resolution before it took the final form on which the entire Congress would act. This process also enabled the Michigan Council to invite resource persons to each session to assist the voting delegates in their deliberations.

The delegates benefitted from the presence of over 100 consultants expert in the areas covered by the issue sessions. Many of these consultants were brought in from out of state. The 24 issue hearings covered the following topics: common

goals and objectives for art education; local government support for the arts and intergovernmental cooperation supporting community arts commissions; communication networks for small or remote arts organizations; assistance to individual artists in presenting their work; improvement of arts criticism and coverage; the establishment of more effective communication resources for the increase of arts information; legislation affecting the arts; improvement of arts education training for the integration of the arts into general education; the urging of local governments and communities for the establishment of public arts facilities; initiation of organizational campaigns for the arts in general and for specific audiences; increasing labor involvement in the arts; increased communication to special constituencies; extension of access to the arts with attention to increased quality; consideration of a statewide computer-based arts information system; legislative support for the arts; increased local government involvement in the arts; the development of marketing skills and programs for Michigan artists and arts organizations; expansion of business involvement in the arts; study of the economic impact of the arts; expansion and improvement of media coverage on the arts; the issue of artists' responsibility; the development of an arts advocacy organization; and consideration of media as art forms.

SOME PROBLEMS EMERGE

The major problem of the Congress—which was an event remarkably free of problems and unusually efficient in planning and execution—was the time factor. It undoubtedly would have been helpful if there had been another day to permit lengthier issue sessions without curtailing other necessary activities. It was also noticed that at least a few of the conference delegates were simply unprepared for their responsibilities—either in a failure to study carefully the agenda of their sessions or simply through lack of experience in debating and resolving issues through a parliamentary process. As a result some sessions reached far beyond their time limits or failed to accomplish their complete agenda, often through frequent excess debate couched in terms such as "I want to make a motion to amend the motion that was just made" and through a "need" for frequent repetition. Nevertheless, at least a few panels were notably successful in executing their task.

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Issue Session M, *To Extend Accessibility of the Arts, Making High Quality Arts Experiences Available on a Regular Basis*, brought a record of 10 resolutions to the floor, thanks to moderator Marshall Turkin, Executive Director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, a hard-working consultant team and the willingness of the delegates to sit through the agenda past the appointed hour.

Many Issue Sessions completed and reported out fewer resolutions than were assigned, another indication of delegate inexperience and lack of time. Nevertheless, at least one team far exceeded its assigned tasks. Issue Session Y, moderated by Dr. Diane Kirkpatrick of the Department of the History of Art of the University of Michigan, reported out twice as many resolutions as it started with. This efficiency, rather stunning to the belabored Congress staff, was due to Kirkpatrick's skillful moderation and to the fact that she summoned her panel to a pre-session lunch at which time two hours were spent analyzing and preparing all details, with a panel consultant assigned to the final preparation of each of the new resolutions needed.

Filmmaker Stan Vanderbeek took on the notable effort of preparing notes for an important video/film research center which brought forth a well-conceived and carefully drafted resolution, while Charlton Burch of *Lightworks* magazine clarified issues on printed media such as magazines and artists' books which had been neglected in resolutions which unfortunately restricted the term "media" to electronic means.

The problems of the Congress were clearly not as much problems of planning and execution on the part of the staff as problems of inexperience and ill-preparedness on the part of the delegates. Other states preparing to hold similar Congresses or conferences will be well-advised to prepare and educate the moderators for various sessions in advance of their meetings and to attempt to educate delegates and conferees as to their tasks and the nature of their responsibilities. It was clear, for example, that some people did not understand that the Congress was recommending resolutions to others who must enact laws and implement the resolutions. In mistaking Congress action for "law," many delegates worried far too much over individual words and too little with overall spirit and accomplishment of the full and important agenda of issues. Even so, most of the work of the Congress was achieved, and in some ways, Congress achievements far exceeded even the expectations of the planning staff.

The problems of the Congress were the problems inherent in the democratic process. Commendably, the Michigan Council and its Congress staff chose to weather those problems—even knowing in part what they might entail—rather than create a more "efficient" but less healthy atmosphere. The Congress was clearly a healthy experience in participatory decision-making.

STAFF

The staff was well-organized. As resolutions were developed, for example, they went to a Congress printing room where they were typed, printed, and bound into books for distribution at General Sessions. The room hummed with activity for the entire Congress, producing neatly designed, usable materials with the skill and style of a busy wire service or newspaper.

ARTISTS

The Congress was not only important for the arts activists, educators and administrators of Michigan, but for the artists themselves. While many artists present were attending in an administrative role rather than as artists, those identified specifically as individual artists were disappointingly few. Despite criticism that artists were not invited, 300 artists received invitations directly from Tom Rudd, Director of the Michigan Council's program in Services to Individual Artists. The artists were not only invited, but offered financial assistance to enable them to attend. While the Congress did charge a registration fee, more than one artist was able to attend entirely free of charge. As well, most Michigan college and university departments in the arts received ample information. It was remarkably disappointing to note that these institutions—which employ more individual artists as such than any other support system in the state—sent very few delegates, or rather that very few artists from them chose to accept delegate status, which was open to any Michigan citizen. Only 27 individual artists registered for the Congress, an incredibly low figure at a time when artists around the world are becoming more aware of their public responsibilities. If nothing else, the failure of the artists of the State to attend was a failure to themselves. All evidence points to the fact that the complaints that artists were not informed or invited were either based on misinformation or were the self-serving excuses of those who preferred to offer specious excuses for their laziness or unwillingness to attend.

It is true that to some degree information on the Congress could have been more ample or more detailed, but in part, the information reflected on its ambiguity the very open attitude and democratic nature of the Congress itself, and it is certain that artists received as much or more information and encouragement to attend as the thousand or so citizens who were present. An artist may justifiably have said, "I simply don't want to attend," but in that statement, one neither blames one's disinterest in the Congress and in the democratic process on others by accusing them improperly of some shortcoming, nor does one thereafter have the right to say "This is terrible. It should have been done this way . . ."

All citizens—and several hundreds of artists, invited directly or through academic departments of all the arts—were invited. The poets, painters, dancers, sculptors, film-makers, and other artists who did attend the Congress, did their jobs well.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Two particularly important activities for artists took place at the Congress. First, a Michigan Artists' Caucus was formed. Launched with great enthusiasm and with the respect of the entire body of delegates, the Caucus is chaired by Dr. Sybil Kein of the Department of English, at University of Michigan's Flint campus. The other significant new organization to develop at the Congress was the Michigan Women's Caucus for Art. At a meeting chaired by Nancy Natow and Marsha Hewitt-Gates of Ann Arbor, plans were drawn up for the MWCA which will be a chapter of the national Women's Caucus for Art. It is interesting to note

that only a few days later, LeAnne Miller, President of the national WCA, was appointed Chairperson of Detroit's Wayne State University Department of Art.

One disappointing aspect of the Congress was the failure of the Congress, both in Issue Sessions and in the General Session, to develop and pass any form of resolution concerned with sexism. Several resolutions were proposed, ranging from strongly-worded resolutions suggesting specific quotas and processes to mild recommendations simply calling attention to the need to combat sexism. The failure of a Congress which was in the largest part open and spirited in its attitudes to adopt any resolutions on the problem of sexism suggests that concerned citizens, arts activists and artists in other states must carefully do their homework and educational preparation as they prepare to attend their own state conferences and to influence the national arts policy to emerge from the White House Conference. The time when sexism could be considered insignificant or in any way acceptable in a healthy art world or in art institutions is long past. If we are to assure that the issue receives due attention—particularly in conservative states, as opposed to predominantly liberal Michigan—it is clear that concerned individuals will be required to do a substantial amount of groundwork and preparation well in advance of each congress or conference.

CLOSING SESSION

The last day of the Congress was shared with the American Council for the Arts. This day included a shared luncheon session featuring a speech by Louis Harris, the well-known survey research expert and current Chairman of the ACA. In the evening, a joint Congress/ACA Banquet was addressed by Joseph L. Hudson, Jr., head of the J.L. Hudson Company. The day also included a number of shared workshops on topics such as copyright, the National Endowment's programs in various fields, CETA, and the Institute of Museum Services.

The First Michigan Congress on the Arts was a clear demonstration of possibilities for intelligent development of public arts policy through citizen participation in partnership with professionals in the field and in cooperation with governmental agencies. The hard work and careful planning of the Michigan Council for the Arts offers models to the other states. Because so many state conferences will be planned with volunteer effort and in cooperation with interested professionals, individuals who wish to work effectively in their own states in developing statewide conferences and in attending the White House Conference on the Arts will want to study the process and results of the Michigan Congress. Full information—including a book-length report to be published this August—can be obtained by writing to Richard Richards, Office of Expansion Services, or Robert D. Nulf, Office of Development Services, Michigan Council on the Arts, 1200 Sixth Avenue, Detroit, MI 48226.

In planning the Congress to effectively embody citizen and professional participation on all levels, the Michigan Council created a model which points the way to a more lively and healthy arts atmosphere than exists in the United States today. The fact that the arts in the United States are

not as healthy as they might be does not stem from any lack of interest on the part of the American citizenry, which has demonstrated an increasing interest in the arts and a major desire to support the arts. It exists, rather, because we have failed to develop methods by which to translate the interests and express wishes of our citizens in relation to the arts—all the arts—into effective policies on all levels of private and public achievement. Democratic gatherings of the general body of citizens together with art professionals focussed on the issues and problems of mutual concern offer opportunities to begin to forge the solutions we require.

This is particularly significant in that public participation represents votes and voter interest, a fact that legislators and public officials respect. If none of the solutions are perfect—and none of them will be—they are a beginning and they are the beginning of a process which will offer better solutions as the public dialogue grows in strength and skill. The First Michigan Congress on the Arts was a major contribution to that growing dialogue.

—Ken Friedman

DEADLINES FOR NEA GRANTS

29 September:	Crafts Exhibition Aid Craftsmen's Apprenticeships Craft Workshops/Alternative Spaces
1 October	Expansion arts: Special summer projects, regional tour events, community cultural centers and neighborhood arts services
2 October	Museums, museum training, fellowships for museum professionals, services to the field
3 October	Literature: assistance to small presses
6 October	Work experience internships

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