

Philanthropic Support of Dance
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Dance receives proportionately smaller attention from foundations because it faces several limitations: it did not gather adherents and interest in the U.S. until the first part of the 20th century; it is dependent on intensive training and rehearsal; it is based on the ephemerality of performance, with no clear means for commodification and reproduction in the marketplace; and it is fused to bodies, with all their attendant social neuroses. In the United States, a commitment to confrontational politics by modern dancers added to the troubles. So the monies that some foundations did give – particularly the Rockefeller and Ford foundations – deserve attention for what they can tell us about how the art form was perceived, what interest foundation officers had in respect to dance, and how dance was seen in relation to the goals of the foundation.

Giving to the arts caused considerable debate within the Rockefeller Foundation from the 1930s to the 1950s. Foundation officers questioned where the arts should be placed, in education or humanities divisions, and wrote memos to each other defining the arts and humanities and articulating their worthiness. David Stevens and John Marshall spent considerable time teasing out the importance of the humanities. In a 1939 draft about the nascent Humanities Program (begun in 1934), they offered the definition that "the essential function of the humanities is perhaps the communication of value. . . . In the humanistic sense value is the worth the individual can discover in what their own or other cultures offers." To this end, as Bill Buxton has written, they devoted attention to libraries, museums, drama (particularly in universities), microfilm, radio, and film. Marshall made particular note in a draft of the 1939 report that the

foundation had "avoided help to the arts in general, including particularly help to literature and the dance." He went on to point out that this was at odds with their working definition of the humanities since, "if we take the arts seriously as a means of communicating what the culture offers that may be of value to the individual, perhaps this is the weakest point in our record."¹

Foundation officers gave renewed attention to the arts in the late 1940s. This may have been due to the demise of federal government support, through the Works Progress Administration, in the early 1940s. The WPA raised the visibility of the arts and also spent a good deal of effort exclaiming their worth and importance in national heritage. Some of these messages stuck.

At the Rockefeller Foundation in the late 1940s, a report entitled "Old and New Work in the Arts" detailed the foundation's giving up to that point, noting that drama had been a constant interest and literature a more recent one, with small grants to some writers and literary magazines. The report recognized that the arts represented a new challenge for the foundation: "the canons and sources of judgment differ from those on which the Foundation normally depends in its other fields of operation." Institutions, and the academy in particular, may lead to an ignoring of individual artists, working outside institutions, many of whom may indeed be in greater need and be at the forefront of the field. Officers described a paradox: the arts suffered from a "lack of responsible institutions," but "unhappily, 'responsible' institutions in the arts tend . . . to become unresponsive to the truly contemporary; and responsive institutions when they exist may seem, and often are, irresponsible." Added to this was the problem of judging which art was worthy of support, which spawned a reliance on critics (arguably, an over-reliance). The aid to small literary magazines was one opportunity viewed as a success. Here, monies were

given to increase the rate of pay to contributors by magazines lauded for their role in identifying "contemporary literary significance."² So writers themselves benefited from foundation funds, but the money was funneled through a respected organization and resulted in benefiting readers as well.

Turning from an expansive, international scope of what the foundation had done, the report honed in on the dire need of the arts in the United States. The report urged the foundation to attend to art forms beyond drama and literature, using as examples the deficits that Martha Graham incurred yearly, and the devoted, but exhausted, patron of the Ballet Society (Lincoln Kirstein and his enduring support of the company that later became known as the New York City Ballet). The first step, quite expectedly, was a series of studies.

The penchant for studies betrays the conservative tendency of foundations that Paul DiMaggio substantiates in his article on philanthropic giving to the arts.³ The hesitancy of both the Rockefeller and Ford foundations meant that considerable time and money was spent surveying the arts before funding any endeavor more boldly. Within the Rockefeller Foundation, Charles Fahs set out to define further the goals of the Humanities Program and, in particular, giving to the arts. He identified three means by which the foundation could support creative activity "without interference with its freedom": "through direct aid to new original work, through the further development of criticism of original work new and old, and through the broadening of opportunities for its experience." Fahs's suggestions, however, excluded what he called the non-verbal arts – music, the visual and plastic arts, architecture, and dance – because the justification for their support could not yet be articulated clearly.⁴ A year later, in 1951, he attempted just

such an articulation. He found justification for non-verbal arts in participation. Still relying on the benefits of the arts for the individual as the primary means of value, Fahs claimed that the "beneficial effects of art on the individual are in proportion to his participation," and the non-verbal arts offered more opportunity for this participation.⁵

What is interesting to note about these deliberations is that they were prompted by the foundation officers themselves who had not received Trustee authorization to consider specific projects. As the officers readily acknowledged, in 1953, expanding their knowledge of a field without consideration of specific projects led to abstract and general philosophizing, which in turn led to hesitancy on the part of the trustees. The result: small and erratic funding.

The main principle guiding giving was not to ensnare the foundation in long-term support.⁶ Within these limits, then, money went toward surveys and histories. A 1956 report studied the effect of the flight to the suburbs on the performing arts. In a dim view of the field, the performing arts suffered from the tendency of suburbanites to spend money and time on home-related leisure; they also competed with the growing mass media for limited leisure time. Ballet lost the most in this scenario, even falling behind opera because it lacked opera's core of loyal fans (the study included no other form of dance).⁷

An earlier conversation about music, in 1949, already demonstrated this lackluster support from both the public and foundations toward the performing arts. Virgil Thompson, composer and critic, and two other composers, Quincy Porter and Otto Luening, joined Stevens and Marshall to discuss what the field of music needed. They concluded that the recording and printing of

modern American music, as well as copying orchestral scores for performances, would be useful and effective ways of supporting the field. In general, support for specific orchestras, musicians, or composers drew less attention, partly because universities had become the central source of support for contemporary music.⁸

Dance followed this general trend of philanthropic support to the arts, although lagging even further behind fields such as music. Foundation officers began gathering information about the dance field in the late 1940s, but did not really turn their attention to it until the second half of the 1950s. The first forays into the field at the Rockefeller Foundation were conversations with dance critics, such as John Martin of the *New York Times* and Walter Terry of the *New York Herald Tribune*, and very modest grants to a book about the history of dance, a bibliography of dance literature, and for cataloguing at the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library. Similar to the conversation on music in the attempt to find discrete, non-confrontational means of support, officers and critics teased out the possibility of recording dance on film for preservation.⁹ All these were cautionary steps, within the purview of what the foundation had supported in the humanities since the 1930s.

In gathering information about the field, foundation officers became attuned to the longstanding rivalry between modern dance and ballet. Modern dance developed in the United States in the 1920s and '30s, with many of its main principles – dancing in bare feet, focusing on the gravity and weight of the body, tackling political and philosophical subjects in choreography, claiming itself an original American art form – created in contrast to ballet. While modern dance gained adherents and legitimacy in the 1930s, it began to lose its prominence in the dance field by the

end of World War II. A tie to radical politics (in its social as well as ideological dimensions), the aging of the first generation of dancers and choreographers, and shifts in the cultural and political outlook of the country edged modern dance from the center of dance world. Ballet, instead, took up the nationalist call, epitomized by the Russian émigré George Balanchine's leadership of the New York City Ballet. In Cold War America, the Russian celebrated America's military prowess in works such as "Stars and Stripes," set to music by John Philip Sousa. Waging a dance battle on the European turf of ballet – and winning with an aggressive and speedy American style – the success of American ballet became the dominant issue in dance rather than upholding the disparate, experimental, and confrontational style of modern dance.

Foundation officers entered the debate via conversations with dance critics. Both John Martin and Walter Terry agreed that modern dance had declined in recent years, ballet was booming, and George Balanchine and his New York City Ballet led the field. The critic Anatole Chujoy, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation to tour the country in 1956 to gather information on dance outside of New York City, thoroughly dismissed modern dance. Marshall noted that, "in Chujoy's view, little or nothing of significance is happening in the modern dance. In fact, though [Fahs] rather pressed for information, Chujoy came up with nothing in which he evinced any interest."¹⁰ In fact, it was Fahs who pointed out in notes about a 1952 performance of José Limón that modern dance had made a considerable impact on ballet and he felt that it was still contributing "most in the way of new ideas and originality of interpretation."¹¹ A few years later, in 1956, however, another officer wrote up his views of a modern dance performance, remarking on the "almost total lack of beauty," and the sterile, routine choreography.¹² This reliance on critics, lack of knowledge of the field, and the unevenness of an evolving art form helped sway

philanthropic support to ballet.

Perhaps one of the most famous grants in giving to the arts is the Ford Foundation's nearly twelve million dollars to ballet in 1963. This grant sealed the ascendancy of Balanchine and his style of ballet by giving exclusively to the New York City Ballet and companies and schools around the country headed by those associated with it. The grant resulted in a "ballet boom" in the 1960s, with many students funneled from regional schools to the School of American Ballet in New York and on to dancing with the New York City Ballet (Suzanne Farrell is the most famous example). While this grant doomed the fate of modern dance for the immediate future, it capped a mounting campaign of philanthropic support of ballet. The inclusion of the New York City Ballet as a resident company of Lincoln Center in the late 1950s may have been even more crucial in this escalation of support.

Lincoln Kirstein, the director and patron of the New York City Ballet, initiated his working with the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1940s. He provided information on the field and often recommended certain small grants, such as the one for a history of dance. Throughout the 1950s, Kirstein met regularly with Marshall, giving him his views of modern dancers and regional ballet companies. At the same time, Kirstein was quickly involved in conversations with John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, about the building of a performing arts center. Such an idea had been brewing since the early 1950s and came to a head in 1955 by the coincidence of the Metropolitan Opera and Philharmonic searching for new homes and the beginning of new urban renewal project, spearheaded by Robert Moses, on the west side of Manhattan. Although not an avid patron of the arts, Rockefeller put his considerable influence behind the project because he was eager to make

a contribution to New York City; his involvement in international affairs also had primed him to want to better the image of American culture abroad.¹³ With these goals in mind, Rockefeller formed an Exploratory Committee for a Musical Arts Center, which soon agreed that such a vision needed to go beyond music to include theater and dance. Soon an Exploratory Committee on Dance formed, with Lincoln Kirstein as the only member from the dance world; the critics John Martin and Walter Terry served as consultants. Unequivocal statements from the committee declared that dance not only needed to be included in the project but to be treated on par with the Metropolitan Opera and Philharmonic rather than folded into constituent branches such as the opera or the Juilliard School. Two options emerged: 1) to bring to the center an existing group as a founding company; or 2) to organize a new group to take on that role in the project.¹⁴

In many ways, a new dance company that featured ballet, modern dance, even popular and Broadway dance styles, would have been an innovative, welcome addition that could have celebrated dance's diversity and broad appeal. The Lincoln Center project had different goals, however: to make "high" culture, popular culture. In its outlook to broaden the audience base for opera, symphony, and theater, there was only one kind of dance it made sense to include: ballet. And, as mentioned above, the kind of ballet that made the most sense was that of George Balanchine, whose choreographic abilities ranged from Broadway shows to story ballets such as "The Nutcracker" to abstract ballet. The grand vision of Lincoln Center – the largest home and monument to the arts ever constructed – called for a populist appeal in a country dedicated to democratic ideals and at a time when the arts were utilized as a weapon in the Cold War. By claiming "high" culture as popular culture the supporters of Lincoln Center could promise a broader, larger audience base as well as heed a call to the highest ideals of beauty. "The arts are

not for the privileged few, but for the many," Rockefeller wrote.¹⁵

Balanchine's talents, of course, mattered in this decision about inclusion in Lincoln Center, but so did the influence of Kirstein. The first documentation of the Dance Committee I have come across, from March 1957, began the discussion of the options for dance in Lincoln Center and ended them in the same memorandum with the decision to ask the New York City Ballet to join the project. In the following months, foundation officers asked some in the modern dance world how modern dance could be incorporated into the project. Nobody offered a plan.¹⁶ Even so, debate continued about whether to form a new company for the center or to choose between American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet. Kirstein effectively ended the debate with a threat. In a letter to John Rockefeller, 3rd, Kirstein accused the Board of the Lincoln Center project of having "no interest in or information about" dance. He also derided the idea of "one-super group" for the complex, claiming that it would be "an amalgam which can be also described as a lowest common denominator." If this were, indeed, the decision, he and Balanchine would likely opt out of the project altogether to "preserve our independence and our integrity . . . rather than to be members of a bureau whose chief aim is to keep everybody, however untalented, happy."¹⁷

In the years that followed the formation of Lincoln Center and the large Ford Foundation grant to ballet, the task for foundation officers became what to do with modern dance. Both foundations attempted to put together collaborative performances of modern dance companies in the hope that joining the efforts of small, disparate companies would better boost the art form's visibility and appeal. The arrival in 1963 of Norman Lloyd as director of the arts program at the

Rockefeller Foundation, in particular, assured attention to modern dance. Lloyd had composed for modern dancers since the 1930s and was an unequivocal rallier of the significant American contribution of modern dance to the world's arts. Soon after his arrival, discussion began about forming a repertory company, to be associated with the Juilliard School, run by José Limón, and designed to preserve the classics of modern dance and the challenging works of a variety of current choreographers. The goal was to become a constituent member of Lincoln Center on terms parallel to other constituent members.¹⁸ The American Dance Theater debuted a week of performances in March 1966, which included works by Merce Cunningham, Doris Humphrey, José Limón, and Alwin Nikolais, among others. Despite that success, the barriers to overcome proved too high. Lincoln Center members had their own battles about the possibility of a new constituent member, particularly the Juilliard School whose facilities and finances would be partially devoted to the new entity; no appropriate leader in modern dance emerged, willing to give up his or her own company to coordinate a repertory company; and a significant amount of foundation support was necessary to ensure a strong start.

Even understanding these obstacles that faced modern dance, the Ford Foundation also attempted to bring some coherence and support to the field a few years later. The foundation agreed to substantially fund separate three-to-four week seasons for modern dance companies from 1968-69. Three institutions – City Center, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Billy Rose Theater in the Lincoln Center complex – would host the performances, choose the companies to perform, and be the recipient of the funds. This scheme furthered the foundation's belief that the visibility of modern dance would be enhanced by performing on a Broadway-size stage without involving the foundation in making judgments about particular artists or a commitment to continued

support.¹⁹

The response to the first set of performances at the Billy Rose Theater, in March 1969, highlights some of the constant problems in funding modern dance. The performance of Yvonne Rainer, an avant-garde dancer and filmmaker, caused considerable controversy for featuring movies that documented sexual intercourse. Clive Barnes, the dance critic of the *New York Times*, excoriated not just Rainer but the Ford Foundation for sponsoring a performance that he found not only offensive but without any artistic worth. Mrs. Lois Ira, from Spokane, Washington went further: "you have . . . caused the general public to wonder if large sums of money are not the breeding pools of obscenities and pornography, of the basest kind – when those same funds could and should be utilized for the betterment of the humanities all around." Another dance critic and the producer of the program who had picked Rainer attempted to undo the damage. The fault or weakness of the performance, they argued, lay not with the foundation, and just such an attack from an influential critic could diminish or stop altogether any monies to modern dance.²⁰

These failed, or at least only partially successful, attempts to support modern dance shaped philanthropic support in the following years. Foundation officers focused on setting up university residences for leading choreographers, gave limited money directly to companies, and began to search for arts organizations with educational and social purposes, as cities and campuses erupted around them in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Certainly many of the problems of funding were problems inherent in the art form. Modern dance is confrontational, experimental, fused to the vision of an individual dancer-choreographer, exists outside of strong institutional structures, and, perhaps, destined to be unpopular. The grand vision of dance that suited – and

succeeded in – ballet could not be realized in modern dance.

Since the 1980s, however, I believe there has been a shift in philanthropic support that benefits modern dance. I have not conducted much archival research on this period, so these are tentative thoughts based on anecdotal knowledge and experience. A wave of institutionalization in modern dance began in the 1990s with the creation of the Joyce Theater, specifically devoted to dance, and is cresting now with recent building projects for Mark Morris, Alvin Ailey, and the Dance Theatre Workshop. Less visible, however, is the turn of foundations to community-based projects. So dance artists who work directly with community members became the recipients of funding in the 1990s – Liz Lerman, David Rousseve, Bill T. Jones, and Doug Dorfman. This is probably partly a reaction to the "culture wars" and a retreat from the elitism associated with "high" culture. No longer is the aim to popularize "high" culture by means of a grand monument to culture such as Lincoln Center; small, locally defined, process-oriented endeavors are accorded the status of "real" art. As Fahs noted in the early 1950s, expressive participation is the safest, least controversial marker of value in the arts. Attention to building an audience has been a constant goal in the foundations, but now the aim is to get the audience involved in the art-making itself rather than building a theater in which to sit.

Philanthropic support to dance, then, still follows a relatively conservative path. Ballet continues to receive a fair amount of funding, now alongside well-established modern dance companies. Neighborhood operations or educational efforts receive more and more attention. All this is to the good, I believe, but still leaves the confrontational, experimental dancer unsupported. As in the 1950s, I think the difficulty of defining the purposes of dance, specifically mentioned in

initial reports on giving in the arts, the relatively few institutional structures in dance, figuring out how to get beyond well-established companies, and the prospect of long-term funding causes foundations to be wary. So dance remains, I believe, a step-child among the arts, often forgotten, under-funded – and obstreperous.

Endnotes

1. John Marshall, "DHS's Draft Review of Humanities Program," June 19, 1939, Coll. RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 1, f. 2; "Humanities grants in 1939," December 22, 1939, *ibid.*; William J. Buxton, "John Marshall and the Humanities in Europe: Shifting Patterns of Rockefeller Support," *Minerva* v.41 (2003): 133-53.
2. "Old and New Work in the Arts," n.d. [1948?], Coll. RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 2, f. 14.
3. Paul J. DiMaggio, "Support for the Arts from Independent Foundations," in DiMaggio, ed., *Nonprofit Enterprise in the Arts: Studies in Mission and Constraint* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986): 113-39.
4. Charles Fahs, "Defining a Humanities Program (2nd tentative draft)," February 1950, Coll. RG, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 1, f. 5. Emphasis original.
5. Charles Fahs, "The Arts," 22 May 1951, Coll. RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 1, f. 6; see also "Humanities without Words," January 1952, Coll. RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 1, f. 4a.
6. Charles Fahs, "Foundation Program in the Arts," 31 January 1957, Coll. RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 1, f. 7.
7. "The Suburban Migration," April 1956, Coll. RF, RG 1.2, Series 200R, b. 314, f. 2899.
8. Notes on a Music Conference, 25 February 1949, Coll. RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 5, f. 45.
9. John Marshall, Interview with Walter Terry, 2 March 1954, Coll. RF, RG 3.1, Series 911, b. 1, f. 6.
10. John Marshall, Interview with Anatole Chujoy, 22 November 1955, Coll. RF, RG 1.2, Series 200R, b. 309, f. 2862. For more of Chujoy's views on modern dance, see his notes on Anna Halprin's performance in San Francisco from his cross-country tour and an article from the *Seattle Times*, *ibid.*
11. Charles Fahs, notes of performance of Jose Limon and Dance Company, 15 December 1952, Coll. RF, RG 1.2, 200R, b. 320, f. 2957.
12. RWJ, notes on the Ninth American Dance Festival, 16-17 August 1956, Coll. RF, RG 1.2, 200R, b. 320, f. 2958.
13. The most succinct but thorough summary of Rockefeller's involvement in Lincoln Center is chapters 9 and 10 of John Ensor Harr and Peter Johnson, *The Rockefeller Conscience: An American Family in Public and in Private* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991). See also Edgar

B. Young, *Lincoln Center, the Building of an Institution* (NY: New York University Press, 1980) and Alan Rich, *The Lincoln Center Story* (NY: American Heritage Publ. Co., 1984).

14. George Stoddard, "The Dance," 6 March 1957, Coll. JDR3, RG 5, 1-OMR-Files, b. 3, f. Dance Council 1957-58. For even stronger declaration that the status of dance be equal to the other arts in the project, see the letter from George Stoddard to John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, 16 May 1957, *ibid*.

15. These words of John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, can be found on a plaque at Lincoln Center in honor of his efforts.

16. Charles Fahs, notes on the Tenth American Dance Festival, 17-18 August 1957, Coll. RF, RG 1.2, 200R, b. 320, f. 2958.

17. Lincoln Kirstein to John D. Rockefeller, 3rd, 29 November 1957, Coll. JDR3, RG 5, Series 1-OMR, b. 3, f. Lincoln Center Dance Council.

18. See, for example, the memorandum from William Schuman, 15 June 1965, which summarizes the conversation up to that point; Coll. RF, RG 1.2, Series 200R, b. 268, f. 2578.

19. Memorandum from W. McNeil Lowry to McGeorge Bundy, 22 May 1968, Reel K-2176, Grant #68-620, Section 1, Ford Foundation Archives.

20. Barnes review, letter from Lois Ira, letter from Charles Reinhart, and review by Marcia B. Siegel in R21776, Grant #68-620, Section 4, Ford Foundation Archives.