



Smithsonian American Art Museum

WPA to NEA: Public Opinions of Federal Arts Funding

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My dissertation explores the introduction of “Russian” ballet to the United States, its evolution into an “American” form, and the funding and political opportunities created as a direct result. I argue that Americanized ballet, most notably personified by the neo-classical stylings of Russian expatriate George Balanchine, was a more palatable type of modernism than that developed in America by modern dancers; it aligned more closely with government and philanthropic ideals for use domestically and abroad, due primarily to its Russian connections. As a result, I contend that American ballet was not just a side beneficiary of programs such as President Eisenhower’s Emergency Fund for the Arts and the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), but instead a catalyst to private and federal arts funding developments not seen since the 1930s.

To reach this point, however, requires both a thorough understanding of the impact of the New Deal arts programs and the development of modernism in the United States. Thus the purpose of my proposed research is two-fold. First, using selected interviews from the Archives of American Art’s Oral History Program collection and New Deal and the Arts Program collection, I will assess where the United States—artists, politicians, and the public at large—stood on the issue of federal arts funding in the aftermath of the Works Progress Administration’s Federal One efforts. Second, with select manuscript items from the Archives that discuss dancers and the arts, along with the assistance of the Smithsonian staff, I will endeavor to place American ballet’s neo-classical aesthetic within the larger context of American modernism.