

Arts & Entertainment

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The culture is ailing. It's time for a Dr. Fauci for the arts.



A visitor wearing a protective mask takes a picture of the statue of Lucius Verus during the public reopening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art earlier this year. (Jeenah Moon for The Washington Post)

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When a president calls a meeting of the Cabinet, most vital sectors of the economy — from soybean farmers to auto manufacturers — have an appointed government

representative in the room, a secretary of agriculture or transportation, to speak for them.

You know what doesn't get a seat at the table, and never has? The arts. And in this crisis moment, when a pandemic threatens ruination for museums, theaters, concert halls, opera houses, dance studios, cineplexes and amusement parks — and the 5.1 million arts workers who staff them — the time has come to rectify this glaring oversight.

Now, more than ever, we need a secretary of arts and culture.

As President-elect Joe Biden rolls out his circle of close advisers, the notion is gaining momentum among leaders and advocates of nonprofit groups and for-profit companies: that someone should be named to coordinate arts funding, unite assorted agencies and underline the value of arts and entertainment to the nation's financial, social and psychological well-being.

A national advocate. An Anthony Fauci — but at the Cabinet level — for the arts.

The United Kingdom has a culture secretary. Canada calls the job minister of Canadian heritage. France employs a culture minister; South Africa, a minister of arts and culture; Vietnam, a minister of culture, sports and tourism; Australia, a minister for communications, cyber safety and the arts. More than 50 nations designate an official in the top ranks of government whose portfolio includes nurturing artistic endeavors. In Germany, for instance, the minister of state for culture, Monika Grütters, has been an [ardent proponent of aid](#) to artists during the covid-19 crisis — a backing that helped secure a [staggering \\$54 billion in aid](#) for those in cultural, media and artistic pursuits. The United States, by contrast, operates the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for the Humanities as shoestring-level grant-makers, each with a budget of \$162.5 million, which is smaller than that of the city of Enid, Okla.



French Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot speaks during a session of questions to the Government at the French National Assembly in Paris earlier this month. (Stephane De Sakutin/AFP/Getty Images)

The outgoing administration tried repeatedly to kill that small-potatoes sum in the \$4.8 trillion federal budget, only to have it restored by Congress. Nowhere, even in that rather low-grade struggle, was there a figure the news media or general public could question and hold accountable. A cable news viewer's appetite for a single talking head to address the problems of cultural organizations goes unsatisfied, year after year. The administration of John F. Kennedy perhaps came the closest to raising up the arts — there's a reason his memorial is the nation's performing

arts center. And celebrities such as Quincy Jones tried to garner support for a Cabinet-level arts post during the Obama years, but the idea went nowhere.

So it's not that establishing a Cabinet-level post has not been brought up before, or is even a cinch to set up. Authorization comes through an act of Congress, in the way the position of secretary of homeland security was created after 9/11 for the new federal department. But even a post that did not require congressional approval — say, as counselor to the president for the arts — would be a step forward. I'd guess that, as with so many other posts, an arts czar's job would have gone unfilled in the current philistine administration.

Still, going forward, the appointment would help confirm what is unarguably true: that the arts are essential. And, at the moment, they are in deep trouble.

Leaders, artists and activists in the creative economy — a sector that accounts for a whopping *\$877 billion a year* in American productivity — have been mulling this idea, too. Henry Timms, president and chief executive of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, says he has been thinking of all the ways in which the incoming Biden administration can harness the values and power of culture and the arts, and make them “a signature.”

“If you think of the three major promises the new administration has made,” he said in an interview, “all cannot be made without the [input] of the arts. Promise 1 is unity: almost nothing is as impactful as the arts to help us understand our relationship to each other. Promise 2 is respect around the world: there is almost nothing that has done more for America's global reputation as the power of its arts. The third is the diversity promise — engaging with different backgrounds and voices. If you center on the promises of these three pillars, the arts actually need to be more than a Cabinet position: the arts have to be in the administration's DNA.”

Michael M. Kaiser, former president of the Kennedy Center and one of the nation's top consultants for ailing arts groups, says that a more concerted federal arts strategy would be a pragmatic boon to the country. “There's a need that goes beyond, *beyond* the NEA and the NEH,” he said. “There is something like seven or eight or nine agencies that give money for the arts. And there is a need to coordinate them.” To bolster the argument, he posed a question: “Do you know who the largest purchaser in the world is of musical instruments?”

The answer is not the first thing that comes to mind. “The largest purchaser of musical instruments is the U.S. military,” Kaiser said. And why that might reinforce the need for the government to upgrade emphasis on the arts comes down to simple buying power. “Imagine,” he said, “if you combined the purchase of instruments for schools with instruments for military bands. It could lead to smarter purchasing” — and by buying in bulk, savings to entities of all sizes.

Why the country has been so reluctant to acknowledge culture's central role in official terms may be rooted in odd custom. As Kaiser noted, “This country was founded by the

Puritans, who thought music and dance were evil. So, from the start, we've had a separation of art and state." The battles in the late 1980s over controversial artwork exhibited by NEA-funded institutions — namely, photographs by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe — cast a frustrating pall over government support that dogs the issue to this day.

"The thing that always drives me crazy is, we're still working in a world where it's about 'Piss Christ,'" said Charles Segars, chief executive of Ovation, an arts and entertainment TV network. The longtime executive, active in Democratic circles, was referring to the fight more than 30 years ago over Serrano's photograph of a crucifix in a liquid the artist identified as urine. "Politics has turned it into political fodder."



Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, speaking during a White House Coronavirus Task Force press briefing. (Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images)

President Barack Obama awards the 2010 National Medal of Arts to musician Quincy Jones. During Obama's administration, Jones tried to garner support for a Cabinet-level arts post. (Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images)

Segars, who made room for a "Stand for the Arts" tab that lists Ovation's advocacy efforts prominently on the company's [website](#), argues that the movement for a secretary-level arts post is not a call for bigger government. It's a method of marshaling a vast American resource. "We have an economic export engine that is almost a trillion dollars," he said. "Having a Cabinet level organization with a secretary of the arts can push arts and culture, can push that economic engine."

T. Oliver Reid, co-founder of the [Black Theatre Coalition](#), which lobbies for recruiting more Black producers and managers on Broadway and beyond, says a culture secretary would mean someone "who is looking at the grass-roots part of it, making sure that we have arts in the schools." Jenny Makhholm, one of a quartet of younger performing artists who created the #BeAnArtsHero movement to press for government relief for arts workers, points out that economic sectors with smaller footprints, like transportation, have far more official traction. "Representation leads to change; it leads to legislative priority," she said.

It should be noted that awakening the nation to the requirement for this new level of representation is indeed a national concern. The National Assembly of State Arts

Agencies sheds some light on this fact in an [interactive map](#), highlighting the financial impact of the arts, state by state. In Utah, for example, arts and cultural industries account for 55,000 jobs and nearly \$3 billion in income; in Tennessee, more than 83,000 jobs and \$5.2 billion in compensation.

Will there be a Fauci for the arts? If one were looking for a figure with stature and visibility, would someone like Anna Deavere Smith make a good Cabinet choice (and not just [because she's played one on TV](#))? Or would a person be preferred who knows the ins and outs of a large institution, such as Kaiser, or [Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden](#)?

In any event, one could wish the Biden administration would add a portfolio to make the U.S. government as culturally savvy as Lebanon's and Croatia's.

“I read recently somewhere that hope is a moral duty, so I have hope that we're going to go through a huge, profound change in the month of January,” said Ellen Burstyn, the Oscar-winning actress and onetime head of Actor's Equity, the union for stage actors and stage managers. “And if we had someone representing culture in the government, what a change that would be. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have someone in the government who is joining with us?”