

National Medal of the Arts  
South Lawn  
November 5, 1998

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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For Immediate Release

November 5, 1998

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
AND THE FIRST LADY  
AT PRESENTATION OF  
THE NATIONAL MEDAL OF THE ARTS  
AND THE NATIONAL HUMANITIES MEDAL

The South  
Lawn

11:18 A.M. EST

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you so much. Welcome to the White House. It's a great honor for the President and me to have all of you here. This is one of the days we look forward to, as we come together to celebrate the unique and indispensable role that the arts and humanities play in shaping our nation, and to honor those who have made such extraordinary contributions to human knowledge and expression.

There are many, many distinguished guests here today, but I want particularly to thank the members of Congress who are with us -- Senator Baucus, Senator Durbin, Representative Engel, Representative Morella -- and all the elected officials who are part of this celebration, for your support and commitment to the arts and humanities. (Applause.)

T.S. Eliot once said that "culture may be described

simply as that which makes life worth living." Well, we decided to open today's Arts and Humanities Award ceremony with a few minutes of culture that will surely make all of our lives a little more worth living. And I believe it will also enrich the lives of these young performers as well, to be able to perform before our awardees and all of you. I am delighted to present a group that has been at the White House before, the Jacques D'Amboise Dancers from the National Dance Institute. Please join me in welcoming these young performers. (Applause.)

(The dancers perform.)

MRS. CLINTON: You know, this day and this ceremony holds real significance for those of us who care deeply about promoting the arts and humanities in communities across our country, because that's where the real work is done -- in places where young dancers are trained, young artists are encouraged, young writers are critiqued -- all the work that goes on that enables us to really understand what T.S. Eliot said.

Today we pay tribute to a number of extraordinary Americans who have stretched our imaginations, tested our beliefs, celebrated our diversity, and channeled our emotions and ideas into positive forms of creativity and self-expression. We also recognize the contributions that each of you in this tent have made to enable us to be in a time when we can see that the arts and humanities are making such an impact on our lives, through your work, your philanthropy, and your public service.

I want especially to thank Bill Ivey, the Chairman of the NEH; and Bill Ferris, the Chair of the NEA; John Brademas, the Chair of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities; the members and staff of the National Council on the Arts, and the

National Council on the Humanities; and the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. I also want to acknowledge Diane Frankel, the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the members of her board, who I will join later today in honoring three museums for their innovative programs serving children and families in their communities.

And finally, I want to thank all of you, who are the supporters of the arts in America. We are all in your debt. Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

We know and recognize how central the arts and humanities are to our lives and, particularly, to the lives of our children, like the young dancers we just saw. We know how they stimulate our imagination, but we also know how they connect us to each other and to our common humanity.

Over the past six years, many people in this administration and many of their partners in the Congress have worked tirelessly to promote the arts and humanities. We've been honored to hold and host many events honoring the arts and humanities here at the White House. And when the President and I began planning for the coming of the millennium, we knew it would come whether we planned for it or not, but we thought it would be a good idea to think of a way we could use this turning point in history to really celebrate the richness of America, and to look at ways we could think of gifts we might give to the future.

Well, we put the arts and humanities at the heart of our efforts, and developed a theme -- Honor the past, imagine the future. We have recognized and will continue to recognize our artists and musicians, our writers and historians, our poets and philosophers, our scientists and others who have always helped define us as Americans, and guided our nation forward. Here in the White House we will continue to hold millennium events that showcase the enduring contributions to our lives and to our vision of the future.

In his State of the Union message this past January, the President called for a public-private partnership to preserve America's cultural and historic treasures. And I'm so pleased and gratified to announce that in this most recent budget, Congress provided \$30 million toward millennium programs that will help preserve our priceless heritage for our children and for future generations. And I want to thank the Congress for doing that. (Applause.)

Some of you may know that we've launched a "Save America's Treasures" program. And I was privileged this past summer to get on a bus with some of you and travel through several of our states, highlighting some of the well-known treasures, like the "Star-Spangled Banner," and some of the relatively unknown treasures that really help mark our passage as Americans. And I know that we're going to be doing more of that, and we welcome your participation and advice.

This Congress also marked a turning point in the future of government support for the arts and humanities. Today we recommit ourselves that we will continue to support the NEA and the NEH so that they will thrive and grow. (Applause.) It makes such a difference to have that federal validation and support for that artist in the school, for that dance company in a small community, for that symphony orchestra -- the only one in a state -- and so many other ways that we have seen lives literally changed.

As the President said in his recent tribute to the National Arts and Humanities Month, our investment in the living cultural heritage of today will reap benefits tomorrow, strengthening our communities and uniting our nation.

Just last month I helped launch, with a number of you, a national campaign to get arts back in our nation's schools, and I hope that we again recommit ourselves to that goal. (Applause.) As I travel around our country, it is literally heartbreaking to go into schools that because of budget problems have had to cut out all of their arts and culture and after-school activities for the children. They've cut out their sports and recreation. And I think to myself that I had more opportunities 30 and 40 years ago growing up than many of our children do today.

But with a public-private partnership, we can re-ignite arts education in our schools. Every child in America should have the skills to read and comprehend a novel or history book. They should know how to research and write about ideas. And every child in America deserves the opportunity these young dancers have had to explore their abilities, create new experiences, and break their own boundaries of creative expression.

Tomorrow, as part of our ongoing effort to promote the arts and humanities here at the White House, I will be honored to unveil the seventh exhibit of American sculpture that we've held in the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden here at the White House. These exhibits have been enjoyed by our millions of White House visitors. And I hope all of you will have a chance to see this current exhibition, which shows how American sculpture was, in many ways, inspired by the great French artist, Rodan.

But in all of these endeavors, we believe -- my husband and I -- that we have an opportunity to take the arts and humanities as broadly as possible throughout our country, to give all Americans a chance to see what it means to them personally and to see what it means to us as a nation.

I was thinking about the sculpture garden because my first date with my husband and our President was at the Yale Art Gallery, when we showed up and knew there was a Mark Rothko exhibit inside and Henry Moore sculptures in the sculpture garden. There was, however, a strike, a labor strike going on and the museum was closed. But in a manner of persuasiveness that I saw for the first time that day, and have seen every day in the last 27 years -- (laughter) -- Bill Clinton was able to persuade the -- (laughter) -- museum curators and watchman that if we picked up the trash that had accumulated in the front of the museum, we could go in. (Laughter.)

So we had our own special tour of the Rothko exhibit, and got to spend a long time with Henry Moore's sculptures in the sculpture garden. And I realized at that moment that he was an effective advocate for the arts and humanities.

So let me introduce our President, Bill Clinton.  
(Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for the