

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
TO THE FRIENDS OF ART AND PRESERVATION IN EMBASSIES

The East Room

June 18, 1997

MRS. CLINTON: Good morning and welcome to the White House. I want to begin by apologizing for my husband, who found this morning that he was unable to join us and is very, very regretful, because we look forward to this event and it's an important one for both of us. And I very much know that he misses being here with all of you and wanted me to convey his deepest regrets to all of you, because hosting the Friends of Art and Preservation in Embassies is something that is especially meaningful to the President and me because we have seen first-hand the results of your labors. I hope that many of you also have had an opportunity to travel and see what the work that this group has done has meant to embassies and ambassadors' residences around the world.

I want to applaud your chairman, Jo Carole Lauder; and president, Ann Gund; and also chairman emeritus, Leonore Annenberg; and president emeritus Wendy Luers, who are here with us as well.

I know that many of you have worked with them over the years, as well as with distinguished members of Congress and ambassadors, in support of this program. We really depend on you to represent the best in American art, design, and architecture in our embassies abroad, making them both more dignified and more livable. We also depend on you to make sure that the United States is represented appropriately around the world, that when someone walks into our embassy or into an ambassador's residence, they know that they are there on American ground and they can see the best that America has to offer.

Since 1986, the Friends of Art and Preservation in Embassies has worked in tandem with the Art and Embassies program at the Department of State to showcase American visual art, acquiring works for display in our diplomatic facilities.

For the last several years, the President and I have had the honor of receiving on behalf of the Friends an outstanding limited edition donated by a famous contemporary artist. This year the American artist Ellsworth Kelly gave 50 copies of his lithograph "Leaves." Now, Mr. Kelly's work, as many of you know, spans 50 years of exploration and exhibition. He has experimented with shape and form and has changed American modern art. And I want to thank Ellsworth Kelly, particularly on this occasion for the work that you are donating, but really for the work of a lifetime and what you've given to American art. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

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The Friends of Art and Preservation are working on an important project I want you all to know about. Since last year, the Friends' 10th anniversary, they have been preserving one of the most historic properties owned by the United States overseas, the U.S. embassy residence in Prague in the Czech Republic. This year the Friends have helped to restore the chandeliers and to clean the stone and stucco, as well as the wood interior walls. New wall coverings and draperies soon will be installed in important residence rooms, and if any of you have visited this particular residence you know what a treasure it is that we can have our ambassador in the Czech Republic housed there.

All of this activity is in addition to the \$8 million already raised by the Friends to purchase fine and decorative art, publish catalogues for the collections at the Department of State and at the embassies, and to continue crucial restoration projects.

I hope that we also can recognize that today, by showcasing American culture and the arts, we are showcasing what is important to all of us through the ages. And I want to say a special word about support for the arts with so many of you who are great philanthropists and supporters of the arts and American culture here in the East Room of the White House.

You know that we are having a debate over government support for the arts in this country, and I believe that Jane Alexander, who is the Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, is here or was here this morning with you. Jane has done a superb job, literally traveling to every corner of our country talking about the significance of the arts.

I want to reiterate strongly this administration's strong support for the National Endowment for the Arts. (Applause.) A budget of only \$10 million, as supported in one of the congressional committees this week, for a federal arts agency is totally inadequate, if not embarrassing, when you think of our nation's rich cultural resources. Such a severe cut will also result in decreased support from the private sector.

Now, some of you have heard me say this before, but I cannot resist repeating it as we stand here in the East Room: that when we think about the strength and enduring legacy of our country, we think both of intangibles, like the values and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, we think about freedom and what it's meant over the course of our country as we have tried to make ourselves a more perfect union, as we were challenged to do so by our founding fathers, and we think about our art and our culture and our scientific advances.

And standing here in this room, as we look at the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington, I am always reminded that when Dolley Madison inhabited this house and we engaged in that unfortunate war with the English -- is our ambassador here again? Yes? (Laughter.) He's heard me tell this story before, and he always wants to make it clear that we're not any longer at war. (Laughter.) But when this house was burned, as some of you may remember from history, during the War of 1812, as a result of the British -- sorry, Ambassador -- breaking through the lines commanded by President Madison, and marching on the house, word came to Mrs. Madison that her husband urged her to flee, that

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unfortunately it appeared they were not going to be able to stop the British advance. And she had prepared a meal for her husband and his officers, which she immediately left, although it was set out, and she began to try to grab a few things that she thought she should save.

And what did she primarily save? She saved a piece of art. She saved a portrait of our first President. She saved something that meant more than anything could have meant to the continuation of our country and the idea of freedom and liberty.

And I often ask those who say, what does art have to do with the federal government: What do we have to do as people to demonstrate who we are, except through art, except through culture, except through an understanding of what binds us together. And we've had a unique partnership in our country between the public and private sectors, between institutions, corporations, and individuals, that is unlike anything in history, with each of us making our contribution to preserve, protect, and advance the artistic heritage of the United States.

And so I can never think about the NEA without thinking about Dolley Madison. She didn't grab the books of accounts of the White House; she grabbed a portrait. (Laughter and applause.) I hope that we are able to make the case about what stands the test of time over and over again. And many of you in this room have a very strong commitment to the arts, and we need your voices as loudly as we possibly can hear them, because that will help us carry out the best of the American tradition, inspiring individuals and corporations to work side by side with our government to achieve more than either partner could do alone.

I'm particularly pleased that I have been told there are a number of young people who have been recruited to come here today to be part of the activity of the Friends and to support the work that is done promoting American art and culture around the world, and I'm so pleased that you could join us.

And I'm now very happy to introduce Jo Carole Lauder, the chairman of the Friends of Art and Preservation in Embassies, who has led the Friends to so many of these accomplishments. Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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