

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES, THE BLOOMSBURY GROUP AND THE ORIGINS OF THE ARTS COUNCIL MOVEMENT

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The article examines the origins of the arts council movement in the ideas of the Bloomsbury Group and John Maynard Keynes. The Bloomsbury Groups' sense of experimentation and flexibility, their willingness to take action to create new institutions, and their distrust of bureaucracy, influenced Keynes's development of a new model for state patronage of the arts in 1946. He took an organization established during the Second World War to employ artists and organize morale-boosting tours of the performing and visual arts, and oversaw its development into the Arts Council of Great Britain, the first such arts council. His model – making grants of public funds through semi-autonomous government bodies to private individuals and privately operated arts institutions – became a standard form of public funding for the arts by the end of the twentieth century in many countries around the world.

KEYWORDS Arts Council of Great Britain; Bloomsbury Group; CEMA; John Maynard Keynes

Introduction

"The great precedent for the Arts Endowment was the British Arts Council," concludes the biographer of a director of the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States (Straight 1988, p. 391). "As with similar bodies in Canada and New Zealand, the Australia Council's structure and functions were based on those of the Arts Council of Great Britain," states the website of the Australia Council. Thus credit is given for a new model of arts funding that originated in Great Britain during the Second World War, was adopted in the United States during the 1960s, and became a broad-based multinational movement¹ by the close of the twentieth century. This method of making grants of public funds, through semi-autonomous government bodies to private individuals and privately operated arts institutions, became a standard form of public funding for the arts by the end of the last century. This model was in sharp contrast to ministries of culture or the arts popular on the Continent.

Who conceived of this new model of funding the arts that has been adopted around the world? It was largely John Maynard Keynes, who took an organization established during the Second World War to employ artists and organize morale-boosting tours of the performing and visual arts, and oversaw its development into the Arts Council of Great Britain. Explaining "The Concept of the Arts Council," Mary Glasgow, first Secretary-General of the Arts Council, writes:

Keynes took office as Chairman of C.E.M.A. (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) on 1 April 1942. He died on Easter Sunday 1946. In the course of those four years he fashioned the Arts Council-to-be and laid the foundations of permanent State patronage of the arts in Great Britain. He did not found C.E.M.A. and he did not live to see the Arts Council incorporated under Charter; but it was he who turned the one into the other. (Glasgow 1975, p. 271)

Although he did not witness the international development of the Arts Council movement, Keynes recognized the potential of this new initiative beyond Britain's shores in a BBC broadcast announcing the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain. He said:

I do not believe it is yet realized what an important thing has happened. Strange patronage of the arts has crept in. It has happened in a very English, informal, unostentatious way – half-baked if you like. A semi-independent body is provided with modest funds to stimulate, comfort and support any societies or bodies brought together on private or local initiative which are striving with serious purpose and a reasonable prospect of success to present for public enjoyment the arts of drama, music and painting. (Keynes 1982, p. 368)

Glasgow's essay, as well as the administrative files from Keynes's years as Chairman of CEMA, provide clear evidence of the depth of his involvement and policy oversight of the emerging Arts Council. Far from being the titular head of an arts organization, Keynes kept in almost daily touch with his staff about both policy issues and the minutiae of specific projects. The files and his letters show that Keynes was consciously shaping a new organization that could respond with awareness and flexibility to the needs of the country's professional artistic community. While some historians and scholars have mentioned the influence of his Bloomsbury friends, I will explore their writings on cultural policy issues and their impact on Keynes's thinking. I will argue that a lifetime of intimate relationships with artists gave Keynes a sensitivity to their need for creative freedom and an understanding of the effects of social and political events on the market demand for art. He seized the opportunity that CEMA provided, found a model for public funding that ensured some degree of creative freedom for the recipient, and structured the new arts council to maximize its flexibility and independence from the government bureaucracy. His actions were rooted in his Bloomsbury background.

“Who were the Members of Bloomsbury?”²

Keynes was a central figure of the Bloomsbury Group, a circle of artists, writers and intellectuals that grew to include Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Clive and Vanessa Bell, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, Desmond MacCarthy and Duncan Grant. Beginning in 1905, the young people who would become the Bloomsbury Group began to meet on Thursday evenings to discuss and debate ideas and to criticize each other's arguments. Named for the section of London where the Stephen children – Virginia, Vanessa, Adrian and Thoby – moved after the death of their father, Victorian scholar Sir Leslie Stephen, the Bloomsburys became a potent intellectual force in early twentieth-century England. Over time, their values as a group emerged. Quentin Bell, son of Clive and Vanessa Bell, writes in his memoir *Bloomsbury* (Bell 1990) that these values included pacifism, feminism, friendship, creativity, freedom of expression and, above all, reason. They were irreverent, skeptical and critical of

Victorian convention, and managed to antagonize most elements of British society during their heyday from 1910 until the 1930s.

Their influence can be traced across twentieth-century art and thought. Fry's introduction of the Post-Impressionists to the English-speaking world, in his exhibitions of 1910 and 1912, set the stage for the development of modernism in British and American art. Virginia Woolf was one of a handful of early twentieth-century writers who revolutionized the novel in form and content with works such as *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Keynes contributed new theories of economics based on human behaviour and advocated the establishment of global organizations. Lytton Strachey revolutionized biography with his publication of *Eminent Victorians*.

These were not artists and intellectuals working in isolation; they debated ideas and examined each other's work in public. Roger Fry was an influential intellectual force within the group, with theories and ideas that stimulated creative and theoretical work by his fellow members of the Bloomsbury Group. Several contributed to the cultural policy discourse of the time with essays, opinion and calls for action by the government. Fry was the most prolific and specific of the policy writers, although Clive Bell, E. M. Forster and Keynes made contributions. Although not part of Old Bloomsbury, art historian Kenneth Clark was a close friend of Fry, the Bells and Duncan Grant, and he, too, contributed cultural policy statements.

The Bloomsbury Group did not stop with simply publishing and, later, broadcasting their policy statements. They took action and engaged in a series of experiments in support of artists such as the London Artists Association, the Contemporary Arts Society, the Omega Workshops and the Hogarth Press, to ensure that artists and writers were gainfully employed and could make their work available to others. The Bloomsbury Group's sense of experimentation and flexibility, their willingness to take action to create new institutions, and their distrust of bureaucracy, influenced Keynes's development of a new model for state patronage of the arts in 1946.

"Civilization Comes from Reflection and Education"³

As articulated by Roger Fry, Clive Bell and, later, Kenneth Clark, the Bloomsbury Group appears to have shared theories about the nature of civilization, and the necessity of art, science and literature in a thriving society. Fry, the theorist, wrote first on the subject, with Bell expanding his ideas and Clark reflecting them into the 1960s. Fry got involved with the group around 1910, when he met Duncan Grant, and Vanessa and Clive Bell. Art critic, curator, aesthete, painter, editor, designer and theorist, he remained a central figure in the group until his death in 1934; his close friend Virginia Woolf was his first biographer.

In his celebrated work "An Essay in Aesthetics" (discussed in Goodwin 1998), Fry proposed that there are two types of human existence: the "actual life", in which a person is engaged in earning a living, making a home, raising children and all the necessities of life; and the "imaginative life". The "imaginative life" is a state of keen and objective observation that can result in the making of works of visual art that reveal commonalities and deeper meanings about human existence. Art is both the product of and the stimulus for, the imaginative life, according to Fry. He argues that life with the imagination is the most desirable way to live, because "the imaginative life is distinguished by the greater clearness of its perception, and the greater purity and freedom of its emotion" (Goodwin 1998, p. 77). Those who live the imaginative life – artists and those who truly experience art – perceive life in a

deeper, more objective way, and they have a “clarified sense perception”. They see things that ordinary people take for granted.

Like Fry, Clive Bell was an art critic and is recognized in the art historical world for his aesthetic theory of “significant form”, first set forth in his book *Art* (Bell 1914). Bell was not an artist like his wife, Vanessa, but his marriage to a painter, his intimate friendships with many prominent artists and his work as a critic gave him an awareness of conditions that artists need for creativity. Throughout their careers, Bell responded to Fry’s theories on aesthetics with his own theories and opinions.

Bell expanded Fry’s ideas about the life of the imagination in *Civilization*, published in 1928 when Bloomsbury was at the height of its influence. While many in Bloomsbury were critical of the book, it can be read as a statement of some of their values: reason, liberal education, pacifism, free expression, and thriving arts, and it is Bell’s rumination on what civilization is and how it might be achieved. He writes that the main requirement for a civilized society is a leisured class with plenty of time and nothing required of them. Their biological needs must be satisfied by an adequate income that is not earned, but granted. Only then will they have time to read, think, converse, appreciate art and seek pleasure – the necessary activities to create a civilization. Essentially, they have the time to cultivate and lead the imaginative life, to form a receptive community for true art and the products of the imaginative life. The existence then, of this leisured class, is the measure of civilization, not the form of government, technological superiority or wealth. Thus, a civilized society values the imaginative life over the necessities of the actual life, and consciously creates policy and social conditions that encourage artists, scientists and others to thrive and innovate. Fry argued that nations were judged powerful or impotent by the quality of their national art collections and their acumen in buying important works as they came on the market. Keynes was celebrated by the Bloomsbury artists during the first world war, less for his work as a civil servant in the Treasury, than because he persuaded the Treasury to appropriate public funds to allow the National Gallery’s director to buy works of art at the sale of Degas’s collection in Paris. His Bloomsbury friends were impressed and delighted when he bought a Cézanne for himself at the auction, one of the first in private collections in England (Shone & Grant 1975, p. 284).

The Complexities of Arts Patronage

The most studied and prolific policy writer of the group, Fry advocated a limited, but very specific role for the state in supporting the arts. He argued that Great Britain could enhance its prestige among nations, improve the aesthetic quality of life for its citizens, provide employment opportunities for artists and talented craftsmen, and improve human welfare, through investments in museums, arts education and the applied arts.

Fry’s writings about policy issues appeared in many publications over a 30-year period, at least from 1903 until his death. He wrote for an educated audience as the art critic and regular contributor to *The Athenaeum*, a weekly journal of literature, science and the arts, for which Clive Bell also wrote. He was the founder and a regular contributor to *The Burlington Magazine*, a prestigious art journal still in publication today. In 1923, Keynes was among a group of investors who bought *The Nation*, a weekly journal of news, arts reporting and criticism, and editorials, to which Fry and other Bloomsburys contributed articles, essays and opinion. Often Fry’s policy positions appeared first in one of these publications and were later republished in books of collected essays. In most cases, he offered specific proposals of

his own or gave attention and publicity to ideas that he believed were sound and constructive and were consistent with his values.

From their youth, the Bloomsburys distrusted bureaucracy, and objects of their distrust included the Royal Academy, national and provincial art museums, and state-operated art schools. Rather than call for the dissolution of these state-supported institutions, Fry sought to reform them with new standards of accountability, more public funding, new methods of teaching and studying art, and wider participation by the private sector. Fry recommended models of state support that worked in co-operation with the private sector; Keynes would later make public support of private initiatives a cultural policy.

Encouragement of mediocrity was the Bloomsburys' principal charge against state-supported cultural institutions and government commissions. Fry's antipathy to government institutions dates from his acquaintance with the Chantrey Bequest in 1903. Left by Sir Francis Chantrey, the bequest was intended to purchase works of art produced in Great Britain for the national collections. Purchase decisions were delegated by the government to the Council of the Royal Academy, which tended to recommend paintings by their fellow Academicians. Fry followed the ensuing investigation by Parliament, and he reported on the findings by the House of Lords, which outlined new procedures for the administration of the trust. In his assessment of the situation, Fry agreed with the report that the purchasing practices were not the result of deliberate malfeasance, but the result of "gross neglect and indifference to the essential artistic merit of the works purchased, rather than to any deliberate and conscious perversion of the funds from their proper purposes to the advantage of the Royal Academy" (Fry 1904, p. 248). He found the problems to be structural and he feared that, even when the arrangements changed, "after a few years of better administration things will return to their former condition" (Fry 1904, p. 249). Fry and Bell were convinced that by subjecting art purchases or commissions to decisions by committees, the standard practice at the time among state-funded institutions in Great Britain, the government followed a recipe for mediocrity in art. They observed that committees sought to satisfy the tastes of their least experienced members and make safe decisions that would not offend the "herd". Also, such committees followed public sentiment in making decisions, rather than seeking to educate the public to greater aesthetic appreciation. "The modern state is a bad patron generally for one of three reasons: it is propagandistic, or it expects artists to satisfy a vulgar and stupid majority, or it compromises," Bell wrote (1937).

As a reformer, Fry offered proposals that would raise standards and blend the private with the public realm. He published specific policy proposals in a straightforward and insightful essay, "Art and the State", first published in *The Nation* in 1924; by then, *The Nation* was owned by, and its editorial content controlled by, his friend Maynard Keynes. Fry identified three major areas of cultural life where the British government should direct its expenditures, stated his criticism of its current practices, and offered questions to be considered in the formulation of policy in each area. What England lacked, Fry wrote, is coherent cultural policy that directs public expenditures. Through piecemeal practice and legislation, the government has "found itself saddled with some of the Royal collection of pictures, until little by little and without being brought to the point of formulating a policy, it finds itself spending annually very large sums of money on the upkeep of museums, on the teaching of art, and the employment of artists in public works" (Goodwin 1998, p. 195). He evaluated each of these areas of public investment, beginning with art education in primary and secondary schools, in the universities, and the Royal College of Art.

Fry and the Bloomsburys saw education as a stimulus to achieve the imaginative life. By advocating new methods of teaching art and arguing for the establishment of art history as a course of study at the university, he sought to reform art education at all levels. He believed that art education in England merely emphasized conventions or “styles” that stifled real creativity. The expression of a personal vision, which is art, simply cannot be taught, according to Fry (Reed 1996, p. 271). He admired the teaching methods of Marion Richardson, a schoolteacher in the Midlands who sought to stimulate her students’ creativity by reading poetry or literary descriptions that excited their imaginations and interest in recording their impressions. Fry saw her method as not just educating future artists, but future aesthetes: “such a training as I have suggested would provide even the average child with a possibility of understanding and enjoying Art far more keenly than the ordinarily educated man does at present” (Reed 1996, p. 274).

Fry argued that conventional methods of art training also hurt the nation economically by stifling the development of artists and of good “native design”. He lamented the state of British applied arts, blaming the mass production instituted during the latter half of the nineteenth century for their decline. Throughout his career, he saw the greatest potential – and most appropriate public intervention – to be public investment in the applied arts. “In a country like ours, which depends largely on exported manufactures of all kinds, any scheme which really succeeded in fostering native talent in applied design would be a source of immense wealth to the country, and might, indeed, justify a far larger expenditure of money than is at present devoted to all the various artistic enterprises of the State” (Goodwin 1998, p. 197).

Fry proposed public investment in laboratories of design where students would have access to equipment and technical expertise to explore and innovate in applied design. Such laboratories would also be equipped with facilities to produce prototype pieces, be located in industrial cities around the country, and could, over time, produce new English exports for international consumption (Goodwin 1998, p. 198). This concept, no doubt born of his experience with the Omega Workshops, was developed more fully by Fry in several proposals in which he recommended the appointment of a government official to oversee the operations, sale of designs, and production of prototype products. Artists would create and develop new designs to be executed by apprentices, and everyone would be paid fees or royalties as the designs were sold to manufacturers for mass production (Goodwin 1998, p. 210).

Fry further refined the programme in a memorandum “On the Encouragement of Design in British Manufactures”; he outlined a proposal for a semi-independent Institution that would select contemporary designs to be produced as prototypes and marketed. Through this government-funded Institution, the state would assume the risk associated with new work on experimental designs. To prevent competition with commercial manufacturers, output would be limited and promising designs sold to manufacturers for mass production. Fry recommended that Marion Richardson operate an educational branch of his proposed Institution. By investing in good design and encouraging native talent, the state would prosper through trade, and artists would be assured of steady incomes and potential markets for the products of the imaginative life. Through the production and export of more sophisticated goods, Fry reasoned that Britain would regain her stature as a European leader in the decorative arts (Goodwin 1998, p. 213).

While he was intensely critical of the administration of Britain’s publicly funded museums, Fry supported the concept of building national collections throughout his career. Clearly, he appreciated the role of museums as educational institutions, where the public – and aesthetes – might have access to original works of art, even great masterpieces. In “Art

and the State", he called for increased funding by the state in this area, "for in no other direction of its artistic enterprise are results of such value for the general education of the people, produced at so small an outlay as in this" (Goodwin 1998, p. 202).

Keynes shared Fry's position that the modern state had a role to support culture, a role that he believed nineteenth-century politicians had neglected. Following the practice of past civilizations, he believed the state should invest in civic planning and architecture, to preserve the monuments of the past and create new ones for the future. Artists should not be left to the caprice of capitalism:

Our experience has demonstrated plainly that these things cannot be successfully carried on if they depend on the motive of profit and financial success. The exploitation and incidental destruction of the divine gift of the public entertainer by prostituting it to the purposes of financial gain is one of the worse [sic] crimes of present-day capitalism. How the state could best play its proper part is hard to say. We must learn by trial and error. But anything would be better than the present system. The position today of artists of all sorts is disastrous. (Keynes 1982, p. 344)

Society has a role in supporting the artist that extends beyond financial support, a role that resonates with Bell's view in *Civilization* and Fry's in "Art and Socialism":

He needs economic security and enough income, and then to be left to himself, at the same time the servant of the public and his own master. He is not easy to help. For he needs a responsive spirit of the age, which we cannot deliberately invoke. We can help him best, perhaps, by promoting an atmosphere of openhandedness, of liberality, of candour, of toleration, of experiment, of optimism, which expects to find some things good. (Keynes 1982, p. 345)

"The Artist Must Work for Himself"⁴

Keynes and the Bloomsburys held that the artistic spirit is essentially independent and operates best outside political, social, financial or structural constraints. However, artists are sensitive to the tenor of their society. According to Keynes:

The artist walks where the breath of spirit blows him. He cannot be told his direction; he does not know it himself. But he leads the rest of us into fresh pastures and teaches us to love and to enjoy what we often begin by rejecting, enlarging our sensibility and purifying our instincts. ... Artists depend on the world they live in and the spirit of the age. There is no reason to suppose that less native genius is born into the world in the ages empty of achievement than in those brief periods when nearly all we most value has been brought to birth. (Keynes 1982, p. 368)

Both Fry and Bell argued that the relationship between artist and patron affected the degree of creative freedom that an artist might experience, and they saw a problematic relationship between the artist and the state as patron, chiefly surrounding this issue of artistic freedom. Both insisted on the necessity of freedom of expression for artists and saw state-supported art as having the potential to be constrained and even propagandistic. However, both believed that great art had been created in past centuries with the financial support of powerful patrons, specifically the church and the monarchy. Both sought to understand and explain how creativity might flourish under such absolutist systems.

At the same time that they criticized the “plutocracy”, Fry and Bell worried about the future of private patronage. The growing debate around socialism as a new economic system after the 1917 Revolution in Russia left both searching for the conditions under which art might survive with a “Great State”. They saw the equal distribution of resources proposed for a socialist system as the death knell of private patronage on the scale experienced in capitalist societies.

These ideas emerge in Fry’s essay titled “Art and Socialism”, first published in 1912 in a collection of essays intended to promote socialism titled *Socialism and the Great State*. He begins to work out his theories of patronage, arguing that although the current “plutocracy” leaves artists subject to the egos of newly wealthy plutocrats, it allows innovative artists to emerge if they inherit family wealth and don’t have to support themselves financially through some other labor: “It is impossible that the artist should work for the plutocrat; he must work for himself, because it is only by so doing that he can perform the function for which he exists; it is only by working for himself that he can work for mankind” (Goodwin 1998, p. 184). Fry argues that artists must be free to follow their creative impulses, and cannot be expected to work and produce as other workers might under a socialist system. He concludes that: “Bureaucratic Socialism would, it seems, take away even this blind chance that mankind may benefit by its least appreciable, most elusive treasures, and would carefully organize the complete suppression of original creative power; would organize into a universal and all-embracing tyranny the already overweening and disastrous power of endowed official art” (Goodwin 1998, p. 186). However, Fry balances this indictment by foreseeing some positive benefits for the applied arts in a socialist system. He ends the essay by arguing that in such a system, workers might be elevated to a more respected status, perhaps the guild system would reappear, and talented artists might move into the applied arts to earn a living, thereby improving the design of English goods.

By 1920, the actions of the communists in Russia caused Fry and Bell to explore the issue of artistic freedom in essays for the Fine Arts column of *The Athenaeum*. Fry (1920) begins by criticizing the Bolsheviks for using artists for what he believes are propagandistic reasons, with “no real concern with art as a free expression of the human spirit”. However, he concedes that art “can rarely exist in a state of perfect freedom”, and doubts that “pure artistic research” will be supported in a socialist or communist state in the way that scientific research would be: “Therefore, if art is to survive, it must come to some terms with the needs of society; it cannot hope to be absolutely free, and it is interesting to consider what kinds of terms it may make with society which will not utterly blight the aesthetic endeavor.” Fry argues that throughout history, artists have made “compacts with society which were in no way damaging to their art or difficult to accept” and that allowed for aesthetic innovation. Such a relationship, which included sensitivity by artists to public norms, could relieve artists from “the indifference and neglect of the State” and from their dependence on the patronage of plutocrats.

Following up Fry, Bell contemptuously dismisses the Bolsheviks and all politicians for using art as propaganda, and for attempting to give art political or moral meaning:

Strange as it may seem, the essential quality in a work of art is purely artistic. It has nothing to do with the moral, religious or political view of its creator. It has to do solely with his aesthetic experience and his power of expressing that. But as no politician is capable of appreciating, or even becoming aware of, this essential quality, it is perhaps only natural that politicians should look elsewhere for the significance of art. (Bell 1920a)

Politicians, Bell argues, even progressives, resist new movements in art because they unsettle the status quo. He sets out to discredit the idea that art has flourished most during times of political freedom. Reviewing human history, he finds that artistic endeavor has the potential to thrive regardless of political organization or social conditions. What matters is the artist's ability to express aesthetic emotion and Bell (1920b) argues that political passion is as good as any other if it moves the artist to those heights of expression.

"The First and Most Pressing Need – To Save the Artists"⁵

By 1939, the realization that Europe would soon be engaged in a second major war caused Bell to reverse his position on state support. In an article for *The New Statesman and Nation*, published on October 14, he calls for the establishment of a Ministry of Arts in Great Britain. Fry did not live to experience the Second World War. However, Bell soberly faced the possibility of a German victory and called for state support of the arts as a means of salvaging "spiritual values". Admitting that wartime might be an unusual moment to institute government support of the arts, Bell writes:

If England were to emerge from the war indistinguishable from Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia, historians might well enquire whether it was worth fighting for what the dictators would have let us have for nothing. Our aims need stating; and the first should be the preservation of spiritual values. We shall lose them, just as Germany has lost them, if we devote our energies exclusively to fighting, training, making arms and producing food.

The situation appeared sufficiently threatening to Bell that he was willing to turn to the government that he had blasted in previous statements: "But if the spark of civilization is to be kept alive, the Government must take a hand. I have never imagined that a government, or any other public body, was likely to be a judicious patron of the arts; but now it is not so much a matter of patronage, of encouragement, as of arresting destruction." He called for the establishment of a public institution that, "if not a ministry, must at any rate be in close contact with the Government". His preference was a ministry with broad powers to "protect and employ artists", to organize and tour exhibitions and performing arts, to publish, and to oversee the reconstruction of public buildings and monuments. Bell names specific individuals with credentials and experience to run such a ministry and concludes: "We have the arts, the artists, and the art directors: it remains to be seen whether we have politicians of sufficient imagination and good will to make use of the opportunity."

Bell would later write in his memoir of Keynes that this article was the result of a conversation with the economist, who urged him to write it for *The New Statesman*, which Keynes partly owned at the time (Bell 1956, p. 391). No doubt Bell sought protection and employment for artists during the coming war because he remembered the difficulties that several of the Bloomsbury artists and writers had in seeking deferments as conscientious objectors during the First World War. However, his greater fear – the annihilation of art and civilization itself – was shared by his friend and fellow Bloomsbury, E. M. Forster.

In a series of BBC broadcasts in 1940, Forster described what he feared as the consequences for British culture if the Nazis invaded England. The Bloomsburys had extensive experience with the BBC; Fry, Keynes and Bell all contributed occasional talks and commentary on the arts and other topics, and wrote articles for *The Listener*, a journal published by the BBC. Forster and Desmond MacCarthy were extensively involved as regular contributors from the early years of the radio service (Lago 1995, p. 99). In his talks,

Forster linked political freedom to artistic freedom in an open society, denouncing the Nazis' appropriation of culture for political ends and their use of censorship. "It is all part of a single movement, which has as its aim the fettering of the writer, the scientist, the artist and the general public all over the world", he concluded (Forster 1951, p. 39). As members of the Bloomsbury Group saw freedom of expression threatened by totalitarian regimes then taking hold in Europe and Russia, they reconsidered their distrust of state-supported culture and their pacifism. War became the stimulus to rally support, even state support, for artists.

"Maynard Keynes Benefited All the Arts by the Creation of the Arts Council"⁶

Where Fry was Bloomsbury's best-known teacher, critic and aesthete, John Maynard Keynes was its great politician, economist and policy maker. A Cambridge Apostle like Fry, Lytton Strachey and Thoby Stephen, Keynes began attending the Thursday evening sessions in Bloomsbury sometime in 1907. As he grew in his career as an economist and moved in international political circles, his friendships in Bloomsbury provided an accepting and supportive place for his personal life and homosexuality (Moggridge 1992, p. 217).

After leaving Cambridge, Keynes had intimate relationships with artists for the rest of his life. His youthful affair with painter Duncan Grant created an intimacy and friendship that lasted until Keynes's death; Grant and Vanessa Bell were his closest friends until his marriage to Lydia Lopokova in 1925, which shook, but did not destroy, his Bloomsbury friendships. A Russian ballerina, Lopokova gave his interests in theatre and ballet focus and motivation after their marriage. Thus, Keynes was surrounded by and clearly chose to form his most intimate relationships with creative personalities. There, he had a front-row seat to observe the artistic temperament. His emotional relationships and friendships predisposed Keynes to sympathy with artists, their motivations to create, their desire for creative freedom, and the struggle of many to support themselves financially.

Throughout his life, Keynes put his financial skills and personal funds at the service of his artistic friends and his wife. An early experiment, the London Artists Association, was conceived of by Keynes and operated from 1925 to 1933 as a cooperative for painters. Acting on behalf of its member artists, who included Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, the co-operative assumed responsibility for sales of the artists' works and their promotion through exhibitions and loans of paintings. The co-operative was run by four guarantors, including Keynes and philanthropist Samuel Courtauld, who paid the guaranteed annual income of £150 to any member whose sales failed to generate that amount. It illustrates Keynes's early use of guarantees of income or guarantees against loss, which would later become one of his favored means of subsidizing artistic organizations (Glasgow 1975, p. 266). Also, the cooperative shows Keynes searching for a means to support new artists before their works are accepted by the market.

He involved himself in other artistic ventures, such as the Camargo Society and the Cambridge Arts Theatre, before being named Chairman of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) in 1942, recruited by R.A. Butler, President of the Board of Education (Skidelsky 2000, p. 286). CEMA had been established in 1939 with private funds given by the Pilgrim Trust to provide tours of the performing and visual arts around Great Britain to boost morale and provide employment to artists during the war. Two trusts, Pilgrim and Carnegie, were established in Great Britain by American philanthropists to participate in

social welfare causes there, and both figured into the earliest days of CEMA's history. Thus, American money actually provided CEMA's initial grants (Witts 1998, p. 55).

Mary Glasgow recalls that, shortly after it was established, Keynes wrote to CEMA on behalf of an actor-manager friend who needed funding for a theatrical production. During the course of his correspondence, Keynes recommended that, rather than financing tours itself, that CEMA consider guaranteeing against loss the productions of existing theatrical producers. His arguments, as related by Glasgow, are specific and precise, even to the sums of money required to provide such a guarantee to his friend. And CEMA agreed to the guarantee. During Keynes's tenure as Chairman, offering such guarantees would become standard procedure (Glasgow 1975, p. 267).

By the time of Keynes's appointment as Chairman, CEMA had organized 8000 concerts, 600,000 people had visited its travelling exhibitions and 1.5 million people had attended CEMA-sponsored plays. The initial funding from the Pilgrim Trust had been matched by the Board of Education; by 1941, CEMA was completely funded by the Treasury (Skidelsky 2000, p. 287). Kenneth Clark was a Council member of CEMA from its founding; he remained involved with CEMA and the Arts Council for nearly two decades, serving as Chairman from 1953 to 1960.

Even at his appointment as Chairman, Keynes was planning for CEMA beyond the war, encouraged by Butler, as well as other members of the Council. He deliberated the structure and purpose of a postwar CEMA over the next three years. The model for the new organization that Keynes began to consider by 1943 was the University Grants Committee. In a letter to Butler, he writes:

I am myself more, rather than less, perplexed as to what is the right line of development for CEMA after the war. There are two great questions to make up our minds about. The first is how far we shall do well to be concerned with making buildings available and how far with making occupants available for other people's buildings. The other question is how far we should aim at being a grant-distributing body, rather like the University Grants Committee, and how far we should be an operating body, running our own concerns. (Keynes 1943)

As bursar of King's College, Cambridge, Keynes had experience with the University Grants Committee. Established in 1919, the Committee comprised "an unelected body of university men, appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, on whose advice the government of the day asked Parliament each year to vote money for distribution, without strings, to each university" (Hewison 1995, p. 32). The Committee acted as a buffer between the government and the academic institutions, allocating public funds in bulk grants to the universities and thereby attempting to remove academic research funding from the political process. This method of distancing government from an institution that it had created and financed, became known in the 1970s as the "arms-length principle" (Hewison 1995, p. 32). The model appealed to Keynes, no doubt, because it removed decision-making from bureaucrats and elected officials and might distance the artist-recipients from possible political intervention in their work.

One model that was considered, and specifically rejected, was a Ministry of Arts. Concerns about bureaucracy and "official" art expressed by Fry in earlier years echo in the objections that Kenneth Clark articulated against such a Ministry:

The objections to a Ministry of Fine Arts are strong and numerous. Like all junior Ministries its occupants would be of two kinds: old political retainers who have to be pensioned off

with a harmless job, or young men (e.g., men under 50) not yet high enough up on the roster to be put into more sought after positions. The result would be a frequent change of Ministers, either through death or successful ambition; and few of these temporary occupants would have the necessary qualifications. Moreover the whole idea of a Ministry of Fine Arts arouses great suspicion and resentment among artists, and it is true that such a Ministry might grow into a sort of octopus, binding all creative activity with the chilly tentacles of the Civil Service. (Clark n.d.)

Keynes's distaste for bureaucracy has been well documented by historians of the Arts Council. Himself a former civil servant in the India Office and the Treasury, Keynes was unequivocal in his desire to establish a flexible organization not staffed by career bureaucrats. His earliest proposals for the Arts Council state that the staff should be full-time, salaried, and pensioned, "but shall not be Civil Servants" (Keynes 1944). He is more explicit as the administrative structure is set up:

My main point, to which I attach great importance and which I should like to see specifically and prominently incorporated, is the following:

It is not expected or desired that the senior staff will spend the whole, or even the greater part, of their careers in the service of the Council. They will seldom or never be promoted from the subordinate staff; they will be appointed by reason of a great variety of qualifications, which they will fulfill in varying degrees, and at all kinds of seniorities. Save in exceptional cases, it will probably be most undesirable that Directors or Regional Officers should remain in the service of the Council for more than (say) ten years at the outside, and a shorter term of office is likely to be quite usual ...

In short, the minimum amount of red tape is desirable. One is not concerned with giving people reasonable expectations of what they are going to look forward to 20 or 30 years later. One will be bringing in for a spell people from all kinds of outside professions and avocations. A rigid salary system will mean paying more than is necessary in some cases and much less than is required, if one is to get the desired candidate, in others. (Keynes 1946)

To decentralize the Arts Council's operations, CEMA's existing 11 regional offices were retained, with regional directors to manage each one.

During Keynes's tenure, he established an administrative structure that was adopted later in the century by many arts councils. He hired directors to manage the organization's work in artistic disciplines, specifically music, theatre and visual art. Also during his tenure, CEMA formalized its review panels, beginning the advisory peer review system that many arts councils still rely upon to evaluate grant requests.

Like its chairman, members of the Council were appointed, as were members of the review panels. Keynes continued this system, which has carried two results. Although members of the Council and the panels were intended to be independent volunteers who were knowledgeable about the arts, some were associated with institutions that could be beneficiaries of CEMA funding. Keynes himself worked to engineer CEMA funding to support the re-opening of Covent Garden as an opera house and served as its chair while he was also chair of CEMA. Today such associations would be considered conflicts of interest; then they were considered "clever" (Witts 1998, p. 141). Furthermore, the system led to a governance by members of the British upper class, described as "reliable and consensual" (Williams 1979, p. 166). With such an attitude of consensus, debate about CEMA matters was not encouraged, allowing the chairman and the staff to forward their own agendas (Williams 1979, p. 161).

By the time he drafted his proposals for a permanent, peace-time organization to be reviewed by the CEMA members, Keynes had answers to the “two great questions” he posed two years earlier: the Arts Council would help provide buildings and make grants. An appendix to his draft proposal outlines the activities that he foresaw for the Arts Council immediately after the war. Except in the case of touring art exhibitions, which it would continue to organize using the national collections, the Arts Council would cease to be a producer of art. Instead, the new entity would help to provide facilities, infrastructure, and funding to fledgling and established groups. It would assist artists, not compete with them. It would continue to organize exhibitions for regional tours, but would cease to organize tours of the performing arts, instead “dealing, on the one hand, with local organizations and, on the other hand, with itinerant companies and orchestras separately incorporated and with an independent organization of their own, normally of a profit-making character”. The Arts Council would work to “maintain and raise standards of taste and execution, cooperating for this purpose with local authorities, educational authorities, and voluntary bodies of citizens, providing advice, facilities and grants, subsidies and guarantees according to a variety of formulas”. He urged the Council to “foster development of National Opera, Ballet, and Drama and of National Orchestras. Most of the permanent or semi-permanent companies and orchestras of national importance are already operating under the auspices of CEMA” (Keynes 1944).

The provision of buildings was especially important in the aftermath of the war’s destruction: “If with state aid the material frame can be constructed, the public and the artists will do the rest between them. The muses will emerge from their dusty haunts, and supply and demand shall be their servants” (Keynes 1982, p. 361). Like Fry’s proposals for laboratories of design, Keynes understood that public investments in facilities like theatres, galleries and concert halls would encourage creative work.

Thus, the new Arts Council would operate as independently as possible from political forces and government bureaucracy to provide artists and arts organizations with facilities, advice and funding. It would not compete with the market; it would work co-operatively with the private and public sectors in a flexible and responsive manner. Its public funds would have a limited and very specific role in the national cultural life, a role that would support artistic endeavor in critical ways that private funding had not, and probably would not, in the new welfare state. Keynes ended his BBC broadcast announcing the establishment of the Arts Council with his vision for a postwar society, straight from his Bloomsbury values: “The purpose of the Arts Council of Great Britain is to create an environment to breed a spirit, to cultivate an opinion, to offer a stimulus to such purpose that the artist and the public can each sustain and live on the other in that union which has occasionally existed in the past at the great ages of a communal civilized life.” Keynes died suddenly in 1946, before the Royal Charter for the Arts Council was ratified.

Conclusion

Would the Arts Council of Great Britain have been established without Keynes? It is hard to say. CEMA’s popularity had built momentum for a peacetime organization, and Keynes had the necessary governmental connections, prestige and administrative experience to conceive the new organization and convince the Treasury to fund it. Certainly two ironies are immediately apparent. First, that Keynes, who abhorred bureaucracy, established a model that has stimulated an arts bureaucracy at local, regional and national levels in the United Kingdom and the United States. And second, some observers have interpreted that

Keynes saw grants and subsidies as temporary investment measures, the need for which, over time, would “wither away” (Peacock 1993, p. 118). Instead, the Arts Council grew in staff size and budget over the decades following its establishment.

Other critics have charged that Arts Council funding has benefited institutions, rather than individuals, that Keynes was not interested in supporting and stimulating creativity, but in building national institutions in the performing arts (Witts 1998, p. 146). In line with Keynes’s interests during his time as Chairman, the national opera, dance and theatre companies have received annual operating subsidies and the largest percentage of Arts Council funds. As applied in the United Kingdom and the United States, the Arts Council model has supported professional artists through the development and sustenance of artistic institutions that produce, present and commission work for audiences of taxpayers and tourists. This emphasis on funding decisions that cultivate artistic standards through professional organizations in metropolitan areas has drawn extensive criticism and comment over the decades. Many of the critics have seen the arts council model as a flawed one, but one that is worth reforming (Williams 1979, 1989; Hutchison 1982; Witts 1998). The Bloomsbury Group would no doubt join in the criticism and then push for reform.

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NOTES

1. I use the term “movement” here to indicate actions and events that foster policy.
2. Bell 1957.
3. Bell 1928.
4. Roger Fry, “Art and Socialism”, 1912 (discussed in Goodwin 1998).
5. Bell 1939.
6. Bell 1956.

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