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## Americans for the Arts Records

1953-2008  
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Read collection overview

With roots extending back to 1965, Americans for the Arts is one of the first and most influential arts advocacy organizations in the United States. Founded as the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies (NALAA), the organization has collaborated with arts organizations at the local, state, and federal level; with government agencies; private individuals; and funders to represent and serve local communities and to raise awareness of the value of the arts in American lives. AFTA plays a key role in sustaining creative communities and generating public and private sector policies, leadership, and resources for the arts and arts education. AFTA assumed its current name in 1996 after the merger of NALAA and the American Council for the Arts.

The records are focused on AFTA's early years and include minutes of meetings and other organizational records, selected publications, and promotional materials.

## Background on Americans for the Arts

### Note

Research and writing by Elizabeth Franz.

AFTA originated in the 'arts council' movement of the 1940s and 1950s, and was officially formed in 1960, originally as 'Community Art Councils, Inc.,' a national organization to support arts councils in the US – later known as local arts agencies. In the 1960s, the Arts & Business Council and the Business Committee for the Arts were both formed by business leaders to promote support for the arts among businesses. These organizations would merge with AFTA in the 2000s.

After an increase of federal funding for the arts in the 1960s, and a corresponding increase in the number of arts councils/agencies at state and local level, AFTA (first the CACI, then the ACA) grew in complexity and focus. In the 1970s, the ACA became more focused on advocating for continued government arts funding. Two organizations branched off from the ACA to focus specifically on state-level and local-level funding. (The

local-level organization, the NALAA, would eventually re-merge with AFTA, while the state-level organization remains a separate organization) AFTA continues to focus on advocacy to this day. In the aughts, AFTA absorbed two more organizations, ABC and BCA, that specifically focused on business and corporate arts support.

**The Arts Council Movement:** The arts council movement grew out of social service/welfare organizations in the 1940s, as social service workers began applying their community organizing skills to support cultural development in their communities. The first official US-based art council was established in Winston-Salem, NC in 1949, and more art councils spread across the country in the coming decades with support from key players in the movement, including the Association of Junior Leagues of America in the 1940s, the American Symphony Orchestra League (ASOL) in the early 1950s, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in the late 1950s.

AFTA's first predecessor organization, 'Community Art Councils, Inc,' a national organization for local arts councils, was formed at an ASOL convention in Winston-Salem in 1960 and continued to operate under the auspices of the ASOL for several years. Over the next decade, the CACI changed its name to the Arts Councils of America (ACA), moved its headquarters to New York, and developed more organizational complexity as the field of art councils grew to encompass arts councils/agencies at the federal, state, and community level, including private non-profits and some affiliated with state and local governments. New public funding sources and specific interest groups led to committees within the ACA splitting off to better focus on state art agencies (the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies split from the ACA in 1969 and is still a separate organization) and local art agencies. (The National Assembly of Community Arts Agencies, later National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies, split from the ACA in 1971).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the NALAA worked to secure federal funding for local arts agencies, advocated for more NEA funding for local agencies, published statistics on how arts improved local economies, and formed subgroups dedicated to state, rural, and urban community arts organizations. Meanwhile, the ACA branched out and formed an array of diverse art support programs, including Advocates for the Arts, Arts Advocacy Day, the Congressional Arts Caucus, and various award ceremonies recognizing individuals for their arts contributions. The NALAA re-merged with the ACA in 1996.

**Public Support for the Arts in the U.S.:** Until the 1960s, there was little Federal support for the arts in the US, even as the size and scope of the Federal government grew dramatically with the World Wars and New Deal. While some efforts were made, support for the arts was seen in government as a private enterprise, supported by philanthropists such as the Rockefellers, and community leaders, such as those who created arts councils or who donated to arts funds.

However, in the early 1960s, the Department of Labor under the Kennedy administration became concerned that the art community in the US was underdeveloped compared to other nations. After Kennedy's assassination, President Johnson continued the push to support federal funding for the arts, and in 1965, he signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, creating the NEA.

While the ACA supported Federal funding for the arts in theory, initial relations between the ACA and the NEA were not good. In the ACA leaders' view, the 1965 Act gave the NEA Chairman Roger Stevens too much power over funding, taking power away from the local arts organizations they represented. When the NEA was set to be reauthorized in 1968, ACA Board Members actively campaigned against it. However, when Nancy Hanks was offered Chairmanship of the NEA in 1969, she accepted, and used her position to dramatically increase Federal support for the NEA, and public support for the organization at the grassroots level. NEA funding grew over the next decade and a half from \$8 million to more than \$150 million.

As public support for the arts became more established at the federal, state, and local levels, an ongoing political argument began over how much public funding would be allocated to the arts, and whether public funding should be given to 'controversial' art projects. President Reagan proposed to cut the NEA budget in half in the early 1980s, and similar proposals continued from conservative Presidents and Congresses over the next several decades. The ACA, and later AFTA, became more focused on lobbying and advocacy through the years as public arts funding was threatened at the federal level.

**Arts and Business:** Before the 1960s, support for the arts in the US was seen as a private, not a government concern. But even after government funding for the arts increased, philanthropists, community leaders, and corporations played a role in support for the arts in the US. The Rockefeller family was especially influential in supporting the arts council movement in the 1950s and would become a key funder for Americans for the Arts, while at the grassroots level, United Arts Funds (UAFs) expanded alongside with arts councils specifically to fundraise for the arts from private sources.

The Rockefellers' involvement with AFTA can be traced back to 1956. After one of the Rockefeller brothers, John D. III, spearheaded the creation of Lincoln Center in New York, he was approached by Philip Hanes (a representative from the Winston-Salem Arts Council, member of the ASOL, and eventually CACI President), to speak at a few events, and the Rockefeller Foundation began giving funds to the ASOL to fund studies on arts councils.

Around the same time, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, founded in 1940, established the 'Special Studies

Project,' a think tank on US domestic and international policy. Nancy Hanks, initially an assistant to Nelson Rockefeller at his post in the Federal government, became a member of the project's planning committee and eventually became its Executive Secretary. In 1963, the Special Studies project began conducting a study specifically on the arts, and Nancy Hanks attended an ASOL meeting. In 1965, Nancy Hanks joined the ACA Board, and the RBF provided office space for the ACA to move from Winston-Salem to New York. The RBF would continue to provide the ACA funding for decades to come.

In 1967, David Rockefeller created the Business Committee for the Arts as a separate organization, to focus specifically on private arts support. The Arts & Business Council, initially created by a group of business leaders from the New York Board of Trade in 1965, had a similar objective. Over the next several decades, both organizations created programs to support and acknowledge corporate support for the arts, including studies, publications, conferences, and awards. And while public funding for the arts experienced a backlash in the 1980s and 1990s, private support did not, and these business-focused organizations continued to operate and expand across the country.

## Scope of collection

The records of Americans for the Arts are still be acquired by SCUA. The materials currently held by the repository are divided into two broad categories: Administrative and Publications and printed material. Administrative files documents the functions and operations of AFTA while publications consist of printed material collected or accrued by the organization.

## Series descriptions

### [Series 1. Administrative](#)

1953-2008

Records documenting the functions and operations of AFTA.

### [Series 2. Publications and printed material](#)

1965-2005

Printed materials consulted and collected by AFTA.

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1981-1982

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1981

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Arts, Education and Americans, Inc; McGraw-Hill Book Company: Advertisements, Correspondence, Sales Reports  
1985 Mar. 26

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Associated Councils of the Arts Annual Meeting, Snowmass-at-Aspen: Agendas, Notes, Personnel, Reports  
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Associated Councils of the Arts Annual Meeting, Snowmass-at-Aspen: Local Guide, Published Report, Meeting Minutes  
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Background Information on Issues Related to Fiscal Year 1990 Funding of the National Endowment for the Arts and Freedom of Expression  
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Blaine, John: Outgoing Correspondence  
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1963-1968  
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National Assembly of Community Arts Agencies: Correspondence, Press Releases  
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National Assembly of Community Arts Agencies, Executive Committee: Agendas, Correspondence, Meeting Minutes, Press Releases, Resume  
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National Assembly of Community Arts Agencies, Executive Committee: Correspondence, meeting Minutes, Grant Form Draft, Stationary Template  
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National Assembly of Community Arts Agencies, Financial: Invoices, Statements, Membership  
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## **Administrative information**

## Access

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## Search terms

## Subjects

- Arts--Management
- Arts--United States
- Community arts projects

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