

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

Remarks on Presenting the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal

February 13, 2012

The President. Thank you, everybody. Please, please have a seat. Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us in this celebration of the arts and the humanities. Two outstanding public servants and ambassadors for the arts are here: Rocco Landesman—where's Rocco? There he is, right here—Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts; and Jim Leach—where's Jim? Good to see you, Jim—the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

We also have two good friends and Cochairs of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities who are here: Margo Lions and George Stevens. And I also want to acknowledge one of our honorees who unfortunately could not make it. Ever the artist, Andre Watts had a concert to give in Salt Lake City. [*Laughter*] So give him a big round of applause in his absence.

Michelle and I love this event. This is something we look forward to every single year because it's a moment when America has a chance to pay tribute to extraordinary men and women who have excelled in the arts and the humanities and who, along the way, have left an indelible mark on American culture. That's all the honorees we see here today. We honor your talents, we honor your careers, and your remarkable contributions to this country that we love.

Throughout our history, America has advanced not only because of the will of our citizens, not only because of the vision of our leaders or the might of our military. America has also advanced because of paintings and poems, stories and songs, the dramas and the dances that provide us comfort and instilled in us confidence, inspired in us a sense of mutual understanding and a calling to always strive for a more perfect Union.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "I dwell in possibility." I dwell in possibility. And so does the American spirit. That's who we are as a people. And that's who our honorees are. Each of you have traveled a unique path to get here, and your fields represent the full spectrum of the arts and humanities. With us are actors and poets, authors, singers, philosophers, sculptors, curators, musicians, and historians. We even have an economist, which we don't always get on stage, but—[*laughter*—what connects every one of you is that you dwell in possibilities. You create new possibilities for all of us.

And that's a special trait. And it assigns you a special task. Because in moments of calm, as in moments of crisis, in times of triumph as in times of tragedy, you help guide our growth as a people. The true power of the arts and the humanities is that you speak to everyone. There is not one of us here who hasn't had their beliefs challenged by a writer's eloquence or their knowledge deepened by a historian's insights or their sagging spirits lifted by a singer's voice. Those are some of the most endearing and memorable moments in our lives.

Equal to the impact you have on each of us every day as individuals is the impact you have on us as a society. And we are told we're divided as a people, and then suddenly, the arts have this power to bring us together and speak to our common condition.

Recently, I've been reminded of Walt Whitman's famous poem "I Hear America Singing." And it's a poem that with simple eloquence spotlights our diversity and our spirit of rugged individualism, the messy, energized, dynamic sense of what it is to be an American. And

Whitman lifts up the voices of mechanics and carpenters, masons and boatmen, shoemakers, woodcutters, the mother and the young wife at work, "each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else."

And it's true that we all have songs in our souls that are only ours. We all have a unique part in the story of America. But that story is bigger than any one of us. And it endures because we are all heirs to a fundamental truth: that out of many are one, this incredible multitude.

I hear America singing today. I hear America singing through the artists and the writers that we honor this afternoon, the men and women who are following in the footsteps of Whitman and Hemingway, Souza and Armstrong, and Eakins and Rockwell. But I also hear America singing through the artists and writers who will be sitting here a few decades from now with another President, the students in Denver who recently wrote a play about teenage homelessness or the kids in Grand Rapids who designed a mural to bring joy to a struggling community. They're singing what Whitman called "strong melodious songs."

And somewhere in America, the next great writer is wrestling with the first draft of an English paper. [*Laughter*] Somewhere the next great actor is mustering up the courage to try out for that school play. Somewhere the next great artist is doodling on their homework. Somewhere the next great thinker is asking their teacher, "Why not?" They're out there right now, dwelling in possibility.

So as we honor the icons of today, we also have to champion the icons of tomorrow. They need our support; we need them to succeed. We need them to succeed as much as we need engineers and scientists. We also need artists and scholars. We need them to take the mantle from you, to do their part to disrupt our views and to challenge our presumptions and most of all to stir in us a need to be our better selves.

The arts and the humanities do not just reflect America, they shape America. And as long as I am President, I look forward to making sure they are a priority for this country, so— [*applause*].

It is now my distinct privilege to present these medals to the award winners who we have here today. And as the citations are read, I'm sure you've gotten extensive instructions from our military aides, so— [*laughter*].

[*At this point, Maj. Gary Marlowe, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.*]

The President. Will you please stand and give a big hand to our award winners today.

Well, we are just blessed to have this incredible array of talent and inspiration with us here today. We are so glad we had the opportunity to make this small gesture of appreciation and thanks to all that you have contributed to us.

Each and every day you continue to inform who we are as a people, and we could not be prouder of everything that you've done, and we know you've got a lot more to do, so keep at it.

In the meantime, for everybody who is gathered here today, we have a wonderful reception. So please enjoy. The food is usually pretty good around here. [*Laughter*] The music is even better. I think the Marine Band will probably be out there playing a few tunes. And again, we are very thankful to all the honorees here today for everything that you've done for our country. Congratulations.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:52 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Amartya Sen, Thomas W. Lamont University Professor of economics and philosophy, Harvard University.

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