

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at a Reception Honoring the 2022 and 2023 Recipients of the National Medal of Arts and National Humanities Medal

October 21, 2024

The First Lady. Welcome to the White House.

The poet Gwendolyn Brooks, a past recipient of the National Medal of Arts, once said that sometimes it's easier to stay home—while it's easier to stay home, "art urges voyages."

The artists, scholars, and patrons we're honoring tonight have given us a gift: They've gone on those voyages. And when they returned, they expressed our shared humanity in new ways, helping us integrate all of our hope, joy, and hard-earned wisdom into the one life we're given and the one Nation we all share.

In paintings and films, in songs and scenes, poetry and history, they've uncovered the memories we didn't know we held onto and the dreams we didn't dare say out loud. And they remind us of the transcendent moments of truth and beauty and that they are not out of our reach. Sometimes, they just require a voyage within ourselves of—toward the people around us.

Joe and I are so grateful to be here tonight with these extraordinary medal recipients. Each of you has helped us venture out to see our world with clarity, empathy, and courage. Thank you and congratulations.

Now it is my pleasure to introduce the Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, Maria Rosario Jackson. Chair Jackson, you've empowered so many people to go on creative journeys, and you've helped us weave the arts and humanities into every part of our lives. We are deeply grateful to have you as a champion of this community.

Thank you.

[At this point, the program continued with remarks by Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts Maria Rosario Jackson and Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities Shelly C. Lowe, who introduced the President. No transcript was provided. Then, the President made remarks as follows.]

The President. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Welcome to the White House, and thank you for making me look good in front of the love of my life and the life of my love—*[laughter]*—my daughter Ashley Biden. Ashley. *[Laughter]*

Welcome to the White House, again, the newest recipients of the National Medal of Arts and Humanities. And truly inspiring individuals and truly extraordinary group.

Jill and I just welcomed each of them and their families in the Oval Office, where they received their medals and official citations.

And just like across the country, in the Oval Office, you see deep impact of the arts, humanities on our national history. Across from the Resolute Desk is a bust of Dr. King and Robert F. Kennedy. I can see them from where I sit. They're two of my political heroes who often quoted the wisdom of poets and philosophers, artists and advocates.

Just last week, I delivered a eulogy for Ethel Kennedy, which was a great honor, and—Robert Kennedy's widow. She was a hero in her own right who supported the arts and the humanities in advancing the causes of human rights and social justice.

While the service was a celebration of life at a Catholic church with plenty of prayer and reflection, it was a literal concert. Stevie Wonder, Sting, Kenny Chesney—[*laughter*—St. Martin Choir each performed. It was deeply moving. Different genres in each voice echoed through the cathedral and reverberated in our hearts. That's the power of the arts and humanities in America.

And today Jill and I are truly proud to continue that legacy by awarding two of our Nation's highest honors to 39 extraordinary Americans. Again, congratulations to all of you. And to your families as well. [*Laughter*]

The National Medal of Arts to honor outstanding contributions to the excellence, growth, support, and availability of the arts in the United States and the National Humanities Medal to honor those who [whose; White House correction] work has depended on the Nation's understanding of humanities and broadened our citizens' engagement with history, literature, philosophy, and so many other subjects.

Now, I could spend all day talking about each one of you, and if it weren't so many, I would. [*Laughter*]

But just let me just say this. You have broken barriers. You've blazed new trails. You redefined culture. You are the truth tellers, the bridge builders, the change seekers. And above all, you're the masters of your craft who have made us a better America with all you've done, and it's a better America. That's what you've done. I mean it.

Bringing all of our rich and diverse cultures to the masses; showing us the beauty of this land and the people that inhabit this land; bringing new characters to life to influence who we all can be.

You also help us find meaning and purpose in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, providing hope, wisdom, and laughter when we need it and we need a way forward, and transporting us through the past and the future to help us make sense of the present, because that's what it does: make sense of the present. With absolute courage, you combat racial stereotypes, confront ghosts of history, and speak truth to power.

As Jill Biden's husband, I know the power of women in this room. [*Laughter*] I know—you think I'm kidding. I'm not. [*Laughter*] All the women in my family are smarter than all the men, and that's not a joke. [*Laughter*] You think I'm joking. I'm not. I know you don't think I'm joking.

I know the power of women in this room to get things done and uplift the next generation of pioneers, proving a woman can do anything a man can do and then some. And that includes being President of the United States of America. [*Applause*] Just saying.

You know, the artist's gift is a sixth sense to imagine something no one else can carve, paint, write, sing, dance, or film until they set their visions free—you know, our vision of our Nation's North Star, the idea that we're all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives. We're the most unique nation in the world. We're the only nation founded on an idea—an idea. Not a joke. An idea. All others are geography and other ethnicities.

But we never, never, never—we've never walked away from the idea that all of us are created equal and deserve to be treated that way throughout our lives. While we've never fully lived up to this idea, we've never walked away from it either—away from it either, because of you—I mean this sincerely—because of you, the people in this room, all of you who we honor in this person—in person today and those whose spirits are with us.

Folks, let's take a moment to recognize those honorees who are no longer with us: Anthony Bourdain, Selena, Ruth Asawa. You know, they were larger than life. We remember every song, every sculpture, every meal, every moment they shared with us. We miss them dearly.

Let me close with this. I'm a—we have a tendency to go on too long here because you're an incredible group. *[Laughter]* No, you really are. You're an incredible group.

It's clear Jill and I, Kamala and Doug, our entire administration believe in the power of the arts and humanities. It matters. It matters now more than ever. This is a very consequential time for the arts and humanities in America. Extreme forces are banning books, trying to erase history, spreading misinformation. But because of you—I mean this—because of you, we keep our books open. You make history. We combat lies with truth.

This administration supports the arts and humanities as essential pieces of America's might and dynamism, whether it's helping local venues and theaters get through the pandemic or opening the White House for a range of groundbreaking concerts and exhibits.

For example, we surprised Elton John while we—with the National Humanities Medal during the concert on the South Lawn. At the first-ever Juneteenth conference at the White House, we heard the great Jennifer Hudson sing from her soul about the glory that will come.

And one of the things we're most proud of is that Jill instilled a new exhibition—installed a new exhibition in the East Wing, featuring artwork from children of military families. You know, through the eyes of a child, we see the power of the arts and humanities—through the eyes of a child—to inspire and imagine a future, a future worthy of our dreams.

In fact, 85 years ago, a 10-year-old boy was listening to the radio. He heard the voice of Marian Anderson standing in the light of the Lincoln Memorial from the shadow of Jim Crow and singing, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land—sweet land of liberty."

Look, folks, showing her pride in America and calling for national unity, her performance is described as a "concert that sparked the civil rights movement."

Nearly 25 years later, that 10-year-old boy stood on those same steps. His name was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And he declared a dream during the March on Washington. He asked Marian Anderson to perform once again, and she did. She sang, "He's got the whole world in his hands."

My fellow Americans, today we honor that legacy, and we remember the power in all your hands—and I mean it sincerely—your hands.

Look, I'd like to ask the following medalists to stand, if you're able, to be recognized.

Let's recognize the class of 2022 National Medal of Arts recipients. The class of 2022. Thank you.

And, folks, the class of 2022 medal recipients are here and are—you just heard them. But the class of 2023, please—of the Arts—stand.

And, folks, you know, you're an incredible group of people. You know, there's one other thing I want to say to you all, is that, you know the class of 2022 National Medal recipients—Humanities—of the class of 2023 National Medal of Arts recipients. I'd like to see you guys stand as well.

Did I already have you stand? *[Laughter]* 2023, come on.

National humanitarians—look, you guys are something else. *[Laughter]* Class of 2023 Humanities Medal recipients are something else.

Well, I tell you what, there—congratulations, you all.

Look, you know, there's a hymn based on the 22d Psalm in my church. It says: "May he raise you up on eagle's wings and bear you on the breath of dawn and let the light to shine upon you. Until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand."

We need you. We need you badly now. Thank you, thank you, thank you for making us better. I love you.

Please enjoy the reception. God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 6 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to musician Gordon Sumner; and Vice President Kamala D. Harris and her husband Douglas C. Emhoff. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 22.

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