

Ralph Burgard

Executive Director of American Council for the Arts 1966 -1967

Interviewer: Maryo Ewell

Date, location of interview: May 10, 2005, by telephone

What were the main issues with SAA's while Burgard was at ACA:

“The biggest issue was to become politically astute. There’s a wonderful story: When I became director, in 66 in Chicago, we had Martin Ryan Hailey as our major speaker. He was an astute lobbyist – had run Humphrey’s campaign, and was a lobbyist for S & H Green Stamps. A wonderful person! I said, ‘Martin, these new people are coming in, they don’t know how to deal with legislators and I need you to give them the facts of life.’ He said, ‘Lobbyists are necessary;’ and he laid everything out. My arts constituents were absolutely shocked: they found it gross, crude – ‘You shouldn’t have to cheapen the arts to politicize them in this way, it was demeaning, it was lowering yourself to get money in this way. It would be apparent that the arts were above that.’ That was in June of 1966. The following year, Martin Ryan Hailey was in demand everywhere! And excerpts from his talk were making the rounds.

“There was a real debate about government and the arts in those days, and the preponderance of opinion was that it should be private. Government shouldn’t be involved with arts issues; art was private. Artists’ integrity would be impugned. The government would be telling us what to paint. The SAA directors were the shock troops (and were the shocked troops!) taking the arts into governmental territory, finding out how the idea of SAA’s would work.

“It was a stroke of genius, having 50 chances to go wrong, rather than a single possible blunder. The essence of our country – decentralization of decision-making.

“Another issue: sorting out their relationships with the NEA. Temperatures rose, verbally-speaking, about the lines of authority and the prerogatives of the NEA – whose guidelines (the federal? The states?) would dictate how money was spent, what should happen, how much say the states ought to have in policy matters.

“The NEA at that time – when Roger was Chairman – may have felt that the SAA’s were not in their direct concerns – the states were off to one side, had been put in [to the legislation] at the last moment. The NEA saw its role as supporting the great arts; the states were not their priority. Of course the states felt that their opinion should be felt, as well.

“I was not the headhunter for the states. Howard Adams did that; I hired him as liaison for SAA’s while I worked more with the LAA’s. Howard was an opinionated man, brilliant in his way. We didn’t have a recruiting agency as such; the closest we may have come to it was Howard making recommendations – informally. It was not a formal ACA service. We did the Cultural Affairs magazine; but I don’t think we had a ‘position wanted’ column.

“The SAA directors who flourished and did well during that time were generalists. Most of them had some arts background, but they were people – the best, most effective ones – had very good people skills. Had to work with their boards, governors, figure out how to navigate the political alleyways. Few had comparable experience in administration; they learned as they went along.

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The characteristics of perseverance, basic optimism were essential – it was all brand new, and there were no guidelines.

“One thing that Howard was very good at was giving them an esprit de corps at the conventions. As with all things new, they were all in the same boat. None of us knew that much, and there was such solidarity. It was a small group. We knew everyone.

“The exhilaration of being at the start of something extraordinary in our cultural history. Howard and I both had a ‘thing’ about celebration, and that was a part of our coming together; we worked hard, but we had a good time doing it. Irreverence was the coinage of the realm.

“It was a fascinating era. And it was one of the really great contributions to American cultural development. Had there not been state arts councils we’d not have the kind of development we have today.”