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Fine arts are in survival mode as funds dry up

By Andrea Stone, USA TODAY

BALTIMORE — Doreen Bolger sees her new exhibit of circus drawings by Pablo Picasso and other 20th-century artists as just right for the times.

The images of acrobats and clowns, says the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, are "uplifting and fun" at a time when the economy is in free fall.

Not so great is the \$8 fee Bolger was forced to charge when the exhibit opened last week in the otherwise free museum. The museum has charged for a few special exhibits, but she had hoped this one could be free. Steep drops in the museum's endowment, contributions, government grants and gift shop sales, however, have made budget-balancing a high-wire act.

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"There's rarely extra money in good times," says Bolger, whose museum opened in 1929, the year the Great Depression began. "We're already into the adversity mode."

The downturn walloping the entire economy has hit non-profit arts organizations especially hard. With millions of people scrambling to pay for food and other basics, a night at the opera can seem frivolous. So museums, symphonies, theaters, ballet companies and opera companies have cut staff, canceled performances, shortened seasons and, in some cases, shut down.

The worst may be yet to come.

Jesse Rosen of the League of American Orchestras says season subscriptions to performances, which are sold a year ahead of time, mask the full impact. "It's the second year when it catches up," he says.

That worries Jane Shannahan, a subscriber to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery. The festival recently canceled a \$1.3 million production of *Les Misérables* because of declining contributions.

"It's important to support museums, symphonies, the dance and theater," she says. "These are things we need in society. If we lose them, we are declining faster than we think."

A USA TODAY/Gallup Poll in December found that 69% of Americans are cutting back on entertainment. Such sentiments have forced arts organizations to plan survival scenarios.

In New York, where more than a dozen Broadway shows closed in January, Carnegie Hall pared its schedule by 10%. The Miami City Ballet cut eight of 53 dancers. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra cut musicians' pay 11%.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art this week said it would eliminate 30 positions, postpone a Spanish art exhibit and possibly increase admission fees to deal with a 26% drop in its endowment. In Washington, the Smithsonian Institution has frozen all hiring. Brandeis University sparked an uproar when it announced it would close the Rose Art Museum outside Boston and sell works by Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and others to fill potential budget gaps.

When soaring gas prices, plummeting tourism and a big drop in contributions threw it into financial crisis, the Kentucky Repertory Theatre in Horse Cave enlisted actor and native Kentuckian George Clooney to help raise \$350,000.

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The Utah Shakespearean Festival in Cedar City dealt with dwindling donations by shortening its summer season and putting on plays with smaller, less-expensive casts in its fall season.

In California, the Palm Springs Art Museum has resorted to layoffs, shorter hours and a hiring freeze as it waits for checks from supporters whose investments have shrunk. Says marketing director Bob Bogard: "The pledges just haven't come through yet."

As foundation grants and private donations dry up, arts groups become more creative. When the real estate bust and high unemployment sent ticket sales south and once-generous donors stopped returning phone calls, Florida Repertory Theatre in Fort Myers improvised with a limited-time deal of five plays for \$99, nearly half the regular price. That "put hundreds of new people into the theater," artistic director Bob Cacioppo says.

Others beg.

In January, the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra e-mailed an urgent plea just before canceling the season's final two concerts.

"Our future is not certain. BCO's fate is in the hands of our loyal audience and donors," it said. "There are no bailouts for non-profit organizations."

"It's frightening," says Lockwood Hoehl, BCO's executive director. "We're unfortunately at the bottom of the food chain. The general thought about the arts in our society is it's expendable."

Overcoming 'practicality'

The philosophical divide between those who see the arts as frivolous and those who see its value is as old as the nation.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the federal Works Progress Administration paid thousands of unemployed artists to write regional guidebooks, produce plays and organize symphony orchestras. The work of more than 5,000 artists can still be seen today in murals commissioned for schools, post offices and other government buildings.

President Obama has not proposed such a program but supports increased arts funding. Most Republicans oppose spending tax dollars on aesthetics.

"America is a practical nation that comes from very practical roots," says Robert Lynch of the advocacy group Americans for the Arts. "That practicality ... is part of what we've had to overcome."

It was on display in the recent debate in Congress over the economic stimulus package.

The House of Representatives version included \$50 million for the National Endowment for the Arts to help non-profit arts organizations avoid closing or laying off workers, but the Senate version left it out. The final bill restored the money for the NEA.

"Putting people to work is more important than putting more art on the wall of some New York City gallery frequented by the elite art community," said Republican Rep. Jack Kingston of Georgia during the debate.

Lynch calls that attitude "uninformed and perhaps disingenuous." His group estimates that non-profit arts organizations generate \$166.2 billion each year in cultural and related spending such as restaurants and parking, and they produce \$30 billion in tax revenue and 5.7 million jobs.

"Those jobs are every bit as important as an auto industry worker," Lynch says. He says 10,000 arts groups employing 260,000 artists and support workers could close this year.

Brian Riedl, a federal budget analyst at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, sees it differently.

"When families are struggling to make ends meet, \$50 million going to the arts means \$50 million less to help families put food on the table," Riedl says.

Josh Bivens of the liberal Economic Policy Institute calls that "a false choice" and says any spending is good spending in an ailing economy. Plus, "it's something we should support as a society."

Artists have heard it all before.

"We in the arts have always had to fight to get the message of our value across," says Debbie Chinn, managing director of Centerstage, a regional theater here. "The arts isn't fluff. It's not discretionary. It's a very important piece of our lives."

'Nobody to turn to'

As in other cities, the economic downturn has not hit all parts of Baltimore's arts scene with equal force. More-established, better-endowed groups such as Centerstage, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the Walters Art Museum have cut back but are financially sound. Smaller organizations with less-secure financial underpinnings, such as the Baltimore Opera, the Baltimore Theatre Project and the chamber orchestra, may not survive.

With few huge corporations in the community, Baltimore arts groups have relied on local companies such as money manager Legg Mason, Constellation Energy and Whiting Turner construction for support. All are reeling.

Randi Vega, head of cultural affairs at Baltimore's arts council, says next summer's Artscape festival will be scaled back. Sponsors have cut funding and at least one, General Motors' Saturn, is expected to pull out.

Public money also is drying up as states struggle with yawning budget deficits. In Maryland, lawmakers have threatened to cut arts funding by 36%. "There's nobody to turn to," Vega says. "There isn't going to be a white knight to pick up the slack."

There wasn't for the Baltimore Opera. In December, owing \$1.2 million to creditors, it filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection and canceled two performances, the first time since 1950 it cut its season short.

Opera may face the most perilous times. Companies often must charge ticket prices of several hundred dollars to cover the cost of large orchestras and elaborate sets and costumes.

Next to past recessions, "this is more widespread and came up quicker," Baltimore Opera general manager M. Kevin Wixted says. "You can continue to try to bump along, but it didn't work."

Wixted hopes to be back by the fall season but says, "All operas are basically on the edge."

The Washington National Opera has put off Wagner's four-part *Ring* cycle. The Los Angeles Opera laid off 17% of its staff. A few companies have closed, including Opera Pacific in Santa Ana, Calif., and Hartford's 67-year-old Connecticut Opera.

Marc Scorca of the advocacy group Opera America hopes fans elsewhere will keep coming.

"The opera audience is unusually passionate," he says. "We hope that passion places opera at the very bottom of the list of things that will be cut."

The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra has seen ticket sales sag and its endowment plunge, but the full season will go on — with a tweak. Instead of performing Mahler's *Sixth Symphony*— which would have required 10 extra brass musicians at a cost of \$20,000 — the orchestra will play Mahler's *Ninth*.

At Centerstage, where the endowment has shrunk by 35% and fewer people are buying full-season subscriptions, Chinn is struggling to keep the curtain up. She and five others worked without pay in February.

A recent production of the musical *Caroline, or Change* was staged without understudies to save money.

A few blocks away, at the Walters Art Museum, director Gary Vikan is taking a one-month unpaid furlough after a 27% drop in endowment funds forced him to lay off seven of 150 employees, freeze salaries and hiring and cancel an exhibit on French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme.

Vikan and the Baltimore Museum of Art's Bolger are determined to preserve free admission, which began three years ago with a local government grant that runs out in October. Since 2006, they say, the number of minorities, children and first-time visitors has soared.

Vega, of the arts council, isn't surprised: "In times like these, people are looking for ways to reduce their stress, and the arts are certainly a way to do that."

Contributing: Judith Egerton of (Louisville) Courier-Journal; Stefanie Frith of The (Palm Springs, Calif.) Desert Sun; Brian Passey of The (St. George, Utah) Spectrum; Laura Ruane of The (Fort Myers, Fla.) News-Press; Marty Roney of Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser; the Associated Press.

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