

Introduction

The Black Academy of Arts and Letters (BAAL) was established to “define, preserve, promote, cultivate, foster and develop the arts and letters of black people,” as stated by Dr. C. Eric Lincoln in his founding address. Notable contributions by blacks to black America were to be recognized by Academy members, who themselves represented some of the finest achievements in arts and letters.

The Black Academy was founded on March 29, 1969, in Boston and was incorporated on June 12 in the state of New York as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. The Twentieth Century Fund financed initial operating expenses, providing \$50,000 in each of the first three years. With this money, Academy officials hired a staff and, in March 1970, opened its temporary headquarters at 475 Riverside Drive.

The Founding Committee was chaired by Dr. Lincoln, and membership was limited to fifty, with provisions to admit new fellows each year. The first board of directors was comprised of Lincoln (president), John O. Killens (vice president), Alvin F. Poussaint (treasurer), and Doris Saunders (secretary), along with Dr. Charles V. Hamilton, Dr. Vincent Harding, Robert Hooks, Charles White, and John A. Williams.

In September 1970 the first annual meeting of the Black Academy was held and included workshops and an awards banquet. At the first awards ceremony the Academy elected the late W. E. B. Du Bois into its Hall of Fame, thereby removing the long-standing visa restrictions imposed by the State Department on Mrs. Shirley Graham Du Bois, who thus was now able to attend. The painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and historian, Carter G. Woodson, were also enrolled. Other honorees that year included Lena Horne, C. L. R. James, Diana Sands, Amiri Baraka, and Paul Robeson for their contributions to arts and letters. Annual meetings were held in September 1971 and October 1972.

In addition, the Academy established an Annual Letters competition for black authors. Among the first recipients were Mari Evans for poetry, Franklin W. Knight for scholastic work, William Melvin Kelly for fiction, and George Jackson for nonfiction. In 1972 the Academy received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Johnson Publishing Company to conduct a conference in Chicago to assess the state of black art in the United States. The purpose of the conference was to establish a resource bank in preparation for compiling a directory of cultural activities in the black community.

Also in 1972, in an effort to economize, all staff positions at the Academy were eliminated, and an office manager was hired to tend to the day-to-day operations of the Academy. The BAAL records indicate that the board of directors and committees functioned through 1973, although there were no further annual meetings. The official date of the dissolution of the Academy is not known.