Diplomacy and the Arts

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In 1779, John Adams departed Massachusetts for Paris, France. The Founding Father was on his second diplomatic mission to the French capital, and much was at stake. The Continental Army fought the British in New York City, Newport, and across the South; France had joined the war, but the outcome—the success of the American experiment—remained uncertain. Adams' diplomacy in France stood to make or break the war effort.

Uncertain about his nation's future, Adams ruminated on the value of his work. In a letter to his wife, Abigail, in May of 1780, the statesman confided:

> *"The science of government it is my duty to study, more than all other sciences;* ***the arts of legislation and administration and negotiation ought to take the place of, indeed exclude, in a manner, all other arts****. I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order* ***to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain****."*

What is the relationship between diplomacy and art? Are the two disciplines mutually exclusive, as Adams implies? To the Massachusetts statesman, negotiation was an austere, thankless craft—a gift to future generations at the expense of self-actualization through the pursuit of finer crafts. Adams would never devote his life to painting, poetry, or music. But through sacrifice and politicking, he hoped to secure a more colorful world for his children and theirs.

This intern project examines the relationship between diplomacy and the arts as experienced by some of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' most accomplished diplomats. The individuals who contributed to this report are former ambassadors, world travelers, polyglots, and veterans, who have devoted their lives to advancing American interests abroad. They bring a wealth of experience in diplomacy—and a noted dedication to the arts.

These are their stories.

Ambassador Patrick Theros

Ambassador Patrick Theros grew up around *Custer's Last Fight*, a copy of the 1896 Anheuser-Busch lithograph hanging in his father's restaurant. Years later, the image resurfaced in an unexpected context. While on assignment in Jordan, Theros observed that many of his Arab counterparts—especially those with Bedouin roots—were deeply fascinated by Native Americans. In cowboy films, comics, and Western media, Bedouin leaders saw reflections of their own nomadic, indigenous heritage. When it came time to decorate his embassy in Qatar, Theros chose *Custer's Last Fight* for the dining room. He recalls that at nearly every dinner, guests would gather around the painting, pointing to details, engrossed in discussions of Native resilience and the U.S. Army's most famous plains-era defeat.

Amb. Patrick Theros' copy of "Custer's Last Fight" (Amb. Theros)

A Cynthia Schira textile included in Amb. Jess Baily's Skopje Embassy (US Dept. of State)

Ambassador Jess Baily

What's more American than blue jeans? For Ambassador Jess Baily, textiles tell a story of fashion, function, history, and culture. They're made to be used and traded—but they're also, inherently, art. That makes textiles powerful cultural ambassadors. So on the Fourth of July, 2018, Baily hosted a "red, white, and blue jeans" celebration at the U.S. Embassy in Skopje, with guests encouraged to wear denim in lieu of formal attire. Blue jeans, he noted, stand for individualism and hard work—and hold special significance in Macedonia, a country once on the front lines of the Cold War. For years, American denim was scarce in Yugoslavia, and Macedonians who wanted to wear that unassuming symbol of Western freedom traveled to Italy or Slovenia to buy their Levi's. Baily's denim-themed Fourth of July was symbolic: jeans told the story of global trade, local resilience, and the enduring appeal of democratic values.

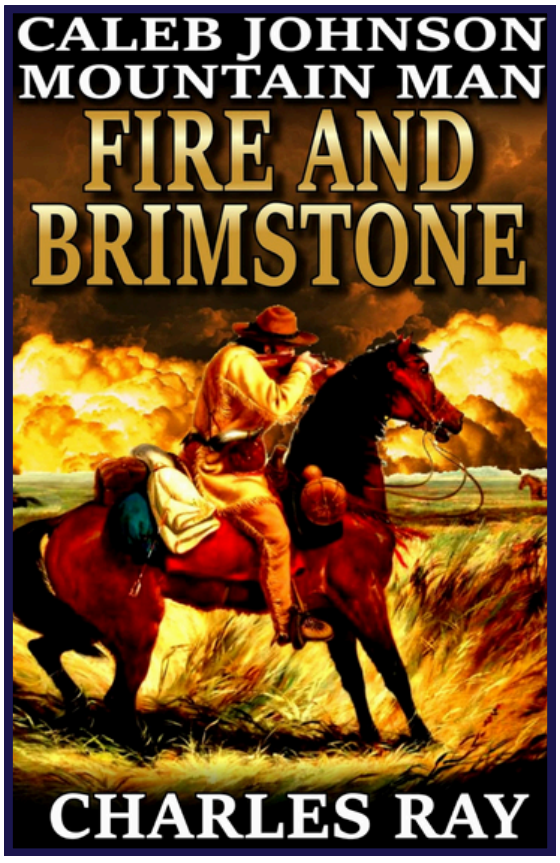
Ambassador Gordon Gray

Ambassador Gordon Gray will be the first to say he's not especially artistic, but that didn't stop him from using the arts to build connections abroad. As U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia, Gray helped facilitate "Memphis in May"—a celebration featuring blues musicians and barbecue that brought together embassy staff, government officials, and everyday Tunisians. He also used the Arts in Embassies program to decorate the residence with pastoral scenes of American life and hosted a luncheon for local artists and an American painter. Through food, music, and visual art, Gray found creative ways to bridge American and Tunisian cultures.

A Michael McNamara painting featured in Amb. Gordon Gray's Tunis Embassy (US Dept. of State)

Ambassador Charles Ray

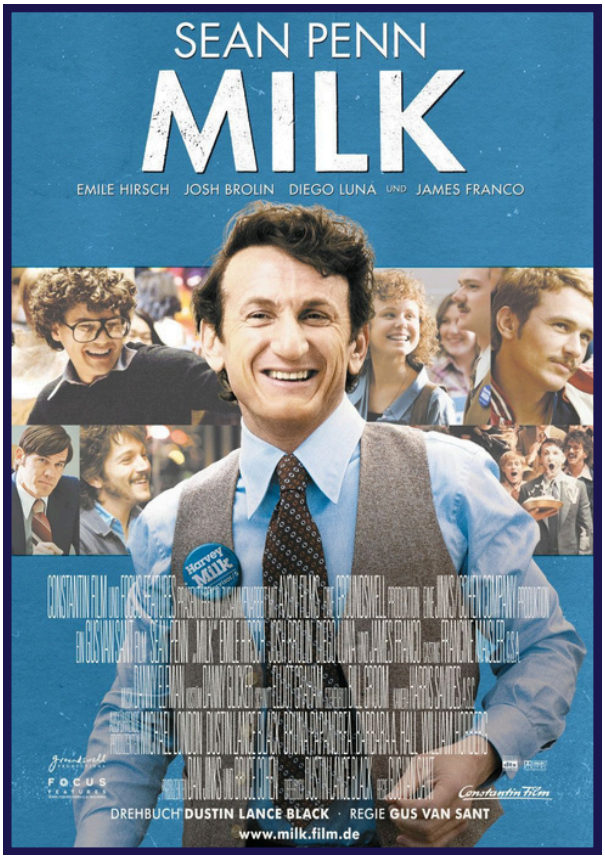
Ambassador Charles Ray first realized his talent for writing as a teenager, when he won a national short story contest. Since then, Ray has been writing on and off at a truly prolific pace. He's published hundreds of books and articles—fiction and nonfiction alike—and has made authorship part of his public diplomacy. As U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe, Ray wrote op-eds on civics for the embassy blog that were routinely picked up by local newspapers. When those essays were translated and published as a collection, it briefly became the country's second-best seller, behind only the Bible. Even a Zimbabwean official critical of Ray read the book—a success, Ray notes, in changing local perceptions of the United States. As a Foreign Service Officer in Cambodia, Ray used a different tactic, building relationships with senior officials through karaoke nights. From Harare to Phnom Penh, Ray has built his diplomatic career on bonds forged through literature, music, and storytelling.



Selected title from Amb. Charles Ray's publications (Amb. Ray)

Ambassador Pamela White

In 1971, Ambassador Pamela White was serving in the Peace Corps when one of her closest friends—a fellow volunteer widely recognized as one of the best English teachers in the program—came to her crying. The government was sending him home, he explained, for being gay. Decades later, as U.S. Ambassador to Haiti, White set out to champion the equality her friend had been denied. For Pride Month, Ambassador White reached out to gay friends, Haiti's LGBTQ+ community, and Academy Award–winning actor Sean Penn to arrange an embassy screening of *Milk*. With Penn in attendance, answering questions and leading discussion, the story of gay rights activist Harvey Milk came to life—and the mood in the embassy was "celebratory." The night was an unqualified success—a "perfect example of how the arts can really bring people together and sort of force some critical thinking."



"Milk," starring Sean Penn, as screened by Amb. Pamela White (Rotten Tomatoes)

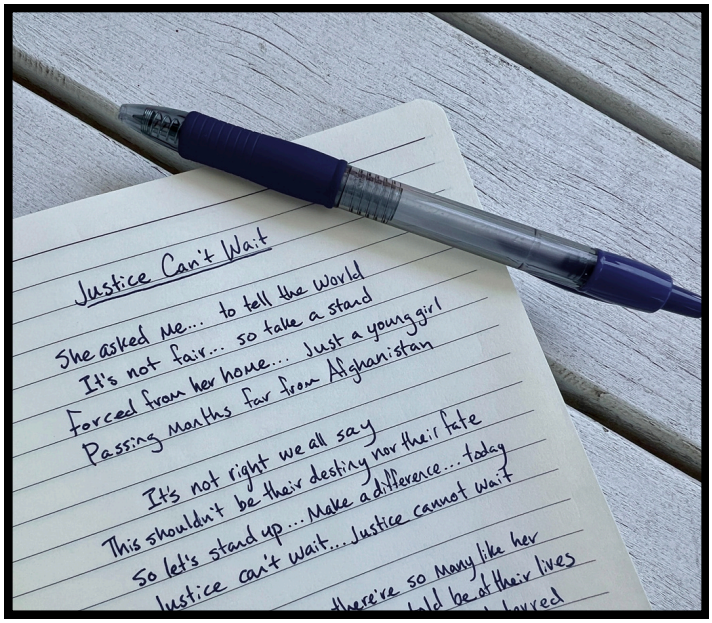
Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard

From Cameroon to Namibia, South Africa to Nigeria, everywhere Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard has gone, her flute has gone with her. Beyond the fulfillment she finds in playing ("it has an almost meditative quality"), being a flutist has become part of Ambassador Leonard's "brand"—a calling card of sorts in her service overseas. As Ambassador to Nigeria, she played the national anthem on local TV, performed at International Women's Day events, and hosted Sunday night music sessions at her residence for diplomats and locals alike. A flutist performed at Leonard's farewell reception in Lagos—a fitting sendoff to a diplomatic career sparkling with music.

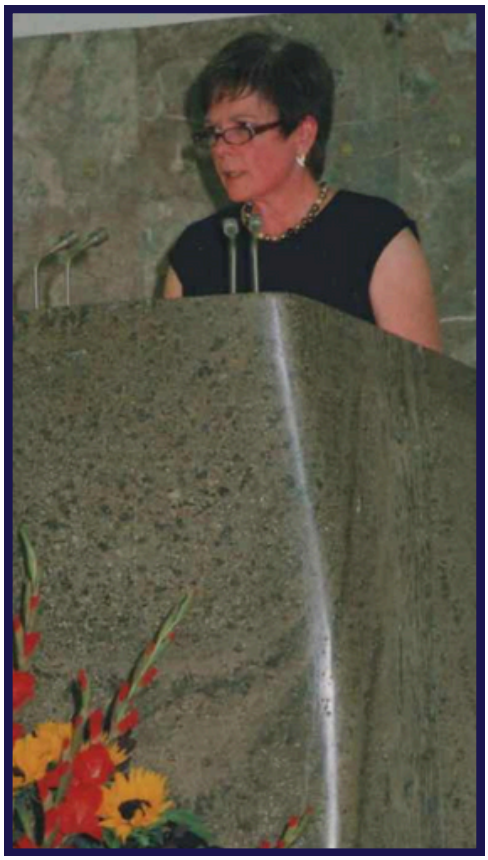
Amb. Mary Beth Leonard plays the flute in Lagos, Nigeria (Facebook, "U.S. Mission Nigeria")

Ambassador Michael Klosson

In 1967, Ambassador Michael Klosson and his *Drunken Lords* bandmates led an hour-long folk-rock Sunday service. The performance left congregants "grinning, grumbling or dismayed," according to The New York Times—but for Klosson, it was an early lesson in music's power to spark conversation. In the decades since, music diplomacy has become a hallmark of his service. Rather than hosting traditional dinner parties, Klosson often built rapport through shared musical experiences—once befriending the Swedish prime minister's foreign policy advisor at a Jackson Browne concert. Klosson continues to write and perform; after meeting an Afghan refugee girl stranded at the Greek border, he composed *Justice Can't Wait* and later performed the piece with a chamber choir. For Klosson, music "mobilizes emotion more readily than words"—a potent tool for conveying empathy across languages and borders.



The lyrics to Amb. Michael Klosson's "Justice Can't Wait" (Amb. Klosson)



Amb. Jo Ellen Powell speaks in Frankfurt, Germany (Amb. Powell)

Ambassador Jo Ellen Powell

Alice falls down the rabbit hole, tumbling into Wonderland. For Ambassador Jo Ellen Powell, becoming Alice was just one step in an acting career that stretched from Tehran, Iran, to Danville, Kentucky. Though she eventually left her high school and college theatre days behind, the skills Powell mastered onstage had a lasting impact on her time in the Foreign Service. As consul general in Frankfurt, Powell accepted the mayor's invitation to deliver the keynote address on German reunification—before a thousand-person audience, and in German. But standing behind a podium "built for Shaquille O'Neal," she drew on her theatre training: memorizing lines, making eye contact, projecting her voice, and speaking with confidence. The speech went off without a hitch. From formal remarks to delicate negotiations, Powell credits her acting days with refining her timing, delivery, and presence. "Diplomacy is theatre," she says. "It's performative—and you have to know your audience."

Ambassador Jeff DeLaurentis

Ambassador Jeff DeLaurentis remembers the silence. “No one was accustomed to speaking normally,” he recalls. As the Cuban and American delegations sat awkwardly, DeLaurentis searched for something—anything—to break the ice. “Did you see the last episode of *Pánfilo*?” he asked. The Cuban diplomat had. Minutes later, the group was chatting happily—as it turned out, the most hard-line Communist among them was a fan of *Downton Abbey*. *Pánfilo* opened doors for DeLaurentis—both literally and figuratively. Embassy staff loved it. Diplomats smiled. So when President Obama visited Cuba in 2016—the first presidential visit since Calvin Coolidge in 1928—DeLaurentis knew exactly which show to book. Obama’s cameo on Pánfilo was brief, but even today, Cubans fondly recall the memory of an American president playing dominoes on their favorite program.

President Obama appears on Pánfilo, per the per the recommendation of Amb. Jeff DeLaurentis (The White House)

Anne Kauzlarich

Diplomacy isn’t just for ambassadors, as Anne Kauzlarich can attest. The wife of U.S. Ambassador Richard Kauzlarich, Anne held no formal post in Azerbaijan, yet President Ilham Aliyev once called her “more valuable to the United States than any ambassador.” Her acclaim stemmed from deep engagement with local culture. In 1995, after learning the National Ballet Company couldn’t afford ballet shoes, she founded Friends of Azerbaijani Culture to raise funds. The group also bought instruments for children and hosted free public concerts. For Kauzlarich, supporting the arts was a way to show America “really cared about Azerbaijan.” She later received the Secretary of State’s Award for Outstanding Volunteerism Abroad—a fitting tribute to an exceptional diplomat.

The Azerbaijan National Ballet benefitted from Anne Kauzlarich’s FRIENDS Foundation (AzerNews)

Ambassador James Warlick

On the streets of Sofia and in the Bulgarian countryside, Ambassador James Warlick is perhaps best known for his acting chops. He appeared—speaking practiced Bulgarian—as a fictionalized version of himself in the TV drama *Stuklen Dom*, who steps in to help an American-Bulgarian dual citizen out of trouble. Though he had to petition Washington for permission, Warlick saw the role as a rare opportunity for public diplomacy: "I can reach 50,000 people with my op-eds," he noted, "or several million on TV." Public appearances were nothing new for Warlick, who trained at culinary school in Paris and occasionally guest-starred on Bulgarian cooking shows. For many viewers, his screen presence—whether walking embassy corridors or cracking eggs—offered a humanizing glimpse of an American diplomat. For everyday Bulgarians, Warlick was not a distant, walled-off official, but a familiar face on their favorite show.

Amb. James Warlick appears on Season 2, Episode 6 of "Stuklen Dom" (Amb. Warlick)

Conclusion

When it came to diplomacy and the arts, John Adams posited a generational trade-off: America's statesmen would pursue politics and war so their children might enjoy lives of poetry and painting. Today's diplomats tell a different story—one in which the arts not only intersect with diplomacy, but enrich it, guiding America's engagement with global audiences and fostering meaningful connections. From Haiti to Zimbabwe, the diplomats of twentieth- and twenty-first-century America have pursued statecraft and cinema, policy and painting. They are authors, songwriters, and actors. The modern Foreign Service benefits from their passion and talent, for America's relationships abroad are shaped not only by money, politics, and war, but also by storytelling, shared culture, and the quiet power of art.

Sherrie York, "Trunk Show." Arts in Embassies Baku (US Dept. of State)

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