

Are Artists “Workers”? Art and the New Deal

by Elizabeth Broun

As I write this essay in February 2009, the nation is engaged in a great discussion about how to restore confidence during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. One contentious issue is whether and how cultural initiatives should play a role in government recovery efforts. *1934: A New Deal for Artists*—an exhibition on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where I serve as Director—focuses on the first United States government program ever to provide direct support for artists and provides insight into this discussion. (For a slideshow of paintings on display in this exhibition, visit the website of the **Smithsonian American Art Museum**.)

This exhibition began as a way to save money in the museum’s seriously eroded budget, a response to our own internal “economic crisis.” We decided to forego two expensive temporary exhibitions and instead fill the galleries with permanent collection objects for ten months. Deputy Chief Curator George Gurney proposed that we commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the first New Deal arts program, called the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). This seven-month program—December 1933 through June 1934—funded 3,750 artists who produced 15,600 artworks, at a cost of \$1,312,000. The enormous success of this program spawned a cluster of other New Deal arts initiatives, some persisting into the early 1940s. The Museum has 180 paintings made under the PWAP program, among more than 3,000 artworks from the 1930s in our collection. Dr. Gurney selected fifty-five for this exhibition and book, and Curatorial Associate Dr. Ann Prentice Wagner researched each work and wrote entries presenting newly recovered information. Dr. Roger Kennedy, author of a forthcoming book called *When Art Worked* (November 2009), who knew key players from the New Deal during his own later government service, wrote an essay for the book conveying his passion for the ambitious goals of the New Deal.

A glance back to the 1930s shows that many New Deal programs were innovative, even radical, in treating artists, writers, and playwrights as workers deserving of support. This was new in America, where artists since colonial times had been considered marginal “extras” in our society. John Singleton Copley (1738–1815) complained that he was regarded as “no better than a cobbler.” Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) lamented that “My honours are misunderstanding, persecution, and neglect, enhanced because unsought.” John Sloan (1871–1951) famously said, “The artist in America is regarded as the unwanted cockroach in the kitchen of a frontier society.” All that changed in the mid-1930s, as New Deal programs were created for unemployed artists eligible for government relief. Artists, newly defined by their government as workers, produced an unprecedented number of artworks, literary works, and theatrical performances, launching careers for many who became famous in later years. President Roosevelt is said to have declared, “One hundred years from now my administration will be known for its



Coit Tower murals, San Francisco, CA, created under the Public Works of Art Project. (Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

art, not for its relief.”

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

A capsule history of New Deal programs for artists is easily found on the Internet, briefly and incompletely summarized here:

The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP)—which supported the paintings in our exhibition—was created “to give work to artists by arranging to have competent representatives of the profession embellish public buildings.” Artists were encouraged to portray “the American Scene.” With this minimal guidance, they turned to local and regional subjects and created a picture of the country striving to survive through hard work and true grit. They were inspired by the idea that their art would be displayed in public spaces for broad audiences. President Roosevelt awarded the ultimate honor by selecting thirty-two PWAP artworks—seven of which are in this exhibition—to hang in America’s premier public space, the White House. Another 130 paintings hung in the Department of Labor Building, while 451 were displayed in the House of Representatives Office Building. Interestingly, 30 percent of the artists in this exhibition were in their twenties in 1934, just trying to get established; 25 percent were first-generation immigrants.

In 1934 the **Section of Painting and Sculpture** was initiated to commission murals and sculptures for federal buildings across America, especially post offices. One percent of federal building construction funds was set aside for “embellishment.” Artists submitted designs that addressed local subjects or “past or present history,” and a jury determined the selection. Altogether, 1,400 murals were created in more than 1,300 cities under this program. (In the 1970s, the “one percent for art” concept was revived as the Art-in-Architecture program by the General Services Administration.) Although some murals were lost or destroyed, many have been restored and are still on public display. John Steuart Curry, Rockwell Kent, and Willem de Kooning are just a few artists whose murals survive today.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) ran from 1935 through 1943, spending \$12 billion to give jobs to nine million people, with three-fourths of the money going for construction projects. But the WPA took a broad view of “workers,” with special programs devised for writers, musicians, actors, and artists. “Why not?” asked President Roosevelt, when criticized for including all these in his recovery effort. “They are human beings. They have to live.” Under the WPA umbrella, the **Federal Art Project (FAP)** employed more than 5,000 artists who created 225,000 works of art for the American people, and these are still seen in public buildings and museums across the country. Some worked in their studios and submitted artworks to the government for libraries and schools. Others worked at community art centers or taught art to wider audiences. Will Barnet, Adolph Gottlieb, Archibald Motley, David Park, and Jackson Pollock, among many others, got their start on the WPA.

One of the most interesting FAP programs was the **Index of American Design** (1935–1942), employing hundreds of artists who made watercolor illustrations of American decorative art objects in museums and private collections. This enterprise was part of a larger search for a distinctive American art and identity—a search for the American soul through the utilitarian objects of ordinary life in a democracy, inspired by a new passion for early folk art. Today, 18,000 of these watercolor renderings of traditional arts and crafts made before 1890 are housed in the National Gallery of Art, an unparalleled record of Americana.

In 1937 a group of photographers employed by the **Farm Security Administration** set out to create a pictorial record of the impact of hard times on rural America. Eighty thousand documentary photographs were distributed to newspapers and magazines to show the devastation of the Dust Bowl and grinding poverty on agricultural lands and people, and some were featured in a 1938 exhibition called *How*

American People Live, producing an overwhelming public response that made New Deal programs more popular than ever. Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" and Walker Evans's Alabama sharecroppers are among these haunting images about profound distress and human dignity. In later years, the program's photographers documented America's mobilization effort for World War II. Today, 164,000 FSA photographs are in the Library of Congress collections as an invaluable resource and moving tribute to hard times.

The Federal Writers Project (FWP) undertook the most ambitious effort ever in the field of American history, fanning across the country to interview town inhabitants and prepare forty-eight critically acclaimed state guidebooks (plus Alaska Territory, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC) called The American Guide Series, which are still classics today. The Writers Project recorded 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery that were donated to the Library of Congress and assembled in 1941 as the seventeen-volume *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States*. The 6,600 writers in the Federal Writers Project, who came from unemployment rolls, indexed newspapers and compiled local histories, oral histories, ethnographies, children's books, and other works; interestingly, their editors were not required to be eligible for relief! Among the writers who got their start on this project were Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Loren Eiseley, Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck, Studs Terkel, and Richard Wright.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP), established in August 1935, put vaudevillians, actors, directors, playwrights, musicians, dancers, box office staff, ushers, designers, and other theater workers on relief rolls to produce performances relevant to local and regional areas. New York City had units for classical theater, new plays, vaudeville, children's plays, puppet shows, and caravan productions; most of the productions toured to rural areas. The FTP also included African American, Yiddish, Italian, Spanish, French, and German units. At first the theater offerings were billed as "free, adult, and uncensored" and were noted for some of the most innovative stagings of the era, but tumultuous times led to radical left-wing productions. Living Newspaper plays focused on current issues like farm policy, syphilis testing, and housing inequities that provoked a backlash and resignations. Funding for the Federal Theatre Project was cancelled in June 1939, but not before helping to establish careers for Arthur Miller, Orson Welles, John Houseman, Martin Ritt, Elia Kazan, and Marc Blitzstein, among the 12,700 people employed. Approximately 5,000 FTP playscripts and documentation related to 2,500 titles are in the Library of Congress, with 13,000 online images of stage and costume designs, still photos, posters, and more.

One other New Deal program inadvertently opened the door to America's greatest rediscovery of its people's origins and development. When the Social Security system was created in 1935, birth information was required for millions of citizens, to determine their eligibility. The Census Bureau hired the Rand Corporation to devise a coding system based on **Soundex**—a phonetic indexing system created in 1918—as an aid in researching the 1880 census records. Soundex allowed an easy search across early records that were wildly variable in spellings and immigrant dialects. In a massive effort, hundreds of WPA workers created Soundex indexes for the 1880, 1900, and 1920 censuses, including the ages of each family member. Today, at the National Archives, where the census records are housed, these Soundex indexes are the point of departure for every person embarking on a genealogical search for family members barely remembered or lost to history. Perhaps no New Deal program has done more to connect Americans to their own histories and to the nation. Thanks to the Soundex workers in the 1930s, Americans continue today to discover the richness of America's development as a nation, one family at a time.

It would be easy to extend this inventory, if space permitted. For instance, as a teenager interested in fine arts, I frequently drew the beautiful stone wall encircling the cemetery in my hometown of

Independence, Kansas, which was built by the **Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)**. A colleague commutes to downtown Washington each day across the CCC’s wonderful bridge in Rock Creek Park. And a friend still talks about Timberland Lodge at Mt. Hood—just one of the grand lodges in the national parks built by the CCC—complete with paintings in the rooms and carved newel posts. The CCC operated from 1933 to 1942 and did everything from beekeeping to installing telephone lines to furniture manufacture, in addition to its essential work of initiating the first conservation programs on national, state, and municipal lands. One benefit was enjoyed for decades—the five million trees planted under this program. The CCC was limited at first to young men aged eighteen to twenty-five, whose fathers were on relief. At the time of entry, 70 percent of enrollees were malnourished and poorly clothed; the average age was eighteen to nineteen. Veterans, Indians, and African Americans lived in separate camps.

The legacy of New Deal cultural programs seems indisputable today as we cherish and mine the resources these “workers” left us. But the renewed debate about whether artists are worthy of recovery support calls all into question again. What seems clear is that America gains in the long term when it invests in its own heritage and people, conceived in a large way.

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