

IN PURSUIT OF THE PUBLIC: POPULIST PERSPECTIVES IN NEW DEAL ART

JANET RANKIN



A group of Cheyenne in full tribal regalia entered a post office in Watonga, Oklahoma to protest the mural, *Roman Nose Canyon* (1941), by Edith Mahier. Chief Red Bird, the head of the Cheyenne tribe, reported to the local newspaper that “Watonga’s highfalutin \$580 mural stinks.”¹ The principle objections were the featured Cheyenne, Chief Roman Nose, resembled a Navajo and his baby looked more porcine than human. In a similar story, the citizens of Topeka, Kansas were in an uproar over the depictions of livestock by the famous artist, John Steuart Curry, in his Capitol murals *Kansas Pastoral* (1942). The local citizenry informed the artist that his bull was out of proportion and that “pigs’ tails do not curl while eating.”² These stories illustrate how local communities engaged with the art created for libraries, post offices, city halls, and federal buildings during the 1930s and early 1940s.

Up until this time, art in America had been sequestered in museums and art galleries by high culture. Franklin Delano

1 Jane Clapp, *Art Censorship: A Chronology of Proscribed and Prescribed Art* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972), 270.

2 Clapp, 271.

Roosevelt's (FDR) New Deal created art designed to meet the American public where it lived. With the government as patron, citizens felt they had a right to offer opinions about what was displayed in their community. Under FDR's administration, the U.S. government employed thousands of artists to produce more than one hundred thousand pieces of art between 1933 and 1943 for communities nationwide as both artists and the public enjoyed the freedom to create and experience art in a new way. These art programs effectively incorporated the populist ideals of the New Deal administration and fostered a unique climate of creativity and collaboration among artists, project administrators, and the public.

The New Deal was more a collection of ideas than a mandate. The term "new deal" first appeared in FDR's acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention in the summer of 1932 where he promised "a new deal for the American people" if elected.³ In his "every man" speech on the campaign trail, FDR espoused the rights Americans could reasonably expect from a government that had more than enough for all its citizens. He argued, "Our government formal and informal, political and economic, owes to every one an avenue to possess himself of a portion of that plenty sufficient for his needs, through his own work."⁴ Reminiscent of the concepts of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence, these ideas about rights to life and work formed the backbone of all of the New Deal relief programs. Populism represented the needs and desires of "ordinary people" and not institutions.⁵ Even though the United States Government was itself an institution, populist

3 Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago," July 2, 1932, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=75174> (accessed May 1, 2012).

4 Howard Zinn, ed., *New Deal Thought* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 50.

5 Politico, "Arena Digest: What is 'populism' These Days?" <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0110/31963.html> (accessed May 1, 2012).

ideas permeated FDR's New Deal administration and the work programs that brought relief to millions of unemployed during the Depression.

The Great Depression necessitated relief programs because citizens endured the deprivation not only of food and meaningful work but also a belief that things would get better for the country. Margery Hoffman Smith, an artist and supervisor of the Oregon Works Progress Administration (WPA) project at Timberline Lodge, recalled the urgency for relief when she noted, "there was a woodcarver, when we took him on, was living in a piano box and eating cold beans, beans soaked in cold water."⁶ When FDR took office in 1933, he offered average citizens something that had been lacking since the collapse of the stock market in 1929 – hope. At his inauguration, FDR informed the country he was waging a war on the economic emergency; in his first one hundred days as president, he initiated the passage of fifteen pieces of legislation to alleviate the banking crisis, stabilize farm prices, and provide relief to the unemployed.⁷ During the first ten years of his presidency, FDR reduced the unemployment rate by fifteen percent and spent over ten billion dollars to put over eight million people to work.⁸ When FDR appointed Harry Hopkins, a friend and former social worker, to the position of administrator of the New Deal relief programs, Hopkins realized he and his staff had to make tough decisions: what was an appropriate amount of relief (so there was still an incentive to find a job), and what expenses should be covered (i.e. rent, medical bills, etc.). Hopkins began to

6 Margery Hoffman Smith, interview by Harlan Phillips, April 10, 1964, transcript, Oral History, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter AAA), <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-margery-hoffman-smith-11781> (accessed March 20, 2012).

7 Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Inaugural Address," March 4, 1933, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14473> (accessed May 1, 2012).

8 U.S. Government, *Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943* (1947 repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), III.

differentiate between direct relief (the dole) and work programs, equally concerned with the state-of-mind of the unemployed as with filling their bellies. All relief distributed funds based upon a formula of family size and location to those who met eligibility requirements. Direct relief programs provided funds to unemployed workers in exchange for continual social worker scrutiny of relief status. The New Deal work programs asked the unemployed to work in exchange for compensation and designed various programs to offer skill preservation and worker training as part of projects that benefitted local communities. Glen Wessels, a Northern California Federal Art Project (FAP) supervisor, stated, "As far as I know, the artists gave the public much more in value than they received in relief pay."⁹ Hopkins' concern for the morale of the country and moral character of the individual were some of the reasons why he was so responsive to the pleas of artists and art advocates to include art in his relief programs.

Four independent art projects formed under the New Deal administration. The first art project was the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) conceived to prevent the starvation of artists over the winter of 1933.¹⁰ The following year, the U.S. Treasury Department established two art programs. The Section of Painting and Sculpture (Section) created art for new federal buildings and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) created art for previously built federal buildings by hiring relief artists.¹¹ The largest program, the Federal Art Project (FAP) under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), produced the most art and employed the most artists on relief. Holger Cahill designed the FAP to give all artists the opportunity to maintain artistic skills, work with peers

9 Glen Wessels, *California Federal Art Project Papers, 1935 – 1964*, Art Forum questionnaire, 1965, AAA, microfilm, NDA1.

10 Harry Hopkins, *Spending to Save* (New York: Norton, 1936), 116.

11 Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1969), 25.

and mentors, and try new techniques in artistic expression.¹² Each project will influence the others and how America came in contact with art.

Since taxpayers funded the New Deal projects, the art projects focused on producing art the public could enjoy, not simply employing artists. There were two main interpretations of public art. One favored public art as any art that is accessible, either because it is physically available to the public or because the public is able to understand and appreciate the art; the other stressed that the art must be created with the specific populace and location in mind in order to be classified as public art.¹³ Emphasizing the latter point, philosopher Hilde Hein contends, “The sheer presence of art out-of-doors or in a bus terminal or in a hotel reception area does not make that art public – no more than placing a tiger in a barnyard would make it a domesticated animal.”¹⁴ Discussions on public art extended beyond location and purpose to include elitist and populist perspectives. Art Historian Margaret Wyszomirski characterizes the elitist viewpoint as one in which “public policy on the arts should stress artistic quality as a criterion of support and that quality is most consistently found in, or associated with, the established cultural institutions”.¹⁵ She outlines the populist position as one that embraces the “widest possible availability of the arts” that was less traditional and with a “more pluralistic notion of artistic merit and consciously seeks to create a policy of cultural diversity”.¹⁶ New Deal art projects contained all of these notions about public art although they were displayed in different ways depending upon the project and

12 O'Connor, *Federal Support*, 28.

13 Cher Krause Knight, *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), viii.

14 Hilde Hein, “What is Public Art? Time, Place, and Meaning,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 4.

15 Margaret J. Wyszomirski, “Controversies in Arts Policymaking,” *Public Policy and the Arts*, Kevin V. Mulcahy and C. Richard Swaim, eds. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 13.

16 Wyszomirski, 13.

administrator.

There were many reasons for incorporating art into the relief projects. The “City Beautiful” movement had been popular since the 1890s and was largely responsible for the urban beautification (art, parks, and architecture) of cities such as New York, Chicago, and Washington, D. C. This movement espoused public or civic art would create a moral and civic virtue among the burgeoning populations of America’s cities. Charles Mulford Robinson, one of the first urban planners, argued, “Civic Art properly stands for more than beauty in the city. It represents a moral, intellectual, and administrative progress as surely as it does the purely physical.”¹⁷ The impact of this idea could be seen in the *Federal Art Project Manual* which referenced the “social value” of art on the public.¹⁸ Philosopher John Dewey’s ideas about art influenced many of the art administrators of the New Deal projects, especially Cahill.¹⁹ According to Dewey, by having art relegated to museums, it had become isolated and formed “a separation of art from the objects and scenes of ordinary experience”.²⁰ Dewey emphasized “art denotes a process of doing or making” as much as an “esthetic experience” and he believed art was to be an experience for both the artist creating the work and the person viewing it.²¹ Cahill adopted Dewey’s experiential ideas in the FAP divisions of exhibitions and art teaching.²²

Most secondary scholarship credits a letter, written by the artist George Biddle to his friend the president, for art being

17 Charles Mulford Robinson, *Modern Civic Art or, the City Made Beautiful*, 4th ed. (1903; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1970), 17.

18 Holger Cahill, *Federal Art Project Manual* (New York: Works Progress Administration, 1935), 3-5.

19 George J. Mavigliano, “The Federal Art Project: Holger Cahill’s Program of Action,” *Art Education*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (May, 1984), 26-30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3192762> (accessed April 30, 2012).

20 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1934), 6.

21 Dewey, 47.

22 Cahill, *FAP Manual*, 18.

included in New Deal programs. Biddle had been inspired by a mural project in the late 1920s in Mexico City that paid artists a small government salary to decorate public buildings. When the New Deal programs were initiated, Biddle encouraged FDR to try such a project because American artists were eager to engage in a similar program and “they would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve”.²³ These ideas about public art and government patronage coalesced into what became the art relief projects of the New Deal.

The longevity and sheer volume of help delivered by the WPA made it by far the most notable of the work projects. Officials estimated nearly one quarter of all families in the United States depended upon the WPA for financial support in its eight years of operation (1935-1943).²⁴ FDR demonstrated the adaptability he brought to his administration in his assertion that “the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it; if it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”²⁵ This flexible attitude was the core of FDR’s New Deal and it gave his administrators the latitude to experiment with programs to get the economy moving. Officials designed the original relief programs implemented during his first hundred days as temporary programs containing time limits of six months to two years. After a program proved successful, legislators renewed it (such as the Emergency Relief Acts of 1933, 1935, and 1937), or it morphed into another agency (the PWAP served as the model for the Section and the FAP). Whatever the program, whatever its brevity or longevity,

23 O’Connor, *Federal Support*, 18.

24 *WPA Final Report*, III.

25 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Oglethorpe University Commencement Address,” Address delivered at the Oglethorpe University graduation held at the Fox Theater, Atlanta, GA, May 22, 1932, <http://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/faculty-research/new-deal/roosevelt-speeches/fr052232.htm> (accessed March 13, 2012).

each represented real relief for real people in one way or another.

The strength of the Roosevelt Administration laid not only in its versatility but also the swiftness with which it was prepared to act. Hopkins authorized the PWAP immediately after taking charge of the Civil Works Administration (CWA) in November 1933 and justified the project by exclaiming, "Hell! Artists have got to eat just like other people."²⁶ The artist Edward Laning argued artists were a natural choice because of the speed with which they could begin work since "they didn't require a capital outlay. They already had paints and brushes of a sort, and they carried the plans for the next painting in their heads."²⁷ Edward Bruce, a professional artist, became the director and he enthusiastically embraced government patronage of the arts. Convening the first PWAP meeting December 8, 1933, Bruce developed a plan to provide work for unemployed artists. Four short days later, sixteen regional committees were in place, and, in less than ten days, Bruce reported "eighty-six artists received their first checks".²⁸ As a winter stopgap, the PWAP originally scheduled projects only until mid-February; however, with many projects incomplete, the CWA extended the program until June. The alacrity with which the PWAP formed also carried over throughout the entirety of the project. In less than six months, it employed almost four thousand artists and produced over fifteen thousand pieces of art and craft.²⁹ The speed and scope of this program would never be duplicated in any other art relief project.

Relief status depended on a person's need and employability as determined by a state or local welfare agency. Once certified, registered artists interviewed with the FAP and completed a

26 Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins, an Intimate History* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1950), 57.

27 Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1972), 91.

28 Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: University Press, 1973), 12.

29 McKinzie, 27.

questionnaire regarding education, art training, and experience in various media to determine skill classification. A local art project could not be undertaken without appropriately skilled artists certified and available to work.³⁰ This elaborate qualification system resulted from earlier employment relief programs that did not screen artists. Researcher Richard McKinzie noted, with the PWAP, nearly “three-fourths of Southern California applicants were not bona fide artists” (professional artists) but art students, tradesmen who painted on the side, and “little old ladies who painted little scenes from nature”.³¹ Many considered themselves artists; administrators, however, recognized far fewer as artists. In a 1930 U.S. census, 57,265 citizens self-identified as a professional artist, sculptor, or teacher of art, but in 1935, only 2,900 artists qualified for relief.³² Clearly from the statistics, more regarded themselves as artists than possessed skills as identified by administrators; equally true, talented artists in need of work remained unemployed.

A discussion of the New Deal art projects would not be complete without a review of the Section (and to a lesser degree the TRAP) for several reasons. All of the art programs relied upon funding from the federal government which made each essentially part of the New Deal. The Section preceded and operated simultaneously with the FAP, which led the public to think of them as one even though each maintained separate projects with divergent objectives. The challenges Bruce faced in managing the PWAP led him to insist the Section be based upon the criteria of “quality” and not employment or relief. Bruce stressed Section art must meet standards of quality, but he never articulated his standards other than to categorize artists into “good, medium, and

30 Cahill, *FAP Manual*, 3-7.

31 McKinzie, 13.

32 O'Connor, *Federal Support*, 192; 196.

bums”.³³ He limited subject matter to what he called the “America Scene” and rejected “anything experimental, unconventional, or possibly titillating”.³⁴ Section art reflected everyday America rather than the heroic or mythological scenes that had dominated art of the nineteenth century. Bruce outlined a list of appropriate subjects for post office art that included postal topics, transportation, or local life or history in a newsletter to artists.³⁵ McKinzie argues, “Bruce had to make artists feel free [to create] and, at the same time, extract from them a quantity and quality of production that representatives of the people and watchdogs of the purse could appreciate.”³⁶ Bruce’s elitist criterion for projects and restrictive content contrasted with his affirmations that artists could exercise creative freedom.³⁷ Average citizens most likely encountered Section art in one of the eleven hundred post offices built during this time, but access alone did not make it populist art or a populist program.

To dispel notions of favoritism or bias, Bruce designed an elaborate system of competitions to choose artists; in this way, art commissions in Washington, D. C. and juries in the communities where the art was to be installed approved all art proposals. Section objectives stated local talent should be considered for every art project, and, in an effort to employ local artists, most competitions limited submissions by region. A Section *Bulletin* announcement for a competition for the Santa Barbara, California post office stated the region included “any state west of the Mississippi”.³⁸ Rather than choosing truly local artists, Bruce’s

33 McKinzie, 17.

34 O’Connor, *Federal Support*, 20.

35 Cahill, *Bulletin*, No.2, April 1935, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/TDAP-Bulletin-No-2--183681> (accessed April 30, 2012).

36 McKinzie, 21.

37 Edward Bruce, “The Implications of the Public Works of Art Project,” *Magazine of American Art* (March 1934), 113.

38 Cahill, *Bulletin*, no. 9, March-May 1936, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/TDAP-Bulletin-No-9--183688> (accessed April 16, 2012).

definition of “local” expanded in proportion to his narrowing definition of “quality.” San Francisco-based artists on the faculty of the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) created all of the Section and TRAP works in Sacramento area post offices, which emphasized the Section’s elitist penchant for institutional art. Even as Bruce articulated the new “democratic patronage of art” these projects facilitated from the public, he continued to exhibit elitist forces on the arts.³⁹ The bureaucratic and selective nature of the Section resulted in the employment of nine hundred artists completing fourteen hundred commissions over the span of nine years.



Figure 1. Marion Gilmore, *Band Concert* (1941), egg tempera on gesso, USPS, Corning, Iowa.

The production of “quality art” did not leave the art of the Section free from debate. The art commissions chose pieces based upon artistic quality whereas most local juries judged content and accuracy of subject matter.⁴⁰ In addition to the controversies with tribe identification and pigs’ tails previously referenced, locals voiced complaints about changing the types of crops planted, removing a non-existent footbridge, and covering bare feet; in Paris, Arkansas, postal officials decried rural scenery “because it failed to show the progress the community had made”.⁴¹ Not all

39 Bruce, 115.

40 Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *New Deal for Art: The Government Art Projects of the 1930s with Examples from New York City & State* (New York: Gallery Association of NY State, 1977), 14.

41 Park, 16-17.

comments about the art projects were negative. Of Peter Hurd's mural *Old Pioneers* (1938) in Big Spring, Texas, Justice Harlan Stone described, "How important is it that the humble people of this country should be impressed with the fact that the artist finds beauty and dignity in their life."⁴² The taxpayer T. B. Turner stated his appreciation for the mural of Marion Gilmore's *Band Concert* (1941) in Corning, Iowa, that "so artistically and yet so truthfully depicts the happy community 'way of life' in the finest little town in the most livable section of the most prosperous state of the most democratic country in the whole topsy-turvy world."⁴³ The Section manifested populist ideals in this one aspect, the exchange of dialogue between the community receiving the art and the artist or administrator. Citizens, as patrons of the art, felt free to express opinions about the kind of art they wanted in their communities even as the Section stifled artistic expression.

The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), the smallest of all of the art programs, created art for previously built federal buildings or small, rural post offices so as to not compete with the Section.⁴⁴ The director Olin Dows shared Bruce's standards for "quality" which resulted in a program that limited the recipients of relief and the overall impact of the art program. After the explosion of art produced by the PWAP in four months, the TRAP employed just over four hundred artists and produced only eighty-nine murals, sixty-five sculptures, and ten thousand easel paintings in four years. Local TRAP projects by San Francisco artists include "The Letter," a wood relief by Zygmund Sazevich (1937) at the downtown Roseville, California post office, and "Farm Life," two tempera panels by George Harris (1937) at the Woodland, California post office.

Compared to the Treasury art programs, the FAP

42 Park, 11.

43 Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 103.

44 O'Connor, *Federal Support*, 25.

aligned itself most closely with the populist ideals of the New Deal. The FAP allowed artists of all skill levels the most access to employment and gave the public accessibility to art in a multifaceted program. The art programs of FDR's administration offered thousands of artists the opportunity to work continuously, to experiment with applications, and to work collectively for the first time in American history.⁴⁵ The San Francisco sculptor Beniamino Bufano argued, "WPA/FAP has laid the foundation of a renaissance of art in America. It is the open sesame to a freer art and more democratic use of the creations of the artist's hand and brain. It has freed American art."⁴⁶ New Deal administrators touted the art programs as exemplifying democracy in action because of the numbers of relief artists employed and the numbers of citizens enjoying art freely.⁴⁷ Whether federal patronage of art really made it democratic for artists or the public could not be proved; however, the *perception* of democracy by the artists, administrators, and the public permeated the projects at the time and continues to influence scholarly evaluations of the art projects today.

The FAP was prolific. Cahill subdivided the FAP into eight divisions including mural and easel painting, sculpture, applied arts, and craft arts. From 1935-1943, the government spent close to seventy million dollars employing approximately 10,000 artists to produce over 2,500 murals, more than 18,000 pieces of sculpture, 108,000 easel works, and over 11,000 print originals.⁴⁸ Employment with the FAP ranged from a few weeks to eight years (for a lucky few) to produce works that continue to grace schools,

45 O'Connor, *Federal Support*, 28.

46 Francis V. O'Connor, ed. *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 109.

47 Cahill, *Art in Democracy speech*, undated, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/container/viewer/-emph-render-italic-Art-in-Democracy-emph--183959> (accessed May 6, 2012).

48 *WPA Final Report*, 122; 133.

libraries, hospitals, and federal buildings today.⁴⁹ Many art works have been lost, many more endure, and others have been carefully restored to their original beauty.



Figure 2. Lucile Lloyd, *California's Name* (1939), oil on canvas, California State Capitol Building, Sacramento, California.

One FAP project with a storied past was Lucile Lloyd's beautiful triptych *California's Name* (1937) originally installed in the State Building in Los Angeles only to be forgotten in storage after an earthquake. Conservators restored and re-installed it in the California State Capitol Building in 1992 at the request of State Senators.⁵⁰

All WPA employees received one of the following skill classifications: professional and technical, skilled, intermediate, and unskilled. The artists of the FAP first had to meet relief requirements; then, talent and experience factored into specific work assignments. Local administrators matched workers with projects and provided for job training. The WPA guidelines allowed for the hiring of non-relief workers with specific talents or supervisory skills who could train workers on relief.⁵¹ Over the years, this ratio of relief/non-relief fluctuated between ninety/ten

49 WPA Final Report, 41.

50 California State Senate Rules Committee, *California's Name: Three WPA-Sponsored Murals by Lucile Lloyd* (January 1992), 1-2.

51 Cahill, *FAP Manual*, 3-5.

and seventy-five/twenty five depending upon the economy and the whims of Congress.⁵²

Contrary to the other art programs which paid for materials and commissioned artists for a specific project, the FAP required the recipient of permanent art (murals and sculpture) to pay for materials while the FAP paid artists a salary. The FAP paid a weekly wage based upon (but always lower than) local prevailing wages depending upon residence and population size which could range in the professional and technical class from \$23.25 for artists in California's larger cities to \$9.75 for artists in small towns in southern states such as Mississippi.⁵³ For this remuneration, the artist was expected to work ninety-six hours per month on a particular project, sculptural piece, or, in the case of easel artists, to paint a fixed number of paintings.⁵⁴ Most artists did not find the FAP work week requirements a hindrance or impediment to artistic creativity. The San Francisco sculptor Sargent Johnson stated, "I think it [was] a pretty wonderful job for the time, considering we had to get these things out quick. We couldn't putt around for long. They gave you a design and you had to have the whole thing up in so many days, you know, or months."⁵⁵ This system kept an artist working as long she/he qualified for relief.

The FAP murals represented populist ideals by being publicly accessible (in all its meanings) and requiring artist collaboration. The art of fresco (painting on wet plaster) gained prominence in America on a large scale with this push for public murals. Several American artists learned the art of fresco in Mexico or from working with Diego Rivera in New York or San

52 Hopkins, 167.

53 Arthur W. MacMahon, John D. Millett, and Gladys Ogden, *The Administration of Federal Work Relief* (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1941), 150.

54 Cahill, *FAP Manual*, 22.

55 Sargent Johnson, interview by Mary McChesney, July 31, 1964, transcript, Oral History, AAA, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-sargent-johnson-11474> (accessed March 15, 2012).

Francisco and taught the technique to others.⁵⁶ The FAP artists worked cooperatively in the creation of art, and skilled artists trained novice artists in a variety of artistic techniques. New York artist Ruth Gikow argued it was not art school but the “early years of the WPA [that] really, really made an artist out of me.”⁵⁷ Murals earned the reputation of being populist because the permanent public display meant they belonged to a “people’s audience”.⁵⁸ This audience could include passersby in hospitals, schools, or subways where artists worked together to invent painted tile techniques that would “resist the dampness, vibration, and modern cleaning methods” so the art could survive.⁵⁹ Muralist Philip Evergood believed the years of the FAP had done more for advancing mural painting and bringing a “closer understanding between the American artist and his public” through art than at any other time.⁶⁰

Mosaic murals were endemic to California; mosaic artists in both Los Angeles and San Francisco experimented with a variety of tile mediums to produce a specific color palette or lower material costs. Bay Area artists used marble left over from the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition; Southern California artist and administrator Stanton MacDonald-Wright invented a vivid colored cement tile he called “petrachrome” to create mosaics that would otherwise have been cost prohibitive given budget limitations.⁶¹ Of the mosaics produced, Mary Morsell noted “all that was needed was a degree of freedom from

56 Holger Cahill, “Mural America,” *Architectural Record* 82, No. 3 (1937): 63.

57 Ruth Gikow, interview by Harlan Phillips, 1964, transcript, Oral History, AAA, <http://aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-ruth-gikow-12598> (accessed March 1, 2012).

58 O’Connor, *Millions*, 48.

59 O’Connor, *Millions*, 49.

60 O’Connor, *Millions*, 49.

61 Stanton MacDonald Wright, interview by Betty Hoag, Oral History, 1964, AAA, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-stanton-macdonaldwright-11673> (accessed May 2, 2012).

purely commercial requirements. This the government provided.”⁶² The project expenditure restraints imposed by the relief programs actually facilitated the invigoration of old techniques (fresco and mosaic) and the innovative use of new or recycled materials.

Ingenuity expanded beyond mural projects as collectives of artists developed new inks, paints, and improved techniques in silk screening in the applied arts division that printed hundreds of thousands of posters for WPA projects.⁶³ The print artist Anthony Velonis asserted “the WPA/FAP was the logical place for all this to be initiated and developed. For nowhere else is there such a crosscurrent of varied technical experience and such an opportunity to practice, mixed with a bold, imaginative, and creative spirit.”⁶⁴ In this way, the art programs benefitted both the artist and the advancement of art techniques in America. Prints fit the populist agenda by being reproducible (not original or valuable) and engaging in the promotional subject matter of performances, parks, and good hygiene, both qualities which brought art to the masses.⁶⁵ Artists on relief in the print division congregated in workshops which cultivated an environment of experimentation and free expression.

Many artists saw the art projects as something more than the mere production of art. In remembering the unique opportunity presented by the art projects, Robert Cronbach, a New York sculptor, reflected “for the creative artist the WPA/FAP marked perhaps the first time in American history when a great number of artists was [*sic*] employed continuously to produce art. It was an unequaled opportunity for a serious artist to work as steadily and intensely as possible to advance the quality of his

62 Mary Morsell, “California Mosaicists,” *Magazine of Art* 30, no. 10 (1937), 623.

63 McKinzie, 132.

64 O’Connor, *Millions*, 156.

65 Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38.

art.”⁶⁶ For many FAP artists, working on the project gave them a sense of worth and collective participation in something larger than themselves. Muralist Geoffrey Norman noted, “Artists were given walls to decorate not in imposing banks or state capitols, but in schools, hospitals, libraries, prisons, in every part of the country.”⁶⁷ He enthusiastically painted for the government and in turn the people, many of whom had little previous contact with art. During these projects, artists focused on communicating with their audience (be it a federal courthouse or country post office) more than communicating ideas with their art, and the notion of “art for art’s sake” that had dominated the art world in the 1920s evaporated in favor of a dialogue between artists and citizens.⁶⁸ This change was the result of the artist as government worker or “citizen-artist” and the government as patron of the arts or a “citizen-public” for art.⁶⁹



Figure 3. Lucienne Bloch, *Childhood* (1935), fresco, Women’s House of Detention, New York, New York. No color photographs of this mural exist as it was destroyed when the building was demolished in 1974.

66 O’Connor, *Memoirs*, 140.

67 O’Connor, *Millions*, 52.

68 Alan Howard Levy, *Government and the Arts: Debates over Federal Support of the Arts in America from George Washington to Jessie Helms* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 60.

69 Harris, 38.

The art programs allowed an artist to fulfill her/his creative potential as well as allowed the public to be enriched by viewing it. Lucienne Bloch described her experience of working on a mural at the Women's House of Detention in New York by stating that when viewing the facility she felt there was "a crying need for bright and bold curves to offset this drabness and austerity".⁷⁰ She also sensed the inmates saw art as "high-brow", and she needed to make her mural relevant and intimate. To accomplish this, she painted a scene of a city park with children of all colors playing as mothers watched and gossiped. The female inmates developed a strong connection to the mural and even "named" and "adopted" some of the children in the painting. This project which required the artist to paint on site where she could meet and talk with the inmates touched Bloch deeply, and she confided, "Such a response clearly reveals to what degree a mural can, aside from its artistic value, act as a healthy tonic on the lives of all of us."⁷¹ In this way, the art provided relief to the artist in the form of work and skill development as well as relief to the viewer from daily concerns.

Public art exhibitions and art centers of the FAP most closely followed the populist ideas of making art available to everyone. The Northern California FAP selected the Berkeley Public Library as a "testing ground" to begin a Print Lending Library lending lithographs to library card holders; this was an effort to afford more citizens the opportunity to enjoy and experience art on a personal level. In the first few weeks, over 200 people viewed 317 prints and librarians "checked-out" ninety-five pieces to patrons. A bulletin subtitled "An Experiment in Democratizing Art" noted several uses of the art included teachers displaying the art in classrooms to students who had never before seen a work of art, impoverished newlyweds decorating an otherwise bare apartment, and a visitor taking a new print to

70 O'Connor, *Millions*, 76.

71 O'Connor, *Millions*, 77.

a hospitalized friend each week in place of flowers. Despite the success of the lending program and interest in similar programs by other state directors, officials disbanded it a little more than a year later to release the hundreds of prints in the program to art centers requesting circulating exhibitions.⁷²

Art Centers throughout the country were not only places where local artists could find work; they were places where citizens of all ages could come in contact with art in their local community. Art teaching and circulating exhibitions were included in the FAP to “provide the public with the opportunities to participate in the experience of art” along with providing employment for local unemployed artists and art teachers.⁷³ Communities provided the space and utilities for a center and the FAP paid the salaries of faculty and staff as well as providing travelling art exhibitions. Administrators estimated between twelve and fifteen million people of all ages took art classes, listened to an art lecture, or saw an art exhibit in one of the eighty-four art centers across the country by 1940.⁷⁴ With most of the projects (other than post offices) created in large cities, art centers gave small communities an opportunity to experience art from Jacksonville, Florida to Spokane, Washington. Cultural historian Jonathan Harris argues as “democratic” as the FAP art center strived to be, the establishment of “so-called Negro Art Centers” in Harlem, Chicago, and in the South “appears never to have challenged the segregation of black and white communities in the United States”.⁷⁵ Democracy in art was absent in the presence of Jim Crow. Art centers relied upon the community for support and therefore reflected community values and prejudices. Forty

72 California Federal Art Project Papers, 1935 – 1964, *FAP Bulletin* (undated) and FAP letter, December 7, 1937, AAA, microfilm, NDA1.

73 Sacramento Art Center Records, 1937-1941, *Art Circular No. 1*, Oct. 8, 1937, AAA, microfilm, NDA14.

74 Sacramento Art Center Records, *Art Circular, No.1*.

75 Harris, 46.

thousand people walked through the doors of the Sacramento Art Center to participate in its various art experiences between June 1938 and December 1939.⁷⁶ Local artists or teachers found employment only at the Sacramento Art Center as all other art projects in and around Sacramento were created by San Francisco artists.⁷⁷ A local newspaper account featured photographs of residents engaged in a variety of artistic pursuits and reported that “many find their talents have been lying dormant for years”.⁷⁸ Art administrators believed these centers “represented a ‘corrective’ force intended to redistribute ‘cultural resources’ and to energize” what were seen as vast deserts of culture and creativity.⁷⁹

The undertaking to employ thousands of artists, create government-sponsored art, and engage the public with art was a radical idea that worked. Artists appreciated the collaborative experience of working, learning, and creating together; at the same time, citizens enjoyed art in local communities as viewers and participants in art experiences. The claim this was a Renaissance in American art was no exaggeration as it was a true revival for art, artists, and the spirits of the public. FDR had hoped to be remembered for this art, according to a comment heard by Henry Morgenthau Jr., U.S. Secretary of the Treasury: “one hundred years from now my administration will be known for its art, not its relief.”⁸⁰ At the dedication of the National Gallery of Art in 1941, he argued for the merits of the art created under his administration. FDR stated Americans had seen paintings *by* Americans “some of it good, some of it not so good, but all of it native, human, eager, and alive - all of it painted by their own

76 Sacramento Art Center Records, *Newsletter*, April 15, 1940, AAA.

77 Sacramento Art Center Records, *Newsletter*.

78 Ronald Scofield, “Painting or Play Acting, Dress Designing or Modern Dancing – They All Find Encouragement and Guidance at the Sacramento Art Center,” *Sacramento Bee*, December 16, 1939, 19.

79 Harris, 48.

80 Lenore Clark, *Forbes Watson: Independent Revolutionary* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001), 148.

kind in their own country, and painted about things that they know and look at often and have touched and loved.”⁸¹ Art did not simply subsist during the Depression. The economic forces actually brought artists together in collaborative efforts of work, art, and process. Despite the schism between elitist and populist forces during the New Deal, creativity prevailed through new techniques in art as well as the community’s appreciation of art.

The hope these programs would change the public’s relationship with art forever never truly materialized, but it neither withered nor reverted back to pre-Depression exclusivity. The art produced during FDR’s administration has endured and gained a newly found respect by historians, artists, and the populace who work to preserve it. The General Services Administration has a WPA art recovery program for lost easel art as well as safeguards in place to protect the art in government buildings. Public art is not perfect. Despite Edith Mahier’s best efforts to study and paint a true representation of a local hero, native tribesmen did not see themselves in her work. The creation of public sculptures and murals has continued but never to the extent of the New Deal years. For the most part, easel art has quietly crept back to the domain of galleries and museums. The public still complains about public art whether it is the tail of a pig or a giant red rabbit at the Sacramento International Airport. The consideration of the public into public art offers rewards for both the artist and the citizen. As accessible as public art is, the art itself is less important than the citizen’s freedom to voice concern, frustration, or delight in the project. In this way, the populist roots planted during the New Deal of ordinary people participating in public art continue to flourish today.

81 Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address at the Dedication of the National Gallery of Art.,” March 17, 1941, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16091>.