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Meghan Bentley

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The Federal Art Project: Intentions, Goals, and Legacy

By

Meghan Bentley

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ABSTRACT

BENTLEY, MEGHAN The Federal Art Project: Intentions, Goals, and Legacy

ADVISOR: Professor Andrew Morris

Created under the umbrella program called the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression, the Federal Art Project (FAP) was a unique program that attempted to put struggling artists back to work and aimed to preserve artistic skill in American society. This thesis examines the efficacy and legacy of the Federal Art Project by examining the legitimacy of the criticisms levied against the FAP, the effect the FAP was able to have on the American public and arts community, and closes by examining the findings of these claims within the context of a collection of local FAP paintings.

While producing an artistic legacy that has become widely appreciated, the program has also been criticized that by paying artists to produce artwork that reinforced proud American themes, the Federal Government was using the Project to mass-produce pro-American propaganda to advance its own agenda. Through the lens of a collection of Federal Art Project artwork from a now-closed Schenectady hospital, as well as records of the FAP from the National Archives, this project argues that the goals in the own words of the leaders of this program show their commitment to the arts and those in need of relief. If there was ever any intent to influence public opinion, it was only to change the relationship between the American people and art for the benefit of both parties, never the leaders themselves. The American public, including citizens, artists, and critics, were supportive of the FAP and what they produced, as well as

believing they offered genuine benefit to society. The lasting legacy they provide today continues to benefit the art community and the American people.

Chapter 1: Review of the Literature

The literature and scholarly work concerning the Federal Art Project is thorough, but still limited. The books, articles, and memoirs written about this program represent an interesting and unique network of literature; most sources draw from the same pool of main texts, and then also each other, and then offering their own unique opinion on the subject matter.

Real investigation into the Federal Art Project didn't begin until the late 1960s and early 70s, with most of the groundwork being laid in informational texts during those decades. This sudden flurry to publish works on the FAP was tied to a revival in the interest in Federal art; in the 1960s, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was created under President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society." The Great Society was a celebration of American culture and success in the new time of prosperity, and there was a revived interest in government support for the arts. This drove people to look back at the period of history where art and the federal government had the closest relationship.

This curiosity led to the first major work on the history of the FAP to be published: *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930's by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Arts Project* by Francis V. O'Connor. This book was a collection of more than 60 essays that had been saved by the FAP national director Holger Cahill, who had the foresight to recognize that they were an excellent window in to the operations of the program and the minds and

thoughts of artists and administrators.¹ These essays were organized and edited by Francis V. O'Connor decades later, and published in 1964. O'Connor was an art historian at the University of Maryland and made a name for himself for his focus on government-sponsored art, being one of the first to do so, after recognizing the high quality of FAP art and dedicating his early studies to the works of Jackson Pollock, who came out of the FAP. In 1965, O'Connor completed his dissertation on the works of Jackson Pollock and became one of the foremost authenticators and experts on Jackson Pollock.² This led to his interest in WPA art as a whole, and as a result, when the U.S. government established the National Endowment for the Arts and wanted to explore the history of art and government partnerships, they naturally turned to O'Connor to collect a history of the WPA arts programs and the FAP in particular.³ The NEA sponsored O'Connor to produce two written works about WPA art, which became O'Connor's first study into the FAP, *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* which later became *Art for the Millions*.⁴

The late 60s and early 70s were the springboard for the first exploration of scholarly work into the FAP with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts. The government was curious about previous attempts at government-sponsored art; these programs had yet to be investigated, and once the first works were produced, curiosity quickly spread. This explains the themes of the

¹ Lincoln Rothschild, "A Commentary on the Book 'Art for the Millions.'" *Leonardo*, Vol. 10, No 2, (1977), 141.

² Arts Alive, "In Memoriam: Francis V. O'Connor, 1937-2017." Arts Alive, (<http://artsaliveli.org/event/in-memoriam-francis-v-oconnor-1937-2017/>)

³ Rothschild, "A Commentary on the Book 'Art for the Millions.'" 142.

⁴ Rothschild, "A Commentary on the Book 'Art for the Millions.'" 142.

literature we see with this first wave of scholarly studies into the FAP. They were completed in the 70s because of a revived interest with the NEA, and were generally background, exploratory works, that were aiming to collect the information that could be found that had yet to be pieced together. They were attempting to relive the days of the FAP, a more celebration of the past in connection to the present art and government partnership. This explains the themes in the main texts from this period: O'Connor's pieces, and a novel by Richard D. McKinzie, titled *The New Deal for Artists*, which would become one of the main texts to come out of this period, and other, more minor works, such as *Accomplishments of the Minnesota Arts Projects in the Depression Years* in 1976, *Violins and Shovels* in 1976, and other works such as *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, which was published as early as 1969.

Then, there appears to be a lull in interest in the program. Scholarly interest in the program was revived closer to the 2000s, when there seemed to be the next wave of literature about the FAP published. These works tended to be slightly more specific, and slightly more opinionated.

The literature surrounding the FAP can best be understood and evaluated by understanding how each author chooses to represent the FAP and what they thought about the project. There are varying conclusions drawn from the same facts, but after reviewing a wide selection of this literature that well represents the available resources and varying analyses, it is clear that most of the scholars are mostly in agreement in their final evaluations of the project, although there are varying opinions about some of the criticisms that the Project faced (and

continues to face today.) Most scholars came to the same conclusion: that the FAP was an imperfect program, but was still a minor success. They also agree that its most important contribution was what it did for society and the lasting legacy it provided in the art world. In fewer words, while the quality of art was rocky and the program occasionally bumbling, American society and the art world is certainly better off for the existence of the FAP.

Many of the authors focus on the same issues. Most prevalent throughout the literature is the question of whether or not the art produced by the program was propaganda. Some scholars adamantly say that it was not propaganda, while some contend just as hard that it was. Many scholars are torn on the issue, and end up falling somewhere in the middle – while the artwork may have been propagandistic in subject matter, it was not done with manipulative or malicious intent. The qualifications and intentions of the project, and those who lead it, are also called into question. Some praise the leadership while others blame it for the program's demise. Some say it was too lenient, while others say it was too harsh. The intricacies of the program are debated, but in terms of the greater picture of the benefit of the program, the literature as a unit is mostly positive.

In 1969, Francis V. O'Connor published an article that is very relevant to this study on the New York federal art programs. "The New Deal Art Projects in New York" follows many of the themes discussed in the literature from the 70s. It is a very informative piece, that chronologically follows the trajectory of the project in New York City, which was where the project began, and remained as the

hub of the program. From this informative piece, one can see that the goals of this essay was to celebrate the past of the FAP, as it these works were designed to in this time of prosperity, but also honestly and intellectually evaluate the FAP as a program and its achievements. O'Connor criticizes the immediate outcome, such as the quality of art, but appreciates the larger impact of putting art into society and giving a hand to struggling artists. He concludes, "despite the strict supervision and narrow taste of the Treasury projects and the never-ending bureaucratic battles of the WPA/FAP, the New Deal art projects in New York were the most creative and effective in the country."⁵ It is no accident that many of the leaders of the later artists movements came out of New York and the FAP, and the program itself provided continuity of work to support and preserve the skills of artists for as long as eight consecutive years.⁶ As O'Connor shows, New York was a massive hub for creativity and the driving force that turned the program into what it was, allowing for it to achieve what it would achieve, but not without acknowledging its imperfections.

The second major work to come out of the 1970s was the aforementioned *The New Deal for Artists* by Richard D. McKinzie, published in 1969. Perhaps one of the first, and most complete, works on the FAP, it is the most commonly cited and referenced. McKinzie follows the rise and fall of the FAP through history,

⁵ Francis V. O'Connor, "The New Deal Art Projects in New York." *American Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (1969): 79.

⁶ Francis V. O'Connor. "The New Deal Art Projects in New York." 79.

identifying key players and major events in the process. It is a vast overlay of all the background information on the Federal Art Project.

McKinzie explicitly states at the outset that his intent is not to pass any judgment or make any analysis on the efficacy or effects of the FAP. "This book is about an experiment. It is not an evaluation or explication of artwork produced under government auspices. It is not an assessment of the effects of the government's largess upon the psyches of artists during the depression. My focus is much more upon social and political forces than upon the creative urge and its result,"⁷ he says. However, it is clear through his writing and representation that he found the FAP to be, generally, a positive. Although he restrains from passing judgment, it is clear based on his reporting of the events and interpretation that he has no real criticism for the project or any of its relatives. *The New Deal for Artists* focuses on what made the project unique: the FAP was the first of its kind, and to this day, government spending on art is still extraordinarily rare. The appreciation of art among the general American people during this time period, and especially the idea of "American" art, was brand new. Up until this point, fine art had been entirely "European," stylistically, thematically, and practically. Even the implementation and organization of the program was unique in comparison to other New Deal programs. The work was subjective, the artist population was more fluid, and rules and regulations could not be as readily applied. It was significantly harder to quantify art and the artistic process than it was to quantify hourly manual labor, which made up

⁷ Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), xi.

most other WPA programs. These unique attributes appear to be McKinzie's main theme throughout the book.

While other historians and authors question the motives behind the creation of the program, or the need of artists, or the efficacy of the program, McKinzie's writing tell stories of the struggles of artists and stresses what he sees as the purity of the motives of FAP leadership. He clearly finds a different story than some within this history: "The economic crisis...brought numbness and despair to the artistic community. It remained for a new force to provide impetus for a new art and for its reconciliation with society."⁸ McKinzie clearly felt for the artists struggling during this time period, and saw the government's actions as genuine compassion in response to a struggling section of the population, without any other motives or personal interests.

This also follows one other major theme: McKinzie, unlike other scholars, evaluates the efficacy of the FAP based on the effect it had on artists. He takes the time to delve into the quality of the art, the artists' processes, and how they felt about their products stretching across decades. He repeatedly remarked on the "controversy over aesthetics,"⁹ as he called it, meaning the impossibility to measure what was "good" art and what wasn't. The subjectivity of art was a major obstacle for both the artists and the program when measuring success, particularly when there were specific guidelines and themes artists were required to follow.

⁸ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 5.

⁹ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 7.

McKinzie closes *The New Deal for Artists* with his final overarching analysis of the FAP: Neither the public nor government ever really decided whether the government should have a hand in art, or what art's value was in society.¹⁰ For, as McKinzie wrote, the bloom of American art marked a success, but "the cultural boom did not mean that art was appreciably more integrated with daily life and that Americans were willing to have artistic talent developed as a national resource."¹¹

In the 1990s, the political sphere of America once again changed. In 1995, Jonathan Harris published *Federal Art and National Culture*. This work became a major text for future publications on the FAP. Harris takes a markedly more politicized view on the Federal Art Project. Harris is critical of the project and its outcomes at nearly every turn, and is considerably more dubious of the intentions and motives of the artists, and particularly of the federal government and President Roosevelt. He comes at the program from the far left of the political spectrum, for not being liberal enough. Harris' approach is very heavy handed in his reiteration that New Deal programs in general were the federal government's attempt to enforce the idea of the citizen belonging to the state and create a (negatively) homogenous national identity. Harris saw New Deal art as not just a part of, but one of the most important tools for this: "Culture, in the broad sense of 'the signifying practices of the whole way of life,' was recognized to be a strategically important terrain upon which could be constructed (and

¹⁰ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 187.

¹¹ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 188.

possibly reconstructed) people's sense of identity and of belonging to a social totality."¹² Harris, as a radical liberal, would have preferred government-sponsored art to not change the identity of the people in its relationship to the federal government, as he evaluated the FAP as doing, but rather reimagine the American people's identity with themselves, and take a class-conscious approach that brought strength to the working class.

Harris' main theme and focus throughout his book, is that the FAP was essentially a means for propaganda. He saw Roosevelt and his populist agenda as using art and its continued American themes as a way to manage national identity, and based on the language he uses he is certainly skeptical, if not outright against, this way of thinking. His pages are riddled with phrases or words in parenthesis, to show "irony" or "doubt" throughout what he says.

His analysis of the FAP rests in a deeper understanding of what the state is and its role. He saw the FAP as Roosevelt's attempt to unify the nation through an establishment of American identity, much like McKinzie did. The two had similar analyses of the goals of the program. However, where McKinzie saw this as a generally positive agenda, Harris had quite the opposite view. He says, "the Project attempted to reconstruct the meaning of 'art' and 'artists' in such a way that whatever else it might mean it also included being a citizen, a loyal member of the nation-state."¹³ He continues, "the people, however, were figured as citizens (i.e., juridical-political subjects of the state, not as a popular force for

¹² Jonathan Harris, 1995. *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 8-9.

¹³ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 9.

revolutionary social change)."¹⁴ Where McKinzie saw FAP art as a legitimate attempt at helping the economy and of art as serving an important *cultural* piece in a society that desperately needed it, Harris sees the art as, at minimum, an effort to expand the reach of government, and at most, outright propaganda: "murals and sculptures physically represented the intervention of the federal state into people's lives...Federal Art Project artworks represented a dispersal of state power through the nation."¹⁵ Harris took a much more negative and cynical view on the control the Federal Government had over the FAP.

This is the most important theme in Harris' work, and clearly the goal of this book, to impress that idea. However, he (likely begrudgingly) had to admit that the FAP was a revolutionary program, in that "the 'citizen-artist' thus found a place within the ranks of the populace, and was granted a legitimate role and identity in the New Deal national culture."¹⁶

These are two commanding sources that are widely used by scholars in the field and provide an introduction to the main ideas surrounding the FAP and the debate of them amongst scholars. There are many aspects of the FAP that most scholars seem to touch on that define the historical relevance of the FAP: the first is whether or not the art produced was propaganda. The second is the motives of the federal government in creating the FAP. The third is the role and effect of communism in FAP history. The fourth and final theme is whether or not the FAP was a success.

¹⁴ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 21.

¹⁵ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 65.

¹⁶ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 43.

One of the major themes in the literature focuses on whether or not FAP art was government propaganda. Most scholars agree that the art produced under the FAP was clearly guided by the federal government to represent something undeniably “American.” The government used art to unite the people and give dignity and power back to the working class by splashing large murals across the bleak depression-era landscape that depicted strong, powerful laborers, heralded for their strength, uniting the American people under nationalism and pride. Where scholars tend to disagree is on whether or not this can be classified as propaganda. There seems to be a near complete dichotomy of opinion; either scholars interpret this as the government using art as a means to an end to influence the people’s opinion and enforce their political order, or as a genuine attempt by the federal government to portray something to lift the spirits of the American people, and unite them under a sense of shared value to help them through this difficult time. The motivations of the FAP will be discussed later in deeper detail.

Cameron M. Weber, in “Dissertation Concerning a Political Economy of Art With Emphasis on the United States of America” investigates if art is propaganda by outlining how art is intrinsically linked to the state. His findings clash with what Harris believed. Weber concluded that he does not find malicious intent in the federal government. He finds that “Some of the art production during the New Deal may have been propaganda in an attempt to grow the discretionary power of the state, something we have categorized as *art-*

statism.”¹⁷ However, he does not think that all the art was propaganda – decentralized leadership and the power of discretion given to local administrators kept them separate from the federal government.¹⁸ Essentially, though he sees the artwork as being propagandistic in theme, it has no “willfull dishonesty.”¹⁹ Weber finds a touch of the propaganda that Harris feels, but seems to feel far from negative about it. He still sees its artistic value, and thinks that the motive behind any aspect of propaganda is not as manipulative as Harris would perhaps find it. In many ways, Weber is a cross between Harris and McKinzie. He sees the argument that the art was propaganda, but with a pure intention to benefit the people. He wrote, “the federal state assumed, through the WPA, a much larger role in the economic life of the American people...this increased role was legitimized by the physical works created by the WPA.”²⁰ However, he sees the FAP and the artwork produced as being a legitimate and important part of what he calls “the second New Deal” of 1935, once classified by social reform, particularly instead of economic reform.²¹

In “Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for Cultural Democracy,” author Jane De Hart Mathews offers a different opinion on FAP art as propaganda: she never addresses it. By avoiding it entirely, coupled with the rest

¹⁷ Weber, Cameron M. “Dissertation Concerning a Political Economy of Art With Emphasis on the United States of America” PhD diss., The New School, May 2015., 208.

¹⁸ Weber, “Dissertation Concerning a Political Economy of Art with Emphasis on the United States of America.” 209.

¹⁹ Weber, “Dissertation Concerning a Political Economy of Art with Emphasis on the United States of America.” 178.

²⁰ Weber, “Dissertation Concerning a Political Economy of Art with Emphasis on the United States of America.” 194.

²¹ Weber, “Dissertation Concerning a Political Economy of Art with Emphasis on the United States of America.” 191.

of her overwhelmingly positive analysis of the FAP, it is clearly evident that she finds no fault in the Program or the art it produced. An aspect of the FAP that is always mentioned in the literature is the strict guidelines to what artists were allowed to express in their work; they were strongly encouraged, and sometimes limited to, producing art that would unite the country by representing the average citizen and American life.

De Hart Mathews takes a different approach. In describing the opportunities in theater through the WPA Theater Project, a sister program to the FAP, De Hart Mathews details the large amount of artistic freedom within the program. She then continues, "more important, they could produce plays that would reflect regional and ethnic differences and plays that would be boldly relevant to contemporary problems."²² This shows stark difference in how she is choosing to portray the guidelines presented by the Federal Art Project than what has been seen with other authors. Some authors chose to tell this information as simple fact. Others, that the guidelines actually impeded artists' work. Even more found it a case for illegitimacy in the art world. But Mathews chose to present the fact that FAP art followed themes of American working-class culture as the choice of the artists rather than the requirement of the program. By presenting the information to the reader in this way, she gives the impression that the FAP artists were free to use artistic freedom, and chose to channel it this way, rather than being limited to it.

²² Jane De Hart Mathews. "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy." *The Journal of American History* 62, no. 2 (1975): 322.

Sharon Ann Musher, in her book discussing how governmental agencies functioned during the Depression, *Democratic Art: The New Deal Influence on American Culture*, approaches the idea of art as propaganda thoughtfully, ultimately deciding that FAP art could not be described as propagandistic. In direct response to the idea of art as propaganda, she says, “All art is political...Yet overtly political New Deal art was unusual because of the ideological forces and political arguments shaping it...Yet experimentation, particularly in the relief projects, remained more central to New Deal art than it was for other government-supported aesthetic programs at the time.”²³ She understands the argument that the art had a political nature to it, but makes the well-articulated point that all art by very nature is political, particularly at the time of the Great Depression, and therefore it would be unfair to single out FAP art as propaganda. She even goes as far as to say that the FAP was the most experimental and furthest from Federal control.

Another theme that often appears throughout the literature that is closely tied to the idea of art as propaganda is the motives and intentions of the federal government in creating and supporting the FAP.

David A. Horowitz in “The New Deal and People’s Art: Market Planners and Radical Artists” classifies the goal of the project as: “Roosevelt rhetoric identified citizenship with ‘the people,’ whose strength and common purpose were to lift the nation out of the Depression. Public art was to be compatible

²³ Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal Influence on American Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 102.

with this newly emerging national culture.”²⁴ The idea of using art as a tool, and as one that will unite people under the title of “citizen,” rings true with the more critical scholars, like Jonathan Harris. However, Horowitz represents the idea as having much more legitimacy as a tactic to save the economy, which was the focus of his work. Horowitz continued to take the more critical stance on the motives of the federal government behind the FAP. Horowitz is clearly more critical and skeptical of the Roosevelt administration, and that its populist agenda was clearly a bad one. He says, “such a populist emphasis no doubt discomforted some political conservatives but served the strategic needs of Roosevelt democrats.”²⁵ Throughout the work, and evidenced here, Horowitz takes a more skeptical tone of the Roosevelt administration and political agenda, seeing the federal government as one that was aggressively trying to shape the public to its desired agenda, as he previously mentioned, using the FAP and art as a means to do so.

Jane De Hart Mathews, who gave a glowing review of the FAP, praises the purity of the motives of the federal government to do real good for struggling artists and to better the lives of all. She says, “It is the term ‘cultural democracy’ which best encompasses the ideas and aspirations of a New Deal élite who sought to integrate the artists into the mainstream of American life and make the arts both expressive and the spirit of a nation and accessible to its people.”²⁶ The

²⁴ David A. Horowitz, “The New Deal and People’s Art: Market Planners and Radical Artists.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 109, no. 2 (2008): 319.

²⁵ David A. Horowitz, “The New Deal and People’s Art: Market Planners and Radical Artists.” 321.

²⁶ Jane De Hart Mathews. “Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy.” 316.

FAP was providing a service to the American people by making art a part of daily life. She clearly holds art and those who work with it in the highest regards. She, like other authors, viewed the FAP as having a much, much larger reach than simply a relief program to target one group of workers. She saw the FAP as the singular tool that would unite the American people at this trying time, and permanently impact American culture.

Sharon Ann Musher saw the intentions of the federal government and the role of the strict subject guidelines as an imperfect approach, but a sincere attempt. She says,

Portraying an ethnically inclusive nation that romanticized the poor, celebrated the working class, and built bridges between worse-off and better-off Americans. Despite the limits of this approach, the publicly funded art...deployed did seek to raise consciousness, encourage debate, and built political consensus around a liberal agenda. It was precisely this effort that led many conservatives to attack New Deal art.²⁷

Musher offers a different perspective in that she sees the parameters the federal government set around subject matter for FAP art were a sincere attempt to do good, even if it brought with it accusations of propaganda. Even further, she believes that the parameters themselves weren't to serve any other purpose then to genuinely help the country in its time of need.

In *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars*, author Joan A. Saab addresses the point of view of the federal government, but also private institutions, specifically the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in changing art and society. Through this unique lens, she is able to offer an interesting

²⁷ Sharon Ann Musher. *Democratic Art: The New Deal Influence on American Culture*. 145.

perspective on the motives behind both institutions that dominated the art world and how the public would use it during this time. The FAP produced the art, and did what they could to integrate it into daily American life, but they were not the only authority on art in American society. Private museums also had an impact on how the general population would view and engage with the arts. She says,

Both Federal Art Project and MoMA staff in the 1930s were heavily invested in creating grand narratives into which their new aesthetic philosophies would fit. But for both the Federal Art Project's and MoMA's pedagogical models, public participation and firsthand individual experience played a crucial role in defining democracy. Through their new narratives both institutions simultaneously challenged the sacredness of art and transformed how aesthetic value had been determined. Moreover, the individuals at both institutions passionately believed in the transformative power of art to do some social good.²⁸

Therefore, as a government relief project, and a private institution working for a profit, the FAP and MoMA naturally came from different perspectives. However, it was their combined efforts that would change how art was consumed in American society. Saab does understand that both were trying to manipulate the narrative of art and, particularly for private institutions, use it for their own gain to attract visitors, but in doing so, it was because they believed in art and the artists, and genuinely wanted to do something good for them and the people for the betterment of society. She sees their motives as genuine.

²⁸ Saab, A. Joan. *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). 182-3.

Something that was an undeniably significant part of the FAP's history was the ties between the Federal Art Project and Communism. Many authors, including those mentioned here, have devoted small sections of their works to communist influence in the FAP, but because it is not the focus of their works and irrelevant to the larger themes and theses, I have not made much mention. However, it is an important, though smaller and distinct, part of the literature concerning the FAP. Many of the works on radicalism and communism in the FAP are specifically devoted to the topic. Andrew Hemingway discusses the links, both real and apparent, between the Federal Art Project and the Communist Party and why they occurred in "Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the New Deal Arts Programmes."

Hemingway immediately draws a line in the sand on how the two are intricately related: "The New Deal, which certainly had no programme for social revolution, inadvertently provided a space for communist propagandizing in cultural guise, while the Communist Party saw the New Deal in terms essentially defined by Moscow as a temporary ally against fascism, and infiltrated the cultural institutions it established and used them for political ends."²⁹ The Roosevelt administration, and the New Deal itself, was certainly not communist. But the Federal Art Project consistently battled clear accusations of communism. For most of the Project's life, these accusations were not a threat to the program, but they also never fully went away.

²⁹ Andrew Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the New Deal Arts Programmes." *Oxford Art Journal* 30, no. 2 (2007): 271.

In some ways, the accusations were not entirely out of the blue.

Hemingway shows that there were many aspects of the FAP that the Communist Party could respond to. Essentially, “the art market replicated the ‘capitalistic system’ as a whole in its intense competitiveness,”³⁰ and if the art market was capitalism, the FAP was its equal-opportunity antithesis, as Communism was to Capitalism, for the FAP “offered the artist ‘a fair opportunity to compete with his fellow-artists in a just and healthy manner.’”³¹ He continues, “it treated artists as individual providers of professional services within the market specialism of public art it created.”³² Here we see notions of the FAP that initially would appeal directly to communist thinking.

As a result, the communist party did end up supporting the FAP for a time, “not only because of their relief functions, but because of the quality of the culture they promoted.”³³ Following the USSR model, “they believed that in the USSR artists enjoyed genuine respect as cultural workers, a generous and secure income from the state, and a healthy organic relationship with their audience.”³⁴ They believed in supporting a cultural and social movement. On the other side, the FAP was not necessary unresponsive to the Communist Party reaching out. “Liberal administrators in turn accepted working with communists partly because liberals too had misconceptions about the nature of the Soviet state, as has been amply documented, but also because they believed in a principle of

³⁰ Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default." 275.

³¹ Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default." 275.

³² Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default." 275.

³³ Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default." 281

³⁴ Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default." 282.

democratic expression that licensed social criticism in art.”³⁵ The complex relationship between the FAP and communism can be simplified to this: the nature and practice of the Federal Art Project was something that was initially interesting to the Communist Party, but it was, for the most part, not reciprocated. While the FAP may have been briefly curious, the organizations were marked for different paths, and at the end of the day, communism was never invited into the program.

In the end, Hemingway has clearly shown how the two complex organizations worked off of each other. But he also makes a distinct comment: “Although the projects’ right-wing critics claimed there was communist propaganda in the products of the arts programmes, this cannot be taken seriously. Rather, what they offered was a vision of popular empowerment that to the right was inevitably ‘communistic.’”³⁶ Hemingway shows that there were periods when the FAP and communism intertwined based on similar values, but core values remained different. They emerged and grew at the right place and the right time to experience a brief period of compatibility, but were on different paths from the start.

There is one theme that centers on the FAP that all scholars touched on. There has always been a question that surrounded the FAP throughout its existence and through literature published in the decades since up to the present: Was the Federal Art Project a success? At least for this question, most

³⁵ Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default." 283.

³⁶ Hemingway, "Cultural Democracy by Default." 286.

authors are in agreement: a tentative yes, though often with a caveat. Just as McKinzie and Harris conclude with as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, most if not all of the prevailing literature comes to the same conclusion. All authors say the FAP had, in general, a positive outcome. Whether it was the refreshing uniqueness of the program, doing real good for the people, or setting the stage for future change, the general outcome is positive, particularly in that it changed the relationship between art and the people.

Horowitz leaves the reader with a generally positive review of the FAP, ending his piece with: "These works offered a creative way to work toward the reconstruction of an ailing economy, the healing of broken spirits, the dream of a peaceful life following a terrible war, and the restoration of hope."³⁷ He viewed the New Deal arts as bringing about a real cultural revolution by "bringing the American audience and artist face to face."³⁸ Horowitz addresses the overall lasting impact of the FAP, but not the immediate, which is where most others authors find issue, such as Mathews.

The goal of Mathews' "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for Cultural Democracy" is to show that the Federal Art Project was a wonderful idea and cultural necessity. Mathews came to the conclusion – that most authors do – that the "quest for cultural democracy" was "only partially realized, perhaps because it was only partially articulated. New Deal cultural enthusiasts did bring arts to the people, even pioneering a new genre that was eminently accessible.

³⁷ David A. Horowitz, "The New Deal and People's Art: Market Planners and Radical Artists." 326-7.

³⁸ David A. Horowitz, "The New Deal and People's Art: Market Planners and Radical Artists." 321.

But most people never fully accepted the arts as public right and personal necessity."³⁹

Joan A. Saab saw the FAP as successful in changing the way the American people interacted with art and the artists, particularly to the benefit of the artist:

By focusing on their rights as cultural producers, these artists embraced the Federal Art Project's pedagogy of cultural production and presented a model for the social usefulness of art both on their own aesthetic terms and within a national cultural context; in so doing they created a compelling example of a more democratic American modernism and made artistic experience available to a much more diverse audience.⁴⁰

Saab's final conclusion on the efficacy of the project was similar what many other authors believed: she concluded that the FAP afforded artists the ability to do produce something of great value to American society that would change American culture and American art for the better.

Victoria Grieve discusses in her book *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* that one of the greater impacts of the FAP was that it created something called the "middlebrow culture," meaning something that lacked intellectual complexity, a more average, homogenized product. However, assigning this word to the FAP, and even saying that the FAP created it, is not a criticism. In a different way, she is saying something that many authors would agree with: the FAP made art accessible to all, and in new ways, which was a definite positive for American society. Grieve says, "The result was government support for a conception of culture that might be called

³⁹ Jane De Hart Mathews. "Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy." 338-9.

⁴⁰ Joan A. Saab, *For the Millions*. 53.

‘middlebrow’: one that championed broad access to the fine arts, widespread education, and the redefinition of art as a commodity available to all Americans.”⁴¹ Later, she concludes that, “Despite these ongoing negotiations between highbrow and lowbrow art, and the role of the federal government in supporting particular kinds of art, since the 1930s, the government has never entirely abdicated responsibility for making American culture broadly accessible, both at home and abroad.”⁴² This homogenized product, this intellectually watered down approach that Grieve sees in the FAP was actually one of the best things that could’ve been done for American culture at the time. It made art approachable enough to become part of daily life, and once it was there, it could return to a higher form without going away. Grieve believes that this effort to the FAP gave it a long lasting legacy.

The current literature on the Federal Art Project is sporadic across past decades, but follows similar themes. The works often have political undertones – those more liberal, which is often aligned with supporting the Roosevelt administration, take a much more appreciative look at the Federal Art Project and the New Deal as a whole. Those of more radical leanings find much more fault in administration and are far more critical of the Roosevelt administration and FAP. This leads to the same data being represented in a positive or negative way, in some cases to such extremes that they use the same information to make radically different points.

⁴¹ Victoria Grieve, 2009. *The Federal Art Project and the creation of middlebrow culture*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press). 83.

⁴² Victoria Grieve, 2009. *The Federal Art Project and the creation of middlebrow culture*. 180.

One of the major themes in the Federal Art Project literature is the question of propaganda. Many of the authors discuss the already polarizing facet of the FAP that artists were mostly restricted to creating works based on “American identity” and uniting the country by identifying the common citizen, and becoming accessible to them. Was this a real strategy to move people past the Depression or the hand of a populist government seeking control? This is very closely tied to the interpretation of the motives of the federal government with the program, and therefore the very definition of the program itself. Was it created as a legitimate extension of aid, or to manipulate as a tool? Or something in between? The ideas on this vary widely and often drive the interpretations of the FAP, because the definition of the FAP resides in how each author defines its goals.

Though mentioned briefly here, the role of Communism in the FAP is important to the study of the program, and the literature surrounding it. Many authors have approached it in the same way I have – it is important enough to mention, but it is a topic that in many ways sits on its own. A succinct but informative section is required, but also all that is required. The ideas on communist ties to the FAP all seem to follow the same theme: there were times in the Project’s history of communist outcry against the program. Most authors agree that there were small but distinct communist influences in FAP art, as art is expressive and attracts all, and there were a few similarities between the doctrines of the FAP and the Communist Party. The two were linked, but not deeply rooted.

It's clear that there are many aspects of the Federal Art Project that are up for interpretation. This work will follow the path towards a more positive review of the FAP. Focusing on the major hub office in New York City, this work will show that many of the greatest criticisms held against the FAP are unfair. The claims of propaganda, though deeply rooted in current literature, remain unsubstantiated in the words, actions, and lives of the leaders of the FAP office. These individuals were deeply invested in art, artists, and American culture and worked tirelessly, often in direct opposition with the federal government, to ensure that they did the most their project would allow. Investigating the reactions and evaluations of the American public reveals they were surprised to find they did support the project's goals. While the evaluations of the quality of art varied, most understood the value in the FAP existence. This legacy the FAP left behind has undoubtedly changed the art world for the better, and its lasting effects can still be seen today.

Chapter 1: Intentions and Goals

The Great Depression of the 1930s was one of the most devastating and unprecedented periods in American history. In response, a new wave of politics was ushered in under Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt, and unprecedented steps were taken to help revive the plummeting economy and support the millions of Americans who had lost their jobs. In 1935, President FDR created the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was designed to create jobs for the unemployed through government sponsored projects and offering relief wages. The Federal government sponsored work projects that opened up millions of labor jobs and other positions. One of the more unique subsets of the WPA was the Federal Art Project (FAP). This program was intended to put artists back to work. The Project's main goal was to help those many desperate artists who had become unemployed by commissioning large murals and other pieces of art for government buildings, and by offering relief to artists in need who would use the money to continue their craft which would then be displayed at FAP art shows and museums.

Government-sponsored art programs were the first of their kind. Nothing like them had ever come before in American society. Economic need during the Great Depression necessitated government intervention, but since government-sponsored art was such a new and untested idea, there were a few years of a trial-and-error period before the WPA enveloped the government-sponsored art program to create the FAP. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) ran from

December of 1933 to June of 1934. This was followed by the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, known as the "Section," which began in October of 1934 and remained active alongside the FAP through June, 1943. The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) began in July of 1935 and ended in June of 1939.⁴³

The PWAP was the first attempt for the federal government to provide aid to artists. The reality of the artists' struggle was brought to the attention of the Federal Government by a man named Francis Biddle, an artist and a dreamer who had more of a personal stake in artist relief than a political or practical one. When he presented his idea to President FDR, Biddle caught the attention of a Treasury Department official, a man named Edward Bruce, who presented himself as willing to give the project the direction it needed. Because of his established government position and experience, Bruce's support gave the program legitimacy and garnered more attention. These two men together conceptualized what an art program would look like, waded through the political red tape, and got the program off the ground and running. These early stages were born out of the fundamental "virtue of 'doing something for art.'"⁴⁴

However, the PWAP steadfastly maintained that the program was intended to be a public works program, rather than a relief program.⁴⁵ Biddle and Bruce eventually stepped aside as the project took on a more established governmental form and became the Section project and TRAP. The PWAP had limited goals and

⁴³ O'Connor. "The New Deal Art Projects in New York." 58.

⁴⁴ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 8.

⁴⁵ O'Connor. "The New Deal Art Projects in New York." 59.

limited funds, explaining it's short run. However, it showed that work-relief for artists was possible.⁴⁶

The Section was created by the Treasury Department to decorate government buildings, and was more focused on quality art; relief work did not come until the creation of the FAP in the fall of 1935.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, TRAP existed as a sort of middleman between the Section and the FAP, taking on mural projects that would borrow artists and funding from both programs.⁴⁸

The FAP was the most important of these programs because it “was the most extensive and comprehensive and had the greatest impact on the culture and consciousness of the nation” out of all the programs, as stated by one of the foremost scholars on the subject, Francis V. O'Connor. Much of this can be credited to the leadership of Holger Cahill, national director, and additionally Audrey McMahon, the New York City director, for making the project what it was. However, it would not have been possible for the FAP to become what it was without the other projects that came before them.

At the outset, the FAP was working against incredible obstacles. Many Americans didn't see the value in art – art was not very accessible to the common citizen, and the concept of “American” art did not exist; art was seen as something for the rich and snobby, and something fundamentally European. Additionally, artists were often seen as the epitome of political and cultural

⁴⁶ O'Connor. "The New Deal Art Projects in New York." 60.

⁴⁷ O'Connor. "The New Deal Art Projects in New York." 61.

⁴⁸ O'Connor. "The New Deal Art Projects in New York." 62-3.

radicalism, in some ways understandably, and at a time when the fear of Communism was running high, the FAP and other Federal art projects, such as the Federal Theater Project, became a natural target for conservative critics afraid of radical institutions. Art was, in general, simply not valued by the American people. It wasn't part of daily life, and it wasn't deemed necessary to culture or happiness. However, it is precisely this feeling that the leaders of the Federal Art Project intended to change. They took on much more than simply putting artists back to work; they wanted to change the relationship between art and the American people, for the better.

The trajectory of the FAP was a rocky one. It had an incredible undertaking, but with very varying levels of support. However, "the economic crisis...brought numbness and despair to the artistic community. It remained for a new force to provide impetus for a new art and for its reconciliation with society."⁴⁹ Artists during the 1930s were feeling the effects of the Great Depression, and the amount of much support the program was able to gather didn't matter; something had to be done for them.

The relief provided to artists did more than just put them back to work – it set American art and artist on an entirely new trajectory that made art more consumable and desirable to the American public, opening entirely new doors. Before any artists relief program, life during the Depression was particularly hard for artist, so even if the efforts of the FAP were imperfect, the intentions of the project were genuine and it came at a time when it was desperately needed.

⁴⁹ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 5.

Holger Cahill had a vision of the FAP, and “implicit in these goals was Cahill’s strong belief that the Government should work with the artist in raising artistic standards and increasing cultural awareness.”⁵⁰ He believed that his role as director was to help all the artists that he could, protect artistic skill, and change the relationship between the American people and art.

As we have seen in the first chapter, much of the debate around the Federal Art Project revolves around the intentions of those who led it. This was true for both scholars writing the history of the FAP today and the American public at the time of the program. The leaders’ qualifications, ability to lead, and interest and loyalty to the program have always been contested. However, in this chapter, by looking at the leaders’ own words, it’s clear that the leaders of the project were very dedicated to trying to help those who needed it. They were invested in their project and their artists. They did everything in their power to give positions, information, and assistance to all those who needed it and fought tooth and nail to keep their project alive. They were loyal to their program and the artists, and fought down innumerable obstacles.

This chapter will demonstrate that at the time, harshest critics claimed that those in charge of the FAP had no interest in producing any real, quality art that would have artistic meaning and value to the American people or in the artist community. However, it will be shown here that the leaders in the New York offices had a deep understanding of art, and that they genuinely wanted to

⁵⁰ Francis V. O’Connor, “The New Deal Art Projects in New York,” 63-4

produce “good” art. The leaders understood and appreciated art and knew how to qualify it. However, they still wanted to help as many people as possible, which is perhaps why some could argue that they were not invested in producing quality art. Although they would accept artists of lesser talent or allow pieces of lesser skill alongside superior ones, it would be unfair to say that the heads of the FAP weren’t interested in or knowledgeable about art. They simply wanted their program to be the best that it could be, which meant producing the best art while helping as many people as possible. They wanted to achieve their goal of creating beautiful “American” art, that would inspire and unify the country.

Similarly, one of the most divisive arguments in scholarly work on the FAP, as we have seen, is whether or not the government was using the FAP as propaganda. With the goal of wanting to create American art, scholars have criticized the Project for allowing the federal government to use the program to glorify the worker and garner support for FDR’s New Deal programs, like the WPA. However, it is clear from evidence taken from the words of the leaders themselves, that the idea to advance government aims or objectives were far from their minds; in fact, they were often at odds. The leaders of the FAP truly believed in American art, not just for the fact of propaganda, but in that they saw true value in the art itself, which no one had believed was possible, and in its power do to good for the country. Americanizing art was not a propaganda tool, it was something the leaders believed would do real good and was the best way they could think to use their program to benefit as many people as possible.

The leaders focused on here are Holger Cahill, National Director of the Federal Art Project, and Audrey McMahon, the director of the New York City office, the hub of the program. Thomas C. Parker, another FAP director is a prominent figure as well. These figures were the most important decision makers in the program.

Application to the Federal Art Project was straightforward for artists, but the acceptance process was a challenge for the administrators. For artists, it involved a simple application, and, upon approval, the applicant was admitted to the program if there was an available spot. However, for the administrators, there was no clear formula for how to allocate those spots. They were presented with the challenge of weighing whose art was worthy while comparing need for relief.

The artist application asked for personal details, and specifics about the type of art each applicant did. The way the form was written assumed the applicant was qualified. It asked where one was trained, not if. Under education, it asked what art training school one attended, assuming that each applicant had more than just a general education. It asked where one trained, in what, and by whom. It asked where one's work had been displayed, exhibited, or sold. It then asked the kind of experience one might have in each medium of art, the courses they had taken, and the instruction they had had.⁵¹

⁵¹ Federal Art Project Application. Date unknown. New York City 1936. Box 23, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

The leaders of the project, however, struggled to find a way to wade through these applications. The main obstacle they encountered was how to define if a person was an artist. Since art is so subjective and comes in so many forms, it was hard to stay objective and the leaders felt uncomfortable claiming themselves to be the only authority on what was and wasn't "real" art. Audrey McMahon, New York City regional director, recalled that the administrators settled on a committee hearing process in order to remain fair and impartial. She said, "How would we know, for example, that an artist was a professional artist? Well, a group of his peers, not on the project, not eligible for the project, would be a committee, but that group would be of my selecting, for example. I would be a member of that committee, and any of the staff that I might designate, but we would not outweigh the group, you see."⁵²

With this process, things fell through the cracks; people were slighted or passed over that did not deserve it. However, in many ways, the obstacles people faced can mostly be chalked up to bureaucratic inefficiency. Things got lost in the shuffle, special permissions were forgotten, applications were misplaced, and at the end of the day, there was the simple reality that there were more artists than there were spots for relief. So the story of Mrs. R. Easton Figero was sadly not a unique one – but Cahill's response fortunately was. Mrs. Figero of Astoria, Long Island applied for the Federal Art Program relief project. She was a proficient artist suffering during the depression, and she and her husband relied on the FAP relief work that he received. When he passed away, Mrs. Figero wrote to the

⁵² Phillips, Harlan. Interview with Audrey McMahon. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. November 18, 1964, 16.

Project to take his place. She had already been evaluated as an equally competent artist, needed the assistance, and knew that with her husband's passing, there was spot open in her region for an artist. She was granted approval to take her husband's post, and even had included with her application a note to "expedite this application" from a Project manager. However, bureaucratic inefficiency struck. After her application was sent in, she heard nothing back. She went in person to track down her application, which she was told must have gone missing, and was referred to twelve different departments. After the application was finally located, she received her response: she was told that an order had been posted to cut employment, and she would not be any given relief work or assistance.⁵³

However, it was because of the organization run by Holger Cahill, that Mrs. Figero was not shunted to the side. An investigation took place, and ended with Cahill stating the following conclusion:

Due to the extensive red tape, and failure to properly expedite this application which under the circumstances, and because members of the various departments were familiar with the case, should have been given immediate attention, it was delayed until after the 'cut employment' regulation was posted.

Inasmuch as this application was made considerable prior to the posting of the reduction in employment arrangement, it is merely through the inefficiency and dilatory handling of this application that it was brought under this jurisdiction.⁵⁴

⁵³ Federal Art Project Report, November 19, 1936; New York City, 1936, Box 23, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD

⁵⁴ Federal Art Project Report, November 19, 1936; New York City, 1936, Box 23, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Mrs. Figero was given the job. As National Director, Cahill was involved at the ground floor. No case was too big or small. He clearly had a deep investment in the Project and a commitment to being fair and to help those who needed it. The directors had no other agenda than pursuing the goal of the Project, to help as many artists as possible. In a situation such as this it would have been easy to give up – or a convenient excuse to not have to try – but instead of taking either option, Cahill and all the other people in this organization ensured that Mrs. Figero would get the relief that she was promised. The leaders of the FAP showed that they were about doing what was right rather than easy.

Cahill, particularly, did everything he could. Even as the leader of the project he answered letters to those asking for help, coming up with as many strategies as possible. In a letter to a Mr. John J. Fowler who was looking for employment, Cahill wrote: “As you probably know, employment on the Federal Art Project has been stopped by Executive Order as of March 6. However, from time to time there are a number of positions which become open due to people resigning from the Project. These positions are very few, and there are a great many applicants for them.” Cahill then went on to encourage Mr. Fowler to apply, giving him direction on how to bend the rules just the right amount. Cahill challenged the forces that tried to limit his ability to help by giving people whatever information he could, whatever job he could, and whatever support he could. He found ways to offer small windows of opportunity, making any suggestion to help others.

The intentions of the FAP leaders are clear. They consistently responded with understanding, genuine care and concern, and worked tirelessly to help as many people as possible through their program. All of their programs and initiatives were done with the artist in mind, and in particular of those that were struggling. The success of their program, in their eyes, was not the flashiest, largest, or self-interested goal they could achieve, but rather that it helped the artists in the best way. Holger Cahill wrote concerning the New York World Fair, "The only problem to be settled here, and this we must discuss with various societies and art groups, is to make sure that we not competing with private enterprise or taking jobs away from artists who should be paid commercially for doing this work."⁵⁵ The World's Fair was going to be the greatest sign of success of the FAP, and one of the major publicity events to show off the program's abilities. However, as Cahill said, at the end of the day, it was about the small scale artist, and even in their showcase, which would certainly reflect well on them, the artist was still put first.

It was well known at the time that Cahill and his coworkers were constantly working under the gun, being told that their project would be eliminated or that funding would shrink or be dropped all together. However, Cahill never stopped pushing the envelope even when it seemed like the sky was falling at any moment. There was never a question of giving in, or letting their

⁵⁵ Holger Cahill [Memorandum to Mrs. Ellen S. Woodward], August 6, 1937; Folder NYC T.R.A.P. Worlds' Fair 1937, Box 35, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD

spirits fall. Cahill faced the future with optimism and particularly, drive. He said in a letter to New York City Director Audrey McMahon in 1936, only a year into the project, "I note what you say about 'the limited time that our project has to run.' None of us knows how long the project is to run, but I feel that we should guide our activities in the belief that the project will be renewed for another six months at least. Of course this is just my personal impression."⁵⁶ Cahill and the other leaders were personally dedicated to taking advantage of whatever time they given, and using it to continue doing everything they possibly could for art and artists.. This demonstration of confidence and willingness to work tirelessly for as long as possible was what gave the project the integrity that made it so unique. The project would not have been what it was without the leaders that it had.

Ms. McMahon, even more so than Cahill was "a fighter," as she calls herself. "I fought tooth and nail every inch of the way...I didn't know any other way of doing a very distasteful job than just go ahead and do it, you know. Of course, if you're going to be an administrator of a marvelous thing like this, you are going to take the bad with the good because you won't have the good unless you take the bad."⁵⁷ The leaders of the FAP worked for the people, rather than for the government. In fact, McMahon also said that in her position, "I very often didn't do what I was ordered to do. I didn't by any means always do what I was ordered to do. I counted on time, tide and normal forgetfulness to get my by with

⁵⁶ Holger Cahill [Letter to Audrey McMahon], February 12th, 1936; Folder NYC WPA 1936, Box 24, Entry 1023, National Archives, College Park, MD

⁵⁷ Phillips, Harlan. Interview with Audrey McMahon. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. November 18, 1964, 28.

a lot of omissions, and I would stall a lot on things I had to do.”⁵⁸ The leaders of the project were committed to getting their job done: they represented what was best for relief of artists and art itself, not any other government interest. They knew that their project has limitations, so they did everything they could to soak up as many resources and distribute them as best as they could without regard to the personal consequences they would face. McMahon knew her job of sharing relief work as much as possible would anger artists. She knew her program’s goals would be at odds with the federal government. She knew there was no way to please either party since they wanted different things. “I knew that what had a beginning would also have an end, and that the beginning would be wonderful and stimulating and marvelous and creative, and that at the end I would be the [scape]goat. I knew it, but all right, there would be all those other years and things one could do, so it was worth it.”⁵⁹ McMahon gave her whole effort to this program not for the sake of the government or even herself, but for the sake of art and its community. This shows the complete dedication of the leaders to nothing more than what was best for art and artists.

One of the other main criticisms held against the Federal Art project is that the art selected was not representative of “true art,” in that it lacked sophistication, skill, and creativity. However, to assume that those in charge

⁵⁸ Phillips, Harlan. Interview with Audrey McMahon. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. November 18, 1964, 27.

⁵⁹ Phillips, Harlan. Interview with Audrey McMahon. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. November 18, 1964, 28.

were either unconcerned with the quality of art produced or lacking the ability to properly evaluate the art to understand what was “good” art, would be wrong. In many ways, varying quality of art produced would be an understandable outcome of the project rather than a criticism, since in order to help all of those in need, there would be varying levels of skill and proficiency. However, to presume that those in charge were unqualified to evaluate or disinterested in the art itself is unfair. Thomas C. Parker wrote to Audrey McMahon during the discussion of a pamphlet campaign, “The articles, while they should contain information that would be valuable to the student, should also have a human appeal to the average layman. I admit that this is a rather difficult assignment, but at the same, I think it presents a very interesting problem for the Project to make a real contribution to knowledge and to art.”⁶⁰ The leaders of the FAP may have had to take some liberties with the complexity and quality of the materials they had to work with in order to reach all those they needed to, artists and consumers, but they were not willing to fully sacrifice quality or give up on the ultimate goal of the project, providing something new and valuable to the art community. Defending herself and her peers on this, McMahon says, “The market for the product was there too, and you know again today you see that there is a market for art when it's stimulated, because it's gone a full circle...This is not to say that everything we turned out was good, far from it, but a lot of good work

⁶⁰ Thomas C. Parker [letter to Audrey McMahon], May 21, 1937; Folder NYC Publicity 1937, Box 35, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD

was turned out too.”⁶¹ This shows that while the quality of art varied, some incredible things were produced, but also that in some ways, this point is moot: at the end of the day, variation in quality was part and parcel of achieving their larger goal. Their intention was to foster a real appreciation of art, and not to approach that lightly. These leaders were dedicated to finding the middle ground where they could reach all parts of American society without sacrificing quality and value in art.

Cahill publicly, and often, voiced his ideas to the American public, doing anything to convince them to engage with the arts, and also to show them – and in some ways prove to them – the truth of what he was trying to do. To get people involved with the arts, Cahill was a huge proponent of classes and training programs, trying to make art accessible to all, while also demonstrating his commitment to the program and the arts. They set up community art centers and established training programs that would appeal to both children and adults. The *New York Times* reported on the Federal Art Project and its progress, remarking that Cahill mentioned that, “no part of the Federal art program has greater bearing on the future of art in America than the teaching program, according to Mr. Cahill...more than 50,000 children and adults are being reached through the teaching force of the Federal Art Project.”⁶² In New York City alone, Cahill was able to reach a massive amount of people, and show to the world that art was accessible and beneficial to all. The article continues, “While the essential

⁶¹ Phillips, Harlan. Interview with Audrey McMahon. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*. November 18, 1964, 14.

⁶² “4,300 Artists Busy on WPA Projects.” 1936. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Feb 16, 1.

aim of the work here is to conserve the skill of artists who, without Federal aid, might lose deftness gained by years of study and work, Mr. Cahill believes that no less important is the acquisition for the public of a collection of art works valuable in itself and serving to stimulate wider appreciation and understanding of art.”⁶³

This goal of creating American art to influence all the American people is precisely where critics introduce the idea of the FAP as a tool for propaganda. However, propaganda implies a purposeful manipulation of the consumer, while the actions, thoughts, and desires of the leaders of the FAP were completely devoid of that. When they spoke of creating American art, of bettering the lives of the people through art, and of bringing the country together, this was truly for the benefit of the people, and not ever to advance the Federal government agenda. The Roosevelt Administration, as one would expect, had the similar goal of trying to do good for the American people, but it will be continually shown in the following chapters that the FAP was in many ways at odds with Congress and the Government. The agenda the FAP pursued was to better the lives of Americans through whichever way would best make that possible. They believed that this way was by celebrating American art, and using it to create a national consciousness. Cahill said to a Mr. P. Allston Trapier, “I agree with you that the American artists and the reproductions of the works of the American artists have had to take a back seat for European work...I think it is very necessary for all of us to work to bring American art to the attention of the public...I think we

⁶³ "4,300 Artists Busy on WPA Projects." 1936. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Feb 16, 1.

can all be very proud of what has been done in this country, and that we should all be interested in it and do everything we can to interest others.”⁶⁴ A unified national identity was at the forefront of the FAP’s goals for no other reason than that they believed that it was what the country needed and deserved. The leaders believed that the best thing for the people and for art was to create an American culture that surrounded, or at least included art. They saw art as a valuable part of American life. Cahill said in a statement,

I feel that an organization among teachers of fine art in the high schools of Greater New York, having as its purpose the furthering of interest among parents and pupils in fine and industrial arts, and to increase the love of the beautiful in the homes, schools and live of students, is a movement of great potential value. General participation of teachers in such a movement as this should be a vital factor in achieving a true democratization of culture and in giving those who will be the citizens of the future a sound conception of the meaning of the fine arts in a genuinely rounded culture.⁶⁵

Here we can see that they wanted to create culture and American nationality for the benefit of the people rather than as a mechanism for any manipulation.

In many ways, the leaders of the project hoped it would change American identity, and hoped it would influence people’s opinions and lives. However it was for the sake of art to flourish in society, and for the American people to accept something they truly believed would make their lives and the country better. In an excerpt from the *New York Times*, Holger Cahill showed that his interests were perhaps not to influence people’s opinions on politics, but rather

⁶⁴ Holger Cahill [letter to Mr. P. Allston Trapier], August 1, 1936; Folder New York City 1936, Box 23, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁶⁵ Holger Cahill, December 14, 1938; Folder NY State Travel Index 1938-40, Box 48, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

to show that bringing art into daily life was an incredible opportunity. He knew that it would change American identity, but not in a way that would manipulate them, knowing that it would strengthen the American people. Cahill said,

We have subordinated art to our desire to pile up personal possessions, to our interest in conspicuous display and conspicuous waste...We have subordinated art to our consuming passion for commercial success, to our materialistic will-to-power. We have subordinated art to our love of rivalry, our passion to outdo others in competitive activity and we have subjected it further to the whims of social snobbery, the erratic interests of dilettantism, to arbitrary judgments and irresponsible criticism. And in doing so we have helped to push art from its honorable place as a vital necessity of everyday life and have made it a luxury product intended for the casual enjoyment of jaded wealth. And wealth has practically stopped demanding the product since the great depression.⁶⁶

Cahill was taking on the problems with art, particularly the problems with the relationship between the art and the people, but thinking that it was the relationship that was fractured rather than the art or American people. He sees a “cultural erosion” and is trying to show the public why it’s so important to protect art, and therefore why one of his main goals is to educate, teach, and spread art as mentioned previously. Cahill believed “that there was widespread ignorance and apathy was ‘no fault of the mass of people who had no voice in the matter and whose interest in art was not even invited.’”⁶⁷ He saw the limits of public access to art as the link to the lack of appreciation of art. He believed that it wasn’t that Americans didn’t like, understand, or need art, but rather the American people and art were kept so separated that an appreciation could

⁶⁶ "Federal Aid Held Vital to Spur Art." 1937. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Dec 19, 50.

⁶⁷ McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 80.

never happen. Thus, if he were able to bring the two together, the American people would surely understand the value in American art.

In another *New York Times* article, author Ruth Harris Green quotes Cahill while also demonstrating how the purpose of the art produced by the project was intended. Green said, "To say that the Federal Art Project is coming to fill an artistic place similar to that once filled by the church would probably be not quite historic. But as Mr. Cahill says, the project is "creating that sounds relationship with a wide public which as been shown to be essential to a living art."⁶⁸ FAP art was clearly becoming essential to American identity, particularly in Harris's poignant comparison to the role of the church in society. She credits this to the FAP, showing that this is how the leaders of the project wanted the art produced under them to affect people and change identity. This attempt was not to replace anything about American identity, or abuse the art as a tool to change American identity, but allow it to flourish in American society because of the good it could do.

The leaders of the Federal Art Project faced incredible obstacles from the start to finish of the program. It's their responses to their struggles with the Federal Government and public opinion that it can be seen their true motives

⁶⁸ Ruth Green Harris. "Art, Life and the WPA Federal Art Project." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jan 24, 1937. 157.

and intentions, which was to help all artists in need and create a better form of American art.

Chapter 2: Perceptions of the American Public

What did artists think?

Artists were, for the most part, pleased with the FAP, mostly because they were thankful for the opportunity it provided them. Many of those employed under the relief program walked away with a grateful and positive review of their time spent with the project, to varying degrees. Not only did they approach what the project could do for them, they also saw the good the FAP could do for art and for the American people. However, the opinions on their own experiences were varied.

A supervisor of the Graphic Arts Division in New York City, Gustave Von Groschwitz, remembered years later that when working for the project “there was a wonderful camaraderie among the Project artists that was shared by the staff. All of us wanted the Project to succeed; we wanted to please the public and win approval of Congress. The way to do that was to work hard and do your best.”⁶⁹ Von Groschwitz was content with his experience, and was incredibly grateful for the opportunity. Notably, he felt supported by the Project, and knew that they were on his side, and was happy to be a part of an organization that aimed to do so much good. The artists who went through the project were committed to doing their best out of thanks to what the Project was able to do

⁶⁹ Greengard, Stephen Neil, Ellen Sragow, Gustave Von Groschwitz, Jerry Roth, Riva Helfond, Harold Lehman, Minna Citron, and Harry Gottlieb. "Ten Crucial Years: The Development of United States Government Sponsored Artists Programs 1933-1943 A Panel Discussion by Six WPA Artists." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 1 (1986): 42.

for them. Artist Riva Helfond recalled that the artists in the program never asked for specific jobs, or complained about what was given to them. They always took whatever was available, realizing that the program itself was a great and rare opportunity.⁷⁰ As a Lithographer working out of the Harlem Art Center, she was thankful just to be allowed to work for the FAP.

Artists also had a mostly positive view of what the project was doing in a large scale. As thankful as they were for what it did for them personally, they also saw the value of the project to the rest of the country and American culture. One mural artist, Harold Lehman, said, "The basic thing about mural painting is that it's a message that the artist is giving to the public and, in turn, the message must be received by the public. This kind of give-and-take is an extremely important and valuable one, to both the social and artistic life of this country."⁷¹ They saw the good that the project could do and what they could do as part of the project. As artists, they understood the value of art in society and saw that the Project has the unique ability to get American art to reach national attention.

Artists, however, were not blind to the shortcomings of the FAP. As complimentary as Von Groschwitz was in what the project could do for him, he also admitted to the fact that while it did great things for artists and for American culture, it had its shortcomings. He said, "remember that the WPA was a relief project. Economic need came first and artists were given job. Some were

⁷⁰ Greengard, et al. "Ten Crucial Years," 48.

⁷¹ Greengard, et al. "Ten Crucial Years," 51.

established and well-known, others were young and inexperienced. Inevitable there were variations in quality.”⁷²

Other artists were not as happy with the Project. While they recognized its good intentions, they personally couldn’t find their place. Jerry Roth said, “There was a stigma attached to it [the WPA], at least in my mind. I was getting wealthier and felt it amounted to charity. I didn’t want this.”⁷³ Roth, who worked on the poster projects, was certainly not the only one who felt like this. Audrey McMahon, New York Regional Director, acknowledged that artists felt disgruntled with their pay: “We had our difficulties with the best-known people who felt that whatever this wage was, you see, it was so petty compared to what they felt that their product was worth, and the standards which we set for production were fairly high, and they were not inclined to give us this much.”⁷⁴

Fred Becker, a young artist at the height of the Depression remembers the obstacles he faced even when he was fortunate enough to obtain relief work from the FAP. He recalls inspectors coming to check if he was doing his work at irregular times and giving no second chances, meaning if he was out doing a legitimate errand, he returned to a threatening reprimand on his door for failing to do the work he was required to do.⁷⁵ Becker says,

The minor annoyances began to increase, along with pressures to make our work more pleasing to the public...Upon looking at my prints it might be possible to say that they don’t look very

⁷² Greengard, et al. "Ten Crucial Years," 43.

⁷³ Greengard, et al. "Ten Crucial Years," 45.

⁷⁴ Phillips, Harlan. Interview with Audrey McMahon. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. November 18, 1964, 21.

⁷⁵ Fred Becker, "The WPA Federal Art Project, New York City: A Reminiscence." *The Massachusetts Review* 39, no. 1 (1998): 79.

'WPA.' There are no striking workers, no miners' widows, no apple peddlers. I was simply doing my thing: the things that interested me the most. I was certainly not unaware of the world events. They affected me in the same way they affected others, but I was unable to express them in my work.⁷⁶

Becker's reminiscences highlight an important aspect in the idea of "art as propaganda": the federal government – and American public – were so unsettled by "radical" ideas and art that artists were forced to produce art that was devoid of any of their real inspiration, not only to enforce uplifting themes required by the FAP, but also because much of what the artists thought and desired to express would have been considered radical and therefore undesirable to both their employers and customers (the government and people).

When Becker was let go from the program, it appears they parted ways without hard feelings. He says, "The Project was over for me. It had provided me not only with sustenance but and education. The name of the game was largely Survival, but it accomplished a great deal more than that."⁷⁷ Becker represents the life of many artists, and the majority of Americans, during the Depression. He was destitute and struggling, and received help from the sometimes bumbling but well-meaning efforts of the New Deal Programs and the WPA. Becker offers an interesting insight into the Federal Art Project that many shared: a frustration with the many obstacles of the program but an overall positive, though not necessarily grateful retelling of his experiences. What Becker does not express, however, is something that can be found in many other experiences of other artists: desperation.

⁷⁶ Becker. "The WPA Federal Art Project, New York City," 79-80.

⁷⁷ Becker. "The WPA Federal Art Project, New York City," 80.

Manuel Tolegian, who had a thorough background in the arts before joining the project, and went on to have an acclaimed career in the arts for many decades after, had nothing but great things to say about the FAP. He too, acknowledged that the relief wages were a large focus of the program, but rather than feeling either slighted by the amount or embarrassed by the charity, he noted that many artists appreciated the funds. "Even though it was \$18, \$20 a week it was something, that was a lot of money in those days, and gave the artists a little dignity, see, made them feel that somebody appreciated their work."⁷⁸ He went on to say that there were no flaws in the project, saying "it's all pro. I think it's the most wonderful thing this government did and the time it did it, of course...First of all it got all the painters together....they got together and they talked about their problems."⁷⁹ The FAP created an artist identity and group consciousness that benefitted the community greatly in its time of need. The FAP strengthened and supported the art community in more ways than just relief in wages. It bolstered it from the inside out to create a solid foundation so the work the FAP did could last longer than the decade it existed. The artists felt this strength and support and in turn supported the project.

What did the American Public Think?

The general American public also looked quite favorably upon the Federal Art Project. They saw the benefits of the program, and were able to see what

⁷⁸ Hoag, Betty. Interview with Manuel J. Tolegian. *Archives of American Art*. February, 12, 1965.

⁷⁹ Hoag, Betty. Interview with Manuel J. Tolegian. *Archives of American Art*. February, 12, 1965.

Holger Cahill had been working so hard to achieve: introduce art into American culture and make it accessible to all.

One of the projects that the FAP took on involved funding and organizing opportunities for educational art centers. This was a key part of preserving current and future artistic skill in the country. One center praised the Federal Art Project for all it had done for their community. Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser wrote to in to the New York office to offer his thanks to NYC director Audrey McMahon. He said, "At a membership meeting of the Forest Hills Jewish Center the work of our children in the art class supervised by W.P.A. artists was exhibited. The men and women present felt enthusiastic about the results shown, and unanimously voted to write to you thanking the Federal Art Project for the use of the services of these artists. We feel that the project has made a definite contribution to the cultural life of our community."⁸⁰ Communities big and small were benefitting from the program, and they could see that. Public reception of the Federal Art Project as an organization was positive.

The general public was also very happy with the Program and what it produced. Even those not involved in art in any way or who had any background in art expressed their gratitude. In response to budget cuts of the program in 1936, one citizen wrote a letter directly to the President of the United States, President Roosevelt: "For the first time in my career as a voter I am moved to write a letter...I'm a grocery clerk, employed by a chain-store outfit. But whether I sell or buy bread, I firmly believe that we do not live by bread alone. When I go

⁸⁰ Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser [Letter to Audrey McMahon], March 31, 1936. Folder NY State 1937. Box 37, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

to the gallery on 57th Street, and look at the prints of the Graphic Arts Show, I know that for the first time in the history of American cultural development, art has found a proper patron.”⁸¹ Even those who had no personal stake in the arts felt their lives being enriched by the program and were moved to express their opinions of the program. The FAP generally received support from the American public.

However, there were others who did not look so favorably upon the FAP. Anthony de Francisi, challenged the FAP in a letter to the editor printed in the *New York Times*, titled, “Art’s Dove of Hope Departs: Federal Project to Aid Artists Found to Have Had Strange Results.” In this letter, de Francisi spoke about how the program’s apparent commitment to recognizing and bolstering art was a welcome sight for artists and the rest of the art community, and they flocked to the opportunity. They were excited about what this would mean for them, in terms of immediate relief, and later on a broader scale. However, Mr. de Francisi believed that “The administrative powers that be chose to categorize the artists at a more or less uniform rating and with a mere weekly pittance for compensation back to the studios they went to give the usufruct of a talent inherent, of years of assiduous application and arduous training.”⁸² Mr. de Francisi represents what some saw as a large problem with the federal art project, mentioned before as one of the major criticisms of the project. The leaders of the project didn’t understand, or at least weren’t working to preserve,

⁸¹ Harry Kronenberg [Letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt], undated. Folder NYC Personnel, Box 50, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

⁸² Anthony de Francisi. 1934. “Art’s Dove of Hope Departs.” *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Nov 07, 20.

the best that the art community had to offer. They didn't know about quality art and were limiting the artists they employed, and accepting others that weren't of high enough talent. The project wasn't really about creating quality art, but about creating uniformity, a generic form of art, which goes strikingly against what is the very nature of art. Creative expression, freedom, and individualism is the essence of art, and many thought that the very nature of the FAP completely missed that mark and therefore wasn't a valuable program. Mr. de Francisi continued, "The acceptance of the humiliating terms under which they worked has created a boomerang which is worse to them than poverty. The dignity of the artist and his deserved compensation has been rendered frightfully vulnerable."⁸³ Clearly, Mr. de Francisi didn't just see the program as missing the mark; he saw the FAP as doing direct damage to the art community. This may be a more critical opinion than typical, but it is one that encapsulates most of the heaviest criticisms held against the program.

Publicity was one of the most important tools the FAP had to reach the American public, and they were rather good at using it. Having the backing of the U.S. President and working so closely with federal buildings meant a constant public audience. Manuel Tolegian remembers, "President Roosevelt wanted to show the value of this type of work and he selected thirty paintings for the White House, for the government buildings...he fortunately took one of mine...and this was a big boost you see to the program. You'd be amazed at the publicity this

⁸³ Anthony de Francisi. "Art's Dove of Hope Departs."

thing got.”⁸⁴ While this doesn’t speak as directly to how the American public felt about the art, the program was very active in making the art readily accessible to the public and the media and public in turn was very interested and willing to engage, showing they were not unaffected or disinterested in what the FAP had to offer.

What did critics think?

One of the hardest groups for the FAP to please was the art world. Artists, critics, and journalists had an influencing opinion and the FAP had a lot to prove. Since one of the largest criticisms against the FAP was that they weren’t producing quality art, the FAP had a very large obstacle to face.

Early on, the FAP already began to win over other artists. Holger Cahill wrote, “One of the leading artists in North Carolina was quoted in the Raleigh News and Observer the other day as saying: ‘Every person interested in art should see this exhibit. Seldom will an exhibit of this kind be shown here, since there are so few collections of folk art in the country.’ The attendance at the exhibition has been excellent, and everybody has shown the greatest interest.”⁸⁵ The art the Project was producing and the collections and exhibitions they were putting together were clearly quite successful in drawing people in and were delivering on their promise of quality, American art.

⁸⁴ Hoag, Betty. Interview with Manuel J. Tolegian. *Archives of American Art*. February, 12, 1965.

⁸⁵ Holger Cahill [Letter to Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr.], December 3rd, 1936. Folder New York City 1936, Box 23, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Even abroad, the Federal Art Project was making waves. An exhibit arranged in Paris went over extremely well. One of the hardest to impress art cultures in the world was thrilled by an exhibition of American art, and of art that came through the Project. A letter written to Cahill expressed, "This exhibition of work by American artists has been very well received in Paris and has aroused considerable interest here."⁸⁶ They encouraged the leaders of the Project in the United States to bring the collection back to the U.S. and have the same exhibit there as well. It had been so well received by the French, that they believed it would be a strong hit with the American public as well.

The FAP was well received by the art community for the most part. Many were supportive of the Project and its goals, but viewed the quality of art produced as mixed. However, it seemed as though they understood that this was the reality of the program, and still reviewed the program as an institution, as successful and beneficial to the country. One expert in *the New York Times* reviewed an exhibit put on by the FAP, saying "an onlooker may hazard the opinion that in a general way the show just opened seems ahead of any previous WPA group offering he has seen since this gallery began its career. True, the work is by no means consistently of a high order. But the average is very good. And along with quite a bit that proves sound or reasonably so in craftsmanship, rather than inspired in sentiment and execution, one finds the occasional print of

⁸⁶ Thomas Dabney Mabry Jr [Letter to Holger Cahill], June 30, 1938. Folder NY City Murals 1938-40, Box 48, Entry 1023, National Archives, College Park, MD.

outstanding quality.”⁸⁷ This review acknowledges the ability of the FAP to produce quality art, even if it was inconsistent, and seems to be pleasantly surprised by the efforts of the FAP. This review also shows that the FAP was improving, and that it was becoming better received by the rest of the public.

Other reviews got more at the heart of the general opinion of the project itself. In one review, author Edward Alden Jewell calls the FAP a “great social experiment.” He says that the FAP was:

A program that, in so brief a time, has served to revolutionize the whole attitude toward art in this country. One would seem to be in little danger of overestimating either the good that has already come of it or the potential good that promises to stand more and more securely reveals as the government’s task continues. Much depressingly worthless or mediocre art, it is true, has been and no doubt will go on being produced....That cannot be denied, but neither is that the point...For the true significance of this effort lies in the general stimulus that has resulted: in the quickened appreciation on the part of millions of people whose lives art has before not touched, or to whom art has meant singularly little in the social sense of the term culture.⁸⁸

The hardest community to win over was the art world, and the FAP in many ways was successful in that. While they were wary of the quality of art produced, they were able to see the vision that Holger Cahill had: one that reintroduced art to American society, that made it accessible to all, and help struggling artists. He clearly succeeded in winning over the people of America, and their interest and patronage only added to the financial help given to artists.

⁸⁷ Edward Allen Jewel. 1936. "Federal Project Opens Art Exhibit." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, May 01, 17.

⁸⁸ Edward Allen Jewel. 1936. "Extending Our Horizons." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Sep 20, 1.

Chapter 3: Legacy in Schenectady

The End of The Project

The Federal Art Project came to its demise in 1943 after an eight-year run. What happened?

By this point, it has been made clear that the FAP had been under fire since its inception. While they were able to prove a lot of critics wrong, at the end of the day, doing everything right could only dull the harshest complaints; there was no way they could ever do enough to permanently change the tide of public opinion to full support of the project. In essence, the FAP was able to prove a lot of people wrong and gather a lukewarm but positive review from the country at large. However, once the severity of the Great Depression had eased and many New Deal programs were coming to a close, at the start of World War II, there were extremely few, if any, individuals who wanted to see the program become permanent. Time and time again, the American people had the same thing to say: the FAP did some good things while it had its run, but few believed that art was something that should be supported with federal funds for the long run. In 1938, the *New York Times* published an article about the debate on whether or not to have the art relief continue post-New Deal. The spokesperson for the side against the continuation said that, 'This is not a question of what the present Administration is doing for relief...In fact, it is a pleasure that the present Administration is recognizing that an artist must eat as well as a

bricklayer. But I do not believe that temporary aid for a temporary condition should be made permanent.”⁸⁹ This is an example of the prevailing opinion among the American public. They thought the project was a good resource during the Depression, but now that it was over, their relationship with art had not been so drastically changed as to support government subsidies for it in the future.

Internally, the FAP also found few allies. According to Richard McKinzie, “Besides failure to influence artists and the general public in behalf of continued patronage, the art units failed to win champions in the government. Art agencies irritated some civil servants because somehow they kept requiring exceptions to traditional procedures and controls.”⁹⁰ It has certainly been made clear by this point that the art programs never saw eye-to-eye with other elements of the federal government, and at the end of the day, it would contribute to their downfall. Regardless, despite the hard work they had put in, and their relative success in changing the relationship with the American people and the arts, the FAP’s time had run out.

The writing was on the wall for the Federal Art Project as their sibling art programs began to fall. In the summer of 1938, the attacks on the arts programs for being agents of Communist propaganda finally hit their mark. A congressional hearing was held, and the Federal Theater Project was ended, and

⁸⁹ "Federal Subsidy Held Curb to Art." 1938. *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, May 05, 26.

⁹⁰ Richard D. McKinzie. *The New Deal for Artists*. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973], 185.

serious constraints placed on the entire WPA.⁹¹ The FAP managed to escape termination, but 1938 marked the beginning of the end. The last few years of the FAP were spent on a downward spiral. The mood from the Congressional hearing carried over into the final years of the project. The trajectory of the project was lost. Movements to extend the reach of the FAP even further were rejected, only bringing more negative energy – and publicity – to the program.⁹² Questions about the project that appeared during its early stages were coming back to haunt them: mainly, people were concerned that the quality of art in this program could not justify making it permanent. For a time, one of the most promising strategies for keeping the program alive was restructuring and relabeling it as a different arts program. However, these concerns that federally produced art would always be greatly inferior to that of “real” artists, carried over and shut down this idea as well.⁹³ The Fine Arts Federation, which represented much of the art “elite” opinion, said that any program like this one would lower the overall quality of art, in the sense that it would be an over-saturation of mediocre, uninspired art. They released a statement saying that they were afraid of:

Regimentation of the profession under the probable dominance of groups which may be responsive to political control. This we feel would menace if not destroy the creative freedom of our professional artists, endanger their rights of free competition, individual liberty of action and self-initiative,

⁹¹ Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 163.

⁹² Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 151.

⁹³ Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 152.

and it would tend inevitably to impair the future achievements of art in America.⁹⁴

The FAP was falling out of favor and their brand of accessibility to art was getting tired. Truly no one was on their side.

The next few years into the 1940s were a constant battle against claims of communism and radicalism within the program. These years saw the ropes of outside control tightening, real anger at the FAP growing, while funds were diminishing. The future looked bleak. With the arrival of World War II, the need for the arts was minimal. The audience for art had disappeared, as had its value to society. There was little the FAP could do to aid the war. The program had managed to cling on until this point but its purpose had been entirely rewritten. “Creative art gave way almost entirely to the practical arts and production of training aids.”⁹⁵ Therefore, in 1943 when President Roosevelt ordered the shut down of the entire Works Progress Administration, and all the programs under it, which would include the FAP, there was nothing of the old project left to save. While the Federal Art Project had managed to remain as long as possible, the true program had died a few years before, arguably as early as 1938.

What we are now left with is up for interpretation. What happened to the artists and art work that came out of the blustering FAP during the 1930s? What did they mean then, and what do they mean to us now?

⁹⁴ “The Coffee-Pepper Bills,” *Art Digest* (March 15, 1938), 33.

⁹⁵ Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 169.

Federal Art Comes to Schenectady

On September first, 1937, Thomas Parker sent Audrey McMahon a list of institutions that had just received artwork on loan from the FAP. Among the various schools and libraries, “Schenectady Tuberculosis High School” was listed.⁹⁶ A large collection of FAP paintings, around 55 in number, was transported from New York City to a small city upstate, Schenectady, New York. These paintings were “run-of-the-mill” FAP artwork, but many still impressive. They included scenes of beautiful landscapes and flowers, still-life portraits with bright, easy-going colors that are undeniably pleasant. They certainly would have brightened up the walls of a Tuberculosis sanatorium.

Sending art to hospitals was not uncommon for the FAP. Any government or state institution that wanted to loan art from the Project was welcome to it, just as Holger Cahill had ensured it. However, there was no real method for getting the artwork back. Once the FAP was shut down, there was no one to account for the paintings that had been loaned out and no one that needed them back, so the paintings often became the permanent property of the institution that had them. The Schenectady Tuberculosis hospital was no different.

Eventually, the hospital was shut down. It became the Glenridge Hospital and Diagnostic Center, which too fell out of use some years later. The paintings seemingly belonged to no one. A large number went missing – it’s unknown just how many – for some were just taken off the walls by those passing by for their own use. They were moved around, separated, and, in the end, forgotten about.

⁹⁶ Thomas C. Parker [Letter to Audrey McMahon] September 1, 1937. NYC Loans Allocations 1937. Box 36, Entry 1023, RG 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

It wasn't until the 1980s that a renewed interest flared. By this point, these innocuous, "run-of-the-mill" paintings were historical relics. They were vestiges of a fascinating and unique part of history.

Doug O'Malley, a leader within the Schenectady community, decided to reach out to local museums, historical societies, and community leaders to track down these paintings. He received considerable interest in response. By 1981, he had amassed a collection of 29 of the original 55 paintings, and found a willing recipient to house them. The Schenectady Museum agreed to display the paintings as a collection along with their stories. However, this could only be a temporary arrangement.⁹⁷ There were no institutions that had the resources to care for and restore such a collection. In April of 1983, the museum recognized that it was time to let the paintings go. They recommended they be returned to the Federal Government, and took action to secure that they would be returned to the National Museum of American Art.⁹⁸ However, O'Malley wasn't finished yet. He implored the museum to find some other arrangement in the capital district, or work together to find another option.⁹⁹

What happened next? At some point along the timeline, Schenectady County Public Library became the only option. They were certainly able to provide the most basic resources that the other local institutions could not, namely safety and security. The paintings needed go somewhere, so the largest

⁹⁷ "Artworks from the Former Glenridge Hospital Housed at Schenectady County Public Library," January 31, 1983. Schenectady County Public Library, Director's Office.

⁹⁸ Ronald L. Lagasse [Letter to Mr. C. Douglas O'Malley] April 27 1983. Schenectady County Public Library, Director's Office

⁹⁹ Doug O'Malley [Letter to Ronald L. Lagasse] May 3, 1983. Schenectady County Public Library, Director's Office.

local government institutions became the best place to take them in. What the library didn't have was the resources to maintain or restore this collection. They ended up in the library director's offices and storeroom. Many decades later, the paintings once again were unearthed in the library basement. Some had disappeared. The ones that remained had experienced a certain amount of neglect. They were transported to Union College for inspection and study. The same problems and the same questions are still present. The funding needs for restoration and upkeep, the room for storage, the question of ownership. To what do we owe these paintings? For what even is their story?

The Paintings

The paintings from the Schenectady Hospital are an exceptional example of the artwork that came out of the Federal Art Project. They are all of the same medium, but they are stylistically nuanced. A beautiful collection, they certainly stand as evidence that great and quality work could be, and was, produced under the project. The following section will review a selection of this Collection. Many of the paintings follow the themes discussed earlier in this investigation. We can see images of the American working class, and farming and working life, glorified and romanticized in its beautiful presentation. We can see images of nature and the world. There are also many examples of still-life paintings of typical subjects, such as baskets of fruit.

Through these paintings, we can get a better understanding of what the project was really about. The essence of the FAP was that it was working with a

unique and extraordinary topic. The goals of the project, what it was able to produce, what it mean to the artists, and public, can only be truly felt when looking at it through the lens of the artwork itself. There is a story captured in them that brings a heightened meaning and the true scope and breadth of the power of the project and what it was trying to achieve can only be fully realized in the presence of the art itself. By analyzing the following paintings, we can see how the FAP worked and what kind of message it was able to get across.

“Full Sail” by William Carlomego of New York. Oil Painting.



This stunning painting from the collection is certainly eye-catching at first glance. Its warm colors feeding into a gray perimeter give off an inviting and welcoming scene mixed with mystery. The welcoming portal breaking through the gray in the sky gives off a forlorn, but true sense of possibility and hopefulness that comes with the break of the day. One can clearly understand the parallels between this and the Great Depression, as the clouds pass and open up to reveal the light of the new day, carrying with it a sense of wonderment in what lies in the future. Acknowledging the struggles of present-day American life but hoping to invoke curiosity and hopefulness for the future was one of the Federal Government's main goals with FAP art. At the end of the day, FAP art was meant to be uplifting, particularly in such a way as to give the American people hope that the Depression would end and things would get better. Boosting morale was one of the most important guidelines FAP artists had to follow.

There are other symbols and aspects of this piece that evoke a similar feeling. The focus of the piece is a large voyaging ship. This is surely meant to evoke a sense of exploration into the unknown. A humble man in a small boat rowing out to the ship is visible in the bottom right corner. This adds a face to this over-arching, somewhat intangible, sense of voyaging out into the great unknown. The man, being depicted as he is, small, overcast, and gray – humble is truly the word – can relate to the working class man that those Americans struggling the most could see in themselves, making this artwork more accessible and more relatable to the average American.

The style of this painting can be described as classic and traditional. Oil on canvas, even brush strokes, realistic depictions, and beautiful colors show a very classic style of painting that is accomplished to say least. That being said, not all artists had to follow this style. There was fluidity in expression; style, color, shape, and realism could be played with according to the artist's own style. We can see this in the next painting shown.

"Landscape and Figures" by James Samuels, New York City. Oil painting.



This painting is certainly different from the first example seen above. The first noticeable difference is in style and color. The shapes, lines, and contrast this artist uses denotes a very particular and more unique style.

It is worth noting here that with artwork like this, it's easy to see how arguments about quality could come into play surrounding the project and the artwork made under its name. As an appreciator of fine art, but not a trained critic, I could choose to notice a difference in skill level, believing this one to be slightly less refined. However, to someone who knows more about the making and critiquing of art, they may see this as a simple stylistic difference. In the same vein, two paintings that I see as of equal quality could be to a more trained eye, very different.

However, for the sake of this investigation, I will focus on the content of the paintings and what they can tell us about the federal art project. However, difference in quality is a very important aspect of the program.

The content of this painting is quite telling. The focus is clearly on positive nature scenes, family, and evoking a general sense of freedom, warmth, and happiness. It draws on something that many could identify with: the beauty of nature, represented in the mountains, lake, and green grass. The artist's decision to paint the figures in bright colors and partaking in what appears to be dancing was clearly an active choice to promote happiness and light-heartedness. Whether these themes were designed to speak to the American public during the Great Depression or simply an artistic expression of how the artists felt or what they wanted to show, the effect is one of general pleasure and contentment when viewing this painting.

This style is certainly more atypical and unique. The lines are less rigid and the creativity is more apparent and there is more personality shining

through in this more individual style. Artwork such as this is evidence that artistic expression and creativity was possible through the project and shows that the project was able to value different styles and methods, therefore capturing more of the artistic spirit than some critics may have thought.

Also of note with this painting is the information listed on the back. In marker, somebody had written the author's name, the title of the painting, and also an address in New York City. "311 West 4th St," it reads. This could be the address of the artist, the place the painting was done, or even a location where it was once housed. It appears to be, now in 2018, an apartment building in lower Manhattan in the West Village. It is information like this, although un-verifiable, that gives these paintings a life and a story and what makes them so important today.

"Service Station" by Manuel Tolegian



This painting by Manuel Tolegian is “typical” FAP art in a way that has yet to be mentioned. It captures the theme of Western United States and glorifies the lower class, farming life that many struggling Americans would be inspired to see depicted beautifully in a painting for the world to see. This painting focuses on the simplicity of life and therefore the beauty of it. You can clearly see the small service station mentioned in the title. A small and humble building, it is a stop on the road towards a small town nestled in the mountains in the distance. It gives this small-town, disconnected kind of life both charm and dignity. There’s also the subtler, second layer meaning; the connection to Western expansion and the idea of unexplored territory and untapped opportunity is something that would speak to a lot of people at this time.

The painting itself is very attractive, using warm colors, blue skies, and the appeals of nature, the open road, and peacefulness to reach the audience. As previously mentioned, one of the guidelines FAP artists most strictly had to follow was glorifying working class America. This painting certainly achieves that, but it also has another significance. It appeals to another important section of the American public which would have been one of the hardest parts of the population to reach and hardest to influence through art. However, it was also one of the most struggling populations: rural America. Including them as an audience and a subject in a what was a very northeastern and urban centric program was necessary for the success of the project in its short and long term goals of reaching all parts of the American public, and adding a cultural component to a American art.

Farming, on the other hand, was a very popular topic among FAP artists. It was in fact a staple of FAP art symbolism and one of the clearest representations of the goals of Federal art. While this piece just brushes the surface on this topic, the next painting dives into it head on.

Manuel Tolegian became a successful painter after the Federal Art Project. At the age of 18, he moved to New York to study painting. He was good friends with Jackson Pollock, and came to New York City with him. His style of art was something that would've been very attractive to the FAP. He said, "Instead of expressing myself I like to express what the people feel, what they aspire to. For they're all Americans, you know. So I get away from the so-called decorative arts and I get into the subject. I think it's more important."¹⁰⁰

Tolegian was on the easel project; he seems to have spent a short time with the program, saying he did it to help a friend and gain experience.¹⁰¹ For some, the FAP was a stopping point along the way. It clearly was a good and legitimate opportunity for artists and had value in the artistic world, but for some, like Tolegian, it didn't define their experience as an artist.

¹⁰⁰ Hoag, Betty. Interview with Manuel J. Tolegian. *Archives of American Art*. February, 12, 1965.
¹⁰¹ Hoag, Betty. Interview with Manuel J. Tolegian. *Archives of American Art*. February, 12, 1965.

“Morning in the Country” by Warren Wheelock



This painting is a personal favorite within the collection. Its use of color and contrast is bright and pleasant, drawing the viewers in. Its connection to FAP art themes is very clear. It blatantly does what the program was intending to do, which was glorify the farmer and working-class America. The man and woman hard at work seem strong and proud. The sun is shining, the grass is green, the animals are plentiful and healthy. It's the picture of a successful and happy farming couple. When portrayed in this light, farming looks like a strong profession, one to be respected and proud of, one that is lucrative and rewarding. The colors the artist uses paints a very bright scene. The viewer is left with the impression of warmth and happiness. The vivid colors of the leaves and the grass, even the particular shades of brown of the chickens and the cows, and particularly the woman's bright red skirt and the man's clear blue overalls

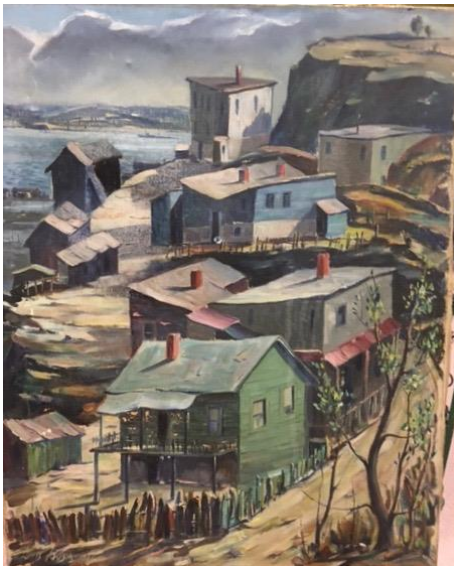
give a lightness to this painting that carries over to create a lightness in the theme.

One of the professions that struggled the most during the depression was the farming community. The prices of their crops were forced so low that they barely turned a profit, if they even managed to turn a profit. Fewer and fewer people were buying what farmers were selling since times were so hard. The government even paid farmers not to grow crops because there was such a surplus and no one was buying. It would surely be a great benefit for a community struggling as much as this one was to see a painting such as this.

However, at this point a question arises that must be asked with these kinds of themes: where are they done to conform to FAP guidelines or was it the topic of choice for this artist? So often in artists' memoirs they are so grateful for the work they were offered, that they rarely address the idea of the propaganda, at least never in such plain words as "propaganda." We may never know the full answer to the question. I personally see a great deal of talent, style, and individualism in this painting and so I must believe that to a degree the artist had a great amount of choice in this painting. However, it also makes the point that even if artists were hampered by guidelines on what they could depict in their artwork, I believe this painting stands as an example that any guidelines that did exist did not hamper the ability to produce something of quality and individualism.

Warren Wheelock was also able to find some success after his time with the FAP. He continued to produce art throughout his life, and these pieces were highly regarded. Through the project, Wheelock was able to establish himself in the art world so much that his time with the FAP is one of many of his accomplishments and not the most defining period of his artistic life. He painted frequently, but his preferred style was sculpting. He was better known as a sculptor, and, in the words of a short biography with AskART, he was “well-enough known and respected to be referenced in articles in *Life Magazine*, *Time Magazine*, and the *New York Times*.”¹⁰² The FAP allowed Wheelock to become an established member of the art community outside of the program.

“Shady Side Of Palisades” by Louis Bosa, New York



¹⁰² Ask ART, “Warren Wheelock.” AskART.
(http://www.askart.com/artist_bio/Warren_Frank_Wheelock/62582/Warren_Frank_Wheelock.aspx#)

One of the major questions that arises with this analysis is: if the paintings were not, in fact, government propaganda, then why did they have the guidelines they did? One possible conclusion to draw is that it's because the program and the artists were trying to speak to a certain audience: the average American, the working class citizen. They had to create art that would draw this population in and that they could identify with. The best way to reverse the idea that art was only European and only accessible to the rich and snobby was to create art that was the opposite; themes that were humble, focused on farming and American past times was the best way to do that.

Another explanation is that the depression was devastating to the American economy and job market, and this was felt by the majority of the American people. Artists, in particular, found themselves struggling. It would be natural for artists to draw on their own surroundings and lives and use their art as a way to express those feelings. This could be why so many of the paintings represented life during the depression, or clinging to hope of a brighter future.

This painting is a clear example of this. It more openly reflects on the current situation of the Great Depression. Rather than speaking of hope for the future, or glorifying the worker, it instead honestly shows what life looked like. This would be a theme that many of the Americans that the FAP was trying to reach would be able to connect to.

Louis Bosa was able to rise out of the FAP and find success in the art world. He is now widely considered to be a distinguished painter. His early life

sheds an interesting light into the artists accepted by the FAP. Bosa was from Italy, and emigrated to the United States at age 18.¹⁰³ The FAP opened its doors to artists of all backgrounds and nationalities. Bosa was known for painting images of his home country of Italy, particularly street scenes, exactly like the one in the Schenectady collection. Bosa's true style, however, was also his most applauded: he was fascinated by the human condition, and was known to study human activity and people in detail to capture their true essence and then portray those traits in a hyper-realistic way, almost like caricatures. Through this style, he was highly regarded for his ability to capture the intricacies of both human emotion and everyday life, particularly as they coexisted.¹⁰⁴ This style would have been particularly well suited for the goals of FAP painting.

After his time with the FAP, Bosa went on to do a number of impressive things in the art world. He taught at the Cleveland institute of Art, the New York Art Students League, the Parsons School of Design, and other universities. His paintings are included in some of the country's most well-known and prestigious studios and museums.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Wolf's Gallery, "Louis Bosa: American, 1905-1981." Wolfs Fine Paintings and Sculpture. (<http://wolfsgallery.com/artists/louis-bosa>)

¹⁰⁴ Wolf's Gallery, "Louis Bosa: American, 1905-1981." Wolfs Fine Paintings and Sculpture. (<http://wolfsgallery.com/artists/louis-bosa>)

¹⁰⁵ Wolf's Gallery, "Louis Bosa: American, 1905-1981." Wolfs Fine Paintings and Sculpture. (<http://wolfsgallery.com/artists/louis-bosa>)

“Still Life, Decorative” by Ben Delman



This painting is an example of another kind of art seen in the FAP collections. Still life paintings were common. Themes were allowed to vary from farm life and the American worker, but still rarely made a bold statement.

Ben Delman, whose full name appears to be Elias Ben Delman, was active in New York. Many of his paintings are available for sale now, but within the terms of the Federal Art Project. His artwork is an interesting and valuable relic of the program, but he didn't seem to make enough of a name for himself as an individual artist after the program.

Conclusion

What we have seen here is a small number of paintings, selected from the partial recovery collection, of a larger collection, of very small slice of what FAP art truly was. They offer the smallest window into what this project was truly about, but an important perspective that couldn't be achieved and other way. Putting the project in the context of these paintings gives it the personality that is so necessary to understanding but the program was really about.

We have a living legacy of a program that changed the course of American art. Every day we are affected by what the federal art project has done. The way we view art and what it means to us and our society is only because of what the Federal Art Project did. Its lasting legacy in the art world is represented in these paintings, and they shed a light on how this unique slice of history in such a short time made changes that has affected American lives for the better, for good.

Whatever questions critics had about the project, then and now, the paintings show that regardless, the FAP had a beautiful product. It affected the American public in a profound way so that even they could see at the time what good it was doing for them in their communities, but certainly now we can see how long lasting the project's effect has been. The power of its legacy has only grown as the decades go by, and now what they represent is a very unique, rather controversial, and definitely underappreciated part of history.