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THE DIVISIONS OF THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION (WPA) AND THEIR VARIOUS INFLUENCE ON VARIOUS ART FORMS

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This research covered the basic outline of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), as well as its origin and development. Specifically, the many areas of art were examined in greater detail. Major points discussed were architecture, visual art, writing, music, theatre productions, and a larger portion on dance. With these points, other aspects such as particular influences on these Arts areas were also described. Finally, the importance of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) on furthering the Arts was addressed.

The Works Progress Administration, or often called the WPA, did not always have the specific clarity as it did by the end of the 1930s. According to Adams and Goldbard (1995), George Biddle is credited with first suggesting some sort of a federal arts program to Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, during his first term as president. Oddly enough, the notion of public artwork was not new to Franklin D. Roosevelt. During Roosevelt's former governorship of New York State, Harry Hopkins, state relief director, had allocated funds to New York City's College Art Association. This was to employ approximately 100 artists in settlement houses. In 1933, Roosevelt turned Biddle's suggestion over to the Treasury Department, which was, and still is, responsible for construction of federal buildings. Biddle's project was approved, and advisor Edward Bruce was put in charge of the organizational groundwork. He went on to develop a much larger program that was then called the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP).

The PWAP was part of the Civil Works Administration (CWA), an experimental program in federal work relief, providing the unemployed with public service jobs during the bitter winter of 1933-34. “PWAP employed artists to create works and to embellish public buildings, including one painting for each member of Congress as well as for public schools, orphanages, libraries, museums and practically every other type of public building.” (Library of Congress, 1999). PWAP was short-lived; it ended in April 1934, along with the rest of the CWA.

The largest and most important of the New Deal cultural programs was the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a massive employment relief program launched in the spring of 1935. As Roosevelt was elected for a second term, Levine describes Roosevelt’s items of social legislation to be that of advocating “union benefits, unemployment insurance, and the maintenance of the Works Progress Administration.” (1985, p. 133) These items were not only optimistic statements, but also ones that interested many of the U.S. citizens at the time. This was the beginning of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s "Second New Deal," (first being the PWAP) as his second term came to be known. Adams and Goldbard stated that in his Annual Message to Congress on January 4th of that year, Roosevelt spoke critically about the failure of his administration's first-term efforts:

> We find our population suffering from the old inequalities, little changed by our past sporadic remedies. In spite of our effort and in spite of our talk, we have not weeded out the over privileged and we have not effectively lifted up the underprivileged.... We have… a clear mandate from the people, that Americans must forswear the conception of the acquisition of wealth, which, through excessive profits, creates undue private power over private affairs and, to our misfortune, over public affairs as well. In building toward this end, we do not destroy ambition, nor do we seek to divide our wealth into equal shares on stated occasions. We continue to recognize the greater ability of some to earn more than others do. But we do assert that the ambition of the individual to obtain for him and his proper security, a reasonable leisure, and a decent living throughout life is an ambition to be preferred to the appetite for great wealth and great power. (Adams & Goldbard, 1995, section 4)

From this statement developed an extremely important event in the history of the United States, the development and advancement of the Works Progress Administration.

The Works Progress Administration, in other words the new and improved New Deal, provided a less restrictive environment for all American artists. It was also

responsible for helping the African American visual artists surge to newer stature as well. Art took on a new meaning in many ways, according to Sylvester (section 3). Human and social conditions could be expressed. Politics and art fused, and historical and current social injustices were allowable manifestations in the creation of art pieces. What this means is that through these advancements, art works and their creators are capable of working with less restrictions. Mixed media, abstract art, cubism, and social realism were now acceptable and desirable creative expressions.

Adams and Goldbard described the WPA philosophy as follows: “to put the unemployed back to work in jobs which would serve the public good and conserve the skills and the self-esteem of workers throughout the U.S.” (1995, section 4.3). Adams and Goldbard also explained that work began immediately on the WPA's Federal Project Number One. Known as "Federal One," the project comprised five major divisions: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project, and the Historical Records Survey. A national director headed each division and just one year after the five national directors first met in Washington, some 40,000 WPA artists and other cultural workers were employed in projects throughout the United States. (1995, section 4.3)

The first of the Federal One project divisions was the Federal Art Project (FAP). At its height in 1936, the Federal Art Project employed 5,300 visual artists and related professionals. Adams and Goldbard (1995, section 4.3) acknowledged that several major events were in place: a murals project that executed more than 2,500 murals in hospitals, schools, and other public places; an easel painting division which produced nearly 108,000 paintings; a sculpture division that produced some 18,000 pieces; a graphic arts workshop; a photography project which served mainly to document the WPA; a poster division; and a stained glass division centered in New York. A scenic design division was also established to provide models of historic stage sets and architectural models for planning and educational use, states Sylvester (section 4). More than 8.5 million people, for an average salary of $41.57 a month, were employed to build these bridges, roads, public buildings, public parks, and airports.

Further sub-divisions of the FAP were created through the WPA’s Federal Project Number One, which included the Exhibitions Division. This division organized public showings of all WPA artists and students, which in turn allowed the artists to display their work possibly for further employment. In addition, hundreds of teachers were employed in settlement houses and community centers by the Art Teaching Division. These local centers received close to $825,000 in local support; some survive to this day.

Many famous artists have emerged from the Federal Art Project including Moses Soyer, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, some of whom became famous abstract artists. Also surviving the times and creating well-known art were Jacob Lawrence and Ivan Albright. Lawrence and Albright created paintings that leaned more towards cubism and realistic abstraction. Among the Works Progress Administration, these individuals were only a select few of the painters in which the FAP provided a stable income and living. It has also been stated that the FAP gave these artists the chance to find "a new orientation and a new hope and purpose based on a new sense of social responsibility." (Adams & Goldbard, 1995, section 4.3)

The second section of the “Federal One” was the Federal Music Project (FMP). The Federal Music Project ensembles included orchestras and chamber groups, choral and opera units, concert, military and dance bands, and theater orchestras. Adams and

Goldbard (1995, section 4.4) declare that these ensembles presented an estimated 5,000 performances to approximately three million people each week of employment. In addition, the Federal Music Project also provided classes in rural areas and urban neighborhoods, as well as public schools having no musical curriculum. At its peak, the FMP employed roughly 16,000 musicians. For the duration of this time, a well-known former conductor of the Cleveland Symphony, Nikolai Sokoloff, directed this project.

The Design Index, which is a component of the Index of American Composers, catalogued 5,500 works by 1,500 composers. The WPA ensembles performed every one of these catalogued works, which led to the extensive recording of folk music. While these ensembles were performing, other WPA workers were becoming pioneers in music therapy experimentation. Finally, Federal Music Project workers served as duplicators and librarians, expanding the availability of musical work. Overall, the musicians of this time were leaders in the development of music itself, as well as musical education and its accessibility. (Adams & Goldbard, 1995, section 4.4)

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was the third division of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Second New Deal. 12,700 theatre workers were employed at the time of this particular division's height. All of the combined Federal Theatre units presented more than 1,000 performances each month before nearly one million people. According to Adams and Goldbard (1995, section 4.5), nearly 78% of these audience members were admitted free of charge, many seeing live theater for the first time. An amazing feat for the arts, the Federal Theatre Project produced over 1,200 plays in its four-year history, introducing 100 new playwrights. These subdivisions of the Federal Theatre Project included these categories, some which overlap: new plays; classical plays; plays formerly produced on Broadway; modern foreign plays; stock plays; children's plays; musical comedies; vaudeville; dance productions; Early Americana; American pageants; puppet and marionette plays, to name a few. (Library of Congress, 1999)

In addition to its production units, the Federal Theatre Project reached an estimated 10 million listeners with its "Federal Theatre of the Air." This radio program was broadcast over all of the major networks in the United States. Another addition was the National Service Bureau, which provided research, consultation, and play-reading services to all the units. Lastly, a Federal Theatre Magazine was developed. Its job was to unite the unlike Federal Theatre Project units. Elem and Krasner (2001, p. 271) describe these units as the various troupes organized all over the country with individual regional directors. In charge of the regional directors was the national director of the Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan. She quickly established an advisory board. Included in Flanagan's initial mailing to her board was an outline of her goals for the FTP:

> Although the immediate necessity of the project is to put back to work some ten thousand theatre people now on relief rolls, the more far-reaching purpose is to establish them in theatrical enterprises that we hope, will achieve a degree of excellence, fulfill a need in their communities, and thus become self-supporting. (Elam & Krasner, 2001, pp. 271-272)

Many of the film and theater individuals who took part in the Federal Theatre Project, went on to become "self-supporting", as Flanagan would have said. Many actors and actresses also went on to become wealthy and successful in Hollywood. Adams and Goldbard (1995, section 4.5) affirm that among these theatre people are Orson Welles, known for his acting work in the television version of *King Lear* and his genius directing in *Moby Dick*. Other members of the FTP were: director of *Equus* in

1977, Sydney Lumet; Burt Lancaster who was cast in the 1956 version of *The Rainmaker*; and Joseph Cotton, star of *Citizen Kane*. Others include John Houseman, Canada Lee, Will Geer, Joseph Losey, Virgil Thompson, Nicholas Ray, and E.G. Marshall.

The Federal Writers Project (FWP) was another division of the "Federal One." The FWP employed 6,686 writers in April 1936, the largest employment number of the Federal Writers Project during its existence. There were active projects in all 48 states and the District of Columbia at the time. Adams and Goldbard (1995, section 4.6) verify that Henry Alsberg directed the Federal Writers Project until 1939, and during this period, 3.5 million copies of 800 different titles were produced. The largest collection of works by FWP participants is currently located in the Library of Congress. Holdings include 2,900 documents representing the work of over 300 writers from 24 states. (1998)

The Federal Writers Project is best known for its American Guide Series, intended to produce comprehensive guidebooks for every state. Similar guides were published for many localities as well. Each guide included detailed descriptions of towns and villages, waterways, and historic sites. To this day, according to Adams and Goldbard (1995, section 4.6), the American Guide Series constitutes "the most comprehensive encyclopedia of Americana ever published." Several volumes of this encyclopedia have been reissued recently, some in updated form.

Other activities of the Federal Writers Project included studies on such topics as architecture, science for children, and American Indians. Among the most important of these studies are oral history archives created by FWP workers. These include priceless archives like the Slave Narratives and collections of folklore. Like so many of the other "Federal One" divisions, the FWP not only worked on projects, but writers additionally provided research, writing, and editorial services to other government agencies too. Often these writings included such information as the interviewee's education, income, occupation, political views, religion and morals, medical needs, as well as diet and miscellaneous observations. (Library of Congress, 1998) This particular information was usually used for statically related journals.

Among many other participants in the FWP were Richard Wright, Studs Terkel, Saul Bellow, Arna Bontemps, and Zora Neale Hurston. Some of the more known writers are Ralph Ellison, an African American author who wrote about the human search for identity, and Margaret Walker, another African American FWP participant who wrote poems about struggle. John Cheever once said about the depressing time in which he worked: "Literature has been the salvation of the damned, literature has inspired and guided lovers, routed despair and can perhaps in this case save the world." (Adams and Goldbard, 1995, section 4.6)

Dance is another visual art that was defined during the Works Progress Administration period. Although it was not specifically a part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Second New Deal, as the previous projects were, dance influenced many citizens. Dance not only had a visual art influence, but also showed an enormous determination not to be ignored. The Federal Dance Project stemmed from the Workers' Dance League of 1933. This organization was established prior to the WPA, but its significance was similar: political activism. The New Dance League soon stemmed from the Workers' Dance League, in which it made dance accessible to everyone. Jane Dudley, Sophia Maslow, Anna Sokolow, and William Bales were all members of this New Dance League.

Eventually a Dance Project was formed under the Works Progress Administration in 1935 for two reasons. First as a teaching activity in the Recreation Project, offering classes in social, folk, and square dancing in communities around the nation, and second under the Federal Theatre Project in theatrical productions that included concert dance. The "always embattled dancers," as they came to be called by Hallie Flanagan, the national director of the Federal Theatre Project, "immediately demanded their own project." (Foulkes, 2002, p. 123) Eventually in January 1936, the New York City Municipal Theatre Project granted dance its independent status.

Foulkes states that in the mid-1930s the Federal Theatre and Dance Projects of the WPA initiated formal government interaction with modern dancers for the first time. "Unlike many modernist artists who divorced their aesthetic revolution from political action, modern dancers designed a political presence and incorporated political ideals into their artistic revolt." (Foulkes, 2002, p. 104) The Dance Project gave concert dancers many unheard-of advancements. Previously paid only an average of $10 per performance, despite numerous hours of classes and rehearsals, now they received $23.86 per week regardless of whether they took class, rehearsed, or performed. (p. 123)

Many individuals of note were formed through the Federal Dance Project, or at least helped advance the art of dance. For example were Fanya Geltman, Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, and Helen Tamiris. These individuals not only opened doors for other modern dancers but for minorities of all sorts in any artistic field. According to Foulkes (2002, pp. 124-126), Helen Tamiris was one of the most important advocators of modern dance at the time. *How Long Brethren?,* which Tamiris choreographed under the WPA, became the project's most popular success. It "combined her interest in African American oppression with her commitment to leftist [democratic] politics" (p. 140). Furthermore, she led numerous protests, and at one point, in accompaniment with Geltman, stormed the Federal Offices of Washington D.C. and New York City demanding the removal of Don Oscar Becque, who was director at the time.

Martha Graham also made an appearance at the White House in February 1937. She was not there to protest, but to perform. This performance was the first dance performance to be seen at the White House. Following this event, art bills were constantly being sent to the House of Representatives. None of the bills ever got very far, but the American Dance Association was created in 1938 and claimed to be the "present headquarters of the dance division of the Federal Arts Commission." Ruth St. Denis was recommended to head the proposed national division of "Dance and Allied Arts." (Foulkes, 2002, p. 126)

Overall, all of the projects, whether part of Roosevelt's "Federal One" or otherwise, have had a great impact on the arts today. The 1930s was a crucial time to our government and economy, as well as individual U.S. citizens. These Federal Projects, which were part of the Works Progress Administration, gave artists a steady job with regular pay, a place in a larger organizational structure, and sometimes even a union to join. The times not only influenced the artists, but likewise the artists influenced the outcome of the times to come. As with Martha Graham, legislature bills were being examined, political activism was at a new height, and doors were being opened to the marginalized. Especially the African American artists were now able to surge to newer heights by participating in the WPA.

Not only did the Works Progress Administration do all of this for the individual artists, but it also affected their families. Surviving the depression gave individuals a new and promising outlook, just as long as the arts remained evident. Even though many of the works created were implicit to the hardships and struggles of the 1930s, some produced a "happy getaway" from the depression of the United States. With the development of the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project, and last but not least the Federal Dance Project, the WPA has influenced the course of history. Both the art world as we know it today and the general development of our great country took shape during this crucial period.

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Kari Appel is a fourth year Dance Education major from Watertown, SD. She will begin her student teaching next year. She had been a member of the U-Rep Dance Company since the fall of 2003 and has been dancing for 18 years at various venues. Her previous training is based on Cecchetti, which she studied at the Johnny Cavelle Dance Studio.

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Julie Kerr-Berry is a Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is the Artistic Director of the University Repertory Dance Theatre. Her primary teaching responsibilities include dance technique, history, world dance, and pedagogy. She is active in the Twin Cities dance community where she continues to dance and perform. Julie earned both her masters and doctorate degrees in dance from Temple University in Philadelphia. As a founding member of the National Dance Education Organization, she is Editor-in-Chief of its official journal, the Journal of Dance Education.