FDR, the WPA, and the New Deal Arts Programs
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The Enduring Legacy of the WPA
American-Made:
When FDR Put the Nation to Work

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President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office at the depth of the depression. He used modern techniques, including “fireside chats” on the radio, to communicate new hope to the American people.
Millions were jobless, with no way to eat but breadlines like this one in New York City.
A Volunteers of America soup kitchen in Washington, D.C.
Many of the homeless lived in shantytowns derisively called “Hoovervilles.” This one was in Sacramento, California.
Drought and dust storms were another mark of the depression. This wall of dust bore down on Rolla, Kansas in May 1935.
Roads and other segments of the nation’s infrastructure dated to the horse-and-buggy era. The entire country needed work.
The Civil Works Administration (CWA) was the Roosevelt administration’s first major work program. These men are working on a road in San Francisco.
Harry Lloyd Hopkins headed the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and its predecessor, the CWA.
From its advent in 1935, the WPA employed the majority of its workers in construction.
WPA workers building a connecting road between two highways in Lawrence County, Tennessee.
Children had to walk to school along this road in Fredrick County, Maryland, before WPA repairs allowed it to be used by vehicles.
The WPA employed women in sewing rooms in almost every city and small town. This one was in Louisville, Kentucky.
Outlets like this one in St. Louis, Missouri, distributed the products of WPA sewing rooms to clients on relief.
Librarian Dorothea Asher looks on as soldiers at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, check selections at the bookmobile operated by the Fairfax County WPA Library Extension Project.
WPA “packhorse librarians” delivered books and magazines by horse, car, and boat to isolated rural areas. This rider is working in Knott County, Kentucky.
A WPA traffic safety worker guards children at a dangerous intersection in Connersville, Indiana.
The WPA worked at malaria prevention, as in this swampy mosquito-breeding area near the center of Southington, Connecticut.
The same area after it was converted to a free-flowing canal by the WPA.
The Beaver Dam School in Bleckley County, Georgia, served African-American children. This is the school in 1935.
The Beaver Dam School in 1936 after renovation by the WPA.
When the Ohio River flooded in January 1937, the WPA mustered nearly 200,000 workers to save lives and property, and clean up afterward. A WPA official takes flood workers’ applications in Louisville, Kentucky.
The flood also created refugees along the Mississippi. This WPA school, in Memphis, Tennessee, is set up with cots to serve young children.
Flood victims being inoculated by WPA health teams in Memphis, Tennessee.
The WPA used native materials whenever possible. These women made mattresses out of Spanish moss in a Savannah, Georgia, program.
A coal fire had burned under New Straitsville, Ohio, for more than fifty years when the WPA began firefighting efforts. These workers are removing flammable material from a mine shaft.
WPA craft workers built and repaired toys, which were then borrowed from “libraries” like this one in Atlanta, Georgia.
These boys are turning in shoes to be repaired by a WPA shoemaker at their school in Asbury Park, New Jersey.
The WPA not only built Oregon’s Timberline Lodge, but WPA craft workers made all its furnishings and decorations.
“I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished,” said Roosevelt in his second inaugural address. Students in this Washington, D.C., school lunchroom are eating hot lunches prepared and served by the WPA.
WPA workers like this entomologist at the Natural History Museum in San Diego, California, supplemented the staffs at museums and other public institutions.
Archeological digs employed WPA labor, including this excavation at the site of the Odessa meteor crater in Ector County, Texas.
Eleanor Roosevelt was active in virtually all aspects of the W.P.A.’s work. She is shown here visiting a nursery school, Des Moines, Iowa, 1936.
The new Southside Bridge at Charleston, West Virginia, opened in 1937, is one example of the WPA’s rebuilding of the national infrastructure.
New York City lacked its own commercial airport before the WPA built La Guardia Field, which opened in December 1939.
The WPA-built San Antonio River Walk converted a crime- and litter-infested area into an attraction for tourists and locals.
A downhill skier photographed above the WPA-built Timberline Lodge.
A driving lesson being conducted on the Ohio State University golf course designed by Perry Maxwell and constructed by the WPA.
Young divers take the plunge at this WPA-built pool in Carbon Hill, Alabama.
The WPA turned to defense-related work as the threat of war grew closer. The laboratory worker waters a guayule plant being tested as a possible rubber source at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.
The WPA helped the United States solve a shortage of aircraft mechanics as World War II approached. Trainees J. D. Oliver and Charles Steele work with instructor L. P. French at Meacham Field in Fort Worth, Texas.
After World War II began with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, WPA artists produced posters such as this one urging the conservation of coal in wartime.
Art in America has always belonged to the people and has never been the property of an academy or a class. The great Treasury projects, through which our public buildings are being decorated, are an excellent example of the continuity of this tradition.

The Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration is a practical relief project which also emphasizes the best tradition of the democratic spirit.

The WPA artist, in rendering his own impression of things, speaks also for the spirit of his fellow countrymen everywhere. I think the WPA artist exemplifies with great force the essential place with the arts have ain a democratic society such as ours.

Franklin D. Roosevelt
Four New Deal Arts Programs

- Public Works of Art Project
- Section on Painting and Sculpture
  - Treasury Relief Act
- Works Projects Administration Federal Art Project
Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr.
The First Federal Art Program

Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), a crash relief program administered without a strict relief test in the Treasury Department. It lasted six months from December 1933 to June 1934, employed about 3700 artists, and cost about $1,312,000.
George Biddle,
“The Expectant Thistles”
Eleanor Roosevelt with Edward Bruce, administrator of the PWAP, the first federal arts program, with Forbes Watson, art critic, and Lawrence Roberts, director of the Brooklyn Museum, 1933.
James Scott, “Hudson Highlands,”
Milton, New York, PWAP 1934.
Collection of FDR Library and Museum

Collection FDR Library and Museum.
The Section of Painting and Sculpture, later called the Section of Fine Arts, was the second program, also administered by the Treasury Department. It obtained painting and sculpture to decorate new federal buildings, largely post offices and court houses, by anonymous competitions. Inaugurated in October 1934, it faded away in 1943. It awarded about 1400 contracts and cost about $2,571,000.
“Postal Workers Sorting Mail,” Ariel Rios Building, Federal Triangle, Washington, DC.
The Treasury Relief Act (TRAP) financed in July 1935 by an allocation of funds from the WPA to the Treasury for the decoration of federal buildings, was administered by the Section according to the same relief rules as was the WPA. It employed about 446 persons, 75 percent of whom were on relief. It cost $833,784 and was discontinued in 1939.
Olin Dows, a Hudson Valley friend and neighbor of FDR, administered TRAP. He was also the East Coast director of the PWAP.
Olin Dows,
Mural in the Rhinebeck Post Office
Interior of the Rhinebeck Post Office
The Work Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), was part of a wider program called Federal Project No. 1, which included drama, music, and writing.

It started in August 1935, was administered according to the relief rules of the WPA, lasted until June 1943, and cost about $35,000,000. Slightly over 5,000 persons were employed at its peak.

Harry Hopkins first employed artists on relief when he worked for New York’s Temporary Emergency Relief Agency under Governor Roosevelt in 1932.
Harry Hopkins watching John Kovacs at work on potter’s wheel at the WPA’s “Skills of the Unemployed Exhibition,” St. Louis, October 7, 1948.
Harry Hopkins joins Hallie Flanagan, head of the WPA’s Federal Theatre Project (wearing the wide-brimmed black hat), in a meeting with actors.
The WPA’s Federal Theatre Project dramatized current events in plays called “Living Newspapers.” This is a scene from *Triple-A Plowed Under.*
Kate Sandwine, the Strongest Woman in the WPA Circus, demonstrating her strength with a volunteer.
The WPA’s Federal Writer’s Project produced landmark guides to every state and to major cities. They are promoted in this window display in Dawson’s Book Store in Los Angeles in 1941.
WPA deputy administrator Aubrey Williams, Women’s and Professional Projects head Ellen Woodward, and Music Project Director Nikolai Sokoloff.
One of the musicians in the Detroit Community Dance Band No. 13, sponsored by the WPA’s Federal Music Project, takes a solo spot at a night concert.
Holger “Eddie” Cahill headed the Federal Art Project.
The WPA’s Federal Art Project sponsored community art centers like this one in Lynchburg, Virginia.
A WPA children’s class at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.
The WPA Pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The mural, entitled “Work—the American Way,” was by Philip Guston.
Portland artist Douglas Lynch created the murals in the Timberline Lodge coffee shop. The stools were hand-carved by WPA craftsmen.
WPA muralist Edward Laning and assistants work on the Ellis Island mural “The Role of the Immigrant in the Industrial Development of America.”
The lobby of Cook County Hospital in Chicago featured murals by Edwin Boyd Johnson, mosaic murals by John Winter, and the figure at the center by Charles Umlauf. The polished stone benches were also by WPA craftsmen.
Homer Dana, “Mexican Mother and Child,” marble, California WPA Program, 1938.

Collection of the FDR Library and Museum.
Print from the “Folk Art of Pennsylvania” Portfolio by Frances Lichten and Austin Davison, II.

Collection FDR Library and Museum
Image from the “Portfolio of Spanish Colonial Design in New Mexico,” Federal Art Project of New Mexico, 1938.

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Collection FDR Library and Museum.
Paul Clemens, “In the Dugout,” tempera on masonite, Wisconsin Art Project, 1938.
Collection FDR Library and Museum
The W.P.A.

650,000 miles of roads
78,000 bridges
125,000 civilian and military buildings
800 airports and 700 miles of airport runways
1500 nursery schools
900 million hot school lunches
225,000 concerts to audiences totaling 150 million
Plays and performances to audiences totaling 30 million
475,000 works of art
276 full-length books
Ben Shahn, poster for Department of Agriculture, Resettlement Administration, 1935.

Collection FDR Library and Museum.
There was a time when the people of this country would not have thought that the inheritance of art belonged to them. . . . A few generations ago, the people of this country were often taught that art was something foreign to America and to themselves—something imported from another continent, something from an age which was not theirs—something they had no part in, save to go to see it in some guarded room on holidays or Sundays. . . .

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dedication of the National Gallery of Art, March 17, 1941.