

# When art coaxed the soul of America back to life

With arts funding in the U.S. currently shaped largely by private donors and declining state and federal funding, [Sheila D. Collins](#) looks back to the New Deal's federal arts projects. She writes that initiatives such as the Works Progress Administration Arts Project not only set the ground for the flowering of the graphic arts in the U.S., but also provided employment for thousands of authors, critics, musicians, photographers and artists who would become famous for their later works.



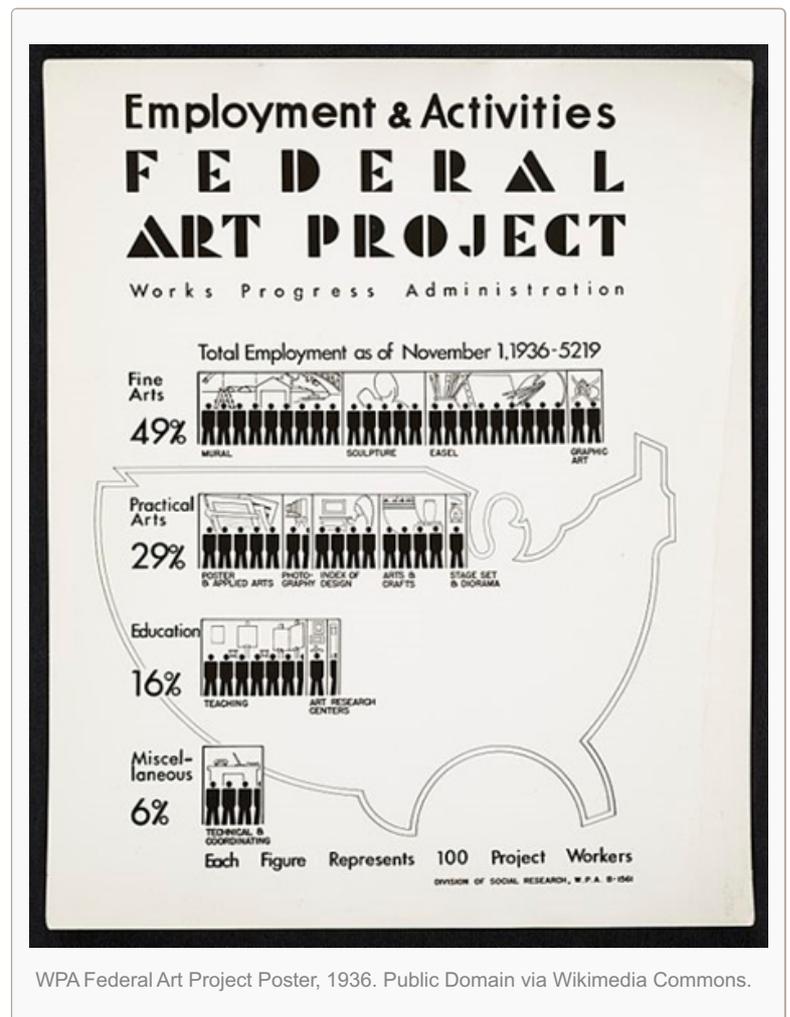
Writing in the *New York Times* recently, art critic [Holland Cotter](#) lamented the fact that the current billionaire-dominated market system, "is shaping every aspect of art in the city; not just how artists live, but also what kind of art is made, and how art is presented in the media and in museums." "Why," he asks, "in one of the most ethnically diverse cities, does the art world continue to be a bastion of whiteness? Why are African-American curators and administrators, and especially directors, all but absent from our big museums? Why are there still so few black — and Latino, and Asian-American — critics and editors?"

It wasn't always like this. During the 1930s under the New Deal, the arts were democratized, made accessible to ordinary people who lacked the means to buy paintings worth hundreds of thousands of dollars or to attend Broadway shows at over \$100 a ticket. The New Deal's support for the arts is one of the most interesting and unique episodes in the history of American public policy.

The federal arts programs initiated in the 1930s were intended to alleviate the economic hardships of unemployed cultural workers, to popularize art among a much wider segment of the population, and to boost public morale during a time of deep stress and pessimism, or as New Deal artist [Gutzon Borglum](#) remarked, to "coax the soul of America back to life."

The best known of all the programs that were enacted during the Depression was the WPA (Works Progress Administration) Art Project. It consisted of four distinct projects: a Federal Art Project, a Federal Writers' Project, a Federal Theatre Project, and a Federal Music Project.

Paintings were given to government offices, while murals, sculptures, bas relief, and mosaics were seen on the walls of schools, libraries, post offices, hospitals, courthouses, and other public buildings. Over the course of its eight years, the WPA commissioned over five hundred murals for New York City's public hospitals alone. Among the now well-known artists supported by these programs were painters such as Thomas Hart Benton, Jackson Pollack, Willem de Kooning, Raphael and Moses Soyler, and the sculptor, Louise Nevelson.



WPA Federal Art Project Poster, 1936. Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.

The print workshops set up by the WPA prepared the ground for the flowering of the graphic arts in the United

States, which until that time had been limited in both media and expression. Moreover, since prints were portable and cheap, they became a vehicle for broadening the public's understanding and appreciation of the creative arts.

Some 100 community art centers, which included galleries, classrooms, and community workshops, were established in twenty-two states—but particularly where opportunities to experience and make art were scarce. Through this effort individuals who may never have seen a large painted scene or a piece of sculpture were given the opportunity to experience not only a finished work of art but to participate in the creative process. In the New York City area alone, an estimated 50,000 people participated in classes under the Federal Art Project auspices each week. According to Smithsonian author, David A. Taylor, “the effect was electric. It jump-started people beginning careers in art amid the devastation.”

The Federal Writers' project provided employment and experience for editors, art critics, researchers, and historians, a number of whom later became famous for their novels and poetry, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Studs Terkel, and Saul Bellow. They were put to work writing state and regional guidebooks that were to portray the social, economic, industrial, and historical background of the country. These guidebooks represented a vast treasury of Americana from the ground up, including facts and folklore, history and legend, and histories of the famous, the infamous, and the excluded. There were also seventeen-volumes of oral histories of the last people who had lived under slavery. An additional set of folklore and oral histories of 10,000 people from all regions, occupations, and ethnic groups were collected and are now held in the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

The Federal Theatre Project was the first and only attempt to create a national theatre in the United States, producing all genres of theater, including classical plays, circuses, puppet shows, musical comedies, vaudeville, dance performances, children's theatre, and experimental plays. They were performed wherever people could gather—not only in theaters, but in parks, hospitals, convents, churches, schools, armories, circus tents, universities, and prisons. Touring companies brought theater to parts of the country where drama had been non-existent, and provided training and experience for thousands of aspiring actors, directors, stagehands, and playwrights, among them, Orson Wells, Eugene O'Neill, and Joseph Houseman.

The program emphasized preserving and promoting minority cultural forms. At a time of strict racial segregation with arts funding non-existent in African American communities, black theatre companies were established in many cities. Foreign language companies performed works in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Yiddish.

The Federal Theatre Project also brought controversial issues to the foreground, making it one of the most embattled of all the New Deal programs. Its “Living Newspaper” section produced plays about labor disputes, economic inequality, racism, and similar issues, which infuriated a growing chorus of conservative critics who succeeded in eliminating the program in 1939.

The Federal Music Project employed 15,000 instrumentalists, composers, vocalists, and teachers as well as providing financial assistance for existing orchestras and creating new ones in places that had never had an orchestra. Many other musical forms—opera, band concerts, choral music, jazz, and pop—were also performed. Most of the concerts were either free to the public or offered at very low cost, and free music classes were open to people of all ages and abilities.



In addition to the arts programs, the Farm Security Administration's photography program oversaw the production of more than 80,000 photographs, as part of the effort to make the nation aware of the plight of displaced rural populations. These images—produced by photographers such as Walker Evans, Gordon Parks, and Dorothea Lange helped humanize the verbal and statistical reports of the terrible poverty and turmoil in the agricultural sector of the economy and brought documentary photography into the cultural pantheon of the nation.

Between 1933 and 1942 ten thousand artists produced some 100,000 easel paintings, 18,000 sculptures, over 13,000 prints, 4,000 murals, over 1.6 million posters, and thousands of photographs. Over a thousand towns and cities now boasted federal buildings embellished with New Deal murals and sculpture. Some 6,686 writers produced more than a thousand books and pamphlets, and the Federal Theatre Project thousands of plays. More than the quantity of the output, however, is the way in which these programs shaped Americans' understanding of who they were as a people and their country's possibilities. Before the New Deal, the notion that government should support the arts was unheard of, but thanks to the New Deal, art had been democratized and, for a time, de-commodified, made accessible to the great majority of the American people.

Perhaps Roosevelt himself best summed up the significance of the New Deal arts programs:

*A few generations ago, the people of this country were often taught . . . to believe that art was something foreign to America and to themselves . . . But . . . within the last few years . . . they have discovered that they have a part. . . . They have seen in their own towns, in their own villages, in schoolhouses, in post offices, in the back rooms of shops and stores, pictures painted by their sons, their neighbors—people they have known and lived beside and talked to. . . some of it good, some of it not so good, but all of it native, human, eager, and alive—all of it painted by their own kind in their own country, and painted about things that they know and look at often and have touched and loved. The people of this country know now . . . that art is not something just to be owned but something to be made: that it is the act of making and not the act of owning that is art. And knowing this they know also that art is not a treasure in the past or an importation from another land, but part of the present life of all the living and creating peoples—all who make and build; and, most of all, the young and vigorous peoples who have made and built our present wide country.*

New Deal support for the arts had coaxed the soul of America back to life, but we are in danger of losing it again. Under the obsession with deficits, arts programs in the public schools are being cut, federal funding for the arts has dropped dramatically, and even private funding has been reduced. Without art, we are ill-equipped as a people with the collective imagination that is needed if we are to resolve the enormous challenges that confront us in the twenty-first century. Who or what will there be to coax this generation back to life?

*This article first appeared at the [OUPblog](#).*

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