

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

CRISIS, CONFLICT, AND CREATIVITY:
THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE WPA ARTS PROJECTS IN MICHIGAN, 1935-1943

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Beverly Chichester, Doll Bed Applique Patchwork Quilt rendering, 1937. | 16 |
| 2. Book jacket for <i>Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State</i> , 1941. | 19 |
| 3. Poster for Detroit Federal Theatre production of <i>It Can't Happen Here</i> , 1936. | 21 |
| 4. Marvin Beerbohm, Detail of <i>Industrial Environment</i> , 1938. | 24 |
| 5. Walter Speck painting <i>Ford Riot</i> , 1937. | 25 |
| 6. Clivia Calder Morrison, <i>Children Reading</i> , 1938. | 26 |
| 7. Blanche Ableson, Sketch for “The Good Old Days” manuscript, September 1941. | 27 |
| 8. Detroit Symphony Library, <i>The Crying of Water</i> manuscript, 1940. | 28 |
| 9. Production Bulletin for the <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> , 1939. | 34 |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------------|---|
| CWA | Civil Works Administration |
| DIA | Detroit Institute of Arts |
| DSO | Detroit Symphony Orchestra |
| FAP | Federal Art Project |
| Federal One | Federal Project Number One |
| FERA | Federal Emergency Relief Administration |
| FMP | Federal Music Project |
| FTP | Federal Theater Project |
| FWP | Federal Writers' Project |
| NEA | National Endowment for the Arts |
| NEH | National Endowment for the Humanities |
| PWAP | Public Works of Art Project |
| Section | Treasury Section of Fine Arts |
| TRAP | Treasury Relief Art Project |
| WPA | Works Progress Administration |

Discussing political issues with relatives rarely ends well, but usually events from over eighty years ago do not have the same polarizing effect. The Great Depression, however, and the New Deal relief programs associated with it, still evokes strong reactions from those who survived it. My grandmother proved the truth of this phenomenon when she asked about the topic of my thesis. As soon as I mentioned the acronym “WPA,” she laughed and said that she and others used to make fun of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s brainchild by calling it “We Poke Along,” a reference to the assumption that Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers wasted time more often than they actually worked. Incredibly, this stigma that attached itself to the WPA at its inception in 1935 still resonates in present-day Michigan and United States. “We Poke Along” was only one of many nicknames the largest program of the New Deal acquired, and was among one of the more polite terms employed.

During its eight-year lifespan from May 1935 to June 1943, WPA employees not only constructed roads in an effort to build up the country’s infrastructure but also produced plays, created paintings, wrote books, and organized orchestras, all with government funding. Each state controlled a division of the WPA, including Michigan. The WPA drew vitriol from those who felt it was a socialistic enterprise and positioned the United States closer to a Communist government. With over 20% of the country unemployed, many did not see any value in paying workers to perform supposedly unnecessary tasks. Refusing to yield to these doubts, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the WPA with Executive Order 7034, which replaced the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Civil Works Administration (CWA). Still, those same doubts and attacks plagued the WPA throughout its existence and facilitated its quick and sudden demise in 1943 when President Roosevelt ended the WPA as quickly as it had begun, with as much enthusiasm for its end as he had had for its arrival. When the United States began

to emerge from the Great Depression in the late 1930s and World War II drew the country into conflict, government officials refocused national efforts from rehabilitation to mobilization.¹

The WPA was not the first relief program undertaken by the federal government in response to the Great Depression. The difference between FERA, CWA, and the WPA was mainly that the new program focused on work relief instead of direct relief, meaning that unemployed workers who met the WPA's qualifications for employment were paid for doing a job instead of receiving dole, which was an embarrassing and last resort effort for most destitute families. Although the WPA helped many avoid the worst of the Depression, it also exposed conflicts and fissures within Michigan. As historian William McDonald wrote,

The WPA represented within a limited domain and for a limited time the assumption of public power within the federal government by the professional social workers . . . That delicate balance of control between the lay politician and the professional expert . . . tends to be disturbed in times of social change. . . The result is, for a time, either government by politicians without expert advice or government by experts without political wisdom.²

This paradox was the success of the WPA but also its downfall: compromise abounded only for a short while between the federal government and the professionals working under them. The “balance of control” that McDonald described between the government and professionals never fully established itself, especially in Michigan, one of the states most affected by the Great Depression. The Depression presented such an unprecedented crisis that administrators and workers were desperate to relieve the strain placed on the nation's citizens, even if it meant little

¹ Frances T. Bourne and Betty Herscher, *Record Group No. 69: Records of the Work Projects Administration: Preliminary Checklist of the Central Correspondence Files of the Work Projects Administration and its Predecessors, 1933-1943* (Sussex: Harvester Press Microform Publications, 1987), iii. The Works Progress Administration was renamed the Work Projects Administration in July 1939, administered by the Federal Works Agency. The acronym WPA remained the same.

² William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 1.

discussion as to how the largest New Deal program was to address the conflict between politicians and professionals. In Michigan, the potential success of the WPA was marred by a high turnover rate of administrators and program directors within Federal Project Number One (Federal One), the umbrella name for the four arts projects that operated under the auspices of the WPA.³

Federal One became one of the most vehemently protested WPA projects soon after its creation in 1935. The project provided federal funding, administrators, and commissions for the Federal Art Project (FAP), Federal Music Project (FMP), Federal Writers' Project (FWP), and Federal Theater Project (FTP), as well as the short-lived Historical Records Survey (HRS).⁴ Each project was run by a national director who was based in Washington, D.C.; the FAP was headed by Holger Cahill, the FWP by Henry G. Alsberg, the FMP by Nikolai Sokoloff, and the FTP by Hallie Flanagan. Similarly, each state had a division of each project that was overseen by the state division of the WPA and further broken down into regional and local components. Each project required a state or local sponsor, usually a company or organization, in order for it to receive federal supplemental funding. Branded as a groundbreaking prototype of government support for the arts, Federal One proved incredibly divisive, poorly run, and produced results of inconsistent quality. Within Michigan, deep ideological divisions existed between its administrative officials, leading to the program's stagnation and eventual abolition. Despite this failure to communicate at the administrative level, hundreds of plays, musical productions, artworks, and books became the legacy of Federal One, which says more for the persistence of

³ McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, ix. "Federal One" is an all-encompassing term that, when used, refers to the FAP, FWP, FMP, and FTP.

⁴ McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, ix. This paper will not address the HRS as it was such a small program, at one point absorbed by the FWP. Even fewer sources exist about it than for Federal One in general.

the artists on the projects than the administrators.⁵ It is miraculous that anything was produced at all, given the infighting among administrators, the constant debate over whether the arts should be a priority during a depression, and the tension between the government's support of idealistic art and the artists' refusal to comply. Federal One left a legacy in Michigan partially due to its notoriety but more so because of the artists it hired and the (mostly) receptive audiences they found. The projects also furthered the discussion of what role art played in an historically agricultural yet increasingly industrial state.

The pinnacle of art and beauty in Michigan in the 1920s was embodied in the homes of the Michigan elite, including Cranbrook, Fairlane, and Meadow Brook Hall, thereby restricting access to artistic endeavors to those wealthy enough to pay for it. Besides providing employment to thousands of creative Michiganders and exposing the general public to original art for the first time, Michigan Federal One artists strove to separate art from the trappings of social class by using art to foster agitation and social awareness in order to delegitimize the federal idyllic aesthetic and expose the numerous levels of conflict between the elite and the working class, professionals and amateurs, politicians and artists, as well as between artists and their audience. By making art a part of as many Michiganders' lives as possible as a vehicle for expression and personal enrichment, the project was recourse against those who had historically held a monopoly on beauty and aesthetics. Federal One, with all its faults, provided a constructive outlet for rebellion in Michigan and defined the duty of artists as producing work with a purpose,

⁵ The term "artists" in this paper will refer to any type of creative vocation, not just the visual arts. Rather, it is an all-inclusive term that refers to painters, designers, musicians, conductors, writers, editors, actors, playwrights, directors, and any other position in Federal One that was not an administrative job. Likewise, "art" will refer to paintings, murals, prints, sculpture, plays, concerts, musical compositions, books, poetry, and plays. The all-encompassing terms will save the author from repetition and unnecessary detail.

not just art for art's sake, while at the same time to open a dialogue between artists and society that had not existed in the state before.

Historiography

The authoritative guide to the administrative workings of Federal One at the national level is William F. McDonald's *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* published in 1969. He painstakingly traced the administrative hierarchy and development of Federal One and explained the purpose, implementation, and legacy of the FAP, FWP, FTP, FMP, and HRS. McDonald focused mainly on the similarities in policy among states and how the federal government tried to perpetuate its vision of homogeneity, when in reality, each state was fairly autonomous. Indeed, this autonomy was one of the reasons that New York and California have accurate records in centralized locations while Michigan's Federal One records are scattered among many archives and libraries. Additionally, he did not attempt to explain how Federal One affected the artists employed by the program. Every secondary source written after its publication in 1969 relies heavily on McDonald's tome but most fail to go beyond his structural and descriptive analysis of the administration, which, while strong, does not discuss the culture or the increasing tension between government-sanctioned and independent art that Federal One cultivated.

Most of the secondary sources about Federal One, of which there are few, focus on the New York and California projects, as the programs in these states were the largest, most organized, and well-documented.⁶ Those books that focus on Federal One as a nationwide project analyze mainly the FAP and the FTP, as the products of the former still exist in abundance and the latter was highly controversial. Francis V. O'Connor was the foremost scholar on the FAP in the 1960s and 1970s and was one of the first historians to attempt to analyze how

⁶ McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 845-860.

the FAP affected artists. In the book he edited, *Art for the Millions*, he gathered together essays by artists and administrators into a book format that Holger Cahill originally planned for publication in 1936. As this goal was not met, O'Connor finished the work that Cahill began and published the work in 1975.⁷ Also common in the 1970s was for people who had been associated with Federal One to publish their recollections of the programs. One of the best is Jerre Mangione's book on the FWP that investigates not only its administration but also the personal interactions between the writers on the project.⁸

Books written in the 1990s and 2000s mark a departure from the political histories of Federal One published in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1980s saw a concerted effort by historians to sort through and assess the haphazardly-organized WPA records. Christopher DeNoon, for example, found a cache of unseen Federal One posters in a Baltimore airplane hangar and then made the FAP's poster division the subject of his 1987 book.⁹ Even today, some records are still unaccounted for and hinder what and how much historians can argue. Still, some recent scholars are attempting to do more than superficially link politics and culture under Federal One at the national level, including Barbara Melosh, Jonathan Harris, Victoria Grieve, and Kenneth J. Bindas. In *Engendering Culture*, published in 1991, Melosh analyzes and defines how Americans saw themselves and American society in gendered terms during the Great Depression and how this identity was expressed through FTP plays and PWAP murals.¹⁰ In *Federal Art and National*

⁷ Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 13.

⁸ Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project, 1935-1943* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

⁹ Christopher DeNoon, *Posters of the WPA*, (Los Angeles: Wheatley Press, 1987), 32.

¹⁰ Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 77-78.

Culture Harris contextualizes FAP art within the broader spectrum of art history. In his view, FAP perpetuated the birth of “democratic realism” while Grieve investigates how FAP altered the high and low art dichotomy present before the Great Depression.¹¹ Similarly, Bindas argues that the FMP was the opportunity the United States needed to create a middle ground between what he calls “art music,” which “required contemplation, appreciation, and education,” and “vernacular music,” or music for entertainment purposes.¹² These books follow the trend of 1990s scholarship on the projects by analyzing one specific aspect, project, state, or theme of Federal One instead of trying to be all-encompassing like McDonald’s work.

Only one book, by Paul Sporn, highlights the Federal One projects in Michigan. Written in 1995, *Against Itself* analyzed the FWP and FTP in the Midwest, primarily in Michigan. He argued that the FTP and FWP’s legacies and successes in Michigan were possible because the institutions and talent that filled these projects existed in Detroit before the WPA. The radical part of Federal One in Michigan, then, was not the creation of art but access to art for all. Then the center of industry, Detroit, home to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO), the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), the Bonstelle Theater, and the Detroit Public Library, seemed well-poised to embrace and adapt to government endorsement of the arts. Like most of the historians writing on Federal One, Sporn ultimately focused more on the political goings-on at the state level than on the effects of the projects on both the participants and their audiences.¹³ Thus, the only way to gain a sense of how artists reacted and participated in Federal One is to look at Federal One

¹¹ Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2. See also Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 6-7.

¹² Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of this Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 7.

¹³ Paul Sporn, *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers’ Projects in the Midwest* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 142.

manuscript collections. George Mason University holds one of the largest collections of Federal One materials and records; they published several guides to their collections from which John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown wrote one of the first books on the FTP, followed by Jane DeHart Mathews in 1980. These are largely descriptive histories, though, and mimic the content, if not the witty style, of FTP director Hallie Flanagan's memoir *Arena* published in 1940. Still the most popular of the Federal One projects that historians choose to focus on, the FTP was the subject of two micro-histories in the 2000s, including *Staging the People* by Elizabeth Osborne and *The Federal Theatre Project* by Barry Witham.

As there are so many gaps in the secondary literature, this paper relies heavily on archival documents written by the Michigan Writers' Project, memoirs and interviews with Federal One employees, the WPA Final State Report, posters, prints, murals, scripts, and musical scores. The Final Report was particularly enlightening as it provided a contemporary view of the WPA's impact on Michigan, as well as a context in which Federal One operated in the state. Written by WPA Michigan Administrator Abner Larned in 1943, it emphasized the abrupt demise of the WPA and was pessimistic about the longevity of its effects. Larned argued that the WPA's usefulness and value should not end because the Great Depression was abating but that a world war was all the more reason to continue to build a strong nation, both culturally and economically. The United States, and especially Michigan, could not afford to again suffer the unprecedented unemployment rate and economic turmoil of another depression and so he made several suggestions that would make the WPA or some similar agency relevant, streamlined, and valued by government and beneficiaries alike in a post-war era.¹⁴ Both Larned's report and

¹⁴ Abner Larned, *Final Report: A Critical Evaluation of the Experience of the Work Projects Administration in Michigan with Recommendations for the Operation of a Future Federal Work Program, 1943* (Sussex: Harvester Press Microform Publications, 1987), 59-73.

Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State, produced by the Michigan Writers' Project, give the reader a sense of what Michigan was like during the 1930s, as they highlighted the tensions caused by class disparities and economic diversification.¹⁵ Interviews with conductor Valter Poole and writer Kimon Friar show that Federal One's implementation provided artists inspiration, employment, and a chance to experiment with the boundaries of acceptable art.¹⁶

Recent historians have moved away from pure administrative history in favor of social and cultural history. The most recent publications on Federal One also serve to breakdown the catch-all category of "WPA art" into its individual components. Much of what is available in the Federal One literature, however, is still limited to analyses of its impacts at the federal level. Michigan's response to Federal One, however, is imperative to uncover in the process of defining the development of popular culture. Most of the secondary scholarship about Federal One still results in a thorough picture of the administrative workings of the program. What is sorely lacking in the literature is how Federal One elevated and made visible fractures in the status quo of who controlled culture. How did political and economic conditions inform Federal One goals? Was a unified vision projected to Michigan inhabitants? Answering questions like these go beyond the scope of survey studies and necessitate the close analysis of the products of Federal One and the thoughts of their creators.

¹⁵ Michigan Writers' Project, *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), v-x.

¹⁶ Valter Poole, interview by Rae Linda Brown, April 28, 1983, transcript, Institute on the Federal Theatre Project and New Deal Culture, George Mason University Oral History Program. Kimon Friar, interview, interview by A. Horton, May 1976, Athens, Greece, Institute on the Federal Theatre Project and New Deal Culture, George Mason University Oral History Program.

The Beginnings

According to Larned, 18.74% of the employable population in the state was unemployed in 1935. In southeast Michigan, designated Region 1, which included Oakland, Wayne, and Macomb counties, 17% were unemployed, of which artists were a small percentage.¹⁷ Still, with these creative workers unable to find patronage and as they were generally unqualified to apply for so-called “blue collar” jobs which made up the bulk of WPA openings, many artists remained unemployed for the simple reason that they only had experience in one field. After many of his advisors assessed the plight of the artist and realized something had to be done, they convinced the president to make relief for artists a priority, with the help of Eleanor Roosevelt.¹⁸ Roosevelt’s main purpose in creating Federal One was not to document the Great Depression through art, but to provide employment for as many as possible, regardless of vocation.¹⁹

The creation of Federal One exacerbated the opposition of those who felt the WPA itself was a waste of government money and resources, drawing accusations of “boondoggling,” a term indicating the laziness of WPA workers and the program’s wastefulness. Art projects seemed like an even greater unnecessary expense and a potential breeding ground for Communism as Americans became paranoid about its spread in the United States. This debate continued throughout the WPA’s lifetime and was one of the reasons why Roosevelt abolished it. For those who were employed by the projects, however, Federal One meant that artists could earn a living wage without resorting to the dole at the same time as they furthered their careers.²⁰

¹⁷ Larned, *Final Report*, 12.

¹⁸ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 3-10.

¹⁹ McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 87.

²⁰ Sporn, *Against Itself*, 41. While Federal One did not employ a large number of people, in May 1936, 12,372 people nationwide were employed by the FTP, a number Sporn argues was only slightly higher for the FMP. Similarly, the numbers for FAP and FWP ranged from 4,000 to 6,000 people.

The Federal One projects were considered “white collar projects” because they required mostly skilled labor and professionals. When first created, each state had to fill 90% of their openings on WPA projects with those who met the government qualifications for relief. Michigan, as did other states, found it difficult to meet this requirement because many artists, though unemployed, did not qualify for relief.²¹ As a result, Roosevelt granted an exception for Federal One projects that allowed up to 25% of its employees to be of non-relief status that lasted from November 1935 until November 1936. Without this exception, the projects could not reach their quotas of production.²²

The main concern that overshadowed the implementation of Federal One after the hiring process was to define how artists’ work was to be judged and valued. How could one assign a labor value to a work of art? How could the work of two artists compare in terms of effort and worth? The attempt to reconcile taste with economics was one not unfamiliar to Michigan artists, as the simultaneous development of Henry Ford’s factories and the flowering of Detroit architecture in the 1910s and 1920s indicated. The production of art during this period by such figures as architect Albert Kahn, sculptor Corrado Parducci, theater director Jessie Bonstelle, and others was possible only because wealthy capitalist dynamos like Henry Ford, Horace Dodge, and Alfred and Matilda Wilson backed these creative ventures. After the Depression began in October 1929, however, these patrons began to limit the size of their investments. The Wilsons temporarily shut down their newly erected Meadow Brook Hall in Rochester. Patrons stopped attending high art productions and ceased commissioning works for their homes either because

²¹ Fern Zwickey, *Report of Activity Operation and Accomplishment of the Work Projects Administration Arts and Crafts Program Now Operating as the Visual Aids Program*, January 28, 1943, 3, RG 81-49, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI. See also McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 173: The makeup of the Michigan Art Project was 50% skilled workers, 25% professional, and 25% unskilled.

²² McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 84-85.

they had lost everything on the stock market and could no longer afford to do so, or like the Wilsons, scaled down their social activities in order to avoid flaunting their wealth. The sharp disparity in social standing between those who controlled the production of art (the upper classes) and those who were shut out of the process (the middle and lower classes) fits into Victoria Grieve's philosophical discussion of high and low art as it existed in the 1920s. High art referred to the fine arts, those that existed for the purposes of moral enrichment and aesthetic pleasure, available and accessible only to those with proper education and breeding - leaving those with money. Low art, conversely, was advertising and cheap entertainment geared towards a mass audience.²³

Michigan, however, began to break down this high/low dichotomy even before Federal One was created as evidenced by Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts, painted from 1932 to 1933. Funded by Edsel B. Ford, it was only because of Ford's public support of them that they were not destroyed in an anticommunist fervor.²⁴ The mural proved extremely controversial, not least because Rivera was a known Communist and therefore drew accusations of tainting the murals with unsavory political messages. Ironically, the Rivera murals were quite literally a representation of what the Federal One projects, particularly the FAP, would do on a much grander scale, branded as a "monumental realism."²⁵ Despite the controversy, thousands of people came to see *Detroit Industry*, proving that art could be enjoyed, or at least experienced, by the masses. One of the world's greatest art museums now housed a permanent piece of art, one that visually and figuratively embodied the struggle taking place in

²³ Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, 6-7.

²⁴ Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 35 and 177.

²⁵ Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 175.

Michigan during the 1920s and 1930s. How could the state reconcile the great bounty of fruits, vegetables, and grains produced from the land with mechanized, impersonal manufacturing and industry? Even though the Great Depression marked a general decline in art patronage in Detroit, *Detroit Industry* made it easier for Michiganders to become accustomed to seeing art that sharply highlighted the struggle between capitalism and labor that was turning violent and destructive.

The fact that Federal One in Michigan continued a decade-old discussion indicates that the state valued the arts. The disorganization of the programs once implemented made the problem only more important to discuss. Even Larned, an avid proponent of the WPA, recommended that greater effort be focused on tailoring training, expectations, and wages to the specific job but offered no solutions.²⁶ Here were thousands of artists, each with varying degrees of experience and skill vying for commissions. Here also were politicians seeking to standardize the creation of art, and to force creativity into paperwork and processes. The artists expected to be paid for their talents and vocalized their complaints but the administration did not respond. With all of these obstacles, why else would Michigan continue to govern the projects unless someone thought they were valuable? Without a compromise of the sort McDonald defined, however, Federal One floundered. While he was referring to the WPA in general, these problems were acutely felt in Federal One projects. What was a fair wage for a painter? A cellist? A playwright? A researcher? How much could they be expected to produce and work in a given amount of time? Unfortunately, the extant sources tell little about how administrators in Michigan solved these dilemmas. Clearly there was a fundamental disconnect between the politically-minded administrators and the artists themselves, and because neither side formally addressed it, Federal One split into so many factions that it ceased to be a national project but a

²⁶ Larned, *Final Report*, 59-60.

series of local ones. The same divide existed in Michigan. In spite of squabbling within the administration, however, most of the employees who worked under the Federal One banner were profoundly grateful for the opportunity to further their careers and to do something personally and professionally enriching even if their ideas over what Federal One should do differed greatly.²⁷

Providing employment for struggling and unemployed creative people was not a new concept, but in order to assuage accusations of “boondoggling,” Federal One, as all WPA projects did, had to provide something equally valuable and usable to society as roads, electrification, and Dust Bowl abatement efforts. To many critics, Federal One seemed unnecessary, relevant to only a very specific sector of society. Artists could create etchings and orchestras could rehearse but who would receive it? More importantly, *how* would they receive it? Grieve argues that the FAP in particular was not built on a radically new philosophy but rather one that had evolved from historical trends of art. Still, the notion of high and low art still permeated American thoughts about culture. As Rivera’s Detroit murals indicate, creating art on a large scale could not help but draw interest and criticism. In so doing, monumental public art bypassed traditional boundaries between the works and audience. The debate was most visibly undertaken by the FAP, which according to Grieve, tried to “create a domestic market for art by redefining it as a commodity within economic and intellectual reach of all Americans.”²⁸ Although Grieve restricts her argument to the FAP, the FWP, the FMP, and the FTP also made explicit efforts to transcend social and economic class as qualifications to understand art in the pursuit of the truly American aesthetic. Similarly, Jonathan Harris argues that the FAP defined a

²⁷ Samuel Cashwan, “The Sculptor’s Point of View,” in *Art for the Millions*, 88-89. See also Poole, interview.

²⁸ Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, 6.

new ideology called “democratic realism,” that regulated what artists portrayed and how they portrayed it.²⁹ In Michigan, though, such regulation only served to inspire artists to push beyond those boundaries and expose the tension beneath the surface. Federal One administrators tried to foster a sense of unity in the face of economic collapse and the threat of Communism but ultimately lost control of the enterprise.³⁰

Building Patriotic Fervor

Federal One marked a shift in “WPA art” programs from providing employment to providing employment within a given community (i.e., the state). It provided employment and commissions only to residents of the state, whereas PWAP, TRAP, and the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (Section) gave commissions to the most qualified artist, regardless of his or her residence.³¹ By restricting the geographic origins of its employees, Federal One was able to return to a local discussion of high and low art, belying its emphasis on unity through several FAP and FWP nationwide programs. Although centered in Detroit and Grand Rapids, the Michigan Art Project tried to reach as many Michiganders as it possibly could, not just by making art but also through the establishment of community art centers and research and rendering for the *Index of American Design*. A national undertaking, artists in each state researched and drew or painted “examples of American handicraft, antedating 1890.”³² Of the 378 plates published in the final version, seven of them were done by artists from Michigan,

²⁹ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 2.

³⁰ Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*, 131.

³¹ Christine Muriel Ruby, “Art for the People: Art in Michigan Sponsored by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, 1934 to 1943,” Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1986, 27-31. Many of the FAP’s efforts continued the public art movement begun by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) under the Civil Works Administration and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) and Treasury Section of Fine Arts (Section).

³² McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 422. See also Zwickey, *Report on Visual Aids Program*, 5.

including Beverly Chichester (see figure 1), David Ramage, George J. File, Dorothy Brennan, and Edward Strazalkowski. These numbers do not reflect the many plates not included in the



Figure 1. Beverly Chichester, Doll Bed Applique Patchwork Quilt rendering, c. 1937, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil, and graphite on paperboard. This rendering of a quilt is representative of the detail and technique required of artists who worked on the *Index of American Design*. Source: National Gallery of Art.

final book.³³ A celebration of the anonymous artist's presence in American history, the *Index* was a symbol of national cooperation and cultural evolution. While its use to the average Michigan resident, unless he or she happened to be an art historian, was low, the *Index* displayed folk art and common motifs, not the work of fine artists or those who were academically trained. It did have value to the common man, however, in that it showcased for the first time the talents of farmers and factory workers and depicted objects that nearly everyone had in their homes.

The FWP also produced books and prose that tried to reach the widest possible audience. Like the other three Federal One projects, the FWP had a FERA predecessor and it was from a supervisor of this project that the FWP's legacy was determined. Henry S. Curtis, a Michigan FERA worker, suggested that unemployed writers undertake the need for a nationwide travel guidebook.³⁴ Although state guidebooks existed before, the FWP seized the idea in 1935 as a way to encourage people to travel the country, hence encouraging them to spend money and support the economy, while learning about each

³³ Erwin O. Christensen, *The Index of American Design* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1950), 197-207. For a full compilation of the plates designed for the *Index*, see the National Gallery of Art, "Index of American Design," <http://www.nga.gov/collection/iad/index.shtm> (accessed November 29, 2012).

³⁴ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 45-46.

state's history. The prose of each book was to be simple, non-academic, and like the *Index*, intended to foster a unified vision of the country. In reality, there was little coordination between states, as evidenced by the varying publication dates, the difference in content, style, and format, and even the titles. The FWP guidebooks were not all bestsellers nor were they all particularly well-written.³⁵ Part of this was due to the disorganization of the FWP and the many writers who contributed essays with different tones and points of view. Ironically this inability to synthesize viewpoints and backgrounds underscores the alienation of the politically radical and the experiences of minorities, exactly the sort of discrimination Federal One claimed to avoid. Developing a national vision, however, encouraged not diversity but homogeneity.

African-American poet Robert Hayden, a future poet laureate who came out of the Michigan Writers' Project, underscored the administration's focus on sameness.³⁶ As an African American man in the heavily segregated city of Detroit, his work did not reflect the same pride in Michigan as would the guidebook. One of his poems, "Autumnal," was published in a 1937 volume called *American Stuff*, a collection of FWP prose and FAP artwork from various divisions around the country. The first two stanzas below encapsulated his frustration with racial discrimination and segregation:

Pity the rose
 With death for root
 And bleeding boughs
 Bereft of fruit.
 Pity the pheasant
 In the gilded wood,
 And the buck lying stark
 In a snare of blood.

³⁵ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 363.

³⁶ Sporn, *Against Itself*, 281-282.

Pity your brothers
 Undeceived by death:
 Though gold his body
 And scarlet his breath,
 They know his beauty
 A thin disguise
 For Medusa trees
 And hollow skies.³⁷

Filled with allusions of death and sharp contrasts of happiness and despair, Hayden suggested the plight of minorities living in a supposedly democratic country. Blacks and other minorities lived in the same state as whites but could not share in the benefits of the coexistence of industry and agriculture. For Hayden and other minorities, the divide was more than economic but racial as well. They were not the “every men” but the “forgotten men” and had to fight, like Michigan itself, to be recognized as valuable. For minorities, Federal One, despite its large percentage of women and creation of black-only divisions, did not live up to its democratic rhetoric.

Part of the failure of the FWP to integrate equality in its writings were the unrealistic expectations that Harry Alsberg, national director of the FWP, set. In 1936, only one year after the program’s inception, Alsberg insisted upon a May 1 deadline for each state to submit a guidebook manuscript to Washington, D.C., for publication. Only five states managed to submit their manuscript by 1937 while Michigan was one of the last states to publish in 1941.³⁸ This late date was due largely to the enormous disruption in the Michigan Writers’ Project leadership between Cecile Chittenden, first director of the Michigan Writers’ Project and assistant director Mary Barrett. Sporn argued that Chittenden tried to use the project as an opportunity to amass

³⁷ Robert Hayden, “Autumnal,” in *American Stuff: An Anthology of Prose & Verse by Members of the Federal Writers' Project, with Sixteen Prints by the Federal Art Project*, Federal Writers’ Project (New York: Viking Press, 1937), 223-224.

³⁸ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 92.

political power and to censor the work that the writers were creating. Her downfall came when she wrote an article in *Detroit Saturday Night* in July 1936, accusing several of the writers of being Communist and spreading leftist ideas through their work. Forced to resign because her accusations were “alarmist” and “illogical,” Chittenden had fired many of the most talented writers on the Michigan Project, most notably Kimon Friar, a well-known novelist, translator, and playwright.³⁹ This type of unchecked power and constant turnover in leadership, a problem not unique to the FWP but evident in all of Federal One, meant that the project changed focus and its goals many times. A lack of a coherent, consistent vision manifested itself for posterity in the garbled and prejudicial guidebook. As a result of this instability, the guidebook and several other small publications on Hamtramck High School and Michigan log cabins, are the only products of the Michigan Writers’ Project. The Michigan guidebook (see figure 2), envisioned to attract visitors to the state did not inspire its readers; the prose was pedantic, unimaginative, and its contents arbitrarily selected. It is, perhaps, most useful as a relic of Michigan in 1941, the peak of global conflict. It certainly does not embody the spirit of optimism, progress, and unity that administrators wished it to effuse.

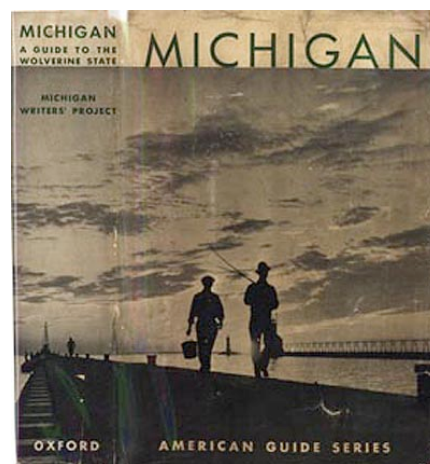


Figure 2. Book jacket for *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State*, 1941. Source: University of Michigan.

A state guidebook may seem a nonpartisan document, but the Michigan book did encourage a specific interpretation of Michigan and its economy and people. It highlighted the tension between industry and agriculture, between modernity and tradition. This theme is evident in the first section of the book, entitled “Contemporary Scene.” First, the book argued that

³⁹ Sporn, *Against Itself*, 190-191. See also Friar, interview.

Michigan cannot be “summed up” as other states might be. It was not only farm country or only an industrialized state, but rather an amalgamation forced upon Michiganders because of the state’s tracts of fertile land and its abundance of natural resources used in mechanical processes. The tone of this opening section was critical: “And, because of what Michigan people did with what they found, Michigan did not develop a type,” but then noted that this adaptation was a product of conflict and prejudice, not noble actions. The future of Michigan could be better than the error-riddled past but much work remained: “We Michigan folk are proud of what we are doing and the way we are doing it. We want the world to know of that pride, and by it we want to be known ourselves.”⁴⁰ The essential issue the guidebook tried to address was how to make Michigan known not just as an afterthought but as a state that was progressing into the industrial age, a state that was a microcosm of national importance. In the context of 1941, this ambiguous statement could very well refer to the debate between economic and social divisions within society and the need for cooperation and collaboration. In this way, the book was very much a political commentary. More than that, it asked the reader to revel in the uniqueness of Michigan and then to share that pride with his or her neighbor - a request for action, not only passive reading. Abner Larned, in his brief introduction to the work, emphasized that the focus of the guidebook was not to create a work of flawless, scholarly reference but instead to employ writers.⁴¹ The administration of the Writers’ Project in Michigan preferred to gloss over the labor riots and backslide of the auto industry in the 1930s and the result was an awkward book, both in prose as well as overall message. Intended to instill pride in its readers, it was fairly pessimistic and had an aura of anonymity that was not objective but disconcerting.

⁴⁰ Michigan Writers’ Project, *Michigan*, 3-12.

⁴¹ Michigan Writers’ Project, *Michigan*, v.

Of course, the possibility exists that the reason the Michigan guidebook was a poor example of scholarly work was because its writers simply could not write well. The problem of finding talent was also difficult for the FTP. The Michigan Theater Project attracted few professional actors, causing a rift to form between the minority who were highly qualified and those with little experience and adding to the already tenuous relationship between administration and employees.⁴² Still, a performance of Sinclair Lewis's controversial play *It Can't Happen Here* (see figure 3) opened in twenty-one cities on October 27, 1936, and received complimentary reviews by audiences and critics alike.⁴³ It was to be the most successful play put on by the Detroit Theater Project.⁴⁴ Due to the apparent inability of the FTP to succeed in exposing the masses to art, the Michigan WPA, in Flanagan's words, "suggested that the project be closed," but "in spite of discouragements, I believed we could accomplish something in Detroit."⁴⁵

In the FMP, the main emphasis was not on talent, as conductor Valter Poole recalled that the Detroit WPA Symphony "was not a real first-class orchestra," but rather on providing music free of charge to non-traditional audiences,

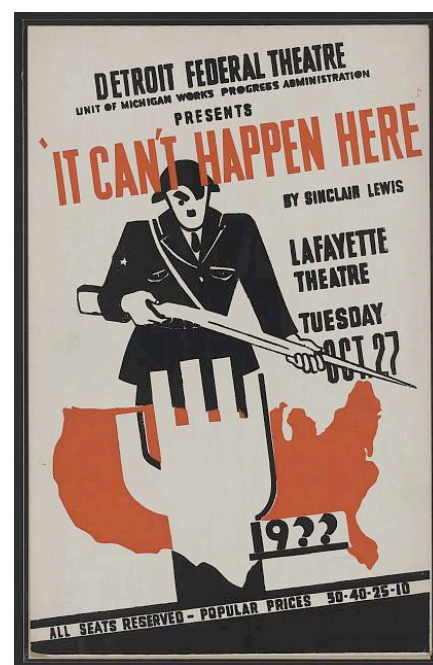


Figure 3. Poster for Detroit Federal Theatre production of *It Can't Happen Here*, 1936. Written by novelist Sinclair Lewis about the possibility of Nazi and Fascist infiltration in the United States, *It Can't Happen Here* was one of the most provocative plays of the FTP. Note the range of admission prices from ten to fifty cents. Source: Library of Congress.

⁴² Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of Federal Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1940), 160. In Michigan, only twenty five out of three hundred applicants to the FTP had professional theatrical experience.

⁴³ Sporn, *Against Itself*, 174.

⁴⁴ Flanagan, *Arena*, 160.

⁴⁵ Flanagan, *Arena*, 160-161.

like the lower and middle classes, children, and the mentally ill.⁴⁶ Although the musicians in the orchestra had to meet certain technical standards and sit an audition, most of the members in FMP had not been professional musicians before the Depression. The Detroit WPA Symphony was so successful in attracting atypical audiences with its emphasis on American-inspired programs that it forced the DSO to modernize its program.⁴⁷ Premiering pieces also meant that no one had an advantage - it equalized the level of listening. Poole emphasized a repertoire based around American composers, something the federal government encouraged all WPA Symphonies to do, and actually did put into practice the equality rhetoric of Federal One by fostering integration. He invited black soloists and musicians to conduct, accompany, and join the orchestra not because they were black but because they were talented. He was also one of the only FMP conductors to perform pieces by contemporary black composers like William Grant Still and Florence Price, helping to expand the purview of American music.⁴⁸

Public Art in Public Places

Part of the goal of Federal One was to make art accessible and available to all and so in the furtherance of this effort, began projects that indeed anyone could experience. As “democratic” as the *Index* and the guidebook purported to be, those who wished to see them had to buy them and thus restricted the audience of those objects. In the Detroit area, the Michigan Art Project combatted this restriction and assumed a public presence through the painting of murals in public places. Following Diego Rivera’s creation of the *Detroit Industry* fresco only

⁴⁶ Poole, interview.

⁴⁷ Herbert Straub, *Michigan WPA Music Project*, 1943, 7, RG 81-49, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

⁴⁸ Poole premiered William Grant Still’s piece “Afro-American Symphony” with the Detroit WPA Symphony in November of 1940. The author highly recommends listening to the recording of this wonderful piece to gain a sense of the “sound” that the Detroit WPA Symphony cultivated and how different it was from traditional classical music. Neeme Järvi, dir., *Symphony no. 1 (Afro-American)*, by William Grant Still, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Chandos, 1993.

three years before the start of the FAP, more Detroiters began to realize the purpose of exposing more people to art as beneficial to society at large, promoting unity and patriotism. Besides beautifying common areas, art served as a political and social mobilizer, though ironically, it was this use of art that Congress later attacked. The government hoped that Federal One art would promote unity, not necessarily conflict, hence its attraction to realism that depicted real life, but with chiseled figures, free of dirt and grime, working the fields without the threat of drought or disease. Artists did use realism techniques but included political details and messages, making the art, especially in murals and the FTP productions, less idealized and more realistic than the government wanted. Some subject matter of the FAP was restricted and censored by the federal government, which elevated realism over the abstraction of the 1920s. The problem with realism, however, was that it presented an idealized version of American life - in trying to portray the “every man,” reality was sacrificed, a problem that federal administrators likely realized. The artists themselves, however, did not give in so easily. Due to the decentralized administration of Federal One, however, many artists could make non-government sanctioned subject matter or pieces imbued with a particular political bent. The absence of records by artists makes assertions about their goals nothing but guesswork but certainly murals represented to some extent the sociopolitical atmosphere of the geographic location in which it was created. No national aesthetic emerged from Federal One, although the variety of styles, though, might now be considered the aesthetic of conflict or the acknowledgment of difference. With the exception of the *Index*, the FWP guidebooks, and some of the FTP productions, most Federal One projects operated internally within each state and were representations of the local culture.

Post offices, schools, libraries, armories, and United Auto Workers meeting buildings held the bulk of FAP artwork in Michigan. These were public places where the most people

would see it, if they wanted to or not, and often the venue itself dictated the subject matter of the artwork. Murals and sculptures placed in libraries and schools, for example, centered around fairy tales, literary characters, education, and American history. In the former Rochester High School building, for example, Marvin Beerbohm painted a mural depicting children learning amidst new technologies and scenes of the locally-based Ferry-Morse Seed Company, known for its experimentation with plant husbandry (see figure 4).⁴⁹ In the recently conserved triptych that



Figure 4. Marvin Beerbohm, Detail of *Industrial Environment of Rochester High School*, 1938. The two men depicted were employees of the Ferry-Morse company. Source: Rochester-Rochester Hills Patch.

hangs in the former Dondero High School auditorium in Royal Oak, painters Andrew Maglia and Bronislaw Makielski depicted the history of the city, with the third panel showing the high school in the distance, the epitome of the bright future ahead. Students

attending these schools remembered the excitement of watching artists firsthand.⁵⁰ In contrast, *Ford Riot*, Walter Speck painted a mural in the United Auto

Workers headquarters in Detroit in 1937 that depicted men picketing, a highly politicized and historical message (see figure 5).⁵¹ Like some easel paintings from the PWAP, Michigan Art Project art did make some subtle political messages about the impacts of industrialization, the benefits of unionization, and the importance of equal access to education, all issues that affected most directly the working class, those previously alienated from the Detroit art scene. These

⁴⁹ Tiffany Dziurman Stozicki, "Community Celebrates Restoration of Depression-Era Mural," Rochester-Rochester Hills Patch, <http://rochester.patch.com/articles/community-celebrates-the-restoration-of-a-depression-era-mural> (accessed November 29, 2012).

⁵⁰ Ken Marten, "Royal Oak History Finally Unfurled," *Mirror of Royal Oak*, March 11, 2004.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Clemens, *The Works Progress Administration in Detroit*. (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 45.

murals, only three examples of the dozens painted, embodied the FAP's goal of exposing all people to art who had never before seen an original piece of art in person. Additionally, because murals are such a large format, the artist had to work on site, so observers witnessed the process of creating art in addition to viewing the results, making it less highbrow, more familiar, and accessible.

More common than the murals are the prints, easel drawings, and small sculptures of the FAP, many of which have been destroyed. Those done by head of the sculpture division Samuel Cashwan, ceramics supervisor Clivia Calder Morrison (see figure 6), easel

painting supervisor Frank Cassara, and graphic arts and mural painting supervisor Charles Pollock are among the best examples of FAP art in Michigan.⁵² These smaller works, often not commissioned, deviated slightly from the themes of education, history, and idealized life and instead depicted landscapes and everyday life.⁵³ None of the known FAP art from Michigan depicts manor houses or portraits of wealthy patrons but instead provide an aesthetic for a new world. These were highly skilled and talented painters and sculptors, far from amateurs, and so



Figure 5. Michigan FAP artist Walter Speck painting *Ford Riot* in United Auto Workers Union headquarters in Detroit, 1937. Note the similarity in style the piece shares with Beerbohm's mural above. Both depict the struggles of industry and modernity. Source: Walter P. Reuther Library.

⁵² Clemens, *The Works Progress Administration in Detroit*, 41-59. See also Kresge Art Museum, *Government Architecture, Murals, and Sculpture of the 1930s and 1940s New Deal: A Walking Tour of East Lansing and Lansing*, 1988.

⁵³ University of Michigan Museum of Art, *The Federal Art Project: American Prints from the 1930s in the Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985). See this exhibition catalog for examples of prints and lithographs produced by the FAP.

their embrace of a “low” art form ironically elevated the status of the lowly print, mural, and statue. In post offices and schools, places all people utilized regardless of class, there was no discrimination. Each person saw the same images and though not all reacted in the same way, they were nonetheless exposed to a depiction of life - stylized and idealized, yes, but relevant and accessible. The artists making these works drew some accusations of being Communists by those



Figure 6. Clivia Calder Morrison, *Children Reading*, 1938. This small sculpture sits in front of a Michigan State University Residence Hall. This is a beautiful example of how Michigan artists were able to create public art that could be enjoyed by anyone.

unwilling to see the art for the mobilizing call it was - to rebel, if only passively, against the status quo. Through art, Michigan Art Project artists asserted that the pre-Depression disparity between social classes caused by industrialization and increasing pressure to compete with machines had to be checked.

Industrialization was a permanent fixture of American and Michigan life by the 1930s but

that could not sustain the state alone. This discussion moved beyond just equal access to art but implied, through commonplace subject matters, that an entire segment of the population had yet to be recognized. The artists were, after all, were as alienated as those working in the factories, performing vital yet unrecognized tasks. No longer would they continue to be shut out of the artistic venues that Detroit had hosted for decades. Of course, Michigan Art Project artists did not know that World War II would make a return to that imbalance impossible, but they did provide the visual transition from an insulated state composed of family farms and small social networks to an urban state centered around the industrial culture of Detroit. The FAP poster division also helped to publicize the work of Federal One and in Michigan produced posters to

advertise FTP and FMP productions, as well as FAP exhibitions and FWP publications. These posters, however, were not themselves viewed as art and so many were thrown away.⁵⁴

Just as hundreds of posters produced by the Michigan Art Project were destroyed, the Michigan Writers' Project wrote many manuscripts that were never published.⁵⁵ One such example was a 1941 plan to write a short book on the history of hunting and wild game in the state, which would likely have appealed to a large cross-section of Michiganders in the 1940s who hunted either for food or sport. Although never finished, this project is one of few extant examples of how the Michigan

Writers' Project worked. Many writers and researchers had a role to play in the development of this manuscript. Tasks included everything from compiling hunting figures using data from the Michigan Game Division and creating charts

to hand-copying primary documents to interviews with trappers from around the state to

drawings illustrating the various uses of beaver pelts throughout history.⁵⁶ Several outlines and manuscripts of "Fur and Game: The Good Old Days" show the extensive and time-consuming revision process, undertaken by writers, editors, and researchers (see figure 7). Spanning 1940 to



Figure 7. Blanche Ableson, Sketch for "The Good Old Days" manuscript, September 1941. Ableson was researching the historical use of beaver fur, one of Michigan's earliest exports. Source: Archives of Michigan.

⁵⁴ DeNoon, *Posters of the WPA*, 32-35. See figure numbers 120, 189, and 261.

⁵⁵ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 375.

⁵⁶ Papers of the Michigan Writers' Project, RG 89-55, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

at least December 1941, this project may well have been the last major undertaking of the Michigan Writers' Project, which ended in 1943.



Figure 8. Detroit Symphony Library, *The Crying of Water* manuscript, 1940. Stamped “Property of Michigan Music Project, Grand Rapids, Michigan.” This piece by the American composer Louis Campbell-Tipton was hand-copied by Reidling (first name unknown) as part of the music copying part of the FMP. Source: WPA Music Manuscripts.

The FMP produced very little that a musical group did not perform, due to the fact that there were so many settings in which having a WPA symphony play a concert was appropriate. Kenneth J. Bindas writes that by 1934, 70% of the country's musicians were unemployed. Part of this was due to the Depression and also to advances in recording technology which meant that orchestras were no longer needed to accompany movies. Radio replaced live

music in many establishments.⁵⁷ Detroit, however, had a strong tradition of presenting orchestral and live music, particularly with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) and numerous area orchestras and bands.⁵⁸ The DSO, however, did not solve the

unemployed musician problem nor could the masses afford to attend their concerts. Even when the DSO gave twenty cent concerts or performed outside, the type of music that it played, mostly of the European masters (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms), was barely accessible to those without knowledge of it. The FMP was created primarily to employ musicians, composers, conductors, and music copyists (see figure 8) but also to encourage and spread knowledge about music to the masses so that everyone could experience music in popular culture, hospitals, schools, as well as

⁵⁷ Bindas, *All of this Music Belongs to the Nation*, 1.

⁵⁸ Michigan Writers' Project, *Michigan*, 152-156.

the orchestra hall. Although the Michigan Music Project was centered in Detroit and Grand Rapids, orchestras, chamber groups, and bands made unprecedented performances in schools, did outdoor performances, and even made forays into the then-new field of music therapy at institutions like the Eloise Hospital and the Pontiac State Hospital in the interest of exposing new audiences to new music, as discussed earlier. In his final report, Straub wrote that several music teachers “spent their entire time at the hospital teaching music to the inmates and finally, organizing an orchestra among the patients.”⁵⁹ Straub also wrote that the Michigan Music Project was very successful in meeting its goal of reaching a wide audience, citing that “thousands” of concerts were carried out around the state despite initial disbelief in the quality of a WPA orchestra.⁶⁰

Of the four projects, the FTP was the shortest in duration, least successful, particularly in Detroit, and the most misunderstood. The approximately 12,000 people who worked under the FTP included actors, playwrights, directors, and crew. Sporn noted that a strong theater community and audiences already existed in Detroit and classified them in four categories: commercial theater, experimental theater, university theater, and left-wing theater. Going further, Sporn states that these troupes were helpful in establishing a Detroit chapter of the FTP even though by 1936, they had mostly collapsed.⁶¹ The problem was broadening the audience. To do this, Detroit Theater put on plays for white, black, and foreign audiences, thus reducing the racial and language barriers that prevented marginalized groups from attending performances, and performed accessible modern plays not as highbrow as Shakespeare and the traditional

⁵⁹ Straub, *Michigan WPA Music Project*, 3.

⁶⁰ Straub, *Michigan WPA Music Project*, 6.

⁶¹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 159. See also Sporn, *Against Itself*, 142.

repertoire. Similarly to the Music Project, the Michigan Theater Project also brought the arts to schools in the form of children's plays and marionette shows. The national director of the FTP, Hallie Flanagan, was heavily involved in Michigan, perhaps because she lived in Detroit at one time and saw its potential. She tried to create a popular appreciation of art by limiting admission charges to twenty-five cents, performing works like the Living Newspapers, which were dramatic reenactments of news events tailored to the locale in which they were performed, and by refusing to focus on financial support when it would cause the productions themselves to suffer. The FTP's dialogue with politics and current events, however, led to a fatal controversy.

The Demise of Federal One

In August 1938, Congress launched an attack on all activities suspected of being un-American. Later known as the Dies Committee, named for the representative Martin Dies who headed it, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was a government response to suspected Communist threats within the country. One of the main targets was Federal One, specifically the FTP and FWP. Fearful of the Communistic unions forming among WPA workers, conservatives within the federal government seized this chance to attack Roosevelt's most important New Deal program - for which he had not sought congressional approval. The Dies Committee did not only attack Federal One, but it certainly made the demise of the projects inevitable. The reasons for accusing the FWP and FTP were, like many red scares, vague and not grounded in fact. To some extent, WPA critics within Congress made a self-fulfilling prophecy in that Congress continually cut WPA funding and laid off workers. In response, WPA workers formed unions in the hopes of gaining job security, which of course the government saw as a disloyal act. In Detroit, WPA workers formed the Professional Division Workers' Alliance, one of many such alliances that formed around the country. Eventually, it was absorbed into the United

Office and Professional Workers of America, affiliated with the CIO, one of the largest unions in Michigan and in the country.⁶² The Dies Committee interrogated many directors of WPA programs, including Hallie Flanagan and Harry Alsberg, directors of the FTP and FWP, respectively. Both denied any latent Communist outbreaks within their projects and instead emphasized the uplifting spirit that their projects inspired.

Despite Flanagan's efforts, the Dies Committee ensured that Federal One lost any credibility it had amassed, and therefore its supporters in Congress. As a result, Federal One ceased to be a federally-funded enterprise in 1939. The FAP, FMP, and FWP, were absorbed by the state governments and funded solely by state sponsors. The FAP was absorbed by the state government, becoming the Michigan Art Program, in 1940 the Michigan Arts and Crafts Project, and finally the Visual Aids Program.⁶³ According to the curator of prints at the DIA Nancy Sojka, the hundreds of prints and paintings made were divided and given to museums at random, with no consideration for where they were made or what their original purpose was.⁶⁴ Similarly, after the FWP ended, records were broken up and distributed to repositories or lost. Works of art that were, for a few short years, so highly prized, were destroyed or forgotten, stripped of legitimacy and their commentary on the many rifts within American, specifically Michigan culture.

The latest dated letter in the Archives of Michigan's collection suggests the implications of the sudden end of the FWP. Addressed to the last supervisor of the project, Harold Titus, the letter was from H.D. Ruhl, head of the Game Division, and inquired where the Writers' Project records for the game manuscript were stored. Written after the FWP and the Michigan Writers'

⁶² Sporn, *Against Itself*, 195-197.

⁶³ Zwickey, *Report on Visual Aids Program*, 1-8.

⁶⁴ Nancy Sojka, interview by author, November 16, 2012, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI.

Project had ended, the October 1943 letter suggests that only a few months later, those records had already been removed from their places of origin and largely forgotten.⁶⁵ Much about the FWP did, ironically, remain unrecorded, a chronic problem for all Federal One projects in Michigan. As the 1943 letter indicated, this relocation of records happened rapidly. Harold Titus, either in jest or in frustration with the disorganized mess of the FWP, mentioned his resignation as state supervisor of the Michigan Writers' Project with a "Thank God!" indicating that the disorganization and accusations of harboring leftist radicals undermined any satisfaction that might have been associated with working on a creative endeavor.⁶⁶ Similarly, the Michigan Writers' Project died a sudden and unadorned death, taking with it any insights into moving past the Depression and World War II. The only manuscripts that were published were the guidebook and several other publications on Hamtramck High School and Michigan log cabins.⁶⁷ Many records were simply destroyed and even those that were placed in depositories were not sorted or documented in any way.⁶⁸ Even today, the bulk of Michigan Federal One records and productions remain unknown and unrecognized as bastions of culture, leaving Federal One's legacy considerably less positive than its participants desired.

The Michigan Music Project administration also felt that it had not been entirely successful for in 1943 the project, like all of the WPA, faded from existence. Again, part of this abrupt ending was due to the distraction, to say the least, of World War II. The state supervisor of the Music Project, Herbert Straub, however, had no final positive uplifting remarks about the end

⁶⁵ H.D. Ruhl to Harold Titus, October 14, 1943, Papers of the Michigan Writers' Project, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

⁶⁶ Harold Titus to H.D. Ruhl, June 30, 1941, Papers of the Michigan Writers' Project, Archives of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

⁶⁷ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 384.

⁶⁸ Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 371.

and in fact was extremely pessimistic, terse, and angry.⁶⁹ The FMP did not attract the attention of vehement anti-Communist agents because its call to action was based on a return to Americanism, but the government still deemed it an unnecessary expense.⁷⁰ Federal One, despite all efforts, died and left only a short-term legacy. Zwickey's comments about the Michigan Art Project also show the range of thoughts about Federal One's permanency as she thought it had served its purpose but that such a program was not relevant in a World War II atmosphere.

Flanagan, though, felt that nationwide theater was something the country desperately needed to continue to grow the art form. Despite Flanagan's protestations, the Michigan government continued to threaten to shut down the Detroit Theater Project and in 1939 the FTP ended nationwide. It did not continue on as a state project, as the other Federal One programs did but disappeared along with any creative fervor it stirred up in Detroit negated by the unfounded attacks of the Dies Committee. As Flanagan repeated many times throughout her tenure, FTP productions did not intend to be political - at least not at first. The decentralized authority structure provided opportunities for slight political messages but not all plays were even remotely political. Detroit's last production, for example, was Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (see figure

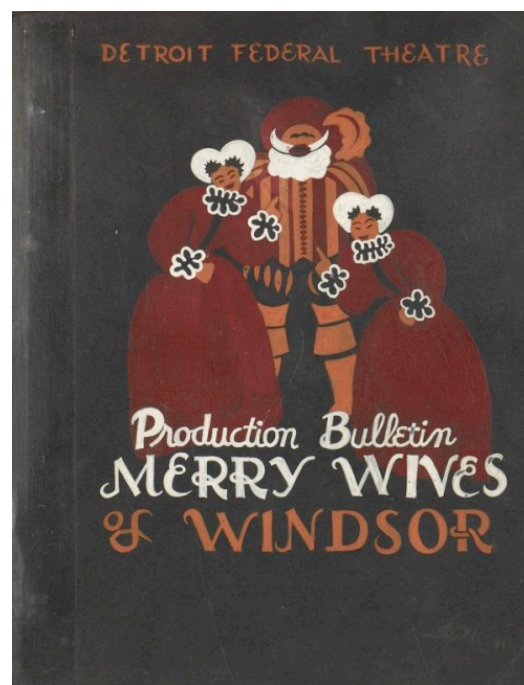


Figure 9. Production Bulletin for the Detroit Federal Theatre Project production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 1939. This piece, now owned by an archive in Florida, is an example of how separated the records of each state became after the abolition of the FTP in 1939. Source: The Wolfsonian-FIU Library.

⁶⁹ Straub, *Michigan WPA Music Project*, 10.

⁷⁰ Bindas, *All of this Music Belongs to the Nation*, 59.

9), which Flanagan found “in acting and staging, vigorous and richly comic. As impressive as the play itself was the splendid morale of the company.”⁷¹ The Michigan Theater Project did present, however, an example of direct confrontation and engagement with the idea of art for the masses. Although largely unsuccessful in a state preoccupied with shoring up its industrial development, a fact solidified by the mobilization responsibilities that World War II entailed, the FTP did directly challenge the status quo of culture and for whom it existed, more so than art, music, and writing, just because of the confrontational nature of the medium itself. This characteristic of theater is likely a factor in explaining why the FTP was so short-lived and why the FAP, FWP, and FMP survived the Dies Committee, if only for a few years.

The Legacy of Michigan Federal One

Federal One succeeded in presenting art to the masses, though to say that it created a democratic style of art is an overstatement. More than anything else, in Michigan, Federal One familiarized residents of the state with politically-motivated art as a tool for social discourse. Federal One was highly disorganized but it was this lack of regulation that gave artists the ability to interrogate what art could do to motivate people to discuss not only the role of art but of conflict and the many tensions that existed. Michigan’s projects were largely a plea for national recognition, both as a budding industrial state and as one that held enormous creative potential, especially in Detroit. The conservative elite marginalized Michigan artists, who expressed their displeasure through the largely pessimistic and critical tone of murals, plays, guidebook, and final reports of the projects. The Michigan Federal One projects, then, were paradoxical in that they used the alienated position of the state to evade federal guidelines while insisting Michigan had a unique contribution to make to the nation. More important than its national message were

⁷¹ Flanagan, *Arena*, 163. See also Clemens, *The Works Progress Administration in Detroit*, 80.

the internal struggles and debates that Federal One brought to the forefront, most prominently high and low art.

The end of Federal One almost seems comical, as if President Roosevelt suddenly no longer thought his own brainchild was worth his support, not even a rationale. Did he tire of fighting with Congress over funding and selfish power-hungry administrators? Did he no longer wish to host artists at the White House who proffered their creative endeavors as gifts to the nation?⁷² Whatever the reason, the withdrawal of federal support, financial and otherwise, sounded the death of the most productive years of the projects in Michigan. Without even a semblance of centralized leadership under state control, the programs became more muddled and acquired even murkier goals. The American entrance into World War II in December 1941 attracted all of Michigan's governmental efforts and shifted the focus away from economic health to building national morale and military equipment. The WPA offered workers classes that trained them in defense work, drew them away from their original jobs, and relegated creative endeavors to war bond drives.⁷³ The concluding thoughts of Herbert Straub, state supervisor of the Music Project, are a good encapsulation of the unfinished feeling, lack of finality, and sense of abandonment that many former Federal One employees felt:

It was the hope of musicians in general that the WPA Music Project was but a stepping stone to the Government subsidizing of music, as in other countries. In Detroit, for the first time in twenty-seven years, we find a city of over two million people with no representative music of any kind. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra has been disbanded for lack of funds and now with the liquidation of the WPA Music Project we have a large metropolitan city, bent on the production of war materials, with no music culture and no chance for the children to get music appreciation except through the mechanical medium of records.

⁷² "1934: A New Deal for Artists." Muskegon Museum of Art, 296 W. Webster Ave., Muskegon, MI, April 26, 2012. See also Clemens, *The Works Progress Administration in Detroit*, 69 for a discussion of the Detroit WPA Spiritual Singers' visit to the White House in December of 1940.

⁷³ Straub, *Michigan WPA Music Project*, 9.

As if that was not pointed enough a response to the federal government's abolition of Federal One, Straub concluded his report that included nothing but compliments for the musicians, composers, and conductors who invested their time and talent in a temporary institution, with this final jab:

During the worst bombing of England, and continuing at the present time, the London Philharmonic Orchestra continues its good work in furnishing surcease for the souls of the war torn and weary people of Great Britain.⁷⁴

Straub clearly felt that music, and the arts in general, were a part of any modern society, not only compatible with but necessary in a world devoured by war. To the dismay of Larned, Straub, and Zwickey, and almost assuredly to the artists employed by Federal One, the project failed to make art synonymous with life. To date, the only programs that have come even remotely close to the scope and impact of Federal One are the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, but even these organizations only provide monetary assistance, not jobs for artists.⁷⁵ Instead of government officials, the NEA and NEH now determine what art is valuable and worthy of support and what is not. Thus, it is ironic that the unprecedented and unmatched efforts and legacy of Federal One in Michigan are ignored in the cultural histories of the state. Through greater awareness and understanding of Michigan's role in Federal One, appreciation of the artwork created under its purview, and recognition of the many artists involved, a discussion will once again open in Michigan about the role art must play both in times of crisis and peace. Only when the artistic dialogue is open can people discuss issues of class disparity, the worth of art, as well as who determines it, and definitions of the cultural status quo to come to any kind of resolution.

⁷⁴ Straub, *Michigan WPA Music Project*, 10.

⁷⁵ Sporn, *Against Itself*, 43-44.

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