Spring 2009

The Federal Art Project in Provincetown, Massachusetts: The impact of a relief program on an established art colony

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THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT IN PROVINCETOWN, MASSACHUSETTS
THE IMPACT OF A RELIEF PROGRAM ON AN ESTABLISHED ART COLONY

BY

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BA, University of New Hampshire, 2007

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Liberal Studies
in
History

May 6, 2009
UMI Number: 1466954

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Margaret Walker Smith, who instilled her love of art in me. I miss you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Lucy Salyer for all her suggestions and advice while I worked on this thesis. Her edits made this a much stronger and more cohesive work.

Thank you to Professor Ellen Fitzpatrick for setting me off on this path.

Thank you to the Provincetown Art Association and Museum for opening the archives to me. I hope make the institution proud with this work and my June 2009 lecture.

And thank you to Julie Heller and the Julie Heller Art Gallery staff for the inspiration, encouragement and support through this whole process.
ABSTRACT

THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT IN PROVINCETOWN, MA

THE IMPACT OF A RELIEF PROGRAM ON AN ESTABLISHED ART COLONY

By

Whitney Smith

University of New Hampshire, May, 2009

The Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration had a lasting impact on the American art scene. The experiences of artists associated with the Provincetown, Massachusetts art colony make evident the impact of the federal relief programs. The importance of the Provincetown art colony to the American art scene survived through the 1930s because of federal support. The focus on Provincetown and this smaller group of artists allows for comparisons to be made with the national society and art scene. The value of the Federal Art Project did not lie mainly in the finished artwork, but rather in the process of creating the art, in the innovations and experimentations in technique, and the sustained presence of art and professional artists during the Depression. The important group of modern artists from the 1940s – 1960s owes much of its success to the Federal Art Project.
INTRODUCTION

“She is doing an excellent job on the domestic animals mural,” Mrs. Florence Brown, a Federal Art Project supervisor, wrote about herself in the fall of 1937. Brown, an artist from Provincetown, Massachusetts, was working on a three-paneled mural for a local elementary school classroom. Although she was sixty-five, technically too old to work for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the local administrator accepted Brown because she needed the work and her style was popular. Brown preferred painting the murals to making prints for posters as the WPA asked her to do because of her skill. “I feel she should be given another panel,” Brown wrote about herself in official files; “she does not want to do posters. I feel she should not do them.” Mrs. Brown was placed in the unique situation of being both a government supervisor and employed artist throughout most of the 1930s. As head of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, she did all she could to help and encourage local artists in need of federal aid. The Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project, and the participation of artists like Florence Brown, is an integral part of the town’s history as an art colony and its continuing identity as one.¹

When it hit the United States, the Depression devastated much of the country. From March 1930 to March 1931 the number of unemployed rose from four million to eight million people. By 1932 roughly one-quarter of the American workforce was left unemployed. Millions not only lost their homes and accustomed way of life, but suffered a loss of spirit and hope. As the writer and historian Wallace Stegner summarized, "The tone of the thirties was neither flippant or satirical, but somber, intense and angry."  

The financial crisis burdened not only individual citizens, but also the structure of the federal economy and the focus of President Herbert Hoover's administration. The Depression crippled banks, closed businesses and corporations, and forced middle class families into poverty. As citizens' demands for federal assistance grew, President Hoover was faced with the difficult task of restructuring and creating organizations to aid the country's workforce.

The employment problems only increased as Hoover's time in office drew to a close. On July 21, 1932 the President approved the Emergency Relief and Construction Act. Title I of this act authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to advance loans to the states in the sum of $322 million to furnish relief and work relief "to destitute persons." The law also allocated $300 million in direct relief loans to local welfare agencies through states. The loans were repaid through deductions from future highway funds. Though the Depression hurt both white- and blue-collar workers, this money mainly went to aid the latter.  

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As the historian William McDonald concluded, “the placement of white-collar workers on proper work projects was... more difficult because everywhere the majority of, and in many places the only, work projects were those of a manual type.” This situation changed with the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his expansion of Hoover’s rudimentary government assistance through the New Deal projects. The White House’s focus on the introduction of urban amenities, “both material and cultural, into rural America... manifested itself in the arts no less than in rural electrification,” wrote McDonald.⁵

Soon after taking office, Roosevelt and his administration moved to create new federal agencies like the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and to engineer the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act. The National Industrial Recovery Act, 1933, established the Public Works Administration and the National Recovery Administration. These two organizations employed workers in public projects and sought to prohibit unfair trade and employment practices. A series of new federal agencies followed the Recovery Act. Among these were the Federal Relief Administration, which granted funds to state relief agencies, the Public Works Agency, which provided employment through the construction of public works, and in 1935, the Works Progress Administration [WPA]. These agencies organized and controlled numerous assistance projects. From

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building schools and municipal buildings, to the creation of a more comprehensive highway system, to bringing electricity to rural areas, holding art classes for children, and restructuring the agricultural system of the country, these organizations employed millions of people and stretched to the four corners of the country.6

Even on the tip of Cape Cod in Massachusetts, federal programs had an impact. The Works Progress Administration in particular employed numerous residents from an eclectic community. In the quiet artist’s colony in Provincetown, the Federal Art Project of the WPA enabled the artists to continue with their work instead of being forced to find jobs outside of their field. The federal aid enabled the town to survive the depression with its community, reputation, and residents intact.

By the early 1930s, many artists resided permanently in Provincetown, including well-known artists of the time. Among them were the painters Hans Hoffmann, George Yater, Henry Hensche and his wife Ada Raynor, Edward Hopper, Jerry Farnsworth and his wife Helen Sawyer, William and Lucy L’Engle, Maurice Sterne, Ross Moffett and his wife Dorothy Lake Gregory, and George Biddle and his sculptress wife Helen Sardeau. Because of these names and the work produced in the town, people began to compare the tip of the Cape with the Left Bank in Paris and Greenwich Village in New York. It was precisely this reputation and the town’s dynamics that helped the community survive the Depression.7

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6 The Federal Art Project was a sub-agency of the Works Progress Administration, established in 1935. The WPA was similar to the Public Work Administration, established 1933, in its construction projects but the WPA also employed non-manual laborers and white-collar workers. See: McDonald, Federal Relief Administration; O’Connor, Art for the Millions; Taylor, American-Made; Del Deo, Figures in the Landscape: The Life and Times of the American Painter, Ross Moffett 1888-1971 (The Donning Company Publishers, 1994); Frederick Hosen, The Great Depression and the New Deal: Legislative Acts in their Entirety (1932-1933) and Statistical Economic Data; Robert McElvaine, The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941; Anthony Badger, The New Deal: the Depression Years, 1933-1940; Nancy Rose, Put to Work: Relief Programs in the Great Depression.

7 Del Deo, Figures in a Landscape; Krahulik, Provincetown; Mary Heaton Vorse, Time and the Town: a Provincetown Chronicle; and Heaton Vorse, as found in “75 Years of American Art,” 14.
Provincetown’s history as an art colony intersects with the Great Depression through the federal art programs that came to town. Since the turn of the twentieth century the Cape Tip was the premiere artist destination in the country. Artists and art students flocked to the town each summer to experience its beauty, light, and the community’s spirit. New Deal art programs like the Federal Art Project (FAP) enabled artists across the country to maintain their chosen profession without seeking alternative employment. Though the goal of these projects was to employ artists, the FAP also made art accessible to citizens across the country. The Project commissioned artists to paint murals of local history, create sculptures of local heroes and events, and hold exhibitions in small towns to encourage participation in “American” arts. The directors of these national projects hoped that by infusing art in the local communities, the country would find some solace, hope, and beauty in the midst of the depression. In Provincetown, however, artists had been a part of the town’s community for decades.

The federal arts programs during the New Deal have been the subjects of many studies. Most historians seem to agree that President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs were essential in counteracting the country’s economic slump and enabling artists from diverse backgrounds to work closely within a community to foster a sense of national identity and pride in local history and art. Never before had the government supported and encouraged such experimentation in American art and accepted its artists.

Immediately following the Depression, historians focused on the unique nature of the government’s involvement in the arts. In the 1950s and after, historians provided overviews of the various federal art programs and the unprecedented ways in which the government
intervened in the arts. Subsequent historians have focused on the specifics of the art projects through individual artists, places, or organizations.

The first scholarly studies of the New Deal art projects reached consensus on several general points. They depicted the federal bureaucracy created by the FAP as wide-reaching and ultimately beneficial. Artists were helped by the federal art projects. And the programs brought art to all people. William McDonald's *Federal Relief Administration and the Art* (1969), for instance, analyzes the specifics of the government's involvement in the national art scene through its Congressional acts and bureaucracy. McDonald's study examines the numbers and distribution of the artists and their supervisors while explaining the revolutionary aspects of the Federal Art Project. In McDonald's view, the government's involvement helped to incorporate the arts into mainstream America by removing the stigma of art as always confrontational and in some cases anti-democratic; across the country, local residents were given hands-on experiences and participation in the arts.\(^8\)

Richard D. McKinzie also took this large-scale approach in his examination of the government art programs of the New Deal. His *The New Deal for Artists* (1973), explores three of the art programs and the government's intentions for and executions of each one. McKinzie's focus on the bureaucratic organization of each program and the impact each had on artists provides great background material for later studies. McKinzie's colleague, Martin Meltzer, took a similar approach in *Violins and Shovels: the WPA Art Projects* (1976). While this work examines the art, music, literature and theater programs, he echoes McKinzie's belief that bringing art to people across the country was a major accomplishment of the federal government during the 1930s and a significant contributor to the subsequent success of "American" art and artists. For Meltzer, especially, it was the WPA Federal Art

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Project that legitimized art as a profession. The WPA/FAP treated artists as equal in status and need to other struggling citizens, brought them out of the academic sphere and into mainstream society, and encouraged interaction and discussion between the artists and their local communities. The federal programs removed the “unattainable” or “unapproachable” aura of art because they brought it out of museums and private collections so that the public could experience and live with art.\(^9\)

Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz’s *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (1984), does an excellent job of tying two generations of scholarly inquiry together. Whereas earlier historians focused on the larger picture of the New Deal art programs – the bureaucracy, directors, intentions and execution – this work examines the Treasury’s Section of Fine Art and Sculpture. This more focused study gives insight into specific artists’ experiences in the Section and the tensions between regionalism and nationalism that played out in their works. In the Section, artists were asked to paint murals specifically related to their location. From these works came the “American scene,” which is associated with the images of the New Deal art programs. Tension arose when the involved artists wanted to reinterpret their surroundings or incorporate outside influences and more modern or abstract styles.\(^10\)

The technique of studying a specific aspect of the New Deal art programs was echoed in two journal articles from the 1990s. Edith Tonelli focuses on the WPA art programs in Boston, Massachusetts, and Sharon Long Baerny examines the WPA Federal Art Project

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\(^10\) Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*, (Philadelphia, MA: Temple University Press, 1984). During the Depression, the Treasury Department built and administered the federal buildings and so its art programs provided decorations and enhancements for these buildings.
through the experience of Massachusetts artist Yvonne Twining Humber. Both historians illuminate aspects of the art programs that earlier authors overlooked. Tonelli argues that it was the encouragement and insistence of the Federal Art Project in Boston that brought some acceptance and awareness to the modern and avant-garde art movement in the city. Overall, she viewed the Project as an essential part of movement away from European influences and the forward progress of American art nationwide and in Boston. Baerny portrays a less rosy interpretation of the WPA/FAP through the story of an individual artist. In the author’s conclusion, the Project did not alter discrimination against women artists, “deserted” the artists as soon as the economic situation started to improve, and “lost, destroyed... or painted over” many commissioned works. These specific studies show how federal funding affected smaller regions and artists through bureaucracy, economic aid, and support of both modern and traditional art forms.  

The 2005 book, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort*, by Karen Krahulik, further demonstrates the benefits of exploring history on a smaller scale. Though her work has only two chapters on the 1930s and its impact on the town, her insights are valuable. Krahulik believes that the Federal Art Project reinstated an economic and social hierarchy of artists over fishermen that had existed earlier in the town’s history. The author argues that, at times, certain artists believed themselves to be above the permanent residents of the town because it was their creations and reputation that brought tourists and recognition to the community. Without the artists, and the federal aid of the Project, the town would not have survived the Depression with its reputation or character intact. Krahulik concludes that

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despite the occasional tensions between the artists themselves and between artists and other
community members, the relationships within the town remained solid through the 1930s.
The author's focus on the town, however, makes it difficult to put periods of its history into
the larger history of America and its art. This study goes beyond the established dynamics
within the town to examine the impact that the Federal Art Project had on the artists and the
community as a whole during the Depression and in the following decades.¹²

This thesis examines the impact of federal funding on the already established art
community of Provincetown during the 1930s. In Provincetown, not only had artists been
permanent residents for decades before the Depression, but also the other residents
recognized them as important contributors to the community. Unlike other towns across the
country, the citizens in Provincetown were accustomed to artists as residents and to
participating in the arts. Since the creation of an art school by Charles Webster Hawthorne in
1899, town residents had posed as models for art students, allowed artists to use them as
subjects in paintings, and helped the artists when they were in need. Federal funding did not
change the dynamics of the town's eclectic community of artists, fishermen and small
business owners, but it did change the way in which artists created, the "messages" of the art,
and, sometimes, where the artists worked. Without federal funding, many artists would have
been forced to leave the town in search of menial or teaching jobs.¹³

This thesis adds a new chapter to the history of the New Deal programs in its focus on
the local bureaucracy of the Project and on its impact on the artists and their standing in the

Press, 2005).
¹³ An Observant Citizen, "Letter to the Editor," The Advocate. December 10, 1936, 2; The Advocate,
November 17, 1939; and Krahulik, Provincetown, 130-1; Ross Moffett, Art in Narrow Streets: The
First Thirty-Three Years of the Provincetown Art Association, 1914-1947 (Provincetown, MA: Cape
Cod Pilgrim Memorial Association, 1964), 60.
community. By focusing on an established art community, and the experiences of those artists in the Federal Art Project, the lasting impact of the WPA/FAP can be better understood. The two components of the FAP — the government with its bureaucracy, and the employed artists — placed the “value” of the Project in different places. The federal organizers of Project intended for the FAP to emphasize the value of the artists as workers in society, and thus the administration was treated like other relief programs. Alternatively, the artists, and some supervisors and administrators, believed the value of the Project was its ability to employ artists, but also the artwork that they created, their innovations in techniques, and their forged relationships in a community.

This exploration of the timely and lasting effects of government sponsorship and its regulations in Provincetown illuminates the importance of the WPA/FAP on a more national scale. The value of the Federal Art Project does not lie in the number of works the artists produced, but rather in the treatment of the artists as legitimate workers, the encouragement of artists’ technical innovations and explorations of new styles, the participants’ sense of belonging to a community, and the lasting relationships formed through the federal programs. Provincetown, and its associated artists, are the ideal topics for study because of the town’s well-established history with the arts and its importance in the American art scene.
CHAPTER ONE

THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT AND PROVINCETOWN

In 1964, Walter Chrysler, owner of the Chrysler Museum in town, explained how Provincetown became a home for so many artists. "Provincetown...is one of the oldest art colonies in America....When Hawthorne came to Provincetown...he was looking for a community that would allow young artists...to devote their time to painting. He wanted to find a community that has exceptional facilities for painting.... Since the late 19th century Provincetown has attracted painters and writers enamored by the peerless light and picturesque location here. The early marine painters of the picturesque, naturalists depicting provincial characters, the impressionists painting light, the abstract expressionists creating spontaneous forms, have through this whole last century helped establish Provincetown as a painter's place." Artists had thus participated in the Provincetown community long before the Federal Art Project came to town. In practice, the Project changed the way that some artists created, its lasting impact upon the artistic community was positive. By examining the impact of government sponsorship in the established art colony, we can more clearly understand the bureaucracy and the artists' experiences as a collective.14

14 Walter P. Chrysler, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, September 5, 1964, Transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Son of the Chrysler Corporation founder and eclectic art collector, Chrysler opened a museum in Provincetown with pieces ranging from early Egyptian to modern art. In 1971 he moved his collection to Norfolk, VA. The Provincetown community converted the museum building into a public library and town art museum. See: http://www.iamprovincetown.com/history/chrysler-history.html.
Outside of Provincetown, the relationship between the artists and their local communities differed because of perceptions of artists' place in society. Prior to the New Deal art programs, participation in and sponsorship of the arts was limited to the academic world and the upper tiers of American society. Artists lived on the outskirts of mainstream America in enclaves like Greenwich Village in New York City or the West Bank in Paris, France. As part of the bohemian movement in the 1920s, artists were accepted as eccentrics, and their work usually ended up in the private collections of many prominent citizens. 16

The infusion of art into towns across the nation was a new experience for a majority of communities in the United States. In Roosevelt’s programs, artists were instructed to create work celebrating the local communities in their area. “The aim of the [New Deal art projects] is to work toward the integration of the arts with the daily life of the community, and an integration of the fine arts with the practical arts,” explained a government brochure. The art projects encouraged citizens to participate in the arts, and many found the opportunity to watch artists’ work, from the start of a new piece through its completion. 17

The federal programs allowed artists to remain in their towns of residence, or find new ones, instead of moving into cities to find work. However, at the start of these programs, many artists were required to return to their home state in order to qualify for federal aid. Once the artists had been enrolled in the various art programs in their state of residence, they were able to request a transfer to a different location.18

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18 For example, see Sharon Long Baerney, “Yvonne Twining,” 17 and Florence Brown on Bruce McKain, November 11, 1938, WPA Files, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.
This emphasis on the artists’ locations is evident in the themes of the artwork produced during this period. At the government’s “suggestion,” artists focused on American history, regionalism, and folklore while emphasizing the American spirit and the average worker-citizen. Artists began to emphasize “native themes” and rejected the European influences that had dominated American art in the 1920s. Dual motifs became present during this time period as the artists focused on social and economic desolation as well as on hope that the American dream could be revived.

The government hoped that a re-emphasis on the American spirit would instill hope and pride in citizens suffering the Depression. “To the educated New Dealer, who was no philistine,” wrote the historians Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, “the fine arts went hand in hand with a strong economy, the two together creating a distinctly American culture. Art, it was thought, might actually help people weather the Depression by giving them meaningful and hopeful communal (and governmental) symbols.” As other historians have commented, this emphasis upon nationalism in the arts, precipitated by the Depression, helped the artist “to find a direct and popular market for his wares.”

This need to strengthen the American spirit and give hope and pride to the citizens suffering in the Depression related to the artists as well. Like many workers during the 1930s, artists suffered economic uncertainty. Artists like Edward Bruce, who was able to make a meager living as professional artist in the 1920s, found themselves without income when the Depression hit. For artists who could not support themselves solely by the sale of their works, and thus had taken up teaching or other jobs, the economic crisis of the 1930s

threw their means of subsistence. Many of the artists who lived in Provincetown before
the Depression were supported with the help of the local community; fishermen sold fish off
the back of their boat for pennies and turned their old fish sheds into art studios or galleries
and in some cases they exchanged food for a piece of art.²⁰

The art boom of the 1920s, associated with the bull stock market, was primarily in
European art. Sales of American art in 1930 were valued at $20 million, less than one-tenth
the estimated total sales of imported art, at $250 million. Even these sales dropped off after
1931. From 1929 to 1934 many artists were forced to find work outside of their chosen
profession. The stock market crash limited jobs in the art sphere primarily to education.
When federal aid was offered through New Deal projects many artists enrolled so that they
could stay in or return to their desired profession.²¹

The New Deal programs treated artists as equally in need as the more established
working groups, like engineers and day laborers. From their conception the government
viewed the federal art programs as work organizations with goals no different from the other
relief programs – to employ citizens in need and then to return them to the private sphere.
The federal art programs helped artists survive very lean years and brought them into
mainstream society by treating them as “legitimate” workers. In a 1934 Report to the
Treasury, the stated purpose of the Public Works of Art Project was to “extend relief to the
professional class, its object being to employ artists who were unemployed.” Similarly, the
objective of the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, established 1935,
was “the employment of artists who are on the relief rolls…. The aim of the Project will be to
work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community…. “ The work

²⁰ Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, 18; Krahulik, Provincetown, 83, 97, 113-114, 116.
²¹ Harris, Federal Art, 16 as taken from Francis O’Connor’s Federal Support for the Visual Arts, 61.
relief projects for the artists had the same objective as the other federal employment programs, to employ struggling American workers.  

To give the artists in the federal projects some direction, the program administrators suggested that they focus on the “American Scene.” According to a Public Works of Art Project document, “It became necessary to devise a plan which would give the artists the largest measure of freedom of expression and … a plan which at the same time insured for the Government works of art that would in fact ‘embellish’ our public buildings. That is why the general theme, The American Scene, was selected.” The American Scene “… provided abundant food for imagination, and set no stringent limits on the artist’s choice of subject matter, since it allowed him to select any phase of life and setting of a vast country.” The New Deal emphasis on producing art that reflected uniquely American themes further tied the artists to the average worker. The government decided that the easiest way to reach the community, and employ artists, was through murals in local public buildings.


23 “Public Works of Art Project: Report,” 1, Holger Cahill Files; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, 23; Harris, Federal Art, 34-5; and Ross Moffett, “Moffett Rounds out Story of Provincetown Art Association,” The Advocate, September 11, 1958. The government work projects were: The Temporary Emergency Relief administration (TERA), 1931-1935; the Emergency Work Bureau (EWB, later called Emergency Work Relief), 1932-1935; the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), 1933-1934; the Treasury Department’s Section of Sculpture and Fine Arts (Section), 1934-1943; the Works Progress (later Projects) Admonition’s Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), 1935-1943; and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), 1935-1939. Between 1933 and 1943 the government employed and commissioned over ten thousand artists. They produced: 100,000 easel paintings, 18,000 sculptures, over 13,000 prints, and more than 4,000 murals. For more information on the general programs see also: Ronald Edsforth, The New Deal: America’s Response to the Great Depression (Wiley-Blackwell, 2000); Elliot Rosen, Roosevelt, the Great Depression, and the Economics of
George Biddle, a resident and artist from Truro, Massachusetts, (bordering Provincetown) and a friend of President Roosevelt since their school days at Groton, proposed the murals project. His 1933 prospectus, entitled “A Revival of Mural Painting,” led to the creation of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Biddle gathered, among others, Henry Varnum Poor, Maurice Sterne, Boardman Robinson and Thomas Benton, to create an outline to the struggling artists. They sketched out their proposal:

1. A few social-minded, creative artists of the first rank, representing a modern movement, and experienced in mural painting.
2. The assignment to them by the government of public wall space on which to express the social ideals of the government and people.
3. The understanding that in the personal expression and technical execution, the artists be given as complete freedom as possible. Interference would only tend to emasculate his work. The government may exercise the right to assign mural subjects and veto any expression of opinion which it considers embarrassing.

This prospectus was submitted to President Roosevelt on May 9, 1933.24

The President replied, “I am interested in your suggestion in regard to the expression of modern art through mural painting. I wish you would have a talk some day with the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Rover, who is in charge of the Public Building’s work.” But that response did not allow for the immediate creation of what would become the Public Works of Art Program [PWAP]. In November 1933, however, the Civil Works Administration [CWA] was founded and established. According to the historian Jonathan

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24 George Biddle, An American Artist’s Story (Boston, MA: Little Brown Publishing Company, 1939), 270; and McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 358. The four men that Biddle had enlisted for help were all established painters in their own right. Henry Varnum Poor was an internationally known artist and one of the first ten artists approved for federal funding, creating frescoes in the Department of Justice and the Interior. Maurice Sterne was a well-known Russian-born artist, and frequent Provincetown inhabitant, who in 1929 was elected as President of the Society of American painters. Boardman Robinson was a well-known artist who worked as a political cartoonist for Masses and Liberator magazines before teaching at the Art Students’ League in New York City. He also illustrated a volume of Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov. Thomas Benton was a well-known (and somewhat controversial) painter and muralist.
Harris, this federal agency created “about one hundred professional and white-collar job classifications for relief funding. Included among them was the category of ‘artist,’ and Harry Hopkins, chief relief administrator in Washington, committed more than $1 million to what became [on December 3, 1933] the Public Works of Art Project.” The federal money did not limit the artists to mural work, but also allowed for easel painting and sculpture.25

After four years of struggling to get by, the artists found assistance in the PWAP. Every state was represented in this program. The Project placed artists in communities across the country to “embellish [the] public buildings” and expose the population to American art. This was a new experience for many citizens because until that time artists had congregated in specific communities and enclaves like Provincetown and Greenwich Village. As towns across the nation began to incorporate artists into their communities, the view and treatment of artists began to shift. Slowly the stigma of artists as being eccentric and different lifted with their participation and infusion in towns nationwide.26

The experience of the community and artists in Provincetown varied from that of the typical place because the town had been home to, and destination of, many artists since the turn of the century. Famous already for its unique American history, the town had embraced artists as community members since their arrival. Provincetown was well known in the history of the United States for two different contributions. The more widely taught relates to the landing of the Mayflower in November 1620. It was in Provincetown that the Pilgrims wrote the Mayflower Compact, which established the laws of the new colony, and from here that they set off to Plymouth to settle permanently.

25 Franklin Roosevelt to George Biddle, May 19, 1933 as found in McDonald, 358; and Harris, Federal Art, 23-4. Edward Bruce and his co-director Forbes Watson retained administrative control in Washington, and divided the country into sixteen regions, each in charge of a volunteer committee which selected and employed artists within that region.

26 “Public Works of Art Project: Report,” 1, Holger Cahill Files.
The other prominent vein of Provincetown history was its prominence as an American, and international, art colony. In 1899, renowned painter, Charles Webster Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown. “By 1906,” author-activist and town resident, Mary Heaton Vorse, said, “the number of people living here whose activities and livelihood was devoted to the arts had reached a large enough percent of the total population to be given the title of being a colony. An art colony. During the summer months the colony swelled to several times its size.”27

The colony grew again after World War I as part of the post-Progressive Era “bohemian rebellion,” according to historian Karen Krahulik. “When expatriate bohemians returned to the United States,” Krahulik observes, “… many of them made Greenwich Village [in New York City] their first stop and Provincetown their second.” As the town’s art colony grew, so did its reputation as a home of “eccentrics” and creativity. The number of tourists climbed from the early 1900s until 1929. Artists came to the colony to experience its creative energies and take classes, and non-artists visited the town because of its natural beauty and bohemian reputation.28

To help support the artists and draw further interest and tourists to the town, local businessmen collaborated with artists to establish the Provincetown Art Association and Museum in 1914. The donation of works by the organizing artists, and two juried exhibitions mounted in the summer of 1915, began the Association’s traditions of collecting and exhibiting the work of local artists. By 1916, roughly six hundred artists and art students

27 Heaton Vorse, “View Through the Small End of the Telescope,” as found in 75 Years of American Art, 1914-1984 (Provincetown, MA: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 1984), 14; and Krahulik, Provincetown, 69. For more information on Charles Hawthorne see: Elizabeth McCausland, Charles W. Hawthorne: An American Figure Painter and Charles Webster Hawthorne’s Hawthorne on Painting. For more information on the first art colony see: Nyla Ahrens, Provincetown, The Art Colony: A Chronology and Guide; and Steve Shipp, American Art Colonies, 1850-1930: A Historical Guide to America’s Original Art Colonies and Their Artists.

28 Krahulik, Provincetown, 81; and Krahulik, Provincetown, 82.
were spending their summers in the town, and no fewer than six art schools were urging aspiring students to join them at “Land’s End.” The art schools attracted artists from across the country to learn under renowned artists’ tutelage and experience the beauty of the Cape tip. As these schools grew, so too did the town’s reputation as an artist’s haven and tourist attraction. The Boston Globe summarized this artistic energy in its banner headline of August 27, 1916: “Biggest Art Colony in the World At Provincetown.”

This influx of artists changed the dynamics of the town somewhat, as Portuguese fishermen and Yankee businessmen were forced to interact with the new residents and tourists. The influx of artists during the summer months aided the local economy as relationships were forged with the local fishermen and business owners. These new relationships generally helped the town, as artists and other “bohemians” rented rooms from the residents and patronized to the local shops. These friendships became vital as the economy faltered in the ‘30’s. From her interviews of residents from this time, historian Karen Krahulik concludes that, “ultimately, the complexity of the art colony helped Provincetown develop into a busy resort town.”


30 Krahulik, Provincetown, 96. The Provincetown fishermen did not receive direct relief from the WPA, but their families benefited from the provisions the WPA handed out in the town hall. Many fishermen supplemented their income by rum-running. The WPA and the town’s board of selectmen arranged jobs for other Provincetown residents in need of work. These jobs included beach cleanup and mosquito control, book and toy repair, school lunch and sewing services, and teaching boys how to construct and operate a mock town government. Krahulik, 113-121.
Two sets of artists took up residence in Provincetown. The first lived in the town on a more permanent basis and rented studios or apartments from the locals for months, or even years, on end, or bought their own property. These artists, such as Karl Knaths, Hans Hofmann and Charles Hawthorne, were professionals who made a living by selling their works or teaching art classes. The community accepted these artists as residents and contributing members of the town. Their presence did not drastically change the town's dynamics, as these residents brought benefits to residents who became landlords and shop owners that obtained more business. A second group of artists came to the town as seasonal residents. These artists came, mainly during the summer, to experience life on the Cape tip or to take classes at one of the art schools or from a specific teacher. The community accepted this annual influx of artists as beneficial for the local economy.31

When the PWAP was established, the experience of citizens and artists in Provincetown was different than elsewhere in the country because of its established tradition as an artists' colony. Artists had been integrated into and valued by the community since the turn of the twentieth century. For example, a 1931 article in the town newspaper, The Advocate, celebrated the arrival of the artists for the summer season. It described an “Artists and Models Ball,” a “reception dance in honor of resident and visiting Artists, their Models and Classes is in belated recognition of the importance to Provincetown and the Cape generally of the Annual [sic] migration to these parts of Fine Arts folk.”32

Provincetown residents supported their artists' participation in the Public Works of Art Project in the same way that they had encouraged the artists' work within the town. The Advocate published news of PWAP projects and exhibits whenever they related to local

31 Del Deo, Figures in a Landscape, 163-4; and Krahulik, Provincetown, 83, 97.
artists. A January 1934 article reported the murals being created in the “Highland, Peaked Hill and Wood End Coast Guard stations.” It highlighted the fact that “all activities of the art project of the Cape will be directed from Provincetown.” In March of that year an article boasted that an exhibition of local PWAP artists held in Boston “will be sent to Washington to be included with those from other regions.”

The Massachusetts section of the PWAP employed such Provincetown artists as Vernon Smith, Karl Knaths, William Zorach and Ross Moffett. The positive response that the PWAP received in Provincetown was matched by the President’s thoughts on the program. Roosevelt called the art created under the PWAP “robust and American,” praising its lack of “slavery to classical standards and decadence common to much European art.” This program and its art that revealed “hope and courage” came to end, however, when the President decided to end the CWA to balance the budget in April 1934.

The Public Works of Art Project set the example for the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), established in 1935 under Holger Cahill. Cahill’s background was in American art, with an interest in Folk Art. Before his appointment in the FAP, he was a writer for several art magazines, acted as a folk art buyer for Mrs. Nelson Rockefeller, and directed the Museum of Modern Art. Cahill had been

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34 McKinzie, New Deal for Artists, 31; and Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, 48. The PWAP created over 15,600 works of art.

Artists were made aware of the termination of their project through a telegram or letter similar to this one from John D. Hatch, Jr., a Director in the PWAP, to Vernon Smith:

Dear Mr. Smith,

I have just received word from Washington that all work under the P.W.A.P. will be discontinued as of April 28th. We greatly regret this action.... It has been a great pleasure to have had the privilege of working with you under this Project and I wish to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the help you have given us in putting this movement across.

intimately involved with the PWAP and its co-head Edward Bruce. After the PWAP, Bruce had become head of another art project, the Treasury Department’s Section of Fine Art and Sculpture. This was not a relief project; the Section employed artists after a rigorous competition process and only accepted the work of established and “qualified” artists. Provincetown artists were involved in both programs, but it was the FAP that established itself in the town and employed over twenty artists from the community.  

Cahill’s vision for an art-relief program came from his belief that art was an experimental, unpredictable activity, which must be supported in all its diversity, and that it held the power to unite society through participation in the arts and help spur the recovery of the American dream. Art, Cahill thought, could remind citizens of their celebrated past and reinvigorate faith in the American government. He believed that art could renew a sense of hope while fostering an “American” art scene separate from the European one that had been dominant throughout the early 1900s. In one of his personal letters, Cahill wrote that the Project had the broad task of “transmitting our cultural heritage to the larger mass of the populous....” Placing artists in a community would inspire the local people and connect the mood of suffering citizens with a great and joyous history represented in art.  

Because of these convictions, Cahill was appointed head of the Federal Art Project, part of the Professional and Service Division of the WPA established in May 1935 under Harry Hopkins. The first WPA projects were approved on July 1, 1935, but it was not until

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August 29 that the first presidential allocations were made. On September 12, 1935, the arts program received the final authoritative approval of the President. The four goals of the FAP were to employ artists, educate students, expand art programs into more rural areas of the country, and conduct research into America’s cultural past. The main purpose of the FAP, like the other relief programs, was to allow artists to continue in their profession and help them reenter the private sector once the economy began to recover. Through its employment of artists on relief nationwide and not just in urban areas, Cahill hoped to show that citizen-artists were productive workers in all parts of society. At its peak in 1936, the FAP employed over 5,000 artists.37

As the Federal Art Project was a part of the Works Progress Administration, it adhered to the stated purposes of such federal relief. According to the federal procedures for professional and service projects, all “projects will be designed to provide employment for all eligible persons equipped by experience, training, and ability for the type of work involved.” Even when the service projects in the fields of “Writing, Plastic Arts, Music and Theatre” were established within the WPA, their directors were not given any special considerations or allowances. The FAP was treated and considered the same as the other relief programs.38

Washington remained in strict control of the Federal Art Project. According to a government publication, “Because of the particular profession and technical requirements in these fields, we wish to give a large measure of direction to the projects from

37 Del Deo, Figures in a Landscape, 189; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 123; and Amity Art Foundation, WPA Artists, Prints from the Amity Art Foundation, 4. For the federal directors’ outline of the relation between federal projects and the Professional and Service Division see Professional and Service Projects, Bulletin No. 29, WPA, September 4, 1935, Section 7 as reprinted in McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 130-1. See also the Federal Art Project Manual (October 1935), 1 as reprinted in McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 383; McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists; Harris, Federal Art And National Culture; and Meltzer, Violins and Shovels.

38 Advisory Committee on Allotments, “Professional and Service Projects, Bulletin No. 29, W.P.A,” September 4, 1935 as printed in McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 130-1;
Washington... The national scope of the Project required bureaucratic organization. The internal power structure of the FAP was made up of five tiers, in a pyramidal design, at the top of which was Holger Cahill, the national director seated in Washington. The next tier down was the “field adviser” section, a group of Washington appointed officials who acted on Cahill’s behalf, monitoring the Project’s activities around the country. These advisors were not attached to any specific region but maintained “free-range nation wide.” In addition to ensuring the correct local administration of national guidelines, they advised and supervised the next tier of decision makers, the “regional and state directors.” These managers appointed and monitored the ground-level administrators and the day-to-day operation of their projects, through their direction of “district art supervisors” and a “local advisory committee.”

These highly organized regulations also applied to artists. Any artist who wished to be enrolled in the Project had to register with the United States Employment Service as “in need” and able “to fill all requirements for labor received from the WPA.” Artists were then classified, as outlined in the FAP manual, according to an evaluation of their “practical skills.” The activities of the FAP were roughly divided into three types: production of works of art, art education, and art research. Over fifty per cent of the personnel employed in the Project fit into the first category.

39 Proceedings from the Conference of State Administrators, Group No. 4, June 19, 1935 as reprinted in McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 131-2; Harris, Federal Art, 30. See also Minutes of the Meeting of Group 4 of the Conference of State Administrators of the Works Progress Administration, June 1935, Holger Cahill Files, Series 3.12, Reel 1105, Frame 0533, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/cahiholg/container183585.htm (accessed April 4, 2009).

40 Letter A-84, Federal Emergency Relief Administration, May 22, 1935, as reprinted in McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 189; and McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 422. The four classifications of artists eligible for the Project were: Class A – Professional and technical workers, “experienced in their skill and ... capable of producing creative work of a high standard of excellence,” was also supervised the activities of artists in the lower classifications; Class B – Skill artists able to
The bureaucratic nature of the FAP trickled down to affect the daily lives of the artists. Like their supervisors and "sponsors," artists had to fill out numerous documents to maintain their eligibility within the Project. Work and time cards had to be filled out on a monthly basis and supervisors "checked in" on their artists every two weeks. Though the artists were classified as state wage laborers, they retained the right to work in their own studios and choose when to complete the required number of hours. Artists in the Project had hours of work fixed between 120 and 140 a month. It was intended that the average rate of pay should be $50 per worker per month, or $600 per year. Easel painters had the most freedom, as they were able to work in their own studios and their supervisors could pick the works they thought were of the highest quality. The works that were created on the Project remained forever the legal property of the federal state on "permanent loan" and were not offered for sale. The easelists were still required to submit finished works on a regular basis, however. Mural artists had this same freedom when creating their preparatory sketches; after that, they had to work on site. The artists who worked on murals or specific commissions were also subject to more intense scrutiny as both their immediate employers and government officials acted as supervisors.⁴¹

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⁴¹ Harris, *Federal Art*, 33; McDonald, 105.; and Federal Art Project Manual, 10, 22 as quoted in McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 428. After the WPA reorganization in 1939 the hour requirements for artists changed. Artists had to work no less than thirteen hours a month but not more than eight hours a day and forty hours a week. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 312.
The allocation of art created on the Project was just as regimented as the artists' approval process. Works of art created under the FAP could be loaned to public agencies or institutions—supported in whole or in part by tax funds—whose functions did not include the purchase of works of art. Such organizations or “sponsors” were then eligible to request loans of works of art, or the creation of murals, with the approval of the State Art Director who would then obtain a final approval from the Director of the Federal Art Project.42

The final aspect of government supervision was the “suggestion” that the content of the artwork be “American” or “regional.” The government believed that if the art was supposed to connect to the local community and recreate a sense of the American dream, there had to be something with which the community could identify. To re-instill a sense of hope in the population, the art was supposed to remind each community of its history and past successes. Thus, many of the works of art that remain today depict the exact community of the artist, showing historical scenes, or based on themes of industry, production and agriculture.

Despite these suggestions, Cahill and the other Project leaders understood the creative and physical needs of the artists and allowed them to paint how, and to some extent when, they chose. This fact was evident in the very diverse styles shown in the exhibitions of Project artists across the country. For example, “Composition” by Karl Knaths, an abstract depiction of two men engaged in conversation on the eve of Election Day, was given as

42 “Operating Procedure No. W-12 of the Works Progress Administration” as reprinted in McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 275-6; and Harris, Federal Art, 34. A ‘sponsor’ was needed, as of June 15, 1935, “to offer a definite plan and procedure for the employment of persons on relief rolls.” In regards to non-government institutions or organizations obtaining artwork, there was a system of “after-the-face” allocation, in which they paid a small materials fee to acquire objects on “permanent loan” from the federal government. It was through these actions that orphanages, veterans groups, and other organizations obtained Project artwork. See “Operating Procedure No. W-1 Revised,” July 2, 1937 and “Operating Procedure No. W-12,” March 20, 1937, in the WPA Public Procedures vol. 60 as reprinted in Tonelli, “Avant-Garde in Boston,” 45.
much prominence as a realistic drypoint portrait of a little girl by George Constant. The first national exhibit of FAP work was organized by Cahill at the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington, D.C., from June 15 to July 5, 1936. This exhibit showcased a cross section of the Project art produced in the past year. Cahill also organized the show “New Horizons in American Art,” held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in the fall of 1936. These two shows began a series of localized traveling exhibitions that lasted until the FAP was cancelled in 1943.  

Even with the flexible understanding of federal and local administrators, the bureaucracy of the FAP changed the way that many artists worked. Time pressures dictated by the process of supervision were difficult for some artists to work with. While some artists liked the pressures created by such deadlines, others felt stressed to complete and submit their work, whether they were satisfied with the final product or not. Some artists felt that the time constraints tampered with their artistic process. Those artists or government officials appointed as supervisors felt this pressure as well. For example, about the artist Charles Heinz, Provincetown supervisor Florence Brown wrote, “must speed up his works!” The very idea of having a “supervisor” was troublesome for some artists: “there were supervisors to come and check on us. They were spot checking where we lived, who we

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43 Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, 181, 192; Joyce Johnson, “The WPA Program: When Art Went Public,” *Cape Cod Antiques and Art* (June 1997), 3; Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, 163; and McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 475 and Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, 163. From January 1936 to August 1938 the FAP reported that it had circulated 228 exhibitions to its art centers and other places, had presented 1,116 individual showings, and had included in these exhibitions some 8,000 works of art. See Letter Parker to Riddick, 24 August 1938 as reprinted in McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 477.
lived with, whether we were making extra money, whether we were really producing — so there were some nasty people...."44

The burdens of bureaucracy seem to have been mitigated by the benefits of a steady paycheck. The government was able to pay more than many galleries had done before the Depression, and, as wage laborers, the artists were guaranteed a set income. Cahill understood that the flow of money to the artists was more important than catering to the individual needs of each person employed by the FAP. The bureaucracy, though a burden at times, was the only means of maintaining this steady income. Harry Gottlieb described the FAP as the only way for artists to make money in their field: "When the Depression started... it was very, very hard for the artists — many of them didn’t have much to begin with. I got on the Project."45

The bureaucracy of the Federal Art Project was not limited to the national organization, but was also established in each state. To further complicate matters, each state implemented the national policies in a slightly different way. Federal legislation allowed each State Director the freedom to execute the federal directives and organization within their state as he or she saw fit. This allowed the larger states, or those with more participants, a slightly different structure than their counterparts. Washington retained ultimate control over Project decisions, the approval process and new regulations. For instance, Massachusetts WPA administrator Arthur Roch decided to operate the projects on a statewide basis. This meant that artists would not have to be assigned to specific work

projects, but could be placed under the loose administrative umbrella of “Easel Project, Massachusetts.” Within this organization, however, the artists were assigned a supervisor in each area to which they moved. Massachusetts also strayed from the national model by giving its State Directors authority to make single purchases of supplies for its artists (if not exceeding twenty-five dollars in amount).46

Like elsewhere in the state and country, the biggest impact of the Federal Art Project on the Provincetown art community was its bureaucratic institution. In a town where tourists and artists had flocked for leisure time, inspiration, and relaxation, artists were now faced with having to answer to someone other than themselves. Though Provincetown had a small government, the town itself worked through a loose organization of businessmen, fishermen and artists. The bureaucracy instituted with the Project changed the way that the town’s artists worked and lived.47

The most important man for the Provincetown artists in this bureaucratic chain of command was fellow-artist Vernon Smith. WPA State Director Harley Perkins appointed Smith Superintendent of the southeast region of Massachusetts on September 1, 1936. Smith served as the primary link between the artists and the FAP administration. He was instructed to “make a point of calling upon each artist in [his] group twice a month.” Smith was responsible for recording each artist’s progress and completed works, their weekly Time Reports, and the allocation of their work. Though he resided in Orleans, he had to travel throughout his region on a weekly basis to check in on the artists. As supervisor, Smith was

46 Tonelli, “Avant-Garde in Boston,” 44; and McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 398.
47 Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, xvii; Francis O’Connor, Art for the Millions, 18; and “W.A. Art Project,” The Advocate, January 11, 1934: 1.
not entitled to much more than the artists - he was required to work fifty-five hours a week and was allotted a monthly salary of $130.00. 48

In Provincetown, the lowest-level supervisor, directly responsible for the artists, was Mrs. Florence Brown. While employed by the FAP, Brown was both an artist and a supervisor. This was not a unique situation as many supervisors across the country were also artists. For example, Provincetown associated artists Philip Evergood and Lee Krasner acted as supervisors in New York City while also participating in the Project as artists. In Provincetown there was no evidence that fellow artists, supervisors, the Project, or Brown herself felt that this dual role compromised either position. There were very few times when she “supervised” herself and as she was the lowest-level supervisor she did not have the ability to make decisions about herself that she could not make for other artists. In Provincetown the supervisors worked very closely with the artists and tried to meet as many of their needs and requests as possible. There was no discernable advantage to Brown being both a supervisor and employed artist. 49

As supervisors, Smith and Brown kept detailed, and personal, reports of all the Provincetown artists involved in the Project. The official progress cards kept by the supervisors include notes not only about the progress and quality of their work but also of the temperaments and personalities of the artists. The supervisors had the difficult task of

48 Harley Perkins to Vernon Smith, September 9, 1936, Vernon Smith Files, Provincetown Art Association and Museum; Tonelli, “Avant-Garde in Boston,” 44; O’Connor, Art for the Millions, 18; and “W.A. Art Project,” The Advocate, January 11, 1934: 1. See also the WPA and Vernon Smith files at the Provincetown Art Association; and Museum and the Vernon Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, (reel 5).
keeping the artists on schedule while allowing them the freedom to explore their creative process and maintain their habits. For example, about the artist Elliot Orr, Vernon Smith wrote, he “works slowly and likes to keep his canvases on beyond several months to make sure they are of a quality to leave his studio.” While it was unorthodox for an artist to keep his or her works so long, given the Project organization and deadlines, supervisor Florence Brown understood Orr’s needs and concluded that “He is very conscientious and is handing in his best work to the Project... and should be allowed all the time he wants.”

Not all artists were able to work with such understanding supervisors. Even within the group considered to be “Provincetown artists,” the artists’ experiences in the federal art programs varied. Provincetown artists include traditional realists like Vernon Coleman and Yvonne Twining and modernists like Jackson Pollock and Karl Knaths. Of the dozens of artists considered “Provincetown artists” because of their connection to the town or their periods of residence in the community, only about twenty were consistently enrolled in the WPA/FAP in Provincetown during the 1930s.

Different types of artists worked in Provincetown, and the WPA/FAP employed and supported all types throughout the 1930s. This was not the case in some of the other

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government art programs, such as the Treasury Relief Art Program [TRAP] and the Treasury Section of Fine Art and Sculpture [Section]. Some of the other art programs did not, like the WPA/FAP, include all “levels” of artists – students to established professional artists. Both TRAP and the Section had relatively rigorous application procedures to pick only the “best” works, and this favored established artists. Edward Bruce, the head of the Section, specifically refused to undertake a relief program and instead concentrated on commissioning quality embellishments for Federal buildings. Since it was not technically a relief program, the Section was able to strictly control the participating artists.\(^{52}\)

The WPA/FAP also put aside the debate in art circles across the country about the value and consideration of “modern” art, paying and treating all artists the same. Nationally, a separation had developed between traditional artists and the younger modern and abstract artists. Robert Beverly Hale, an artist and teacher at the Art Students League in New York City in the 1930s and 40s and later the head of the American Arts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, clearly remembers the traditional-modernist division. About the divide between the two groups, Hale said, “what has always amazed me is the deep separation between artists during the days of the abstract expressionists, they seemed to be utterly divided from the conservative artists. Certainly they never went to each other’s funerals I can assure you.” The WPA/FAP did not discriminate between these two groups. This acceptance was particularly beneficial for the many Provincetown artists who spent the 1930s experimenting with new styles and techniques. Many of Hale’s peers, like Karl Knaths, Dorothy Loeb, and Stuart Davis, among others, were able to continue developing and

experimenting throughout the Depression. It was from the work of artists like these that the “modern” and “pop” art of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s developed and flourished.\textsuperscript{53}

The structure of the FAP allowed artists during the 1930s to continue with their work. Artists in Provincetown were able to remain in the community and keep alive its reputation as an artists’ destination. The bureaucracy of the WPA/FAP did not leave the town unaffected, however, because with the government aid came new procedures and regulations. In theory, the government aid kept thousands of artists employed; in practice, the programs changed some aspects of the artistic process and the artists’ work.

The bureaucracy that some of the artists and supervisors found cumbersome actually enabled the WPA/FAP to function and employ such a large amount of artists. As the purpose of the FAP was to employ artists until they could reenter the private sector, the government organization was designed for administrative efficiency, not to produce the best creative environment for its employees. In each city and town, the enforcement of Project rules and regulations differed. In Provincetown, however, the bureaucracy of the Federal Art Project did not change the established town dynamics or the freedom of the artists to create and experiment with their work. The Project helped Provincetown to survive the Depression, just as it allowed a generation of artists to continue to work and create in the 1930s.

"I gave them my worst work and I’ll tell you why. I knew it was a fraud," said Provincetown-New York artist Maurice Sievan about his time in the Federal Art Project. "The object was not to promote art, the object was just to make it comfortable for us so we could make a living, so we could survive as artists…. I had an idea that it was really temporary and I also knew that as soon as the Depression was over they would take our work and throw it in the ashcan – the best of it; it didn’t make any difference.” Sievan’s belief, that the WPA/FAP would be a relatively short-lived enterprise, turned out to be true, as was his guess about the probable fate of much of the completed work. Based on his cynical view of the FAP, Sieven concluded, “So I knew this was a temporary thing, they wanted us to survive and I was going to survive and take it easy and get as much paint from them as possible, and brushes. I still have some brushes and paint from that time.” Sievan saw the flaw of federal sponsorship of the arts before many of his peers; the government sponsored artists in a relief effort and thus placed emphasis on the employment of these individuals and not on the works that they produced or their social contributions.54

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Sally Avery, the wife of renowned artist Milton Avery, had a different impression of the WPA/FAP. "I think the WPA was terrific," she remembered, "It gave like a breathing space for all those artists who could have a chance to work, a lot of good things came out of it." George McNeil had similar recollections of his time in the Project. "It was a very, very gratifying experience," the artist said, "...it was marvelous in the sense of working day in and day out for five years. I was on the Project from 1935 to 1940 and I did a tremendous amount of work in that time."  56

The experiences of the artists enrolled in the Federal Art Project differed depending upon each artist and his/her respective location. Some artists felt confined by the regulations of the government program while others were happy to adjust to the federal standards in return for a guaranteed paycheck. It seems that most of the artists had some mixed emotions in their assessments of the Project; they struggled with, but grew accustomed to, the guidelines of the government bureaucracy, and they were all thankful for recognition from, and security in, the Project. In retrospect, the lasting memories of most FAP artists were of their relationships with fellow artists and supervisors, their creative processes and experimentation, and the in feelings of belonging to a community.  57

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For many artists, being supervised and having the theme for their work "suggested" by Project administrators were new experiences. The FAP informed the artists that their purpose in the Project was to bring art to the people and to celebrate the history and culture of every geographic location. The government deemed "Americanism" to be the unifying artistic theme, but it was up to the artists to translate and produce its meaning. The muralists felt more pressure from the government's "suggested" themes than the easel painters, who were more free to choose their subject matter. For artists in the Midwest, "Americanism" meant themes of industrialism and agricultural work; in New York City it meant themes of immigration, lower class workers, and the importance of the port; and in Washington, D.C., common themes were a celebration of the government and American citizens.  

Some artists' styles and creative process could be more easily adapted than others to the regionalism and Americanism stressed in the New Deal art. As the intention of the Project was to employ as many professional artists as possible, the administrators did not go out of their way to be respectful of each artist's creativity. Ultimately, the enrolled artists were subject to the preferences of their immediate supervisors and commissioners. For example, Provincetown artist Karl Knaths was commissioned by the Treasury's Section to paint a mural in the post office in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. His initial sketches contrasted the mail delivery of pioneer days with modern practices. The supervisors asked Knaths to expand upon the pioneer theme but, after visiting Rehoboth, the artist sent another idea: "The whole life and existence of the town is in its beach. They have a boardwalk on piles and at each corner a step leads to the beach." Knaths wanted to downplay the mail service and

58 Baerny, “Yvonne Twining,” 17-18; Paul, “Byron Browne,” 10; Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, xviii-iii, 16, 47, 59; Del Deo, Figures in a Landscape, 190-1; McKinzie, The New Deal for American Artists, 31; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, 24, 31, 163, 169; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 383, 424, 465; and Purposes, Functions, Techniques: Federal Art Project Exhibitions, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art.
celebrate the town and its beautiful location. The supervisors preferred the “pioneer theme” of early mail delivery, however, and so to keep the commission Knaths painted a rural setting in which the mail is delivered at the country store.  

Despite the differences over the mural’s theme, the Section allowed Knaths to paint in his more abstract style. Within the mural, Knaths expressed his cubist and semiabstract approach through shifting, flat areas of color with a structure of black lines. Instead of a realist interpretation of the pony express, which would have looked similar to a photograph, Knaths used large swatches of color and thicker black outlines in his images. There is a linear quality to the mural that a realist painting would lack. The final mural was a compromise between Knaths’s modern style, his expression of the American scene, and the Section supervisors’ thoughts on the subject.  

Each piece of work created for the federal art programs was the result of a sort of negotiation between the artists’ vision and interpretation of the “suggested” themes and the government and supervisors’ guidelines. Across the country, artists’ regionalism was expressed in as many different ways as “Americanism.” Even within one state, the chosen themes and interpretations varied according to specific local history and practices. In Provincetown, the artists created works dedicated to fishing, cranberrying, whaling, farming, the Pilgrims, the Indians, and other local occupations or historical figures and events. Thomas Somes painted “nice little figures of fishermen, etc.,” while Ross Moffett depicted

59 Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 47, 125-6. In 1934 the Treasury Department Arts Projects, Painting and Sculpture for Federal Buildings - known as “the Section” - was created to employ artists to paint murals in federal buildings. Unlike the WPA/FAP, artists had to submit their sketches and pass a rigorous discrimination process before being chosen for a project. The Section, at the time, was viewed as somewhat more prestigious because it accepted limited artists and designs, only of the “highest” quality. For more on the Section, see: McDonald, Federal Relief Administration; Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas; O’Connor, Art for the Millions; McKinzie, New Deal for Artists; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation; and Treasury Department Art Projects: Sculptures and Paintings for Federal Buildings, The Whitney Museum, 1936.

60 Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, 125-6.
"the Pilgrim fathers coming ashore after the landing of the Mayflower and two dory fishermen" in his mural in the town’s high school. Perhaps because many artists came to Provincetown because of the local beauty and history, or perhaps because many of them were accustomed to painting landscapes and local scenes, the Project artists in town did not complain about the regionalist “suggestions” made by the FAP supervisors. 61

To the artists in each region of the Project, the local supervisors were the face of the federal government and the agents who enforced the federal regulations. In Provincetown, town director, Florence Brown, and regional supervisor, Vernon Smith, oversaw the work of the community’s artists. For the most part, the artists appreciated the supervisors and understood the need for bureaucracy. Provincetown painter Elliot Orr, for example, described Smith as “an intelligent and pleasant man to work with.” Another artist, Elizabeth Tracey of Boston, called the supervisors “the backbone of the projects.” Though the bureaucracy imposed supervision upon the artists, most understood that the supervisors’ sensitivity, flexibility, and encouragement could create a positive atmosphere for their work and experimentation. Whether working in the town or on outside commissions, however, artists were subject to constant supervision. 62

The supervisors visited the mural artists on a more frequent basis than the easelists. The muralists were also held to slightly more rigid standards because of the “public nature of their work,” as a Chicago supervisor stated. On a national scale, the muralists were afforded


62 Elliot Orr to “Mom,” May 1937, Elliot Orr Papers, Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institute as reprinted in Tonelli, “Avant-Garde in Boston,” 45; Tonelli, “Avant-Garde in Boston,” 44-5; Moffett, Art in Narrow Streets, 60; Harris, Federal Art, 33; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 130-2, 185, 196, 426-8; WPA Files, Provincetown Art Association and Museum; and Vernon Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, (Reel 5).
less liberty and freedom than the easel painters. Because the sponsors commissioned the murals, they were able to specify certain criteria and were involved in the approval process of the artists’ sketches and preliminary designs. A “sponsor” was an authorized governmental agency – anything that was tax-supported and not a private institution – and it was required to pay twenty-five percent of the total costs of the mural. The supervisor’s job was to ensure that the muralists remained true to the vision of those who had commissioned the works. The artists were given some freedom of style, but in some instances the commissioning person or group told the muralists to shy away from more abstract or surrealist modes. The supervisors, as well as the men, women, or group sponsoring the mural, usually kept a very close eye on the artists through all the stages of their work: sketches, scaled painting, and finally painting the mural.63

It was the supervisors’ job to remain connected with their easel artists in a timely manner as well. Every two to three weeks a supervisor would check in with the easel artists and note their progress in official reports filed with the government agency. There were not strict time constraints in the easel division of the FAP, because the artists were rarely commissioned to create a specific painting. For this same reason, the easel painters were free to create out of their daily experiences or imagination.64


64 Philip Evergood, Interview by Forrest Selvig, Transcript, December 3, 1968; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 403; and Dubin, “Artistic Production,” 675.
Through their interactions with their easel painters and muralists, the Project supervisors compiled files that were extensive and thorough. In their role as local administrators, FAP supervisors commented on everything from an artist's demeanor to skill with a paintbrush and pencil. In Provincetown, each artist on the Project had at least three note cards filled, front and back, with their progress, problems, and current location, work, and enrollment status.

About their twenty artists, Smith and Brown wrote copious notes. Their comments ranged from: "still puzzles me, he's so good and so very bad," to "in every way a definite asset to the project – is kind, helpful and has been impressed upon by people on the project," to "when he gets talking on chemistry it is hard to stop him," and, "he gave me very bad water colors which seemed like things any self-respecting person would throw away. I feel he was trying to put something over on me because I was new...." No detail seemed too small as each supervisor tried to leave as much concise information as possible for the next meeting, in case a different administrator paid that artist a visit in two weeks time.  

The artists did not see the notes that their supervisors wrote about them, but they were aware that their progress was being marked. This relationship between artists and supervisors had a significant impact on how the artists felt about the FAP and their enrollment in the program. The artists within Provincetown dealt primarily with Florence Brown, though Smith did appear regularly. The artists commissioned to paint elsewhere in the area dealt mainly with Vernon Smith in his bi-monthly check-ups. Brown and Smith

\[65\] Vernon Smith about Robert Rogers an easel painter, March 25, 1937; Florence Brown about John Gregory, lithograph printer, June 1, 1937; Florence Brown about Harold Walker, easel painter, November 26, 1937; and Florence Brown about George Yater, easel painter, June 1, 1937, all from the Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.
were both liked by the artists they supervised, because, as artists themselves, they understood
the nature of an artist’s working process.66

Most of the Provincetown artists who were given commissions out of the town were
sent elsewhere on the Cape to paint murals. This mural project extended to school buildings,
town halls, court buildings and community centers. This in turn created another set of
bureaucratic relationships, as the artists had to cooperate with and listen to the school
supervisors or school boards, local officials, and other community leaders in charge of the
new projects. Sketches of the project had to be approved by both the Project supervisor –
usually Smith – and the local administrator from the town, and later the regional and
sometimes national offices of the FAP, before the actual painting could even begin. And
once these projects were started, the artists had to contend with the timetables and
expectations of both the Project and the local community.67

The pressure of these timetables was not limited to the muralists, as the easel painters
often had monthly quotas to make. As the artist Giorgio Cavallon explained, the amount of
time given to each artist to complete his or her painting depended upon its size: “Twenty-four
by sixteen or sixteen by twenty-four they gave you six weeks [for the final piece]. Twenty
four by thirty gives you eight weeks and like that.” As a result of this quick pace some artists
were afraid that, although their work was documented, it would be lost or not properly
recorded. Their fears were not unwarranted, as local, regional, and federal administrators

66 Vernon Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institute, (Reel 6); and The WPA files,
Provincetown Art Association and Museum. The artists who worked in under the FAP in
Provincetown for more than a few weeks included: John Beauchamp, William Bicknell, Florence
Brown, Vernan Coleman, Fritz Fuglister, John Gregory, Chaim Gross, Gordon Ham, Charlie Heinz,
Edith Hughes, Charles Kaeselau, Karl Knaths, Blanche Lazzell, Dorothy Loeb, Harold Lund, Bruce
McKain, Philip Malicoat, Ross Moffett, Elliot Orr, Fritz Pfeiffer, Vollain B. Rann, Robert Rogers,
Thomas Somes, Harold Walker, George Yater
67 Vernon Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institute, (Reel 6); and the WPA Files,
Provincetown Art Association and Museum.
were known to "lose," destroy, or sell paintings as scrap canvas. Many easel painters, like Charles Heinz, requested that the government aid them in securing photographs of their work. A November 1936 WPA ruling, however, prevented the Project from assisting the artists in this way. Vernon Smith, in an attempt to help the artists who desired photographs, allowed Heinz and other artists to take photos of their work once it was completed and even returned a few paintings to Heinz so he could photograph them himself.  

Just as artists' requests for paint, photographs, or more time, were met, or not, depending on the local supervisor, the supervisors also allowed varying degrees of leniency in style and subject matter. Provincetown was one place where artists were encouraged to experiment with new mediums. Abstract artists were treated with as much respect and given as much credit as their more traditional peers. For example, Florence Brown wrote about Fritz Pfeiffer that he "understands principles [of] modern art and abstraction [that] he uses. ...[He paints] unusual and fairly distinguished oil landscapes which seem to please conservative folks in spite of their rather modern quality...."  

Despite the praise that Brown bestowed upon certain works by Pfeiffer, the artist was not immune to the criticism and critique of his other works by the supervisors. "[Pfeiffer's] work is often superficial," Brown wrote in more than one entry. Nearly all of the artists were critiqued, as such feedback was considered one of the duties of the FAP administrators. The easel painters submitted their work to a supervisor who would determine if the painting was


of a “reasonable degree of acceptability.” If the painting did not meet such criteria, it would be criticized and returned. In the case of the muralists, the comments came from both the Project supervisors and the sponsors of that particular work.\(^{70}\)

The supervisor’s role within the FAP combined similar aspects of both foreman on a work site and professor in a classroom. They had to keep their “workers” on task, and producing, while providing encouragement and critiques when necessary. A 1935 brochure entitled *Purposes, Functions, Techniques: Federal Art Project Exhibitions* stated that the supervisor’s role was “to encourage young artists so that they may develop their talents as fully as possible,” but also that they were to maintain the “quality of work” acceptable to the Project. The tension within the supervisor position was similar to what many artists felt as laborers. Each group had to satisfy two criteria: dedication to their work in the arts and an adherence to the bureaucratic rules of government relief programs.\(^{71}\)

Provincetown artist, Philip Evergood, recalled that his job as a WPA supervisor in New York City during the Depression was, “to be a liaison man between the government project, the government people in Washington, and the head of the New York Office; and see that something was produced, see that they got the canvases there once a month or once every three weeks, that they brought a canvas in that was respectable[y] done and craftsmanlike and not just any old sloppy thing.” Holger Cahill himself said that it was the supervisors who judged “the qualifications of these people... and [who were] responsible for

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\(^{70}\) Florence Brown note on Fritz Pfeiffer, March 16, 1936 and July 15, 1937, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum; McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 403.

the work [the artists] turned in... and saw what they were doing and that it was the sort of stuff that we wanted.”

The supervisor-artist relationship could be strained, depending upon the artists and the nature of their own work or commission. Fritz Fuglister, an oil and watercolorist, developed a tense relationship with his supervisors after being commissioned for works outside of Provincetown. Because of his reputation, Fuglister was given the project of painting a mural at the new Falmouth Police Station early in 1937. After the approval of the sketches for the two-paneled, four-by-twelve foot mural, Fuglister had begun painting by April 4 of that year. Fuglister chose the neutral subject matter of a shipyard with gas buoy and seagulls for the mural. The note from Brown on the twentieth of July reads, “coming [along] very well, almost finished – excellent effect using the oil transparent-luminal over colors, gives matte, fresco-like effect.” This praise was fairly short-lived. When Mrs. Brown visited the mural (after Fuglister moved on to another mural project) she found that he “needs to do more work to finish Falmouth mural!” because the piece was very roughly finished. Fuglister promised he would polish and complete the mural “next time he is here.”

The headache that Fuglister had become to Brown did not end with the Falmouth mural. In June of the same year, Fuglister was selected by Edward Surprise and “Mr. Thompson” of the building committee of a new school in Harwich to paint a mural in the cafeteria. Unlike the apparently lenient expectations of the Falmouth Police Station mural commissioners, the Harwich school sponsors had stylistic concerns and fairly strict criteria.

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72 Philip Evergood, Interview by Forrest Selvig, Transcript, December 3, 1968; and Holger Cahill, Interview by John Morse, Transcript, April 12, 1960.

for the artist. "They want a mural but don't want a modern job – nor the social struggle – nor vegetables – but something more related to Harwich history. A sequence of say – a) Early agriculture b) wind-mills era c) fishing d) whaling e) cranberry business f) summer tourists," Brown wrote after an initial meeting with the sponsors. On a subsequent visit, "Mr. Thomson's" concerns were further outlined: "[He was] much afraid of [a] modern job too shocking [for] the rest of [the] building committee. I assured him that he would first see sketches of the entire job which had to be approved by Washington – by the school committee and by Boston," Brown wrote after meeting with the sponsor.74

The Harwich school mural was to be completed by the fall of 1937, so there was a very clear deadline for Fuglister. The artist's sketch, admired by Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt herself showed a part of the busy deck of a Grand Bank fishing vessel. The sketch that the First Lady admired, however, was the only one completed and viewed by "Mr. Thompson" and Florence Brown by that September. Brown complained in her official WPA cards that Fuglister's "sketches are coming very slowly, [he] seems to have been delayed. ...I feel that he should go on easel painting for a couple of weeks. It is embarrassing not to be able to show Mr. Thompson [his sketches thus far]– he will tell we are laying down on the job." It seems that Brown's main fear was that Mr. Thompson would think poorly of the Federal Art Project and the artists' professionalism and capabilities. As a supervisor, Brown represented not only Fuglister, but also the FAP and the federal government itself. There was the fear

74 The exact name of "Mr. Thompson" and his relationship to the school and the Project are not documented. Eleanor Roosevelt saw Fuglister's sketch in an FAP show. "First Lady Likes Work by Fritz Fuglister," The Advocate, May 29, 1938: 1; Florence Brown note on Fritz Fuglister, June 2, 1937; Florence Brown note on Fritz Fuglister, July 1, 1937; Florence Brown note on Fritz Fuglister, July 16, 1937, all in Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.
that if the public was not satisfied with the work of Project artists, the FAP could lose favor with the government altogether.\textsuperscript{75}

As the months passed, Brown's notes about the completion of the Harwich murals grew more urgent. He is "working much too slowly... We must make him hurry!" she wrote in late November. At this point, Fuglister had not only fallen behind schedule on the school murals, but he still had not returned to the Falmouth Police Station to improve the mural there. "He must work on the two panels on the Falmouth mural!" Brown lamented. Clearly in a confused or depressed state, Fuglister no longer responded to the pressure applied by Brown and the Harwich building committee.\textsuperscript{76}

By January 1938, Vernon Smith became involved in the Harwich mural supervision at the behest of the building committee. Smith reported that he found Fuglister "in a fog about the mural.... He seems to be inhibited by the importance he attaches to the job."

Smith found himself in the difficult position of needing to push his artist to create when his "juices" were not flowing. The supervisors had to balance their role as "foreman," to keep the artists working, and inspiration, to provide encouragement and constructive criticism. In his next note about Fuglister, Smith wrote he "has [at] last by 'hint' of strong urging completed sketches for one wall for Harwich job. I think he is doing alright again after a depressing lapse. Afraid I am too late to get the Harwich job back for him to 'sell' it." This example of Fritz Fuglister's move to Harwich and his struggle to complete his work in time because of the pressures and expectations of Project officials and the commissioners


\textsuperscript{76} Florence Brown note on Fritz Fuglister, November 20, 1937, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.
demonstrates the complex and, at times, negative impact that the federal bureaucratic processes had on some artists. It also suggests the oddity of trying to produce art in a bureaucratic framework.

This difficult relationship between Fuglister, Brown and Smith, and the Harwich building committee and school board, however, represents a minority of the relationships between artists and the supervisors/sponsors. In Provincetown these relationships were for the most part congenial and positive; if the artists were respectful of the supervisors and committed to their work, they were for the most part encouraged and left alone. These positive interactions were also found among sponsors, artists and supervisors.

For example, Vernon Coleman’s mural work in a West Yarmouth Lyceum Hall was praised by Smith, Brown and the West Yarmouth sponsor, H.M. Canning. From the start, Canning was excited about Coleman’s work, prompting Brown to write that he was “very much of a boy scout in his feelings that Vernon Coleman must do these [murals] – in fact he says they won’t have anyone but Coleman do them.” It is unclear exactly what Mr. Canning liked about Coleman’s work because Vernon Smith and Florence Brown often complained about the artist’s lack of experience. He “is not especially skillful,” Smith wrote about Coleman in one entry and later commented that his work was “surprisingly bad.” Unlike Fuglister’s strict deadline, Vernon Coleman was allowed two years to complete the requested Lyceum Hall murals – he did not even work on the stage set until November 1936.

77 Vernon Smith note on Fritz Fuglister, January 6, 1938, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum; and Vernon Smith note on Fritz Fuglister, January 1938, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

78 A library in West Yarmouth was being made-over into a recreation hall and auditorium. Vernon Smith note on Vernon Coleman, November 4, 1935; Vernon Smith note on West Yarmouth Mural, October 29, 1937; Florence Brown note on West Yarmouth mural, October 27, 1937; Vernon Smith note on Vernon Coleman, November 29, 1936; Vernon Smith note on Vernon Coleman, March 10, 1937, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.
Throughout this process, both Smith and Brown were encouraging and supportive, even when they did not think Coleman was producing his best work. “This painter is avid for help and advice,” Smith wrote in late 1936, “he knows he is missing the mark.” Three months later, however, Smith noted that Coleman’s work was “decidedly improving,” and later, that the artist “needs all the encouragement the Project can give.” There are no notes pressing the artist to finish, or marked complaints and concerns by Canning, despite the fact that Florence Brown found his taste to be “basically cheap [and] bad...most of the time.” Coleman completed the West Yarmouth mural in early 1938, to the pleasure of H.M Canning.79

The artists in Provincetown experienced the full force of the negative and positive impacts of working on the Project. All artists who worked in the WPA had to deal with a new way of producing their work. The Project, however, also rewarded the involved artists. Though the bureaucracy was difficult for many of the artists to deal with, the Project provided a steady income, exposure, experience, and an avenue for experimentation, and treated artists as valuable and legitimate workers.

Even prior to the published goals of the Federal Art Project many artists wanted to legitimize their occupation in the minds of the public and protect art as a profession. In 1933 a group of artists banded together to form the Unemployed Artists Group, which turned into the Artists’ Union in early 1934. Its purpose was to unite artists in their struggle for economic security. Among the founding members were Provincetown artists Byron Browne and Harry Gottlieb. Instead of being viewed as wandering eccentrics, living hand-to-mouth,

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the members of the Artists’ Union fought to socialize artistic production and extract it from the domain of private patronage. The artists believed that as a community they were valuable to American society and thus should be protected in the same way that unions protected other workers. The goals of the Union went hand-in-hand with the FAP’s intention of establishing art as a legitimate profession. Through its vast scale, the Project inadvertently helped the Union in establishing its goals. 80

The Artists Union was important in legitimizing art as an occupation because it presented the profession as equally deserving of workers’ rights and protections as other unions. The Union attracted artists in the 1930s, when both labor unions and the communist movement were growing. The Artists Union was firmly in the communist movement, even if not all members were card-carrying party members. One of the loudest voices of the Union, Meyer Schapiro, believed that every artist should “confront life and ally himself with the workers.” Schapiro pointed out one difference between the artists from the Union involved with the FAP and other workers in the WPA – the artists wanted the Project to continue. Industrial workers on the projects received wages below what their skills could command before the Depression; they wanted to return to regular work with social insurance. “Artists

on the other hand," said Schapiro, "would rather maintain the projects than return to their former unhappy state of individual work for an uncertain market."81

The Union's connection to the communist movement made many Americans uneasy. Much of the country viewed communists as dangerously radical and anti-democratic. There was a danger that if too much of the general population associated abstract artists with communism that the profession would lose its legitimacy. The communist-led Popular Front that spread through the United States in the late 1930s threatened artists' reputations and their hope that unionization would help the country view them as contributing members to society.82

The Union came to Provincetown in 1936. The Preamble to the Union's Constitution was printed in an article on the front page of the town paper. It read: "Believing that united action can best improve the conditions of artists... and that the maintenance and development of a whole field of cultural growth depends upon the solution of the social and economic problems of the artist... and that these problems are not different from those of all other laborers... we... have organized the Artist and Writers' Union...." The Union in Provincetown fought against the down-sizing of the WPA "white-collar" projects and defended the artists' participation in the FAP to those members in town who did not understand.83

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82 Paul, "Byron Browne." 20.

83 "Artists and Writers Form Union," The Advocate, February 6, 1936: 1.
A major reason why the Union fought for the FAP was because of the security the Project provided its artists. As resident-artist Bruce McKain summarized in 1978, “The WPA came along and helped a lot of us.” Other artists wrote that the “certainty of a regular check gave them a sense of security which enabled them to work without the distraction of financial uncertainty. It brought to the artist for the first time in America the realization that he was not a solitary worker.” Cahill himself remarked that, “during some of [the Depression] years the WPA matched anything that any gallery did, in fact they surpassed it. They paid you.”

As Audrey McMahon, the director of the FAP in New York City, noted, “few artists had ever been able to make a living selling art before or after the stock market crash in 1929.” Thus the WPA wages were essential. In many cases artists were better off while enrolled in the Project than they had been prior to the Depression. In Provincetown, as well as across the country during the 1930s, art sales to individual buyers were few. This need for employment is evident in a letter from the artist Charles Heinz to Vernon Smith in the fall of 1937. Heinz wrote, “Please do all you can to get me back to work again, going onto five months now.... I want to do some good work this winter for the Project... I am not working.”

On top of a steady income for the artists, the FAP also helped pay for the materials they needed for their projects. In Massachusetts, the state director for the Project was appointed “deputy procurement officer,” with authority to make single purchases of supplies

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85 Harris, Federal Art, 13-14; Charles Heinz to Vernon Smith, 1937, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum; and Moffett, Art in Narrow Streets, 60. Heinz had left the Project to care for his ailing mother outside of Provincetown. Artists were able to leave the Project or transfer to another location by notifying their supervisor. To rejoin the Project, the artists had to re-enroll with the FAP and meet the required criteria.
not exceeding twenty-five dollars in amount. In Provincetown, the artists submitted requests for supplies such as “25 largest possible white blotters,” “18x24 watercolor paper,” “two stretchers,” and “1/4 pound ultra blue marine pigment.” The easelists had to pay for some of their supplies – if not for a specific commission – but they filed requests for materials, and for the most part, the Project complied. The FAP and/or the project’s sponsor paid for the muralists’ paints and other materials. Even Vernon Smith’s materials were paid for by the Project. Thus, the financial help of the FAP, artists and their work survived the Depression years.

Another benefit of participating in the Federal Arts Project was the exposure artists received; exhibitions were held across the country promoting the involved artists. For example, at the inaugural exhibition in the New Federal Art Project Gallery in Boston, 1936, works by the Provincetown easel painters Fritz Fuglister, Bruce McKain, Fritz Pfeiffer, Robert Rogers and George Yater were displayed. This space was established to showcase the work of Project artists from across the state. On a more national scale, prints by Provincetown artists John Gregory and Blanche Lazzell were chosen for the National Print Exhibition of the FAP in June 1937. Blanche Lazzell had two color block prints, “Provincetown Yards,” and “The White Petunia,” on display and John Gregory’s lithograph, “Night in Provincetown,” won him distinction. Reviews of these exhibits were written up in both national and local newspapers. Famed art critic Edward Allan Jewel often discussed the FAP exhibts in his New York Times articles.


87 "F.A.P Exhibition to Show Works by Provincetown Artists," The Advocate, March, 19, 1936: 1; “Exhibition of Water Colors,” The Advocate, May 24, 1934: 1; “Up an Down the Narrow Land,” The Advocate,
This national exposure continued with the 1939 Sixteenth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings at the Corcoran Galleries in Washington, D.C. This exhibit of 375 paintings was chosen from over 3,000 works that had been submitted from FAP offices across the country. Of these 375, twenty-one works were by Cape Cod artists from Provincetown, Truro and Wellfleet, under the supervision of Vernon Smith. Among the Provincetown artists, some already famous, some just breaking out were, John Beauchamp, George Elmer Browne, Karl Knaths, William L’Engle, Philip Malicoat, Helen Sawyer, and Agnes Weinrich. These exhibitions showcased the work of both established and young artists and not just in New York City but in cities and small towns across the country. For many artists such shows were their first chance at public exposure. In a sense, the Project helped to democratize the art world because many artists were given more exposure than they would have received before the Depression. Publicity by the FAP was better than anything that commercial galleries or museums could do during the Depression.\(^{88}\)

This exposure was taken to an international scale during the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The purpose of the FAP’s presence at the Fair, according to Director Cahill, was to display the activities and productivity of the arts programs. Audrey McMahon echoed these beliefs in her statement that the *American Art Today* exhibit would “demonstrate the role of

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the Government as a sponsor of the arts” and act as a benevolent facilitator in encouraging a “wider understanding and appreciation of modern art as it exists....”89

Many Provincetown artists were drawn to the idea of participating in the World’s Fair. Ross Moffett, an older artist, was approached to serve on the jury selecting paintings from the entire Cape Cod area. The creation of a selection committee for just the Cape portion of Massachusetts speaks to the high regard the Project administrators had for the region’s artists. As a juryman, Moffett appraised the paintings submitted to the Provincetown Art Association and sent the selected pieces to Washington. These works helped to create the show of 800 works by painters, graphic artists and sculptors displayed in the Contemporary Arts Building at the Fair. The Cape Cod arts were recognized through the works of Charles Heinz, George Yater, Bruce McKain, Jerry Farnsworth, Byron Browne and Fritz Fuglister. This recognition of artists outside of the town was not a new phenomenon for the Provincetown community, but the publicizing of the artists enrolled in the FAP did increase the recognition of the town and its creative residents on the national stage.90

While throughout this time the town newspaper, The Advocate, published articles praising and celebrating the artists, the relationship between the non-artist residents and the FAP employees was not always congenial. Toward the end of 1936, when there was talk of the government cutting back on the “white-collar” projects in the WPA, a series of letters from the Artists’ Union and non-artist citizens were exchanged in the local paper. These rumors began in early 1936, when the Project had achieved its maximum employment and

89 Audrey McMahon was the director of the Federal Art Project in New York City. Harris, Federal Art, 103-108; “Artists Picked for World Fair,” The Advocate, November 24, 1938: 3; Greengard, “Ten Crucial Years,” 50; and Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, 192.
90 “Thomas Blakeman Heads Committee to Pick Art for the World’s Fair,” The Advocate, February 23, 1930: 1; Del Deo, Figures in a Landscape, 207; “Artists Picked for World Fair,” The Advocate, November 24, 1938: 3; Contreras, Tradition and Innovation, 92.
had exhausted most of its allocated funds. While the administrators sought more funds from Congress, some officials suggested moving control of the Project to the states to reduce the federal financial responsibility.91

The artist Robert Rogers was the first to pen a letter to the editor in response to the threatened federal downsizing of art programs. In April 1936 he announced a special meeting of the Artists' and Writers' Union. Rogers pleaded with the community to write to their state Senators and Representatives as well as Harry Hopkins, the head of the WPA, to save “white-collar” jobs. A majority of artists in town were on the FAP, “all consuming the necessities of life through local stores and services, to an enormously greater extent than the potion of Federal taxes that is paid locally... It is hoped that the town as a whole, and especially the local businessmen, will realize just what it will mean if this source of emergency income of the town is removed or curtailed... at this time,” Rogers wrote. An Artists' Union letter in November echoed Rogers’ statements about the large number of “outstanding painters” in town. “These people,” the Union wrote, “have spent their earnings – and the buildings in which many of their paintings now hang would indicate that they have earned their $17 a week – in Provincetown. The 55 [artists and writers who are] members of

the... Union of Provincetown ask the support of Provincetown businesses in the Union’s
effort to keep jobs for those who need jobs."^92

Two citizens responded to these cries – one supportive and one wishing the FAP
would leave the town. The first letter, from December 2, 1936, wrote that the artists should
be able to defend themselves, but “I am going to defend my own interests in increasing the
prosperity and well being of Provincetown and I know that the artists and writers are one of
the greatest assets to the town’s summer business... Our local businessmen receive a much
better proportion of the WPA money from the project employees than other towns with no art
colony.” The benefits of the FAP in town included new works and valuable public property
created from national government funds; such events could not have happened by the town
welfare alone.^93

The second author writing on December 10 said that, “...the time has come to end
this ridiculous farce. Certainly any artist who has any real merit of his own, now after three
or four years of indulgence and pampering is able to stand on his own feet and create
independently....” And in regards to the town as a haven for artists, this letter concluded that
“this town... has no real desire to discourage art or a real art colony.... It does and should

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^93 “Another Taxpaying Wage Earner,” “Letter to the Editor,” *The Advocate*, December 2, 1936: 2. The beautification and new projects about which this author speaks were the murals in the Town Hall and High School, and other such WPA jobs in the town as well as the paintings that were created and distributed throughout the town and Cape.
want to discourage all of this sneering and grasping deceit that attempts to parade boldly through under the banner of Art." 94

A final response on the issue was made on the twelfth by the Union. The article reported that, "The Union was endeavoring to keep needy workers of this town employed on the arts project of the WPA, and it pointed out that the emergency of the depression was not yet over for this particular type of worker." The article went on to praise the "intelligent attitude" of all but two members of the town who showed their support for the artists who were struggling to sell their work in a market destroyed, and as yet un-revived, by the Depression. "Three points," the article concluded, "should be clear to all:

First, the WPA funds that are temporarily supporting workers and their children are federal not ‘local.’ The town itself is not being taxed directly in proportion to the number of its residents on relief, but rather, the system which was endorsed both by this town and by an overwhelming vote of the people of the United States in the last election, is being continued. Second, the requirements of the federal art projects are that trained, professional workers be employed, and the record of accomplishments shows that this has been the case. Among those now on the project rolls are men whose work has won prizes in national competitions in the past, and who, when they were able to sell their work in better times, contributed substantially to building up the reputation as an art center which Provincetown now enjoys.

Third, these workers are carrying on as best they can, in an effort to work their way off the WPA. No class of worker would welcome with greater pleasure a condition of the market enabling him again to become independent.

As this rebuttal implies, there was limited tension within the town as the non-artist citizens realized that the artists were vital to Provincetown’s economic survival during the Depression. 95

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95 The Artists' and Writers' Union, “Letter to the Editor,” The Advocate, December 12, 1936: 2. No other open objections to the WPA were found in the files of the Advocate from this time.
Part of the reason for the limited support in 1936 to end the FAP in Provincetown was that tourism began to pick up in that year after a five-year lull. It may be that other citizens disliked the instituted bureaucracy of the WPA and how it changed the way that their artists worked. That such examples are limited speaks to the unchanged sense of community that both artists and non-artists felt in the town. As Philip Malicoat remembered, the symbiotic economic system of the community “made it all easier. One thing Provincetown has done, I think, is to give the artists and, of course, the fishermen, a sense of being at home.”

Unlike most communities across the country where artists were sent or commissioned to work, the Provincetown residents were accustomed to the artists in their midst and had accepted them as contributing members of the town. The limited presence of negative publicity in the town can be attributed to the fact that the artists were not a novel addition during the Depression. Because artists had been working in the town for decades, some residents felt that they should not be paid special attention or wages by the government if the rest of the town was still struggling through the Depression.

The artists’ experiences in Provincetown during the Depression were not so different from those in their previous years working in the community. The Beachcombers Club, for example, was a group created out of men from the community – mainly artists – who gathered weekly (sometimes nightly) to lift spirits, engage in competition and debate, and weather the difficult times. “We had chess tournaments and just bolstered each other’s morale,” Philip Malicoat said. The Club “made it all easier.” Fellow artist Nathan Halper remembered the Club as a place where the members went to get “away from their wives once

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90 Bill Regan and Joyce Johnson, “Philip Malicoat Remembered,” Cape Cod Arts 2 (Fall 1981), 22; and Krahulik, Provincetown, 122.
a week. ...Those were the two things: you’d drink and there was a piano... it was considered good man stuff....”

Because of their long history in the town the experience of the Provincetown artists during the New Deal was a unique one compared to that of other artists across the nation. While other artists struggled to accept the bureaucracy and its trappings while simultaneously establishing themselves in a new place, Provincetown artists only had to accept the regulations that were part of government sponsorship. Likewise, while other artists across the country had to contend with administrators who were new in the art world, the Project supervisors of Provincetown were artists themselves; Florence Brown had been a part of the Provincetown art community for years before her appointment and Vernon Smith was a known and established artist from the regional community.

Ultimately, the FAP had a limited effect on the creative process of the artists and the community dynamics of Provincetown. Before the Depression, artists came to the Cape tip to be inspired by the scenery and light. The resulting paintings highlighted the local scene, its inhabitants, and, in some cases, its history. The federal bureaucracy merely institutionalized many of the themes with which local artists had been working for years. Though the day-to-day regulations of being enrolled on the Project were new for the artists, in Provincetown the overall affect was not negative; in the long run, local artists were thankful for the Federal Art Project and its support through the Depression. While enrolled in the Project, the artists explored and experimented with their styles and techniques because

of the guaranteed paychecks. The FAP gave the artists economic security, placed them within the larger American community and treated them no differently than employees in other relief projects – the artists in this sense were workers no different than road crews.
CHAPTER THREE

THE LASTING IMPACT OF THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT

During the Great Depression, artists and citizens applauded the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project [FAP] because it employed a struggling group of citizens and it gave hope and beauty to local communities. When the United States joined World War Two, the New Deal projects were disbanded as federal money was diverted to the war effort. The value of the FAP was apparent after the war as elements of the Project served as models for subsequent groups, artists were treated as valued members of society, and American modern art grew prominent the middle of the century.

"Here is an opportunity which would hardly have presented itself to the artist without the intervention of an enlightened government agency," Karl Knaths said about his time as a muralist for the Federal Art Project. While enrolled in the WPA, Knaths was exposed to an abundance of materials “whose artistic value had scarcely been tapped” and given the opportunity to make a lasting impact in the local communities around his murals. Knaths reflected upon his impressions of the blank walls in the Science Hall and Music Room of the Falmouth High School as “splendid.” He was excited to create images on the classroom walls “...which in the past had served to chill rather than stimulate activity.” Even at the time, Knaths saw the value of his murals: “As I proceeded with my work, it became more and more absorbing... pictorial devices were used for their decorative effect as well as
for the value a striking image has of making a fresh impact on the mind.”

The impact of the Federal Art Project on artists like Knaths, and the communities in which they worked was a lasting one. Unique to the New Deal art programs was the fact that, even at the time, the artists were aware of the importance of government sponsorship and were grateful that they were able to keep working as artists through the Depression. Provincetown artist, Irving Marantz, summarized these feelings perfectly: “It is a source of personal satisfaction to me.... But far more significant is the social value of this work.... It is to the benefit of society that the activities initiated by the Project be extended to reach every American community where they can be of service.”

During the Depression, Marantz was a member of the Project in New York City. He was employed as an art teacher in a Community Boys Club where he taught “Negro and White, Gentile and Jewish, [lads with] hearts that were hungry for the personal contact and encouragement that was lacking in their lives.” The local FAP office gave Marantz and his fellow teachers supplies for them to instruct the boys in everything from drawing and painting to sculpture and block printing. The highlight, for Marantz, was the “hanging of the outdoor exhibit of the painting by these boys, [it] was the first time in the history of the neighborhood that there had been a display of creative work. The boys stood proudly by and guarded the exhibition from any vandals from other neighborhoods. This was the beginning of a large movement and a sharp change in the attitude of the entire neighborhood towards the Club and toward art.” This experience not only had a profound impact on Marantz at the

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98 Karl Knaths, “Mural Education,” in O’Connor, Art For the Millions, 68.
time, but even after the Project ended he continued his push for public art classes throughout the City and participated in art education during his time in Provincetown.100

Like Marantz and Knaths, many artists took what they had learned from their time in the Project with them to their next endeavor. For many Provincetown artists, this meant continued involvement in the community through the various art schools and galleries, or participating in the growing culture of American art. Modernism, abstract expressionism, surrealism and other “new” forms of art that had been created or experimented with during the New Deal came into prominence in the decades after the Federal Art Project had ended. Some of these artists who had participated in the WPA/FAP elsewhere in the country came to Provincetown in the following years. Prominent Provincetown artists during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, who had been enrolled in federal art programs were, among others: Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner, Bruce McKain, Jack Tworkov, Karl Knaths, and Peter Busa.101

These artists, and many others at the time were products of the Federal Art Project and other federal art programs. When these projects came to an end, many of them banded together in places like Provincetown or in organizations like the American Abstract Artists or Artists Equity Association, taking with them the spirit of camaraderie and cooperation that had been embodied in the New Deal art programs. It was with the persistence of these artists that the American arts experienced unprecedented acknowledgement and acceptance in the wider world during the next decades.

The disbanding of the federal art programs was a relatively slow process. For the Federal Art Project, the first major changes came in 1939. In April, Congress received President Roosevelt’s Reorganization Act Plan No. 1, which folded both the Treasury Department aid programs and the Works Progress Administration into the Works Projects Administration, part of the newly created Federal Works Agency. Passed in July, and instituted in September, this undertaking drastically reorganized the Works Projects Administration and the FAP became the WPA Art Program. With this bureaucratic change, Holger Cahill lost control of the art project as John. M. Carmody took over the WPA Art Program and operations were placed under state control, severely limiting the program’s freedom and funds. This shift in funding transferred the control of the budget from the national office to state administrators who could choose to continue whatever project activities seemed most desirable to them. Congress pushed for this change, as it believed that less federal funding would be needed with state control. The changes were also the result of the conservative backlash against the New Deal in the election of 1938. The Federal Art Project was tainted by its affiliation with the more (politically) radical Federal Theater Project.\footnote{O’Connor,\textit{Art for the Millions}, 14; Contreras,\textit{Tradition and Innovation}, 210-211, 220; McDonald,\textit{Federal Relief Administration}, 309. On the conservative coalition: Dubin, “Artistic Production,” 671; McKinzie,\textit{New Deal for Artists}, xi; and Contreras, 156. The Federal Theatre Project was associated with the left-wing and socialist and communist movements of the time. The government often felt it necessary to censor the Project’s plays and productions to eliminate subversive, radical, or derogatory content. For more on the Theatre Project see: Barry Witham,\textit{The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study} (Cambridge University Press, 2003); George Kazacoff,\textit{Dangerous Theatre: the Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays} (P. Lang, 1989); Elmer Rice,\textit{The Living Theatre} (Harper, 1959).}

The reorganization of the FAP and the Works Progress Administration was not the only change that had an impact on the participants. The reorganization also terminated the Theater Project, prohibited any project sponsored solely by the WPA, removed participants who had been enrolled in the WPA continuously for over eighteen months (but they could
apply for re-enrollment after thirty days), and mandated that twenty-five percent of the total costs for any given project be contributed by sponsors. The new WPA functioned under these rules and steadily decreased enrollment until the program was finally liquidated in 1943.\(^{103}\)

Both artists and the Artists' Union protested this reorganization of the WPA/FAP. Provincetown painter William Zorach wrote to Roosevelt to fight these changes. According to Zorach, the cultural policies of the Federal Art Project exemplified the "idealism of Jeffersonian-Whitmanesque democracy" in its attempt to transform American society. Zorach believed that the FAP gave power to the people and united them in basic equality. The artist liked that the government treated his peers as full contributors to society. If the Project was abolished, this spirit would be lost, and the artists would be back on the street, fighting for their place in the larger American community.\(^{104}\)

The American Artists' Congress [AAC] also fought against the reorganization of the FAP. The representatives in the AAC were concerned that the government did not care enough about the welfare of the artists and their struggles because its focus was strictly on employing the artists to reintroduce them – as soon as possible – to the private sector. Peyton Boswell, the editor of *Art Digest*, and Thomas J. Watson, president of IBM, suggested that the "true liberals" in the AAC should take control from the "art politicians" in Congress. These men and their supporters, like Zorach and Biddle, argued that the AAC needed to take decisive action to help American artists protect themselves. As the role of the AAC was to establish a bond between the artists and the public – and the government employed most of the artists – the organization structured itself as a kind of union that sought to protect its


\(^{104}\) Harris, *Federal Art*, 47 and 141.
members through continued federal support. Given the fact that the private sector was unable to continue adequate patronage in the arts, the artists were dependent directly on the public for support. Ultimately, the protests of Zorach and his peers in the AAC failed, and Congress passed the Act.\(^{105}\)

Congress found it necessary to reorganize the WPA in 1939 because it believed the initial purpose of the program was overstepped. Congress declared:

> The Works Progress Administration was never set up or continued with the idea that it was career employment. The purpose of the program was to develop a cooperative effort between the Federal Government and States and localities to furnish temporary employment and rehabilitate the morale of the worker and return him to private employment as soon as possible. The [House of Representatives] committee feels that there has been a tendency on the part of too many on the Works Progress Administration rolls not to make an effort to get back into private employment.

These findings seem to apply specifically to the Art and Theater Projects of the WPA. About these branches, Congress found that “from the evidence obtained during the course of its investigation that... too high a percentage of the relief workers on them have a tendency to regard them as a career, and that many of the workers do not measure up to the professional requirements they should possess to qualify them to relief as such.” Congress felt that the burden to support the “unqualified” workers should fall to the states in the restructured WPA.

Pressure to restructure many of the New Deal programs came from the conservative coalition that grew more powerful after the 1938 election. Many citizens felt that programs like the Federal Theater Project became too radical, and even pro-communist, after their creation. This conservative push helped bring about the 1939 reorganization.\(^{106}\)

\(^{105}\) Harris, *Federal Art*, 141; Bystryn, “Variation in Artistic Circles,” 122. For an account of the artists’ thoughts on society at the time, as exemplified in the American Artists’ Congress, see Baigell and Williams’ *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First AAC* (1986).

\(^{106}\) United States, House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, *Appropriations for Work Relief, Relief, and for Loans and Grants for Public Works, Fiscal Year 1940*, 76th Congress, 1st Session, H.J.
The government did not seriously consider the pleas from artists like William Zorach or petitioners within the government itself. In January 1939, two groups of the WPA Theatre Project went on a hunger strike after the government announced the dismissal of 1,500 FAP employees in New York City. In February Senator Claude Pepper of Florida and Representatives Caroline O'Day and Vito Marcantonio of New York aligned themselves with Arts Union and called upon WPA administrators to repeal the national dismissal of the 6,000 art project workers the previous month. In June, just as the government announced the final reorganization of the WPA/FAP, New York Senator Robert Wagner received a petition, signed by more than 300 people prominent in the arts, asking him to protest the cuts in Congress. This petition, supported by Burill Freedman, the executive secretary of the National Citizens Committee for Support of the WPA, was addressed to both the House and the Senate. The petition asked:

that the honorable houses ...endorse the principle of fostering, protecting and encouraging the fine arts in the United States, and...enact into action this principle and make fair and just provision in such form as may be proper for the development of a large number or existing needy professional citizens trained in these various arts... [and continue] the policy of maintenance of skills which preserve for our nation these fundamentals of vast, profound and broad cultural development, and by the continuance of underlying American philosophy of self respect through work.

The petitioners wanted lasting federal support for artists and American art in order to secure the healthy continuation of the art profession. By aligning the arts with the American ideal of “self respect through work,” the petitioners sought to remove the perception of art as

radical and emphasize its national value. Despite such protests, federal attention turned from the work programs in the arts to the growing concerns in the European theater of war and "national-defense." The new WPA lasted until the United States' entry into World War Two, when the economy had recovered and men of fighting age were shipped off to Europe and the Pacific.\textsuperscript{107}

By that point, there was no longer a general unemployment problem and the government no longer had had motive to employ artists. By the of the FAP disbandment, between 1933 and 1943, the government had employed and commissioned over ten thousand artists. These artists produced roughly 100,000 easel paintings, 18,000 sculptures, over 13,000 prints, and more than 4,000 murals. Over sixty Provincetown artists participated in the New Deal art programs, and about of twenty artists participated throughout the ten-year period while residing in the town.\textsuperscript{108}

Though a great deal of work was created during the New Deal art programs, the lasting impact of the Federal Art Project and similar organizations was on the artists who became prominent in the following decades. Unfortunately, much of the art that was created for the Project during the Depression was lost, destroyed or discarded with the end of government sponsorship. There had been rumors of the mistreatment of art while the


\textsuperscript{108} Park and Markowitz, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, 5; WPA Files and Vernon Smith Files, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.
government had employed the artists, but it was not until after the programs were disbanded that the amount of missing art was realized.  

A recent investigation of the work of Yvonne Twining, an artist associated with Provincetown, revealed that only eleven of the roughly seventy paintings and drawings she created while on the Project are accounted for. Known for her landscapes and urban scenes, Twining was an expressionist and realist painter from Boston. After her time in the WPA/FAP, she moved with her husband to Seattle in the early 1940s. Her missing works demonstrate the potential problems in a bureaucratic organization as large as the FAP. A part of the founding legislation of the Federal Art Project stated that the government would own the works created by the artists during their employ. The very provenance, then, of the six surviving works by Twining in private collections is curious. One painting was purchased in the 1960s, still in a frame with a Massachusetts WPA stamped plaque, from an antique store in Vermont. Five other paintings have been sold through auction houses for upwards of $8,000. The whereabouts of the sixty other works of art that Twining created while employed by the government are unknown.  

Twining's story, unfortunately, is not unusual in the history of the federal art programs. Project offices often kept the paintings and drawings that they deemed worthy of exhibition and sent the best works to the administrative offices in Washington, D.C. for national shows. Many other works, not thought to be of this quality, were never sent to

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qualified institutions/organizations to be displayed, and inadequate records show no
documentation of the location of even those that were allocated.\textsuperscript{111}

When the Project disbanded, thousands of completed works were lost, destroyed or
sold. According to the artist Harold Lehman, many of the works on canvas were sold at
auction by the pound. The canvases were put on a scale and buyers offered a certain amount
for that weight. Most of Jackson Pollock's paintings for the FAP were lost this way. Mark
Rothko's early canvases were found wrapped around pipes as insulation after they had been
sold to a junk dealer for four cents a pound at an auction in Flushing, New York.\textsuperscript{112}

The government's treatment of the artwork created for the Project shows that it found
more value in employing struggling artists as workers than in the art itself. After five years,
Project administrators decided that the FAP had swayed too far from its original purpose of
providing "temporary employment" to artists. Instead, the secondary purpose of revitalizing
the citizens' "American spirit" had become the main goal of the relief work. The treatment
of artists as legitimate members of society and the population's exposure to "American" art,
were byproducts of the Project's execution, not explicitly sought by the federal government.
The 1939 reorganization of the FAP emphasized this different view. The new WPA was
strictly a state relief organization and placed no value on the social or emotional content of
the artwork or the artists.\textsuperscript{113}

Perhaps worse than the mistreatment and destruction of the easel artists' works was
the removal and destruction of murals done by artists employed by the Federal Art Project.
Provincetown artist George McNeil worked on a mural for the Williamsburg Housing

\textsuperscript{111} William Leuchtenburg in Townsend Ludington (ed.), \textit{A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United
\textsuperscript{112} Harold Lehman in Greengard, "Ten Crucial Years," 50.
Project, but, when he returned from his military service after World War II, he discovered the mural had "disappeared. When I came back it was gone. That was because they had stored it out in the hall." Even the preparatory work that he had done before painting the actual mural—small paintings, sketches, etc.—"disappeared during the war."  

Harold Lehman, a friend of Jackson Pollock and George McNeil, faced a similar situation in the treatment of his murals after the termination of the Federal Art Project. Lehman had painted a mural for Rikers Island Penitentiary, and, after it was completed, he was commissioned to do "two large [panel] details to be used as decorations in the American Art Today building at the New York World’s Fair 1939-1940." One of these panels, now in the Smithsonian National Museum of Art, was preserved and exhibited around the world. It was Pollock who "found" the second panel.  

As Lehman tells the story, a few years after the Project ended, Pollock stumbled upon the panel in a junk shop. "Harold, I saw a painting of yours down on Canal Street in a curio shop," Pollock informed Lehman, describing the second piece that had been done for the World’s Fair. The next day, Lehman found the shop on Canal Street: "Sure enough, on the very back wall of this huge establishment was my second panel, stripped from the frame, but hanging on the wall. Strangely enough it didn’t have my signature – it was signed by Anton Refregier! – that was the name scrawled on the base of this panel." The proprietor told Lehman that the price was $100 because "it’s an original Anton Refregier! I said, ‘No it isn’t – it is an original Harold Lehman!’ And I proceeded to describe to him where this had been and so on...." Eventually, Lehman was able to buy back his own painting.  

114 George McNeil, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, Transcript, June 3, 1965.  
115 Harold Lehman in Greengard, "Ten Crucial Years," 50.  
116 Harold Lehman in Greengard, "Ten Crucial Years," 50.
Portions of a Project mural by Arshile Gorky, an artist associated with Provincetown, were destroyed or lost by the FAP, much like those painted by McNeil and Lehman. In 1937, Gorky was commissioned to create a ten-paneled mural for the newly constructed Newark Airport. Eight of the panels disappeared in the years following the termination of the WPA/FAP. Eventually, two of the sections for the mural were recovered, but the remaining pieces seem to be forever lost.\(^{117}\)

Though most of it is gone now, the work produced for the government was only one of the important impacts that the Project had on the country during the Depression. Apart from the sheer number of artists who participated and the works that were produced, the Federal Art Project spread the Provincetown model of artist-immersed-in-community to towns across the country. The project administrators believed that as long as there was an unemployment problem, the arts could help cure of social and psychological maladjustment. In the same way that construction workers built or remodeled buildings for the population, and factory workers produced physical goods, artists “serviced” the community. The hope was that in the employment of struggling artists and bringing such art to the populace, and the FAP would also bring, beauty, and a morale boost. Holger Cahill explained that, “the aim of the Project is to work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community....” Within the Project, the sponsorship by local groups and organizations established a rapport between the local town and the artists. In Provincetown this relationship between the artists and community existed since established in the Cape tip.\(^{118}\)

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\(^{118}\) McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 100, 393; “Purpose, Functions, Techniques: the Federal Art Project Exhibitions,” Series 3.12, Reel 3482, Frame 1134-1153, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
The Project modeled Provincetown’s celebration and acceptance of all types of artists. Though there had been a debate between the modernists and traditionalists in the town – and on a national scale – the community had always been able to celebrate these artistic differences. In Provincetown, after the First World War, the lines were drawn between the “conservatives” – also called academicians or traditionalists – who practiced realistic or impressionistic art, and the “moderns” – avant-garde cubists or abstract expressionists. And though they banded together in town to form the Provincetown Art Association, and the Beachcombers Club, the two schools continued a heated debate. Out of necessity, members of the Art Association agreed it would hold two separate shows per year to showcase the town’s best works. Despite this ongoing debate, the town retained its reputation as a place of artistic freedom and education. This acceptance of alternative, or up-and-coming, styles helped Provincetown to remain an important and relevant art colony and later enabled the FAP to employ many diverse artists there.119

Elsewhere in the country at this time, abstract and modernist artists were rarely accepted in the same way. In Boston, for example, most art clubs and planned exhibitions banned even limited excursions into “modern” art. Provincetown artist Dorothy Loeb worked in Boston during the early 1930s and experienced such discrimination. Both the Copley Society and the Guild of Boston Artists found her artwork crude, defiant, and too avant-garde. It was not until the intervention of the FAP into the Boston art scene and its action as guardian to the modernists that Cubists or other radical artists began to be accepted.120

Unlike in some of the other federal art programs, all types of artists were employed and supported throughout the 1930s by the WPA/FAP. In large part because of Holger Cahill’s belief that art was an experimental and unpredictable activity that must be supported in all its diversity, the government accepted the modern as well as traditional modes of art. Under the direction of Cahill, the local and national administrators in the FAP bureaucracy encouraged artists engaged in modernism and experimentation.\(^{121}\)

Explorations in symbolism, surrealism and abstraction were present in the work of mature Provincetown artists like Karl Knaths and in the experiments of younger artists like Fritz Pfeiffer. The experiments of these artists in the Depression led to innovations in techniques. According to the historian Joyce Johnson, these innovations led to “the serigraphic print making process, carborundum etching and the perfection of color lithography.” The FAP gave these young artists a sense of legitimacy and professionalism. Before the Project, this professional acceptance was limited to the academic sphere, or smaller artistic circles such as Provincetown.\(^{122}\)

This acceptance of newer artistic genres and forms was vital to the survival of Provincetown as an important and leading art colony. A number of famous and influential artists came out of the Great Depression or were students of that generation. Provincetown artists Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, Fritz Bultman, Harry Gottlieb, Lee

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\(^{122}\) Johnson, “The WPA Program,” 8; Tonelli, “Avant-Garde in Boston,” 46; and Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation*, 162. Not all government art projects accepted all artists and styles. The Treasury’s Section of Fine Art and Sculpture, for example, had certain expectations and norms. It encouraged realism and Regionalism; artists’ sketches were not chosen for federal murals if they were too abstract or provocative. The Treasury Relief Art Program also encouraged realism in its murals. Though this was a relief program, artists in TRAP were subject to more rigorous criticism and supervision because of the organization’s expectations. See Contreras *Tradition and Innovation*, 133-4; and Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 168.
Krasner, and Hans Hofmann all gained fame for their “modern” works of art following World War Two and into the next decades.  

As the exploration into abstraction and other experimental styles progressed after the New Deal, the awareness of the arts continued to spread to the American public. The citizens’ exposure to art during the federal programs did not cease after the termination of such organizations. Debates about contemporary, “good,” and traditional art flourished during World War II and into the following decades.

Evidence of this debate is seen in *Life* magazine articles during 1947-1951. While at first, the periodical tried to balance its coverage of abstract and traditional artists, the avant-garde and modern art movement gained emphasis in the magazine as the period progressed and the artists’ reputations grew. *Life* even attempted to “explain” the more abstract art forms to the average American, as artists themselves had done during the Project. In a 1947 article about Stuart Davis, for example, the author explained: “Fundamentally, there is nothing very mysterious or difficult to understand about the work of an abstract painter like Stuart Davis. He goes about painting a picture in very much the spirit grandma had when she was making a patchwork quilt, placing squares and oblongs of color where they will contribute tastefully to the over-all pattern. Being a professional, he is somewhat more skilled and imaginative than grandma.”

Though there was not an immediate appreciation the abstract and surrealist art, ultimately Americans accepted these artists as leading practitioners in significant part

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because they had been exposed to these genres during the New Deal. After World War II, sales and exhibitions of abstract works rose in the United States and the techniques gained recognition abroad. The general public was introduced to these new artistic styles and innovations through abstract murals like the ones done for the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York. Designed by Provincetown painters like Byron Browne, George McNeil, Ilya Bolotowsky and other artists, the murals were on a very large scale. Burgoyne Diller, the head of the Mural Division in New York, said that “abstract patterns painted in strong vibrant colors would add to the enjoyment of residents…. These murals, as well as many others, symbolize the effort that is being made by the WPA/FAP to stimulate rather than restrict the direction of painting.”

The Abstract Expressionist movement gained hold in years following the Depression, with leadership from many Provincetown artists. Though many of these significant painters had been involved in the Federal Art Project, the movement towards abstract expressionist and surrealist styles was in part a reaction against the social realism that had prevailed during the New Deal projects. The federal programs enabled the experimentation into such styles by providing economic stability, opportunities for camaraderie, and acceptance of more avant-garde works.

Three of the more significant painters during this time were Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Hans Hofmann. All three men Provincetown artists, but only Rothko and Pollock participated in the Project. These men, along with a handful of their contemporaries,

are credited with establishing the abstract movement in American art. Hofmann was already an established artist on the national scale, and notable teacher in Provincetown, by the time the Depression hit America, but a majority of his students, who went on to fame, were participants in the FAP. Among his students enrolled on the WPA were George McNeil, Lee Krasner, Burgoyne Diller, and Lillian Orlowsky. Lee Krasner began studying with Hofmann during the early 1940s at night, after she had completed her work for the Project. It was these men and women, their students, and their contemporaries that brought American art to the world stage for the next generations.¹²⁷

From Rothko and Pollock to Krasner and McNeil, many of the now-famous abstract artists got their start in the federal art programs of the 1930s. Apart from the exploration into new techniques, the very large canvases of many of these artists – think Pollock – were also a product of the FAP, influenced by the mural division. Even though Robert Motherwell was not enrolled in the Project himself, he believed that the WPA and the mood of the participating artists was “the catalyst that led to abstract expressionism.” Grace Hartigan, a Provincetown abstract artist of the next generation, called the WPA experience “crucial” to the development of American arts of the 1940s-1960s.¹²⁸

Other artists shared the belief that the Federal Art Project and other government programs were vital to the development of “American” art. Peter Busa referred to his four years on the Project as a kind of “graduate school of training” where he not only honed his

¹²⁷ Lee Krasner was the wife of Jackson Pollock and a respected artist in her own right. Politically active, she was the voice for many artists through the Artists Union and the various abstract clubs that sprang up after the Depression. Lee Krasner, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, Transcript, November 2, 1964; John Loftus, “The Plastic Arts in the Sixties: What is it that has Got Lost?” Art Journal 26.3 (Spring 1967): 240, http://www.jstor.org/stable/774920 (accessed March 2, 2009).

artistic skills but also nurtured close relationships with fellow abstract artists Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock and William Baziotes. The Project fostered close-knit networks of artists who worked, experimented, debated, and succeeded together during and after the federal funding. For example, while working with Baziotes, Busa’s art took on “an aspect where the doodle was glorified,” through “automatic drawing.”

George McNeil, also a Provincetown artist, came of age during the Depression and found artistic maturity and recognition in the late 1940s and 1950s. Arthur B. Carles passed on the advice to McNeil that, “every young painter needs about five years after he comes out of art school... in which to find himself... to sort of counteract the influences of the art school. And that’s what the Project did as far as many of the younger artists were concerned.” For McNeil, the FAP not only provided the time, money, and independence to work on his techniques, but it fostered a cohesive group of like-minded artists. “You can say that at some point around 1936, 1937,” McNeil said, “there was a very cohesive group of modern artists in New York centered around the [American Abstract Artists], but also in relation to the Project.”

Like some of his peers, McNeil volunteered for the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. When these artists returned, they reconnected with their contemporaries – like Pollock and de Kooning – who did not join the war, but stayed home to work during the 1940s. McNeil called the time of his return, in 1946, “a tremendously stimulating period. Everyone had sort of compressed a lot of energy during [the war] years and it was all ready

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130 Arthur B. Carles (1882-1952) was an established artist in the early part of the twentieth century who most famously worked with Georgia O’Keefe. George McNeil, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, Transcript, June 3, 1965.
to come out. And it did. So I would say that this was one of those great periods like 1905
Fauvism and 1909 Cubism.” Even at the time, McNeil and the abstract artists in his circle,
like Gottlieb, Krasner, Pollock, Motherwell, and de Kooning, understood the importance of
what they were doing and the opportunities afforded to them in the 1940s and 1950s through
the federal art programs of the 1930s.131

This group of artists traveled to and lived in Provincetown throughout the
“modernist” period during the middle of the century. Similar to the art community that had
been established in Provincetown before the Depression, the camaraderie and community
that had been forged during the New Deal in New York City and other places where the
artists worked stayed strong in the following decades. The Federal Art Project and other
government aid programs brought artists together in a way that had not been widely
experienced outside of artist communities like Provincetown and Greenwich Village.

The “high point” of Provincetown’s artistic history, according to artist and historian
Tony Vevers, were the summers of the mid-Fifties and Sixties “when art schools and
galleries flourished amid the influx of established artists from the New York art world.”
Historian Dorothy Seckler concurred with Vevers’ interpretation of the 1950s and 1960s.
This resurgence of artists and ‘important’ art in Provincetown began with the 1949 “Forum
‘49” show in the 200 Gallery, at 200 Commercial Street. The works displayed in this show
composed one of the most important exhibits of abstract paintings seen in America at this
time. It showcased the work of such artists as Hofmann, Bultman, Pollock, Rothko and
Motherwell. This show re-inspired the lively art scene of past Provincetown summers.

Between the late 1950s and the late 1960s, Seckler explains, “it was often possible to see as

131 George McNeil, Interview by Dorothy Seckler Transcript, June 3, 1965; Bernard Smith, Modernism’s
History: A Study in Twentieth-Century Art and Ideas (UNSW Press, 1998), 237; William
Leuchtenburg in Townsend Ludington, A Modern Mosaic, 249.
much distinguished American art in eight or ten galleries on Commercial Street as one could see making the rounds of Fifty-Seventh Street and Madison Avenue in New York.”

Without the government support through the Depression years, however, this revitalization of the art colony would not have been as prominent. It was because the names of the artists associated with the town, and its sustained reputation as an important art center through the 1930s, that students and admirers of the then-inhabitants came to the colony twenty years later. The FAP in Provincetown enabled the community to keep its historic tradition of American art alive and supported the town’s existence through difficult years.

Long after the Works Progress Administration was disbanded, the spirit – and some of the artistic works created for the Project – lived on. The artists themselves carried the legacy of the FAP with them, as they continued to embrace the Project’s ideology that their profession was important for American culture; this generation of artists fostered the abstract and surrealist movement in the next decades and the eventual pop-art boom in the later potion of the century. The tightly intertwined groups of artists and the relationships that were formed from the organization of the Federal Art Project remained with the generation long after the FAP ended.

Also coming out of the WPA was the belief that artists were valuable members of society and thus should be treated like, and given the rights of, any other worker. In 1947 the Artists Equity Association [AEA] was formed by a group of artists to “advance the economic interests of painters, sculptors and graphic artists.” Fully utilizing what they had learned

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during the Depression about generating public support, and the need and usefulness of
banding together, the founding artists developed the organization to protect the artist. The
AEA recognized the power of a structured organization – like the FAP – and the danger of
being interpreted as too political or liberal, and thus tried never to take public stands other
than on matters of financial importance to its members. The 1933 Artists Union was
associated with the communist movement and thus it garnered negative attention, and some
citizens feared its allegiance. The AEA sought to avoid such political associations in the
public eye and to focus more directly on the artists and their rights and needs. Among the
founders of the Association were Provincetown artists Max Weber, Paul Strand, Charles
Scheeler, Philip Evergood, George Biddle, Raphael Soyer, Henry Varnum Poor, and Jack
Levine.¹³⁴

Both the general and arts-oriented press supported the idea of an artists union
protecting the economic interests of its members. The art community embraced the AEA as
well; by the first anniversary meeting in 1948 its membership numbered over one thousand.
By the time the delegates met in Chicago in 1951, there were over eighteen hundred
members and thirteen chapters. The number of participants steadily grew until the New York
chapter of the AEA split from the national chapter in 1965 because of increased hostility and
disagreements. The New York chapter encompassed the largest regional group of artists and
struggled with their parent organization. The disputes over resources and access caused a
split between the two. In its twenty years of united existence, the AEA worked to represent
artists of every school, maintain and extend the importance of American art, and establish
standards of procedure to protect the artist and reputable dealers and agencies from unethical

¹³⁴ David Sokol, “The Founding of the Artists Equity Association after World War II,” Archives of American
practices. Without the model of the Federal Art Project and the relationships that the program forged, the creation of such an organization would not have been as seamless or accepted. The WPA/FAP gave the AEA a model from which to work while also highlighting aspects of the American art scene that needed to be changed or protected.¹³⁵

On the national scale, it is easy to see in retrospect how significant the Federal Art Project and similar federal programs were to the development of the American arts. Enrolled artists were not only allowed to – and in some cases encouraged to – experiment with new techniques and styles, but the friendships that were fostered during the Depression were vital to the success of the “modern” artists in the following decades. The FAP supported what has become one of the most important generations of American artists in one of the most significant national art movements. Though the abstract expressionism that prevailed during the late 1940s and onward was a reaction to the realism promoted during the 1930s, without the federal programs this impetus would not have been present.

On a local scale, the Federal Art Project had a similar impact. In Provincetown, the federal funding enabled the art colony to last through the Depression and welcome a new generation of artists and students after the Second World War. Without the FAP, the twenty-year cycles of artist teachers and students would have been disrupted for at least one generation. Though “important” artists had worked in the town prior to the Depression, the generation of artists that participated in the New Deal programs greatly influenced the local and national art scene for subsequent generations. From Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock to Harold Walker and Dorothy Loeb, the federal support in the 1930s was vital to the continued dominance and importance of Provincetown as an art community. Though the

artists in the town at the time of the FAP felt new and different pressures than they were used
to, the bureaucracy and other forces were worth the struggle because it allowed them to
continue their work.

Though these sentiments were felt outside of the town as well, the existence of the
FAP was vital to Provincetown because of its rich history as an art colony. Artists and
townspeople were able to continue on with their daily routines fairly uninterrupted. The
overall impact of the FAP on Provincetown during the 1930s was a positive one that enabled
“American” art to continue and develop. It helped maintain the dynamics of the community
while growing its reputation – and its attraction to tourists – as an eccentric and robust art
colony.
CONCLUSION

“Certain people, clever people... made a business of buying up a lot of the pictures from the government that were done on the WPA easel painting project. One man... who sold paints and hardware on Canal Street was very active in that. He bought up, say, two or three hundred of them and later on they’ve been selling for big, big prices. Tremendous profits were made by people who bought them. But I don’t know how it was done.” As this story from the artist Philip Evergood recounts, the lasting legacy of the Federal Art Project is an elusive one. 136

Today, there is evidence of the impact of other New Deal programs across the country. For example, roads and trails through National Parks built by the Civilian Conservation Corps are still utilized. Dams built by the Tennessee Valley Authority still generate electricity on the Tennessee River. The Federal Crop Insurance Corporation, later the Risk Management Agency, continues to insure crops and livestock against loss of production or revenue. Social security pays billions each year to retirees. The legacy and importance of the FAP is more difficult to grasp because much of the artwork created for the Project was misplaced or sold. 137

136 Philip Evergood, Interview by Forrest Selvig, Transcript, December 3, 1968.
137 For information on New Deal Programs see: Anthony Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940 (Ivan R. Dee, 2002); Paul Conkin, The New Deal (Crowell, 1967); Nancy Rose, Put to Work: Relief Programs in the Great Depression (Monthly Review Press, 1994); Elliot Rosen, Roosevelt, the Great Depression, and the Economics of Recovery (University of Virginia Press, 2007); and Howard Zinn, New Deal Thought (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).
It is through analyzing the experience of a smaller community during the Great Depression that the impact of the Federal Art Project can best be seen. In Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Federal Art Project was vital to the survival of the vibrant artist colony that had existed since the turn of the century. According to Provincetown resident and artist Gayle Charles, the town was “recognized as the most influential and important place of its kind in the country.” The Project provided its artists with job security and freedom of expression. For the participants, the “certainty of a regular check gave them a sense of security which enable them to work without the distraction of financial uncertainty.” Artists were able to stay in Provincetown through the Depression and visit the colony after the economic crisis because of the FAP sponsorship. 140

The artists’ freedom to experiment with new styles while employed by the Project helped to bring about the modern art movement of later decades. When Provincetown artist Maurice Sievan was asked if he faced any stylistic restrictions during his time working on the Project he said “Not at all, no. You could paint abstract.” Many artists, especially the muralists, utilized more modern and abstract styles and designs while enrolled in the FAP. Among the “initiators” of American abstract mural painting were Provincetown painters Byron Browne, Karl Knaths, and Willem de Kooning. Many of these artists credit their start and the success of the modern art movement to the freedom given to them by the WPA/FAP.

Robert Motherwell, for example, stated that it was the spirit of the 1930s that was "the catalyst that led to abstract expressionism."\footnote{Maurice Sievan, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, April 22, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/sievan65.htm (accessed March 9, 2009); Paul, "Byron Browne," 18; Robert Motherwell, Interview by Paul Cummings, November 24, 1971, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Arshile Gorky and Stuart Davis, New York artists, are also considered among the "initiators" of abstract mural painting.}

Though the Federal Art Project imposed a bureaucracy on the artists of Provincetown, the established dynamics in the town did not shift. The artists' speed of production and quality of works may have changed, but these changes did not impact the relationships between the artists and the community. The limited resistance to the Project in Provincetown was not dissimilar to the problems that some residents had had with the artists and the "modern" artists before the 1930s. "There are some people who are always attacking the artists and writers who have made Provincetown their home by calling them all kinds of names, 'crazy people,' 'bums,' etc." wrote a resident in the Advocate, "There were probably some people who said untrue things about Eugene O'Neill and other brilliant white-collar workers."\footnote{Another Tax Paying Wage Earner, "Letter to the Editor," The Advocate, December 2, 1936: 2. For more contrasting and complimentary articles, see The Advocate archives at the Provincetown Library or on its website. Eugene O'Neill came to Provincetown in 1916 and stayed until 1925. This period was one of the most productive of his career and helped give Provincetown the reputation as the summer center for the bohemian movement of the time. For more on O'Neill see among others: Leona Rust Egan, Provincetown as a Stage: Provincetown, the Provincetown Players, and the Discovery of Eugene O'Neil! (Parnassus Imprints, 1994); Eugene O'Neill and Mark Estrin, Conversations with Eugene O'Neill (University Press of Mississippi, 1990).}

Nationally the impact of the Project on artists and communities was both similar to and different than its impact on the Provincetown artists and community. Apart from new dynamics between the artists and their communities, what seems to have had the most influence on the artists at the time were the judgments made of their works and the standards that the Project imposed upon the participants. Whereas, in the past, most artists had created
for themselves or for a teacher and very rarely for commissions, in the WPA/FAP they were making works for a particular institution or place and thus had to satisfy both supervisors and local representatives. While enrolled in the Project, the artists relinquished control of how “acceptable” each of their pieces was; the artists may stop after one layer of paint and a very abstract scene while the supervisor might perceive this piece as “rushed” and not of a satisfactory standard.  

Many artists appreciated this close relationship with the supervisors and the Project’s strict guidelines because it was a type of finishing school for the younger participants. In Provincetown and elsewhere, the WPA/FAP paid the artists to experiment and hone their skills individually, but also to work closely with more established artists. Within the mural department of the Project, for example, almost every mural was by its nature a “cooperative enterprise in which the medieval relationship between master artist, journeyman, and apprentice was maintained,” noted historian William McDonald. Both the critiques of the supervisors and established artists, and the freedom of experimentation that the Project afforded the enrolled artists provided, the environment and tools for many artists to find prominence and success in the following years.

Elsewhere in the country, the bureaucratic organization of the Project fostered a sense of community among artists and their place of residence. Unlike in Provincetown, before the Depression artists were usually viewed as a community exterior to mainstream America. As

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143 Bystryn, “Variation in Artistic Circles,” 121; Harris, Federal Art, 32; Krahulik, Provincetown, 130-1; McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 403; Florence Brown note on Phil Malicoot, June 18, 1937, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum; Vernon Smith note on George Yater, January 6, 1938, Vernon Smith Papers, Provincetown Art Association and Museum.

the historian Karen Krahulik summarized, “the FAP demystified what it meant to be an artist and to appreciate art and, in doing so, brought artists closer to the average public.”

According to artists, reactions in their towns were particularly favorable when people could watch them paint. On the whole, many citizens were proud of the art installed in their buildings and felt as if the murals truly belonged to them and spoke to their sense of themselves.145

The art programs in the New Deal brought the artists into mainstream society. Across the country, citizens became aware of the great talents within their country and developed an appreciation for the visual arts. The unique dynamics of the Provincetown community were mimicked to various extents across the nation as artists moved into rural towns to work.

With the establishment of the Federal Art Project, the White House required that professional artists be exported from city to countryside and that rural programs be devised compatible with the artistic capacity of the countryside.146

As a result of the established intimate relationship between artists and citizens in Provincetown, the lasting impact of the FAP was the town’s continued existence as an art colony. Ross Moffett summarized that the mid-1930s was “a time in which sales of art works to independent buyers had shrunken almost to the vanishing point. To a large extent art was kept alive in Provincetown only by the government art projects....” Without the creation of the FAP branch in Provincetown, its resident artists would have been forced to

145 Krahulik, Provincetown, 119; and Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 28.
146 McDonald, Federal Relief Administration, 185.
abandon the colony, and its tradition as a site of innovation and creativity in the art world would have been lost for a generation of artists.\textsuperscript{147}

Out of this generation of Provincetown artists came some of the most influential American artists of the century. It was in the two decades following the Great Depression that “American art” established itself in the international art scene. Many of the artists that pioneered this movement were Project artists associated with Provincetown. From Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko to Milton Avery and Karl Knaths, to Jack Tworkov, Byron Browne and Bruce McKain, the Federal Art Project was vital to the success and experimentation of significant American artists.\textsuperscript{148}

Without the WPA/FAP many of these now-famous artists would not have been able to stay in Provincetown during the Depression, nor would Provincetown have survived as an artists’ colony. If the government had not intervened across the country to aid impoverished artists, those that had taken up residence in Provincetown would have been driven from the Cape tip to find work in larger towns and cities. The Project enabled Provincetown’s prominence as an American art colony to continue despite the harsh economic climate and struggles of the artists.\textsuperscript{149}

The scope of the Federal Art Project and the number of works created was impressive. When Holger Cahill wrote an informational brochure about the WPA/FAP in the mid-1930s, he boasted that, “five thousand three hundred artists and art teachers are now

employed by the Project in forty-four states.” By the time the Project was overhauled and eventually disbanded starting in 1939, its artists had created 2,566 murals, 1,744 sculptures, over 108,000 easel paintings, 11,285 fine prints (out of over 250,000 designs), and over 35,000 poster designs for about two million copies at a total cost of thirty-five million dollars. It reached across the country to expose all citizens to art and its historic value. It enabled a generation of artists to continue painting without sacrificing their economic wellbeing, and it educated, encouraged, and introduced a significant generation of American artists.\textsuperscript{150}

It is unfortunate that more of the work created in the Federal Art Project did not survive. Though there are some murals, prints, paintings and original poster designs left in private and government collections, a fair number of the works were destroyed or lost, either during the Depression or afterwards. Many of the government employees at the time saw the work project as a social experiment and did not believe that any value lay in the artwork itself; rather, the importance of the project rested in the process and the spirit and hope that the artists and their work brought to the country. Many pieces were sold for scrap, painted over, or removed following the end of the New Deal programs, and with the pieces, unfortunately, some of the value of the Project vanished.

The legacy of the Project then, is not necessarily the art created, but the environment in which the artists worked and the pieces that were made after the end of the government sponsorship. The artists themselves remember their \textit{experiences} in the Federal Art Project, their friends and colleagues, and the communities in which they worked, moreso than the

\textsuperscript{150} “Purposes, Functions, Techniques: Federal Art Project Exhibitions,” Brochure, Series 2.13, Reel 3482, Frames 1134-1153, Holger Cahill Files, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Francis V. O’Connor, \textit{Art for the Millions}, 305.
specific pieces they created for the WPA/FAP. When the artists looked back at their lives during the Depression, they remembered the impact that it had on their experience and the American art scene in the succeeding years: they remembered the bureaucracy of the Project, they remembered their supervisors and their support or critiques, they remembered the friends they made and other artists with whom they worked, they remembered the sense of belonging and importance that they felt because of the government recognition, and they remembered the impact that working with so many other artists in such an inspired environment meant to their work and American art in general in the subsequent decades.¹⁵¹

In the oral histories collected by Smithsonian Institution in the decades following the Depression, the artists express their frustrations with the Project and its limits on the creative process, but more often they remember the people with whom they worked or a new technique that was discovered or developed. For example, Peter Busa said, “I remember the particular project I was on. Lee Krasner... was the head of this particular project. And we were supposed to do murals. And this was with Jerry Kamrowski, myself, William Baziotes, and Jackson Pollock.... Mr. William Baziotes was instrumental in getting all of us to practice therapeutically automatic drawing. And from there on my interest in art took on an aspect where the doodle was glorified.” George McNeil’s recollections of the FAP emphasize the process of painting a mural and the resulting aversion to commissioned work. McNeil learned from his time on the Project that his artistic process was the same for murals and larger paintings as it was for smaller easel paintings, and that he despised commissions.

McNeil said "I made hundreds and hundreds of sketches and prior things.... But then I finally had to make what amounted to a big easel painting... I worked on a big painting, maybe two years... it was maybe ten feet by twenty feet. I treated it like an easel painting. And that's the only way I can do it. Now I've gotten to the point where I feel if I were offered a commission of some kind I wouldn't take it. I say take what I've already made and use it."  

In retrospect, the artists valued the Project for its emphasis on the process of creating the artwork and the people with whom they worked, over the specific artwork they produced. It is interesting to note that when the artists remembered a specific piece, it was often because of some fault of the Project. Some artists, like Maurice Sievan, recognized the bureaucratic realities of the FAP and its treatment of the artwork produced, but many other artists recall shock and disappointment that their work was mistreated. Though many participants appreciated the ability to work through the Depression and acknowledged the FAP's stated purpose as a relief project, artists still naturally placed value on the art they created. Unlike Sievan, who understood that "the object was not to promote art, the object was to make it comfortable for us so we could making a living," some artists hoped that the creation of a federal art project would mean that the government might value the work itself. Thus, the destruction of the artwork stuck with these artists as a bad memory. Philip Evergood clearly remembers his search for a "picture" that he made for the Project, "Railroad Men." "The mayor of Norwalk, Connecticut liked the picture when it was in one of these government warehouses. I supposed... he asked that it be sent to him to be hung on

152 Peter Busa, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, Transcript, September 5, 1964; George McNeil, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, Transcript, June 3, 1965.
the wall of his office.... This is the way it was told to me. And before he or anybody else knew it, the picture was gone. And it finally ended up in the sanitation department on the wall of one of the...supervisors. I tried to locate the picture years later.... I couldn’t get any farther than the fact that it was handed over to the sanitation department and was gone.”

While the Project brought artists into mainstream society and legitimized art as a profession, some artists struggled with their legacy in the New Deal as an average worker. As art is a specialized field and many people place value in the finished product, the emphasis on the process during the FAP over the finished works held different kind of significance.

However the artists interpret the Project and their experiences in the FAP, they never doubt the importance of this period. As evident by the sustained memories of this generation of artists, the WPA/FAP had a lasting impact on American art and artists. Through this program and its other art projects, the government made art a legitimate occupation in the minds of citizens. The Project fostered discussion about different artistic styles as it incorporated both modern and more traditional art forms. It allowed artists to experiment with new mediums and techniques by providing them with a steady income for all works produced. The exposure for these ‘modern’ artists as well as their counterparts was unprecedented for American artists prior to the Depression. The Federal Art Project treated known and unknown artists as equals and thus fostered a new, exciting and “American” generation of artists.

153 Maurice Sievan, Interview by Dorothy Seckler, 22 April 22,1965; Philip Evergood, Interview by Forrest Selvig, December 22, 1968.
In a 1986 panel discussion about the Federal Art Project, the artists Jerry Roth and Riva Helfond summed up their feelings about the importance of the WPA/FAP quite clearly. Jerry Roth concluded that: “Looking back on my days on the WPA, I can’t replace those – it did so much for me, it was wonderful. The tender thoughts and feelings I have in retrospect.” Riva Helfond said that in the Project she “developed as an artist and as a person. I really grew up. That was the most important experience of my life and it always amazes me, after all this time… we have become more aware of how important a stage in American art it was… I feel the work produced on the Federal Art Project was very influential on what happened in American art in the late ’40s, ’50s, and ’60s. American artists came into their own.”

The art scene that developed after World War II owed much of its success, techniques, styles and artists to the federal art programs of the New Deal. Without the ability of the artists to continue to work and create during the 1930s, the American art scene – and that of one of its greatest art communities, Provincetown – would have been dormant for over a decade. Without the work that was done for the Federal Art Project, the relationships that were formed, and the techniques that were developed, the great generation of modern artists may have never found their voice.

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