

The Myths About FDR's New Deal Arts Programs Are Misleading. Here Are the Real Lessons for Struggling Artists Today

Commentators have looked the New Deal art projects for lessons for today's crisis. Do we really understand their legacy?

Ben Davis, February 25, 2021



Moses Soyer, *Artists on WPA* (1935). (Image courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum)

Ever since arts institutions went into a tailspin at the very beginning of the pandemic-induced economic shock last year, commentators everywhere have invoked the example of the New Deal art projects in proposals to address the crisis. William S.

Smith, then editor of *Art in America*, reached for the history as early as last March in a stirring call to action. This January, the *New York Times*'s ace art critic Jason Farago did the same. Even more significantly, a host of Democratic mayors put out a letter recently calling upon the newly minted Biden administration to look to the example of FDR's New Deal in supporting the increasingly desperate culture industries.

It makes sense. The New Deal is our brightest-shining example, in a country with no social democratic tradition, of directed government intervention into the economy in the face of crisis. Yet I feel a lot gets left out in these appeals to the example of the New Deal art projects. Without filling in the nitty-gritty of the history that impelled the United States's singular experiment with government arts patronage, I get the sense that we are calling people into battle without arming them for the fight.

The Origin Myth



Cover of *Time* magazine, September 5, 1938, featuring a story about Holger Cahill and the Federal Arts Projects.

There is a kind of mythic origin story for the New Deal art projects. It goes something like this: In May of 1933, the painter George Biddle, an old school chum of Franklin Roosevelt, wrote the newly elected president a letter.

Biddle mentioned the then-current mural renaissance in Mexico, adding that “Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because [president Álvaro] Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumbers’ wages in order to express on the walls of the government building the social ideals of the Mexican Revolution.” Young US artists, Biddle wrote, “are conscious as they never have been of the social revolution that our country and civilization is going through and they would be very eager to express these ideals in a permanent mural art if they were given the government’s cooperation.”

FDR forwarded the letter to Harry Hopkins, his head of federal relief programs. Art initiatives were worked into the welter of relief schemes, and the rest is history.

That’s an appealing narrative. It fits the ingrained bias of artists and intellectuals towards individualistic narratives focused on elite benevolence. History is spoken of as if it is a matter of people coming up with nifty plans that kindly technocrats then execute for you.

Yet Holger Cahill, who would go on to head Federal One, the most celebrated of the New Deal art projects, doubted this tale. Here is what he said on the matter to the [Smithsonian Archives of American Art](#) (the last sentence is a fragment because it is as oral history):

Who actually started this? Now, when people write about this thing and when George Biddle writes about it, he claims that he did it because he knew Roosevelt at Groton and at Harvard. Well, I’m not so sure of that, and really I don’t believe it because there were so many people—the terrible excitement about the unemployment and the possibility of our program, which nobody had ever envisaged in this country.


As Shannan Clark puts it in a more scholarly register in the just released [The Making of the American Creative Class](#): “Although it may be tempting to see the WPA cultural projects as part of the inexorable expansion of state capacity during the Roosevelt administration, pressure from leftist activists was critical in overcoming the skepticism that many New Dealers harbored regarding relief employment for culture workers.”

The Crisis for Culture

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What does that mean? Our country has (rightly) been transfixed since January 6 by the spectacle of a disheveled gang of right-wing dead-enders, encouraged by Donald Trump, attacking the nation's Capitol. That sordid carnival has substantially changed the political conversation. One has to understand, however, that for the political

establishment and public alike, the spectacle of the 1932 election—taking place years into a brutalizing economic collapse—was even more transfixing.

As Hooverville camps of the destitute went up everywhere, masses of unemployed WWI veterans and their families occupied the Anacostia Flats in Washington, D.C., demanding the immediate payment of a promised “bonus” payout from the government. As the election approached, Hoover decided to shoo the so-called Bonus Army away from the seat of government. The news reels lit up with footage of a trifecta of future World War II generals MacArthur, Eisenhower, and Patton leading bayonet charges against penniless vets through clouds of tear gas, incinerating their last belongings.

The sense that society had reached a boiling point, that a showdown between masses and rulers was imminent, impelled the first years of the FDR administration. It also radicalized the nation’s cultural workers.

The widely debated 1932 open letter, “Culture and the Crisis.” directly referenced the violence against the Bonus Army as a sign of the descent of the United States into a crisis that its capitalist class was not equipped to deal with. The essay-statement, signed by cultural luminaries including Sherwood Anderson, Countee Cullen, John Dos Passos, Langston Hughes, and Edmund Wilson, triggered widespread debate and a rethinking of solidarities among artists. But its immediate mission was as a pitch for the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford—that is, it was in support of the Communist Party USA in the ’32 election.

While Herbert Hoover is draped forever in righteous scorn, FDR is now so sanctified in progressive mythology that it may inspire a double-take to read the intellectuals’ view of him in ’32 as a typically two-faced political operator: Roosevelt “has promised progressivism to progressives and conservatism to conservatives. He has promised to lower the price of electric power without lowering the inflated value of power company stock. He has promised more and less regulation of the railroads.”

The tone was probably in advance of mass sentiment, the product of a Communist Party then under the influence of Moscow’s freakishly sectarian and delusional claims that the final revolutionary battle was at hand. But it does illustrate the urgent disillusionment among influential cultural layers, looking for an outlet. Two years later, the same unsparing frustration was expressed in Langston Hughes’s bitter poem, Ballad of Roosevelt: “The pot was empty / The cupboard was bare. / I said, Papa, / What’s the matter here? / I’m waitin’ on Roosevelt, son, / Roosevelt, Roosevelt, / Waitin’ on Roosevelt, son.”

Another case in point: In '33, *The Jungle* author Upton Sinclair published *I, Governor of California, and How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future*. Capturing the desperate hunt for any narrative of salvation, this bestselling novelist's picture of cooperativist government inspired his real-world End Poverty in California (EPIC) movement, a socialist-ish grassroots electoral uprising.

Sinclair came seriously close to winning the governorship. FDR assured him of his sympathy in private and refused to endorse him in public. The bigfeet of California industry, including the Chandlers and Warners, unleashed a tidal wave of dirty tricks and scare-mongering media—including a threat to move Hollywood to Florida should Sinclair win—to brake the momentum of the insurgent EPIC movement.

The point is: The main event of US cultural life at the time wasn't Biddle's glad-handing. It was deep radicalization among cultural workers who were pulling hard left under the influence of the Depression and weren't inclined to "wait on Roosevelt" very long at all.

The Scope of the Projects



American artist Allen Saalburg directs WPA artists at work in a temporary studio at the American Museum of Natural History on murals commissioned for the Arsenal Building in Central Park, New York, New York, 1935. (Photo by New York Times Co./Getty Images)

The New Deal Arts Programs unfolded in two phases. The earlier programs, most notably the Treasury Section and the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), synthesized with FDR's public works programs in what you call the First New Deal, the early patchwork of emergency economic relief measures. They focused on placing artworks in public buildings and government-funded projects. They operated via juried competition, and had a more or less conventional idea of the artist's role in society.

The more famous part of the New Deal Arts Programs emerged from what you call the Second New Deal, the mid-'30s initiatives done under the pressure of what amounted to a nationwide labor uprising led by organized political radicals of various kinds, including full-scale, city-paralyzing general strikes in San Francisco, Toledo, and Minneapolis, all in 1934. This is thought of as the most radical portion of the New Deal, the period of large-scale government work relief under the Works Progress Administration, begun in '35, which incorporated direct employment of thousands of artists, actors, musicians, and writers as hired employees.

The New Deal art projects seeded important parts of the US art landscape which would bear fruit later. Jackson Pollock, too poor to travel to his own father's funeral and working as a janitor, would spend eight years with the Federal Art Project's mural and easel divisions. He wasn't eligible for the earlier arts projects like the PWAP because these required proof of skill as an artist or teacher, which he did not yet have.

The Second New Deal's focus on need saved him.

Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko were all WPA beneficiaries—though since none were US citizens, they were all terminated amid a wave of anti-immigrant backlash in '37. Alice Neel worked on the WPA; so did Louise Nevelson. Augusta Savage ran the Harlem Community Art Center, sponsored by the WPA. Among her students was Jacob Lawrence.



Poster for the Harlem Community Art Center (1938).

The young Charles White, recently so celebrated, got his start on the WPA's Illinois Art Project (IAP) in Chicago. He became a lifelong radical in part because of the sit-ins he participated in to get more Black artists hired by the program.

"My first lesson on the IAP project dealt not so much with paint as with the role of unions in fighting for the rights of working people," White would recall later.

Artists Get Organized



Diego Rivera addresses a protest at Columbia University shortly after his commission for the Rockefeller Center Murals was cancelled, 1933. (Image courtesy Getty Images)

The very day that George Biddle penned his letter to Roosevelt—May 9, 1933—Diego Rivera had his contract terminated by Nelson Rockefeller for his *Man at the Crossroads* mural at Rockefeller Center, due to the Mexican muralist's insistence on including an image of Lenin. (Rivera was probably in the mood to make a statement, having just spent down some of his socialist cred doing the *Detroit Industry* murals for

arch-capitalist Henry Ford.) Artists rallied to Rivera's cause, forming the Artists Committee of Action, which would become part of the basis for the Artists' Union that would agitate for government hiring of artists and then organize the Federal Art Projects.

The other component that fed into the Artists' Union was the Unemployed Artist Group (UAG), organized out of the John Reed Clubs, a Communist Party-sponsored chain of nationwide community art centers that amounted to an embryonic, alternative left-wing art world. Hundreds of UEG members swarmed the College Art Association in October of 1933 to demand work relief for artists, petitioning and putting active pressure on officials like Hopkins.

It was thanks to such collective organization that the arts projects would be shaped into the unprecedented form that they ultimately were: as economic relief for hungry artists rather than the more conventional type of commissioned state patronage. When Julianna Force, director of the newly minted Whitney Museum, was put in charge of the New York City region, the UAG led protests at the museum to demand that the program would focus on need rather than just awarding established successes. That pressure worked.

You really have to appreciate the audacity of artist organizing in this period. Artists were hired as unemployment relief, yet they had the spine to insist that they would be treated with respect and were owed dignified conditions (it should be noted that pay was always more meager than the hoped-for "plumbers wages"). Where, in the midst of such historic economic desperation, did this unexpected reservoir of self-confidence come from?

As art historian Andrew Hemingway puts it, the answer is not hard to find: It was the larger phenomenon of a mobilized and militant working class. "There was a real homology, partly grounded in direct imitation, between the rank and file energies that led to the great sit-down strikes of the period in Flint, Detroit, Akron, and elsewhere, and the sense of mobilization and collective solidarity among artists."

The Counteroffensive



A crowd protests the curtailment of the WPA and piles picket signs outside Madison Square Garden. (Photo by Hulton-Deutsch/Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis via Getty Images)

But you must also understand that artists fought because they had to fight. The New Deal arts projects were under siege from almost the moment they arrived on the scene. “[D]uring the seven and a half years that I ran that project it was attacked by everybody under the sun,” Holger Cahill remembered. “There was a dead cat coming through the window every few minutes.”

Artists and their supporters fought to make the arts projects permanent. Very soon, though, amid scrutiny and calumny, they were fighting just to keep them from being shuttered.

Roosevelt came under pressure to rein in spending after the '36 election. Salaries on the projects were slashed. Government spending cuts, in turn, helped unleash a terrible new phase of the Depression in '37, the so-called Roosevelt Recession, spiking unemployment back up to near 20 percent. Riding the wave of voter disillusionment, Republicans came roaring back and re-took Congress in '38, going on the offensive to roll back whatever they could of the New Deal.

Though minuscule in the scope of things, the New Deal art projects were a ready-to-hand symbol for government waste and the futility of government work creation in general, which was hated by free marketeers as interference into the labor market. Arts advocates liked to say that the New Deal art projects had finally connected art to a broad and democratic audience and that art was now valued like any other form of useful labor. While it is fair today to celebrate its successes in that direction, it's also important to know that not everyone bought that line, not even at the high point of artist-worker solidarity in the 1930s.

At the time, *The Nation* summed the role of the New Deal art initiatives in the public discourse like this:

The Federal Art Projects have become the focal point for the continuing attack on the standards and methods of relief symbolized by the Works Progress Administration. The reason is easy to discover. Nobody loves the artist. Ridiculing him or condescending to him is an old American pastime.

An attempt to pass a bill to create a permanent Federal Arts Bureau, the Coffee-Pepper Bill—seen as a proxy for “the defense of the Left’s conception of what the New Deal had achieved and how that achievement should be extended,” according to [Jonathan Harris](#)—went down in defeat in June 1938 in a 195 to 35 rout.

The End of the Deal



Hallie Flanagan on CBS Radio for the Federal Theatre of the Air, 1936.

The New Deal arts initiatives were slammed as Soviet propaganda. They were attacked as handouts for lazy artists who couldn't make it on the market. The Hearst press, the Fox News of its day, was relentless at stirring up resentment with headlines like "Children of the Rich on the WPA Project." Federal One was denounced, above all, for subsidizing "bad art."

And it was in the campaign demonizing the FAP that a sinister force first arrived centerstage, in 1938: the Dies Committee, aka the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC). At the hearing in late 1938 about Communist influence in the Federal Theater, Alabama Democrat Joseph Starns infamously grilled project director

Hallie Flanagan over whether Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe was a current member of the Communist Party and whether Greek dramatist Euripides “was guilty of teaching class consciousness.” Funny stuff, though Flanagan herself didn’t think so: “Eight thousand people might lose their jobs because a Congressional Committee had so pre-judged us that even the classics were ‘communistic.’”

Post-war, HUAC’s anti-Communist witch-hunting would go on to become the means to discipline any kind of public progressive sentiment, tearing the guts out of the labor movement and the heart out of the arts.

Some of the decline of the New Deal art projects amounted to self-inflicted harm. The Communist Party, of course, really was influential in the Artists Union—a mixed blessing, bringing an imperfect but ahead-of-its-time commitment to fighting racism, on the one hand, along with an unthinking adherence to the USSR’s foreign policy on the other. When Stalin signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler in ‘39, that split the Artists Union. Disillusionment and a wave of defections followed. Recriminations about “Communazis” persisted through the art magazines of the ‘40s (even as the Communist Party itself swung into line behind Roosevelt in the period of the alliance with Stalin, even arguing against strikes in war industries).

But by then, the hour was late anyway. The radical part of the New Deal was over. FDR was not particularly inclined to fight for unpopular arts relief. When workers went on strike to fight cuts to government arts programs in ‘38, he explicitly argued, “Participation in these activities by such employees will be considered insubordination and grounds for dismissal.” He was more preoccupied with mollifying big business to meet the demands of rearmament for the impending World War.

In ‘39, Congress voted to take the dog out to shoot it, terminating the US’s already weakened experiment with large-scale support for artists.

The Relevance Today



WPA mural from the Clarkson S. Fisher Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse, Trenton, New Jersey, ca. 1935. (Photo by VCG Wilson/Corbis via Getty Images)

Certainly, we have nothing like the level of sheer organized and rebellious energy in society that existed in the New Deal period.

On the other hand, the arts were a much smaller economic concern at the time. MoMA, the Whitney, and Mellon's bequest that formed National Gallery of Art were all phenomena of the 1930s. The modern "art world" then was only just coalescing.

As the recent letter from Democratic mayors attests, the cultural industries today are a much bigger share of the economy. One of the effects of the neoliberal economic policies that define our immediate history is that they have downplayed manufacturing in favor of tourism, entertainment, and services. So there is a much larger raw capitalist case for an arts industry bailout.

But when it comes to the threat of right-wing forces using arts support as the tip of the spear for of a larger demonization of all forms of economic support—that threat, if anything, is much more likely, given the cynicism and extremist drift of contemporary politics and the general climate of atomization. The first COVID bailout last year saw Nikki Halley score fake-populist points by demonizing the rescue package for having crumbs for the arts in it. Trump ended last year pairing a demand for \$2,000 checks with a demand to zero out the Smithsonian and the National Gallery.

I don't want to minimize the relevance of the New Deal art projects for today as an inspiration. It's important history, with plenty to inspire in it. And we are in an emergency whose only analogy may well be the Great Depression.

But I would say that the relevant lesson of the era is that such programs are not just a good idea laying around to be dusted off or a nice thing you ask for. The history is important: the New Deal art projects were born in struggle and they inspired implacable hostility that had far-reaching effects. To take their historical example seriously as a model for the present is to understand that it is a *dangerous* demand—in both ways you can mean that.

It is dangerous in a good way because the idea of federal art support threatens the settled ways we think about how art works—which is a good thing, since even before the present crisis the art system was broken and in need of a new deal of some kind. But it is dangerous in a bad way in that it makes art a political target. And without organization and the solidarity of much broader social movements, art is a very, very easy target to hit.