

## Topic Page: [Federal Art Project](#)

Summary Article: **Federal Arts Projects**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

Building on the precedent of the Public Works of Art Project organized in the U.S. Treasury Department in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration made large-scale employment of artists part of the overall work-relief program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), established in 1935 under Harry Hopkins. The Federal Writers', Theater, Art, and Music projects were to provide work for the thousands of writers, painters, sculptors, theater people, and musicians made expendable in the Great Depression.

As enacted by Congress in August 1935, the initial WPA appropriation of 2 billion dollars included 27 million dollars for the four arts projects. Six months after hiring began, about 40,000 people were on the rolls: 6,500 in Writers'; over 12,000 in Theater; 5,530 in Art; and almost 16,000 in Music. Approximately seventy-five percent were classified as professionals. WPA wage scales varied, ranging from about 60 dollars to 100 dollars a month, depending on the degree of professional skills and geographic location. Informal advice was given to the arts projects by a national committee of one hundred members. There were also state committees, many of which did very little. With no provision for local matching funds, the arts projects had to depend almost entirely on federal support and some private contributions.

Under the direction of journalist Henry Alsberg, the Writers' Project gave unemployed writers a maximum of twenty-five to thirty hours of work per week. Many writers welcomed a steady income for work that at least partly used their skills, while having free time to pursue their own interests. Though some of those employed by the Writers' Project were virtually incompetent, others were brilliant. Among those writers who worked for the project were Conrad Aiken, Nelson Algren, John Cheever, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright.

Between 1935 and the fall of 1940, the Writers' Project was responsible for 100 books and some 500 shorter items. Its publications included studies of ethnic groups; several photographic essays; *American Stuff*, an anthology of verse and prose written by 50 project workers; and valuable inventories of local and state archival materials held by some 3,066 counties, 5,400 towns and cities, and 20,000 churches. The American guide series, however, was the Writers' Project's greatest achievement. Its volumes were guides for all the states (then 48) containing vast historical, geographic, economic, and cultural information about the nation. Far from being chambers-of-commerce tracts, the guides collectively comprised a literal rediscovery of America and its roots. As such, they represented a turn inward in search of assurance during hard times. Ironically, the guide series—created by down-on-their-luck writers who felt betrayed by their plight and that of their country—would never have materialized if not for the Depression.

The Federal Art Project, directed by Holger Cahill, included such artists as Stuart Davis, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko. In addition to its creative products, the program provided instruction in arts and crafts and set up civic arts centers in areas without such facilities. Project artists produced thousands of paintings, murals, prints, sculptures, and illustrations, as well as making tapestries, rugs, ceramics, ironwork, and furniture. Works created by project artists circulated in exhibitions or decorated public buildings. When World War II broke out, the project turned

its artistic endeavors to support the war effort.

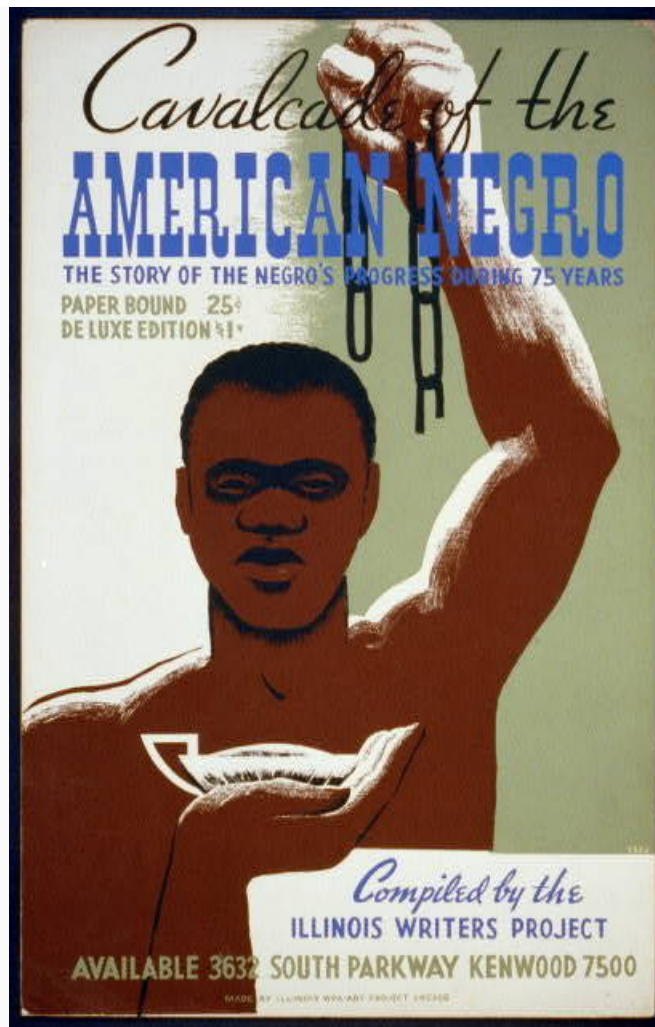
Many of the murals produced for federal buildings by the Art Project depicted events in local history or familiar scenes from different eras. As a group, the murals emphasized progress and patriotism; upholding important American myths, they may have addressed Depression-era fears regarding threatened values and social breakdown. Especially interesting for its cultural and historical importance was the Art Project's Index of American Design. On some ten thousand color plates, its artists carefully copied for posterity the designs of American decorative and folk arts.

To direct the Theater Project, WPA director Hopkins turned to a friend, Hallie Flanagan, head of the highly regarded Experimental Theater at Vassar College. Flanagan saw the Theater Project as a tonic for American dramatic arts and as an instrument for social change. Although she was the driving force behind the project, she enlisted expert help and gained the cooperation of community groups. Before the Theater Project moved into a town or city, local people were called in to explore the area's possibilities and interests.

Project productions ranged from the plays of William Shakespeare to those of George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill, from black theater and foreign-language plays to puppet shows, light operas, and musical comedies. Among the innovative approaches taken by project groups were Orson Welles's production of *Macbeth* with an all-black cast and the staging of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* without scenery. Combining stage, radio, and newsreel techniques, *The Living Newspaper* was developed to highlight such contemporary problems as agriculture, hunger, and housing. Though "Drama is a weapon" became the slogan for a proposed left-wing theater movement of the 1930s, it is all too easy to exaggerate the importance of political radicalism in the theater.

The Federal Music Project, like the other arts projects, was supposed to encourage and develop native talent as well as put people to work while disseminating culture. Nikolai Sokoloff left the directorship of the Cleveland Symphony to head the project. As well as forming full symphony orchestras, chamber groups, and bands, the project hired unemployed music teachers to hold classes throughout the country. Research workers recorded cowboy ballads and black slave songs, while the work of Woody Guthrie and John and Alan Lomax reflected and furthered a growing national interest in folk music. Sokoloff invited American composers to submit their manuscripts to a national audition board to pass on their suitability for performance by project music groups. Though the Federal Music Project was more receptive to American compositions than regular orchestras were, and thus may have helped broaden Americans' musical appreciation, it did relatively little to respond to demands for a nationalized musical expression.

The political contention and controversies that swirled around all the Federal Arts Projects particularly troubled the theater. Though its work earned critical favor, its controversial themes, along with alleged communist activity in the program, aroused the ire of the U.S. Congress. Its appropriation was discontinued in the summer of 1939; the other three arts projects were made dependent on local sponsorship. The WPA, whose funding was destined all along to be reduced and then abandoned as economic conditions improved, was terminated in 1943. Proposals for permanent federal subsidy of the arts fell on deaf ears. The Federal Arts Projects, like much of the New Deal, were just another experiment; their principal legacy was more of promise than lasting achievement. After their demise, no major step was taken in the United States for federal support for the arts until the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities was established in 1965.

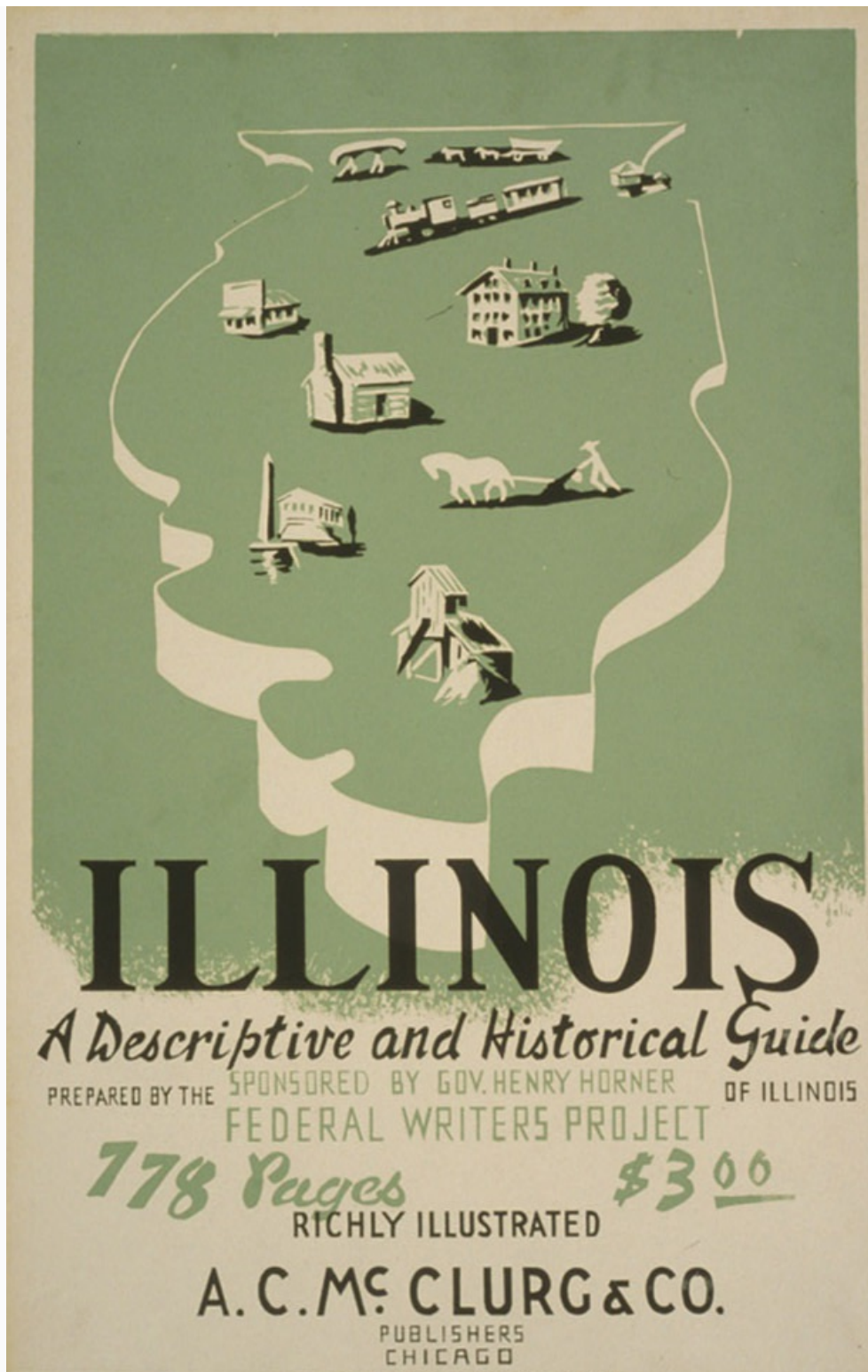


*Cavalcade of the American Negro: The story of the Negro's progress during 75 years, compiled by the Illinois Writers Project. 1940. Cleo Sara, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.*



*A guide to the golden state from the past to the present California history and culture, tours and trails, recreational facilities: American guide series. 1936-1941. Benjamin Sheer, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.*





*Illinois: A Descriptive and Historical Guide. Poster for Federal Writers' Project advertising "American Guide Series" volume on Illinois. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.*



*Exhibition. Metropolitan Housing Project Sketches. Sculpture Ceramics Murals. WPA Federal Art Gallery. Poster for Federal Art Project. 1939. Stanley Thomas Clough, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.*



*WPA Women Painters. Federal Art Gallery. Poster for Federal Art Project. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.*

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Simms, L. M. (2018). Federal arts projects. In S. Bronner (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of American studies*. MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/federal\\_art\\_project](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/federal_art_project)

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