

Art as Relief

Many of the **New Deal** programs were innovative, even radical, in treating artists, writers, and playwrights as workers deserving of support. This was new in America, where artists since the colonial era had largely been considered marginal “extras” of society. The mid-1930s saw artists brought to the forefront, with New Deal programs created for unemployed artists eligible for government relief. Artists, newly defined by the government as workers, produced an unprecedented number of artworks, literary works, and theatrical performances, launching the careers of



Artists on WPA, 1935, Moses Soyer, [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

many who would find fame in later years. President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously exclaimed, “One hundred years from now my administration will be known for its art, not for its relief.”

The first New Deal arts program was the **Public Works of Art Project (PWAP)**, which was created “to give work to artists by arranging to have competent representatives of the profession embellish public buildings.” This seven month-long program (December 1933 through June 1934) funded 3,750 artists to produce 15,600 artworks at a cost of \$1.3 million. Artists were encouraged to portray “the American Scene.” With this minimal guidance, they

*“[Art] to coax the soul the soul
of America back to life.” –
Gutzon Borglum, sculptor*

turned to local and regional subjects and created a picture of the country striving to survive through hard work and true grit. They were inspired by the idea that their art would be displayed in public spaces for broad audiences. President Franklin D. Roosevelt awarded the ultimate honor by selecting

thirty-two PWAP artworks to hang in America’s premier public space, the White House. Another 130 paintings hung in the Department of Labor Building, while 451 were displayed in the House of Representatives Office Building. The enormous success of the PWAP spawned other New Deal Arts initiatives, some which lasted into the 1940s.

The better-known successor of the PWAP was the **Works Progress Administration (WPA)** which ran from 1935 through 1943, spending \$12 billion to give jobs to nine million people, with

three-fourths of the money going for construction projects. But the WPA took a broad view of “workers,” with special programs devised for writers, musicians, actors, and artists. “Why not?” asked President Roosevelt, when criticized for including all these in his recovery effort. “They are human beings. They have to live.” The WPA helped such young, up-and-coming artists as **Jackson Pollock**, **Mark Rothko**, and O. Louis Guglielmi who, on relief himself, painted *Relief Blues* for the WPA in 1937.

This powerful painting documents the harsh conditions and emotional toll on Americans during the Great Depression. The painting’s title suggest that the effects of the Depression were both economic and psychological. When the economy collapsed, all hope seemed lost. Welfare was offensive to many; they wanted jobs instead. Yet many people had to admit that they could not make it on their own and were forced to apply for help from the government. In this painting Guglielmi shows how a family and all of their belongings are crowded into a small urban



apartment, which they have probably had to move into to save money. The case worker at the right has come to inspect the home to make sure that what is stated on their relief form is correct. The small coal-fired heater and the case worker’s keeping her coat on, both hint that the family has been unable to afford central heating. All this has been seen and is being recorded by the case worker. This invasion of a family’s home for the purpose of making sure that they were truly in need was widely reported as a humiliating

ordeal. In Guglielmi’s painting, the father seems lost in thought, hiding his feelings as if he is unable to cope with the idea of going on relief; the daughter literally puts her best face on the situation as if hiding behind a mask of makeup as she pretends that everything is normal. Only the mother openly looks out to share her sorrow with the viewer. Many found the process of applying for relief humiliating, but had realized that there were simply no other viable options. A clothing seller recounted how his life fell apart after the stock market crash and he had to apply for relief:

I didn’t want to go on relief. Believe me, when I was forced to go to the office for the relief, the tears were running out of my eyes. I couldn’t bear myself to take money from anybody for nothing. If it wasn’t for those kids – I tell you the truth – many a time it

came to my mind to go commit suicide. Than go ask for relief. But somebody has to take care of those kids.

Rural America suffered from the economic downturn as well. In 1937, a group of photographers employed by the **Farm Security Administration (FSA)** set out to create a pictorial record of the impact of hard times on rural America. Eighty thousand documentary photographs were distributed to newspapers and magazines to show the devastation of the Dust Bowl; and grinding poverty on agricultural lands and people, and some were featured in a 1938 exhibition called *How American People Live*, producing an overwhelming public response that made New Deal programs more popular than ever. **Dorothea Lange's** "Migrant Mother" and [Walker Evans's Alabama sharecroppers](#) are among these haunting images about profound distress and human dignity. In later years, the program's photographers documented America's mobilization effort for World War II. 164,000 FSA photographs are in the [Library of Congress](#) collections as an invaluable resource and moving tribute to hard times.

Glossary

Dorothea Lange: (1895-1965) American documentary photographer and photojournalist. She is best known for her pioneering Depression-era work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

Farm Security Administration: (FSA) created in 1935 as part of the New Deal, the administration was created to combat rural poverty during the Depression.

Jackson Pollock: (1912-1956) American painter and major figure of the Abstract Expressionist movement. He is best known for his iconic "drip" paintings.

Mark Rothko: (1903-1970) American painter and major figure of the Abstract Expressionist movement, although he refused to self-identify as such.

New Deal: (1933-1938) a series of domestic social programs and projects enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in an effort to combat the crippling effects of the Great Depression. These programs included immediate economic relief, as well as reforms in industry, agriculture, and labor.

Public Works of Art Project: (PWAP) a program established to employ artists during the Great Depression as part of the New Deal series of social programs. The program ran from 1933 to 1934.



Works Progress Administration: (WPA) the largest New Deal agency that employed millions of people to carry out public works projects. These projects included roads, public buildings, bridges, dams and more.