

# Historiography

Like all research specialties, New Deal art-historical scholarship emerged in a particular context and pursued a specific set of questions. Early inquiries into the government-supported art projects of the 1930s were rooted in the political, cultural, and intellectual climate of the 1960s. Pioneering scholar Francis V. O'Connor was first prompted to explore New Deal art projects because of his interest in Jackson Pollock and his desire to track the painter's experiences in the 1930s. Thus the initial aim, at least in part, was to understand the impact of the projects on a cohort of high-profile contemporary artists who had emerged in New York City after the war. O'Connor's work also developed against the backdrop of advocacy; he studied the New Deal projects as a potential model for the establishment of a permanent government funding structure that would support the creative arts.<sup>1</sup>

As this early research evolved, O'Connor and his collaborators shifted their emphasis from the art projects in New York toward documentation of the art projects as a whole. They sought to articulate the chronology of, and differences among, various New Deal art programs, and to identify their respective ideologies, administrative practices, and funding streams. This approach ran counter to what Audrey McMahon, regional director of art projects for New York and New Jersey, had earlier predicted: "Nothing is to be gained by the separate consideration of these various programs.

It is safe, I believe, to prophesy that retrospectively they will be envisaged by art historians as one and the same thing.”<sup>2</sup> Their relevance, she suggested, was to be found in general impact, not specific details. This was not borne out as the field of New Deal art history took shape, but when it came to the assessment of these programs in relation to African American artists, McMahon’s assumption proved largely true. Historians have tended to think of the projects overall as initiatives that redressed chronic disadvantages faced by Black artists, with a generally positive effect on their subsequent professional development. The result is a kind of consensus view of their collective historical relevance that is often vague or scarce in terms of details and complacent in terms of analysis.

Perhaps the biggest problem facing scholars interested in African American artists and the federal art projects has been getting reliable basic information on participants. The largest New Deal art project, what was known as “Federal Project Number One,” administered by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), encompassed government-supported programs to provide work relief not only for artists but also for writers and creative practitioners in theater and music. Black visual artists were largely associated with the Federal Art Project (FAP), a branch of Federal One. But, unlike the other branches, there was no dedicated “Negro” unit within the FAP, as there were, for example, in theater and writing. The personal record section of the FAP questionnaire asks about gender but not race. By design, the various divisions of the FAP were intended to be “race blind,” at least in principle. In some ways, the well-intentioned strategy of the FAP, to eliminate race as a separate category, has made it difficult to examine the differences between promises and practice within it.

Finally, when considering the general topic of African Americans and the federal art projects, an important distinction must be maintained between institutional issues related to administration and participation, and thematic concerns as they played out in New Deal art. O’Connor’s primary concern, at least initially, was the former, even as he noted the differences between various projects and their general policies with respect to matters of artistic freedom and choice of subjects. But in the wake of his groundbreaking research, an art-historical subspecialty emerged that focused on the analysis of style, subject matter, and themes in visual art produced under government-sponsored programs. In this area of research, African Americans have been more visible, especially when it is concerned

with artworks made in specific locales where Black communities figure prominently in local history and mythology. Although contemporary approaches to race and representation have increased interest in such material, it does not figure prominently in the present study.

#### DOCUMENTING THE NEW DEAL ART PROJECTS

There is no systematic or exhaustive study of African American experience in the visual art projects, but there are numerous places to look for information and insight. Sources fall into several general categories, all of which evolved out of O'Connor's initial research. Archives were at the center of this early work and remain essential to New Deal scholarship. Of particular import are the papers of Holger Cahill, national director of the FAP, and those of O'Connor himself. Both contain key documents culled from the vast records of the WPA housed in the National Archives.<sup>3</sup> These documents formed the core of O'Connor's 1968 groundbreaking report to the National Endowment for the Arts on government support for the arts, published the following year by the New York Graphic Society.<sup>4</sup>

A half century later, this research remains unparalleled in its scope and ambition. In addition to mining official documents, O'Connor sent letters to artists and art teachers as well as to former supervisors and administrators who were employed on various New York City and New York State projects between 1933 and 1943. He wrote to historical societies, art magazine editors, art dealers, and galleries that might represent artists who had been on the projects. Effectively, his goal was to establish contact with anyone who had been associated with the FAP, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the Treasury Department Section of Fine Arts (Section), or the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). In a form letter designed to solicit information, he underscored that the historical aspect of the project would be used to shape future policy, and that recovery and evaluations of artworks were research priorities.<sup>5</sup>

O'Connor's initial research included outreach to the Schomburg Center, from which he requested the catalog for a 1967 exhibition at City College titled *The Evolution of Afro-American Artists, 1800–1950*.<sup>6</sup> He explained that he was seeking documents relating to the participation of Black artists in the projects and material on the Harlem Community Art Center (HCAC). A small number of Black Americans consistently appear on working lists

of artists in the O'Connor Papers. As the mission expanded, the research team made a responsible effort to uncover and record details about African American participants. New names were added to the archive and O'Connor sought information from the General Services Administration about their employment, a process that continued after he submitted his report in October 1968. These records were by no means exhaustive, but they made it possible, for the first time, to track the work history of a significant number of African American artists on the projects.<sup>7</sup>

Soon after the publication of O'Connor's research, it became clear that focus on the creative divisions of the New York projects had led to an incomplete if not biased understanding of New Deal art programs overall. In the years that followed, O'Connor and the scholars he brought together systematically identified aspects of the New Deal art projects in need of more research. Through conferences and symposia, as well as in the pages of *Federal Art Patronage Notes* (1974–83), a quarterly newsletter that shared information about ongoing research and the status of current government-sponsored initiatives, parameters emerged for a new scholarly field expected to expand over time. As stated in the inaugural issue of *Federal Art Patronage Notes*, the newsletter was to function as a resource for those interested in the history and matters of public policy related to government support for the arts. It promised to report on newly completed scholarship and work in progress and on forthcoming exhibitions and academic conferences dealing with this topic. "In short," O'Connor wrote, "these pages are intended to serve as a clearing house for ideas and information from those actively engaged in writing, research or administration in the field of federal art support."<sup>8</sup>

The first issue of the newsletter called for the organization of an academic conference on New Deal cultural programs. Research had been ongoing since the late 1960s and it was time for scholars to share findings and exchange ideas. The conference objectives were ambitious:

- 1) to assess the present state of research and plan long-term goals,
- 2) to exchange information directly and to encourage students to work in the field,
- 3) to stimulate regional shows of New Deal art and activities,
- 4) to explore the compiling and publishing of a basic textbook on the New Deal art, music, theatre, writers and historical records programs to which experts in each area would contribute,

5) to assess the effectiveness of federal art preservation efforts and to organize a strong voice to encourage these efforts—and to protest if necessary, 6) and finally, to organize a similar strong—and historically informed—voice in the drafting of legislation affecting the visual arts and the individual artist.<sup>9</sup>

O'Connor felt that energies and resources needed to be directed at more than academic scholarship; he spoke as an advocate for research, for the preservation of New Deal art, and for ongoing federal support of contemporary art.

The following year, a conference called “Fine Arts and the People” was held at Glassboro State College, organized by O'Connor, Gerald Monroe, and Jane De Hart Mathews and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Key figures in the first generation of New Deal art historians participated, including Greta Berman, Belisario Contreras, Garnett McCoy, and Karal Ann Marling. Warren Susman chaired a session called “The Projects Seen in the Light of Cultural Trends in the 1930s,” and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was invited to act as a commentator and synthesizer.<sup>10</sup> The content of the Glassboro conference shaped future scholarship on New Deal art and the government projects. The session O'Connor presided over, devoted to general issues on art and the Depression, raised a series of questions that would guide research for the next fifty years.

Participants were urged to consider the federal art projects as agents of artistic change, democracy in the arts, and cultural populism. They called for better understanding of the ideological positioning of the projects, asking not only how they affected artists but also whether they created new audiences, markets, and a stronger sense of community. Questions were raised about the role of censorship and the projects' collective impact on art education. O'Connor asked specifically about the role and influence of the community art centers (CACs) and what kind of data and analysis would be helpful. He addressed the need for comparative frames that would weigh the national against the local, and federal support for the arts in the United States in relation to other nations. Finally, participants identified the need to broaden inquiry by asking, “What was the role of Blacks, women, and the various ethnic groups on the Projects? To what extent did Project art reflect minority views and depict ethnic heritage as related to the strength and destiny of America?”<sup>11</sup>

Susman's session provided strong support for inquiry into these larger questions. He called for expanding perspectives on the projects in ways that related them to broad cultural patterns of the interwar decades, such as the documentary impulse, the visibility of culture in popular mass media publications like *Life* magazine, definitions of high, middle, and lowbrow culture and their impact, and ideals espoused by proponents of the so-called American Renaissance and by philosopher John Dewey. Susman also stressed the need to develop appropriate methodologies for approaching these questions that would allow historians to think about the artist as both a creator and a worker, and about the relationship between art and society in America. His remarks were underscored by Schlesinger, who noted the need for better understanding of the personal tastes of those who sponsored and ran the programs, and of their nationalistic and patriotic impulses.

In the ensuing years, *Federal Art Patronage Notes* continued to encourage and share research on the New Deal federal art projects in the interest both of expanding understanding and of providing historically informed guidance on the drafting of contemporary federal art policy. It published periodic bibliographies of New Deal arts scholarship and reported on various public initiatives. By the summer of 1983, O'Connor seems to have become discouraged about the slow progress of research. His remarks that year were in part occasioned by events marking the fiftieth anniversary of the inaugural New Deal art project. Referencing the earlier conference, he noted that an ambitious research agenda had been laid out but that not enough had been accomplished. In his view, there had been a decline in the scope and originality of New Deal patronage studies, and he expressed hope that commemorations of the anniversary would stimulate new work. Once again, he singled out the importance of conducting regional and state studies, and he prioritized increased understanding of the art education initiatives: "More than any other institution, it was the New Deal art projects in general, and the Federal Art Project's Community Art Centers in particular, that first brought the personal experience of creativity to the American people. Yet the history of this vast educational endeavor has been neglected, as has the role played by project artists in creating the various schools of the arts which now flourish in so many universities."<sup>12</sup>

A follow-up conference, "New Deal and American Culture in the Thirties," was held at Columbia University in April 1985, timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the legislation that created Federal Project

Number One. The purpose of the conference was to assess the state of interdisciplinary New Deal scholarship a decade after Glassboro, with emphasis on addressing each of the Federal One projects independently and on trying to understand the relationships among them. O'Connor, speaking on the "Visual Arts" panel, noted that after twenty years of dedicated scholarship there had been "a certain unwillingness to go beyond what is convenient in the archives."<sup>13</sup> Participants concerned with problems in regional studies pointed out that traditional documentary sources do not capture the nuances of diverse programs and audiences. CACs across the country again took on special importance in this discussion, each one understood as specific to its location and environment. In discussing future directions for New Deal scholarship, the historian Jannelle Warren-Findley observed that "the mapping of state and regional programs is absolutely crucial before we can even say for certain what was done by these government programs, because state and regional programs were simply too diverse to be able to generalize about them."<sup>14</sup>

Even as he prioritized regional and cross-disciplinary approaches to New Deal cultural projects and their diverse constituents, O'Connor remained concerned about issues of quality that had emerged early on in his research, focused as it was, at least initially, on project participation among celebrated artists of the post-World War II generation: "Those of us in the field of the visual arts have to consider just how far we can go with works of art as documentation before we have to decide between the good and the bad. . . . Do we seek the 'significant best' or the 'best significant'? . . . Are we to assume that one should apply universal criteria of quality or only historically relative criteria? . . . Do we select out of the product of an entire generation of American artists the best to illustrate our points about the culture from which they came?"<sup>15</sup> In raising these questions, O'Connor recalled the anxiety of FAP administrators such as Holger Cahill, who similarly worried about criticism of New Deal art as driven by social objectives rather than aesthetic values. But, in the end, these questions were about the story New Deal historians wanted to tell and how they were going to tell it.

#### EARLY NARRATIVE HISTORIES OF THE PROJECTS

The first wave of narrative histories of the federal art projects appeared in the years immediately following O'Connor's early publications and built

extensively upon them.<sup>16</sup> In addition to official documents, oral history played a prominent role in shaping the content of these subsequent narratives. Personal testimony provided important details about individual experiences and the bureaucratic functioning of the projects, as well as interpretation of the ideological flashpoints. While in the main they were celebratory, participants also raised larger questions about the implications of government support for the arts and its impact on outcomes and the future development of American art.<sup>17</sup>

In assessing the pivotal role of oral testimony in New Deal cultural history, Roy Rosenzweig and Barbara Melosh offered a critical examination of the strength and inherent limitations of excessive reliance on such sources.<sup>18</sup> They identified biases attributable both to limited sampling and various contextual issues that could be brought to bear on these accounts. For example, they noted that despite the impressive number of such interviews (by their count well over one thousand), a disproportionate emphasis was placed on speaking to creative visual artists and high-level project administrators, with little insight from support staff who managed the projects on the ground. The sample is also unbalanced geographically, with the metropolitan New York area heavily represented, followed by California and a select number of mostly urban areas spread across the country. The South is vastly underrepresented, with only Florida achieving at least some visibility.

Rosenzweig and Melosh also identified various forms of bias that emerged from the identities and personal circumstances of the subjects and from the historical moment in which they were interviewed. Among the small number of women who were consulted, little emphasis was placed on the uniqueness of female experience, perhaps reflecting prefeminist wariness of dwelling on gender differences. The authors ascribed age-related bias to a large swath of the oral accounts, given that many were individuals well past middle age recalling the experiences of their youth. In addition to being tinged with nostalgia for youth and romantic ideas about comradeship under shared circumstances of deprivation, the projects tended to be seen through the lens of subsequent success. As the authors said of the sample overall, “generally the bias is toward people who continued to work in the arts and who were thus likely to agree that government sponsorship helped artists.”<sup>19</sup> Subjects were inclined to think of how their personal goals and creativity were supported, rather than the implications of the projects’ larger social goals.



African American oral history subjects did reflect on issues of race in the challenges and opportunities they faced, but their conclusions about the value of the projects were equally embedded in a set of assumptions about art and creativity that were widely shared among their peers. In scholarship about Black artists and the art projects, an interview conducted with Charles Alston for the Archives of American Art enjoys particular prominence among historians. While generally positive about the projects, like many artists of the postwar era, Alston expressed reservations about the dominance of social issues in the art of the 1930s. As Rosenzweig and Melosh explained, “when Harlan Phillips interviewed the painter Charles Alston in 1965, their conversation revealed the doubts of both the interviewer and interviewee about the aesthetic efforts of the socially conscious art of the 1930s. Both men shared the tacit assumption of formalist art criticism, the notion of art as separate from society and therefore inevitably compromised or debased when in the service of politics. Asked by Phillips how the project affected his work, Alston was ambivalent.”<sup>20</sup> Writing in 1990, these authors concluded that the evolving priorities of New Deal cultural historians, and their increased interest in the broader social patterns implicated in the art projects, necessarily involved a shift away from individual recollections to sources less mediated by highly personalized and, in many ways, contingent assessments of value.

Whatever the shortcomings or limitations of their work, these early historians provided a very clear picture of the scope and aims of the New Deal art initiatives. In addition to furnishing empirical data on logistics, financing, and levels of participation, they charted important distinctions between the projects managed by the Treasury Department and those associated with the WPA. They sought to explain the impact on these divisions of the philosophical and personal differences between Edward Bruce and Holger Cahill, their respective directors. These discussions turn on a few key points: an emphasis on need versus competency; on relief versus competitive commissions; and on volume of production versus the production of a few good works. Although the differences were real, we are cautioned against absolute binaries here. Richard McKinzie, for example, pointed out that Cahill, who ran a program based on need and relief, worried privately about issues of quality because he wanted to ensure an elevated and ideally permanent status for his programs. Cahill addressed the issue of

competency by creating different divisions based on skill levels, but he also recruited accomplished artists to the projects.<sup>21</sup>

William McDonald suggested that the FAP understood that it could and should potentially play an important role in improving race relations.<sup>22</sup> This was to be accomplished through ensuring access to the benefits of the projects rather than challenging existing norms regarding legal segregation. Cahill believed that the achievements of Black artists such as Samuel Brown and Charles Alston added to the positive image of the projects; the two were frequently cited in official literature because they had been chosen for inclusion in *New Horizons in American Art*, an early showcase of project art held at the Museum of Modern Art. But historians sometimes exaggerate the extent to which the projects made the development of African American art possible, perhaps taking too literally the claims of key administrators. Black artists recognized that the projects gave them opportunity, but to overstate this is to ignore the fact that Alain Locke had been writing about Negro art for a decade, and that familiarity with the works of these artists had been growing through the Harmon Foundation (HF) and other exhibitions.<sup>23</sup>

All of these authors were required to mediate between recognition of opportunity and nondiscrimination as reflected in project official literature, and the reality of low participation numbers. McDonald stressed the growth in the number of Black artists in the WPA in the first year, thanks in part to successful advocacy by organizations such as the Harlem Artists Guild (HAG). Bruce Bustard, by contrast, points out the failure on the part of Section administrators in particular to be proactive in securing commissions for Black artists.<sup>24</sup> Most writers agree that while the employment of African American artists was mixed, there was definite progress in terms of expanding opportunities for art education and appreciation in Black communities.<sup>25</sup> They consistently note that the projects did not challenge legal segregation, and some examine the general implications, especially in the South. According to McDonald, local administrators in southern states worked with the national office to achieve equality of opportunity to the extent that this was possible given conditions on the ground. These historians also argue that the projects stimulated interest in African American culture, both by employing Black artists and by encouraging the depiction of local history and African American life. This did sometimes involve stereotypes, but it could also lead to new levels of understanding and cultural sensitivity.

What do these early sources tell us about African American artists and their actual experiences? With various degrees of attention and detail, the authors note the participation of specific artists and the projects they worked on. Drawing on similar primary sources, they tend to tell the same stories. Detailed discussions of African American experience in this literature are focused largely on a few high-profile initiatives that were well documented as sites of controversy, or on individuals who directly intersected with the agents of cultural change that define the era, such as the Artists' Union (AU), the American Artists' Congress (AAC), and the magazine *Art Front*. The Harlem Hospital mural project, for example, involved biracial activism in which the AU and the HAG joined forces to combat the unsympathetic and intrusive actions of a local WPA administrator. Not much attention is given to the HAG as a specific organization beyond published statements in *Art Front*, but the overall contributions of Aaron Douglas and Gwendolyn Bennett, who were active in the HAG and also involved in the AAC, are recognized. The many accounts of the HCAC and its founding director, the artist-educator Augusta Savage, emphasize its status as a flagship of artistic outreach to local communities and as a training ground for a generation of Black artists.

It would be inaccurate to state that these early authors simply ignored African American experience, but one does not get a consistent sense from this literature of how aware project administrators were of race issues beyond a very general sense that positive things could be achieved. And while historians spent a lot of time discussing the programs' varied philosophies and requirements, they did not always demonstrate a critical awareness of how such things related to the larger issues facing African American artists. Most note the lack of Black supervisors on the FAP as a problem and the efforts of activist groups to exert pressure on authorities to expand these numbers. But distinctions between association with the creative versus the educational divisions, or between the Treasury- and WPA-funded projects, were not routinely examined in terms of their implications for African American artists except to account for their numbers.

#### AFRICAN AMERICAN ART HISTORY

Historians of African American art have understandably paid greater attention to this topic but have relied on the same resources: oral histories,

archival records, and New Deal cultural histories.<sup>26</sup> They also benefited from the growing number of specialized studies in African American art, particularly monographs on individual artists. Participation in the projects of notable figures such as Aaron Douglas, Archibald Motley, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Alston, William H. Johnson, Richmond Barthé, Augusta Savage, and Sargent Johnson, to name a few, has been consistently noted in the historical literature, providing important insights into the impact of that experience on their work. Monographs have also added much-needed primary source material to the record and expanded our understanding of the local context in which these various opportunities were offered.

Collectively, these historians have raised questions and identified issues that had specific bearing on the participation of African American artists in the projects. They were, for example, attuned to the complications of qualifying Black artists for the art projects. Individuals were asked to provide information on their training as artists and their exhibition history, a challenge for Black artists who lacked the opportunity to attend art school or regularly show their work. Augusta Savage, who had been teaching Harlem art workshops for many years prior to the establishment of the FAP, was a key figure in assisting many of her former students who sought employment by the projects. The HF was also involved in this process despite its troubled relationship with the Harlem artistic community in the 1930s.

On the issue of artistic training, there is strong consensus among historians of African American art that the projects provided Black artists with time to work and unprecedented access to materials and instruction. In this sense, there is consistency with official project literature and the secondary sources on New Deal art history. These historians recognize and celebrate the contributions of FAP-supported initiatives in urban locales, such as the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago and the HCAC, to the education of Black artists. Printmaking and mural painting have special prominence in this literature, the former for the democratic impulse the medium embodied and the latter for the obvious public profile mural projects enjoyed. In addition, printmaking required technologies difficult to access for artists not formally enrolled in art schools, and mural painting involved a specialized pedagogy and mastery of technique not easily obtained outside public commissions.<sup>27</sup>

One very significant difference between mainstream general histories and those that focus specifically on African American art is the attention

given to the role of the HAG in the cultural politics of the 1930s. Mainstream sources tend to focus on the AU and AAC, but historians of African American art have recognized the importance of the guild as an advocate for everything from increasing the number of Black supervisors, to fighting cutbacks that disproportionately affected Black artists, to rallying public support for the establishment of the HCAC. The role of the HAG was also crucial in addressing a problem that many historians note: the obvious imbalance in terms of access to FAP-sponsored exhibitions. Denial of adequate opportunities to show their work had been a persistent challenge for generations of Black artists, and the HAG worked collectively to organize and promote exhibitions of its members as an alternative.

With respect to documenting actual participation, these general texts vary widely in both scope and accuracy. Inconsistencies in the literature can be explained in part by an early investment in biographical and archival scholarship on a topic for which the primary record is itself uneven. The many references to who-worked-on-what-project-and-when can give the impression of randomness, of the impulse to convey information on hand without much concern for discursive force or relevance. There is some differentiation between artists who were understood to be in a privileged position owing to their association with nonrelief initiatives such as the Section or the very exclusive PWAP. But mainly we learn about identifiable works of specific artists done with government support, not unimportant by any means, especially given the general problem of recovery in New Deal art history.

Approaches to this period that emphasize the facts of participation provided infrastructure for a parallel effort to establish what access to these programs effectively *meant* to this generation of Black artists and to the development of African American art. At their best, these analytical accounts transcend standard histories and seek to capture the larger relevance of the projects as mechanisms whereby African American artists could successfully enter the mainstream of American cultural life. Such observations are most persuasive when the frame is comparative—that is, when they weigh what appears to have been a paternalistic and exotic interest in so-called Negro life driving the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s against an era of openness to Black experience that seemed connected less to the reification of racial difference than to the broad search for a complex notion of American identity. These arguments are ultimately about

redefining the position of race in the national story and the relationship of Black America to the majority culture.

Jeff Donaldson's groundbreaking study of "Generation 306" made this case, characterizing the interwar decades as "germinal." During this period, we witness the abstractions of the Harlem Renaissance give way to the practical politics of the New Deal; the associations between race and primitivism, so appealing to white viewers, recede. Black artists were "invited" to participate in the projects, their status and fate more closely linked with white American artists than at any other time in history.<sup>28</sup> Donaldson constructed the 1920s as a period that encouraged individualism among artists competing for limited resources. Conversely, the Depression ushered in an era of shared aesthetic ideals and investment in collective strength. More recently, Stacy Morgan has argued that even if such comparisons are rooted in timeworn contrasts between the preoccupation with Black exotica in the 1920s and the manifest social justice concerns of the 1930s, there is truth to the claim that Depression conditions reoriented artists' thinking in terms of their ideological and structural relationship to American culture.<sup>29</sup>

David Driskell presents a very different scenario in his essay for the landmark exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. While recognizing the legacies of the Harlem Renaissance as quite specific (nationalism, primitivism, atavism, and what he called "Tannerism," by which he meant overcoming the system), he understood it as extending into the 1930s, albeit mediated by changing economic, social, and cultural conditions. Driskell invoked W. E. B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness as a way of understanding the complex relationship between these two decades. Despite forging an independent identity in the 1920s, Black artists continued to see themselves through the eyes of others, part of the sociocultural system yet apart from it. Driskell also revisited Locke's argument that the American Scene movement was helpful to Black artists insofar as it led to the "discovery" of African American subjects and established their importance to the country's story. He felt that Locke at times exaggerated the transformative implications of 1930s realism, pointing out, correctly, that this had been ongoing since the majority culture "discovered" Black subject matter during the Jazz Age.<sup>30</sup>

Driskell noted that many Black critics and artists enthusiastically embraced the ethos of the 1930s in part because it enacted a shift away from racial protest to overall social protest sanctioned by the mainstream.

Black artists were drawn to socially minded realism both because it was a dominant idea and because it genuinely met the needs of a generation of artists who wanted to express their fundamentally American identity and also to accelerate social change. But even though this confluence of ideas was a good fit for Black artists in the 1930s, they were ultimately not able to get out from under what was a fundamentally narrow perspective on art. As these social platforms collapsed and government support dried up, the problems faced by Black artists were compounded by multiple factors that, in Driskell's view, slowed their growth: lack of a coherent aesthetic ideology, sustained informed criticism, and diverse forms of patronage.<sup>31</sup>

Recognizing that the government policy of nondiscrimination in the federal art projects had a significant positive impact on African American artists and allowed them to survive, Driskell also suggested that the projects created false hopes among artists about the possibility of lasting change. And he argued that the commitment to socially conscious realist art may have hamstrung Black artists, especially in the postwar period. This point is underscored by the thinking of American critics such as Sam Hunter and Barbara Rose, who looked down on the 1930s as conservative and reactionary. When Driskell argued that Black artists embraced the period ethos to their eventual detriment, as abstraction and formalism ascended in postwar art, he seemed at some distance from the feelings of social solidarity and common agency that infuse Donaldson's account, written as it was in the context of the Black Arts Movement and its commitment to community and activism.

Among the authors of survey texts, Sharon Patton has been the most interested in detailing the social and institutional aspects of the period that influenced the circumstances and development of African American art. She covers basic information in a way that balances the larger picture with details that are specific to Black experience. In addition to a clear time line and summaries of the respective projects, her book *African-American Art* includes an informative discussion of the CACs nationwide and their role in employing Black artists and providing art instruction for those who could not afford it. With respect to Harlem, Patton charts the HCAC's relationship to prior workshop activity in the 1920s and identifies key players who facilitated these kinds of initiatives in Harlem and elsewhere. Patton's treatment of the projects is framed by nuanced discussions of the patronage and critical issues surrounding African American art in the 1920s and their

extension and modification during the 1930s. She positions the New Negro thinking of Alain Locke in relation to both the ideology of the New Deal and counterarguments embodied in the alternative critical paradigm of James Porter, all of which are examined for their implications in the post-New Deal art world of the 1940s.<sup>32</sup>

Patton provides a fulsome account of the HAG, characterizing it as an alternative to, and not just an appendage of, the AU. She notes its importance as a political organization but also points out that it was created to animate discussion on how best to foster the visual arts in the Black community. In effect, she confirms that the HAG was a cultural as well as an activist organization. This insight was advanced earlier in Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson's *A History of African-American Artists*, whose treatment of the 1930s deserves special recognition as the most comprehensive discussion of African Americans and the New Deal art projects in the general literature.

Bearden and Henderson were particularly interested in providing a complete and accurate account of the Depression era and what it meant to African American artists. They conducted numerous personal interviews and reviewed available archival documents as well as the secondary literature. They consider several projects at length and provide an impressive level of detail on the participation of many individual Black artists. Bearden and Henderson promised prospective publishers an inside look at the HAG, as a way of accentuating the book's originality. Their extensive account of the HAG drew heavily on typescripts of previously unpublished minutes from meetings held in 1938–39, and on other supporting documents such as membership lists and internal correspondence. While this material was abbreviated in the published book, their basic argument about the rise and fall of the HAG, and its connection to earlier efforts to advance the interests of Black artists, fundamentally altered simplistic narratives that characterized the organization as an advocacy group embedded primarily in the cultural politics of the moment. Like Driskell before them and Patton after, Bearden and Henderson stress continuity modified by an altered sociocultural landscape.<sup>33</sup>

#### NEW DEAL SCHOLARSHIP AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM

In the past three decades, a new generation of scholars interested in the cultural landscape of the 1930s has shifted the conversation about the art



projects, moving it closer to O'Connor's vision for future research. Recent New Deal scholarship builds on earlier conceptual formations while raising different kinds of questions, and in the process a more nuanced account of Black experience is emerging.<sup>34</sup> While scholars have long recognized the impact of American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey on the functional ideology of the New Deal art projects, there has been increased scrutiny of the specific role it played in FAP national director Holger Cahill's drive to supplant elitism with grassroots engagement in the arts. This line of inquiry has given privileged status to the CACs and the Index of American Design as embodiments of the FAP's purest investment in democratic and populist ideals. The CAC movement has proved fertile ground for scholars interested in New Deal cultural initiatives as anti-elitist and inclusive in principle and implicitly educational and social in purpose.<sup>35</sup>

Broader inquiries into social context and lasting impacts have resulted in a more complex understanding of African Americans' relationship to the projects and their aims. For example, while most historians engaged official FAP rhetoric on art and democracy to affirm the nationalistic aspirations of the WPA, interest has grown of late in the projects as mechanisms of social and political engineering undertaken to restore cultural coherence during the Depression. Definitions of "citizenship" as a condition reliant on common ideals shared by diverse segments of the population lend themselves to consideration of African Americans as key constituents in the project of achieving national identity and unity. The New Deal art projects are also increasingly viewed as agents of education that had a significant impact on the development of citizen-consumers operating in an emerging market for accessible populist art. To varying degrees, like the projects themselves, recent authors have moved away from traditional understandings of professionalism in the arts toward an emphasis on amateurism, shared values, and the cultivation of grassroots interest in the arts, all of which resonate with the development and circulation of African American art.

Jonathan Harris's 1995 study *Federal Art and National Culture* marked a turning point in the literature. Harris described the instrumental construction under the New Deal of a coherent American public able to acknowledge difference without inciting antagonism. In the rhetoric of the New Deal, he argued, citizenship elided the particularities of class, race, gender, and occupation. Society writ large maintains ideological consensus through shared organizations and structures directed at common goals.

Harris understood the FAP as a fundamentally hegemonic project, directed at creating and sustaining a unifying vision of America during a period of crisis. Through programs such as the Index of American Design, which aimed to document the regional histories of American material culture, the FAP sought to excavate lost cultural memory and in so doing revitalize American art and the nation itself. CACs promoted aesthetic populism and democratized notions of artistic production and experience. Art that belonged to the people and embodied popular values could combat the destructive associations with individualism and elitism that had caused cultural disaffection and eroded fundamentally American values, as the FAP understood them.<sup>36</sup>

This understanding of the FAP as a universalizing discourse perpetuating national unity in the interest of restoring cultural health to a badly damaged nation has been challenged by scholars who see a much more complex ideological landscape informed by multiple goals and evolving definitions of culture.<sup>37</sup> From the standpoint of African American experience, it is an abstraction largely disconnected from the reality of people's lives. Harris, like other scholars, acknowledged that the FAP did not challenge legal segregation. But, he claimed, it rhetorically advanced the equivalence of artist/Negro/citizen to neutralize conflict and admit this otherwise marginalized group into an inclusive notion of national identity. In practical terms, of course, this did not happen, especially in places where the overall number of artists was small and racial segregation was strictly enforced. Black artists remained isolated no matter how seductive the paradigm; there was a functional inconsistency between promise and practice that rhetoric could not resolve.

Lauren Sklaroff, like Harris, discusses the approach to race in the rhetoric and strategies of the government art projects as a way of addressing concerns of African American citizens without attempting actual structural change to segregation. These programs promoted the idea of a more inclusive America in part to secure support within the Black community for Roosevelt's agenda, a point that Harris also makes. But Sklaroff, in her book *Black Culture and the New Deal*, maps the conditions on the ground as Black leaders engaged in constant negotiation on issues that mattered to them, such as discriminatory practices and the right to control representation of African Americans in project art. She examines in detail the extent to which Black artists and intellectuals associated with the Federal

Writers' and Federal Theatre Projects were invited into the process. The result was sustained conversation about administrative prerogatives and the interpretation of Black life and culture. In the context of these cultural debates, Sklaroff argues, African Americans achieved a measure of agency. In her view, the projects were a form of civil rights policy that went far beyond their nominal objectives of providing relief for financially distressed artists.<sup>38</sup>

Although there is some overlap between the FAP and the other divisions of Federal One in terms of approaches to race, it is important to note how they differ. In general, the progressive administrators behind these programs believed that art could be a weapon of social reform and a democratizing force, and they were invested in the notion that improved race relations might be a potential outcome of the projects. But because both the Theatre Project and the Writers' Project had administrative structures dedicated to Negro affairs, where race issues were front and center, they had greater potential to advance thinking about Black cultural experience and achievement. There are examples of African Americans who pushed back on isolated representations of race in mural and public sculpture projects, but this was more closely scrutinized in the Federal Writers' Project, where officially appointed advisors such as the well-known poet and literary critic Sterling Brown monitored literary production. As Sklaroff points out, the Writers' Project developed complex mechanisms for addressing race concerns that involved consideration of both historical circumstances and present-day demands. The FAP, with a few notable exceptions, was in large part focused on the logistics of extending benefits to Black communities in a segregated society; it was primarily concerned with access.<sup>39</sup>

Historian Joan Saab has identified education as a key operative principle in the cultural landscape of the New Deal. In *For the Millions: American Art and Culture Between the Wars*, a thoughtful analysis of the so-called populism of the era, she weighs the educational mission of the FAP against that of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), pointing to their concurrent efforts to influence the national discussion through what she calls the pedagogy of production and the pedagogy of consumption. The former associated making art with the development of a healthy citizenry and improved spiritual existence, while the latter encouraged thoughtful engagement with utilitarian objects. Both contributed to a sense of the nation as enriched by a commitment to art grounded in everyday experience; people feel better

because they express themselves through art production, and the quality of their lives is improved by recognizing and acquiring good (as in folk or modernist) design.

Saab's study charts the contentious relationship between art and democracy that characterized the interwar decades and the mechanisms of accommodation, both ideological and practical, that evolved to resolve emerging contradictions. Her treatment of African American experience breaks new analytical ground, particularly in her discussion of the Harlem Hospital mural project. This initiative resulted in a well-documented controversy that invoked major themes of race discrimination and activism in the WPA projects; it frequently serves as a trope signaling racial awareness in New Deal art history. From the push to appoint a Black supervisor (Charles Alston) to protests against interference from unsympathetic local WPA administrators, the Harlem Hospital mural project has come to signify successful resistance to racism and bureaucratic injustice. Acknowledging this, Saab also enlists this project as an exemplar of the tension likely to emerge when notions of aesthetically and socially relevant art come into conflict with mutable constructs of the so-called public. In mural painting, aesthetic values are brought into conversation with social utility, a situation that is complicated by the intent to widen access to include diverse audiences. The value of Saab's discussion lies in the way she uses the Harlem Hospital murals not simply as a racial cipher but as a way to illuminate a larger thesis about navigating inherent tensions in public art. Black experience in the projects emerges as both specific and conceptually broad.<sup>40</sup>

In *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (2015), Sharon Musher points out that New Deal art historians like Harris have gone beyond what she describes as the celebratory recovery stage, examining FAP contributions both to the cultural agenda of the Left and to the solidification of bourgeois values. Like earlier historians, she identifies the diverse ideologies underlying the art programs that led to varying approaches united by similar aims: to democratize and Americanize the arts and expand public consciousness about the value of cultural experience. Her discussion of the CACs in Cahill's vision of democratic access to the arts is an excellent account of how these centers worked and their guiding philosophy. Musher foregrounds the importance of engagement with artistic process in this division of the projects, which emphasized education, broad participation, and the integration of the arts into everyday life rather

than the creation of singular works of art. She also points to the genuine popularity of the CACs as measured by the levels of attendance and the enthusiasm shown in communities that pursued the opportunity to establish them.<sup>41</sup>

Musher's approach to the centrality of the CACs within the FAP supports an extensive consideration of the impact this program had in Black communities. She looks carefully at the implications of race in the planning and realization of the CACs, weighing official project rhetoric against actual operating conditions. While many communities celebrated the civic and social implications of the CACs, African American leaders, she notes, saw equal access to these programs as a civil rights issue. Musher is also attuned to pitfalls in official project rhetoric with respect to race. The CACs placed a great deal of emphasis on the education programs' capacity to tap into the naïve artistic impulses of children, which was seen as a way of restoring what had been lost to the inhibitions of adulthood and the damage of industrialization. But, as Musher points out, when speaking about encouraging creativity in Negro children, FAP officials reinforced primitivist stereotypes by advancing ideas about instinctive creativity and paid insufficient attention to structural and societal issues that impeded the development of professional Black artists.

There were bound to be challenges with an organizational structure that hoped to support artists without discriminating but had to operate in communities that took segregation for granted. While previous historians have identified this problem, Musher gives it a nuanced analysis. The CACs "attempted to expand creative opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities," she notes, "while simultaneously reinforcing race-based distinctions and hierarchies in the art world."<sup>42</sup> Musher is aware of the unique conditions that Black artists and communities confronted in the FAP, but she is also careful not to overstate the implications of separatism. In a fulsome account of the HCAC, the best known of the Negro-identified CACs, Musher acknowledges its unique origins but does not detach it from centers established in nonminority communities. She presents the HCAC, located at the heart of an urban Black community, as the successful realization of project goals overall; it was an achievement that existed not in isolation but as the very embodiment of the project's goals and values throughout the nation.

Saab concludes *For the Millions* with a discussion of the transition at the end of the decade from experiencing art to acquiring it. Democratization

creates new markets, she argues, and learning about art becomes learning about what to buy. The role of the FAP in the promotion of consumption to an expanded audience for art has become an important theme in recent New Deal cultural histories. In *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*, Victoria Grieve explores this theme, focusing on FAP contributions to the consolidation of middlebrow culture in the 1930s. Cahill's project of providing ordinary citizens with wider access to the arts did not require the outright rejection of highbrow culture but rather its transformation into something more inherently populist. Both the CACs and the Index of American Design became key elements in the ascendance of middlebrow culture by connecting the creation, access, and appreciation of art to the so-called common man through nonelite and widely available education.<sup>43</sup>

Grieve asserts that the creation of middlebrow consumers was intrinsic to the FAP's agenda from the start. Cahill believed that expanded participation in the arts would have great social and cultural value. But he also expected that this would ideally lead to the impulse to purchase among people otherwise alienated from the notion of owning art. The cultivation of middlebrow audiences through the CACs was crucial to the process whereby ordinary Americans, having been encouraged to participate in and value the arts, would ultimately replace the federal government as the primary patron of American artists. There is not much discussion of race in her study, but Grieve's emphasis on the commercial aspirations of the projects has important implications for the African American community and its artists. This is especially relevant given the significance she assigns in her conclusion to the disrespect shown to middlebrow culture in the 1940s, as the FAP succumbed both to political pressure and aesthetic contempt.

By focusing on expanded education and appreciation as mechanisms that fueled an emerging market for accessible art, these scholars collectively suggest that perhaps the most transformative aspect of New Deal cultural programming was the creation of a new audience. Isadora Helfgott argues that this impulse to bring art to the people served multiple agendas and was not the exclusive province of the federal art projects. In *Framing the Audience: Art and the Politics of Culture in the United States, 1929–1945*, she argues that New Deal historians have tended to understand the rise and fall of the projects primarily as a case study in the politics of government support for the arts. As a result, they have become isolated from other interested groups

with similar strategies for raising the profile of the arts and employing them as agents of change.<sup>44</sup>

There were many stakeholders, both progressive and conservative, in this movement to democratize art by changing its relationship to audiences and patronage systems; some embraced populism in the service of social change and others as a way to maintain the status quo. Traveling art exhibitions figure prominently in Helfgott's study as agents that expanded exposure to the arts across class and geographic lines. Specifically, she discusses the programs of the American Federation of Arts (AFA), College Art Association (CAA), MoMA, and the HF, examining them in terms of the cultural and political agendas they served. The objectives of these various traveling exhibitions ranged from the desire to encourage a new consumer base for the purchase of American art (AFA and CAA) to popular acceptance of modernist aesthetics (MoMA). Helfgott understands the objectives of the HF, an organization dedicated to the promotion of Black artists, as implicitly political. Its goal, she maintains, was to improve race relations and, like left-leaning artists, it enlisted art in the service of a social ideal.

The inclusion of the Harmon Foundation in Helfgott's analysis provides an opportunity to rethink the impact of an organization that over time has endured close and not always favorable scrutiny of its legacy.<sup>45</sup> The HF as an entity is rarely considered outside the scope of African American art history, but Helfgott includes it as part of an overall trend to erode elitism in the art world and encourage the development of wider audiences for art. This is an interesting argument, which, like Saab's, Musher's, and to a certain extent Harris's, advances the idea that what was happening in the African American community was not an isolated phenomenon but rather emblematic of larger cultural and ideological forces.

Helfgott reasonably concludes that these efforts to expand audiences, whatever their intent or origins, were in the main viewed by artists as being of limited or mixed value. This was especially true after the projects ended and the art world once again fell back on the traditional agents who circulated art and prompted its consumption: galleries, museums, and elite patrons. Be that as it may, in the decade after Harris moved the concept of social utility, and the creation of CACs, to the center in accounting for FAP ideology and its goals, historians expanded this discussion in ways that made it possible to argue that the community-based educational mission

was perhaps the FAP's most enduring legacy. This position stands in sharp contrast to the work of earlier generations, irrespective of race, for whom participation in the New Deal art projects, and its impact on the career development of professional artists, was central to perceptions of their import and success.