



## ***Women and the WPA: As Seen Through RAM's Collection***

March 1–September 16, 2023

Artwork produced through the Federal Art Project/Works Progress Administration (FAP/WPA) has long been a part of the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts and Racine Art Museum history, so there have been several showings of it over the years. Early gifts of WPA artwork—primarily textiles, drawings, watercolors, prints, and photography—also foreshadowed the collecting directions of Wustum and RAM with an emphasis on contemporary craft, works on paper, and works by women. However, this is the first exhibition focused primarily on the role of women artists associated with the WPA in RAM's collection.

As seen through their artwork, these women artists reflected on the world around them—capturing the social, cultural, and everyday climate of a nation battling financial depression and somewhat unknowingly on the brink of a world war. While specific artists can be linked with the works on paper, most of the textile samples are attributed to anonymous craftspeople associated with the Milwaukee Handicraft Project (MHP). The MHP was a landmark Wisconsin-based endeavor that employed over 5,000 people—mainly women and many of color—to create handcrafted, domestic-oriented goods to be sold to schools, libraries, and other public institutions.

*Women and the WPA* highlights a significant moment in American art and history through works on paper, textiles, and other objects associated with the MHP—including a recently acquired doll jacket and large fabric swatches.

Please note that because this is a long exhibition showcasing pieces made of fragile materials, some works—and therefore some artists—will be changed midway through.

### **More about the Milwaukee Handicraft Project (MHP)**

From a 2017 RAM exhibition guide:

"While there were artists from a wide variety of backgrounds supported by the FAP/WPA, the subject matter of much of the work produced emphasized landscapes, social circumstances, architecture, and people. By and large, and following trends of the day, the artists favored realistic—rather than abstracted—styles. There were some making pointed statements about cultural circumstances or documenting the effect of economic disparity, yet there were also those creating designs—as seen in the textiles produced through the Milwaukee Handicraft Project (MHP)—that were based on nature, the landscape, and folk traditions. The MHP, running from 1935 to 1942, employed over 5,000 women and people of color to make mostly household-related articles of wood, paper, yarn, and cloth that could be sold to schools, libraries, and other public institutions. Operating with one of the most progressive mindsets of the WPA initiatives, the MHP utilized an integrated workforce with designer foremen and laborers sharing the same workspace. What began as an initiative to employ those classified as unemployable due to age, disability, race, or the circumstance of being a woman who had not worked outside the home previously, became a successful program with a high rate of production. After learning block printing, design, and bookbinding, workers created art instructional and children's books, such as *Come and Sing*. A collaboration between the Milwaukee State Teacher's College and

the MHP, this piece included illustrations and songs that had been written by children at the Teacher's College training school. RAM has a copy of this as well as multiple portfolios of block-printed textile samples. A partial list of works produced by the MHP includes printed paper and textile pieces, woven draperies, table runners, placemats, upholstery fabric, bed covers, toys, dolls, costumes, quilts, furnishings, and wall hangings. This initiative attracted attention nationwide, with high profile figures such as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Frank Lloyd Wright visiting the project."

Not everyone associated with the MHP was a woman and some have been critical about the stratification of jobs—i.e. while there were women supervisors and decision makers, the men were often designers not laborers. Note that the dictates of the program and the desires of those supervising may have inadvertently contributed to these dynamics—they were looking for untrained help, a qualification that incorporated many women who had not held a job outside the home prior to the MHP.

Arguably, the most useful product produced through the MHP was a skilled worker. Many worked with the MHP for a time, gained valuable skills, and went on to other forms of employment.

The MHP was unique in that it was an integrated workforce—a fact that garnered both positive and negative attention.

While they started out designing and making certain products, new opportunities arose as the project developed and they began to address individual organizational needs.

### **Role of WPA and Women Artists at RAM**

"While the works produced through the WPA are now historical, they first entered the [RAM's] collection as contemporary art, made by artists who were alive and still making work. This is significant for two reasons. It reflects an ongoing commitment on the part of Wustum and RAM to support contemporary artists by exhibiting and collecting their work. This gift was also visionary in that it foreshadowed the collecting foci of Wustum and RAM—contemporary craft and works on paper."

Visual artists working with the WPA were employed to create work such as murals, easel paintings, sculpture, graphic art and design, posters, and photography. They were also involved in the Index of American Design, theatre set design, and craft and design projects. Some were working in community art centers throughout the country.

Thousands of women artists apparently worked for the FAP/WPA. However, it is still difficult to find a comprehensive list documenting who was employed through the project. While not a part of RAM's collection, Black artists such as the pioneering sculptors Augusta Savage and Selma Burke were involved.

Employed artists were often working artists with established careers that included exhibiting their artwork, working as teachers and children's book illustrators, and running art centers and studios. Many have works in large American museums such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Ultimately, WPA support was valuable for making sure the voices of women were being heard—as creative directors, organizational leaders, project managers, and artists.

Interestingly, studies of university art programs suggest that since the 1980s women have been entering the highest levels of the professional art world at a rate equal to men. Apparently, the same thing was true in the WPA era but then numbers fell back for several decades. Note that while this accounts for some portion of the art world, it does not necessarily incorporate studio artists.

41% of the artists represented in RAM's collection are women—a number far greater than average for general museum collections.

An exhibition solely featuring only the work of women is not rare or difficult at RAM, but it has not been typical at other museums in the last few decades. This is the first exhibition, however, that has focused primarily on the role of women artists associated with the WPA in RAM's collection.

RAM collection artists whose works are featured in the exhibition:

**Anonymous women associated with the MHP, Berenice Abbott, Ida York Abelman, Kendrick Bell, Vera Berdich, Marie H. Bleck, Mabel Dwight, Minetta Good, Rosella Hartman, Marbel Wellington Jack, Ann Krasnan, Jennie Lewis, Margaret Lowengrund, Clara Mahl, M. Lois Murphy, Ann Nooney, Elizabeth Olds, Agnes Jessen Slater, Elinore Stone, and Camilla Travanti Wichman**

A valuable resource for research and the source of labels with historical images within the exhibition was an online source—the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project Online Exhibit published by UWM Digital Commons.

The complete exhibit is available at:  
[https://dc.uwm.edu/eti\\_pubs/19](https://dc.uwm.edu/eti_pubs/19)