

The Depression Blues . . . and Reds . . . and Yellows . . . : Artists of the New Deal

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Can a person born and raised in North Carolina be an artist? If you had asked state residents that question in 1930, they might have laughed and said that artists came from big cities up north. Full-time jobs in this state for painters and sculptors were rare. North Carolina had no art classes or art museums. There was only one art exhibit, held annually in Raleigh. To acquire an art education, people had to go to other states or hire private tutors.

But why would anyone want such an education or career, especially during the Great Depression? Even in prosperous times, it had been difficult to make a living as an artist—most North Carolina artists held regular jobs during the week and used their artistic skills only in their spare time. During the Depression of the 1930s, when millions were left unemployed, ill-housed, and ill-fed, the demand for artists, actors, architects, writers, and musicians largely evaporated. These professionals had to struggle to provide for their families, and they often could not afford to stick with their careers.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, elected in 1932, promised the country a New Deal. His administration created a large number of overlapping agencies to help people survive the desperate times. They were called “alphabet soup” programs because people knew them by their initials, like the WPA or Works Progress Administration, created in 1935. Some of these organizations provided work relief. The nation’s unemployed were hired to build roads, courthouses, parks, sewers, and other public works. But what about the unemployed white-collar workers and all the artists? They had to earn a living, of course, but many Americans felt that these professions should not be funded by the government during the Depression. Art and other cultural activities were luxuries for better times, they believed. Should the government help these people in their artistic professions or have them build roads with other WPA workers?

The Roosevelt administration decided that the nation’s cultural heritage was important. Rather than let the nation’s creative talents go to waste, the government put artists and professionals to work in the WPA in five different federal arts projects. Architects studied and recorded historic buildings. Surveys of historical records, state histories, and oral history interviews were completed by writers and historians hired under the Federal Writers’ Project. The government organized symphonies and theatrical groups under the Federal Music Project and the Federal Theater Project.

Painters and other visual artists worked in the Federal Art Project (FAP). They created art for buildings, public health advertisements, theatrical productions, and many other uses. *Time* magazine noted in 1936 that, “Today, there exists the greatest official interest in art, the greatest

production of paintings, the United States has ever known.” The visibility of the work done by the FAP also allowed people across the country to view the work of professional artists firsthand. Major cities and small rural towns received these programs, although there were differing opinions on the artistic worth of the work. Nevertheless, artists enjoyed the opportunity to earn a living at their particular crafts.

When the WPA came to North Carolina, one Raleigh artist eagerly joined the Federal Art Project. Under this agency, James McLean painted murals in different parts of the state and taught art classes to the general public. Initially, the state’s WPA officials allowed artists to select projects that they especially wanted to do. McLean decided to paint murals for the four walls in the library rotunda at State College, now North Carolina State University. He approached the school with his ideas, talked with the college’s departmental staff, and submitted four preliminary drawings of his murals to a library committee. The officials approved the sketches unanimously, and McLean began his first WPA art project.

McLean’s smooth sailing came to an abrupt halt, however, when the murals were completed and hung in the library. Students and faculty vehemently protested the modern style of the paintings and poked fun at them. The campus newspaper, *Technician*, quoted one man as saying, “. . . the murals are so crude they scream at one looking at them.” The paper’s April Fools’ Day issue ran an article titled “Library Riddled of Mural Menace.” The article jokingly called McLean “McPain” and reported that a woman had taken the murals to scare her alcoholic husband away from the bottle.

The objections raised against the McLean murals reflected the students’ and faculty members’ shocked reaction to modern art. Others claimed that the colonial-style architecture of the library was not compatible with the modern murals, and they wanted the paintings removed. McLean felt that the hostile reception indicated that no one believed a North Carolinian could be a good artist.

The murals were indeed taken down in 1941, when the library was remodeled. Placing the paintings in storage, the dean of the college said the works would be rehung when a modern building was constructed.

The murals were stored and forgotten. Then, in 1958, McLean’s daughter spotted one of the murals while rehearsing for a play at the Raleigh Little Theatre. The painting was being used to cover machinery. The other three murals had apparently been lost. McLean salvaged and restored his work. He generously returned it to the university, where it now hangs in the Student Gallery.

McLean painted two other sets of murals for the WPA. Two hang in Greensboro’s Grimsley High School. Another mural, 52 feet wide and 11 feet long, hangs in the Charles Cannon Memorial Library in Concord. The cloth for the Concord mural had to be specially woven by Cannon Mills employees.

McLean’s murals reflected subjects popular with WPA artists and FAP directors. The works in Greensboro and Raleigh depicted the strength, dedication, and achievements of modern

technology. The Concord mural featured historic scenes from that town's past. FAP officials felt that people caught in the Great Depression needed to look to the past to find strength and hope from traditional American values.

Important as the individual paintings were, WPA officials wanted their artists to do more. Art classes were started, museums were opened, and exhibitions were held. James McLean took an active role in these activities. Indeed, the WPA adopted his plan for a Raleigh art center for use across America. Sixty-seven art centers were established in the United States, six of them in North Carolina. Each center received four years of federal funding. The Raleigh center opened on May 1, 1936. McLean supervised the center and its programs. The staff taught classes at public schools and universities and sponsored lectures, demonstrations, and exhibitions. The chance to expand the public's knowledge of all types of fine art provided McLean with a great sense of achievement. In his view, few people before the New Deal were interested in art, except for an educated elite. With the WPA programs of the 1930s, however, much of the public awoke to the riches offered by all the different arts.

McLean worked hard for the WPA, but even with the government's help, money was scarce. The "alphabet soup" programs were designed to help people survive, not to make them rich. McLean's family often did not have enough to eat, and his shoes had holes in them. When his children were born, McLean could not afford the doctor's bills. So he and the doctor agreed to exchange services instead. To pay the bill for his first child, McLean painted the doctor's portrait. For the second child, he provided a portrait of the doctor's father, and for the third child, he sent a portrait of the doctor's mother. By the time McLean's fourth child was born, he could afford to pay the bill in cash.

WPA work helped McLean and his family survive. In return for this financial assistance, he left an artistic legacy to the entire state. Works painted by other WPA artists during the New Deal exist in this state. WPA paintings are housed in the post offices at Beaufort, Chapel Hill, Wake Forest, Warrenton, Weldon, and Williamston. A mural hangs in the town hall in Whiteville, and several paintings hang in the United States District Court in New Bern. Visit one of these sites, look at what those 1930s artists had to say about America, and think about how the WPA projects kept artists alive during one of the desperate times of our nation.

**At the time of this article's publication, Melissa Shelton was an intern at the North Carolina Museum of History.*