

**“Have we an American design?”: The Index of American Design  
and the United States’ Search for National Culture in the  
Great Depression**

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## Introduction

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the American federal government provided artists with relief work through the New Deal's Federal Art Project. Although the most famous products of this initiative are public murals and frequently reproduced photographs of the Dust Bowl, New Deal artists also created thousands of works on paper. In archives around the country, one finds charcoal drawings, etchings, lithographs, oil paints, and curious objects such as this:



Why exactly does an image like this exist? What is it made out of? Is it rendered in paint, or is it a photograph? And why would anyone want a work of art depicting such an object?

The picture is a watercolor rendering of a toaster. It was painted in 1940, and it exists because of a New Deal art program titled the Index of American Design. Largely forgotten, the Federal Art Project (FAP)'s Index of American Design attempted to catalogue American decorative, folk, and vernacular arts from the colonial era to the beginning of the twentieth century. The toaster's wooden handle, iron wire, and brass rings give it a clean, functional, yet elegant aesthetic. With an eye-catching replicated star-shaped motif, it was included in the Index because of its unique shape. The toaster is a boring household appliance; however, the little quirks in its design encompass the idea of beauty and excitement in an everyday, useful object.<sup>1</sup>

The Index of American Design employed nearly one thousand artists in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia from its inception in 1936 to the end of its funding in 1942.<sup>2</sup> The Index produced small-scale works on paper<sup>3</sup> meant to document American material culture from the past for contemporary and future American industrial designers. In compiling this record, the curators and intellectuals in charge of the Index entered the perplexing problem of defining American culture; they strongly believed that by recovering and preserving examples of beautiful ordinary objects, they could create a printed record of a concept as complex as American design. This essay explores the structure, implementation, and demise of the Index of American Design as an example of how the federal government used culture to construct nationalism during the Depression era. I focus on the tensions that underlay the Index's goal of connecting concrete

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Chotner, "Toaster Catalogue Entry," in *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Clayton Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past'" in *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4, 7.

<sup>3</sup> A work on paper can be defined as any work of art using paper as a medium (as opposed to canvas, wood, or metal).

regional design traditions of the folk and vernacular to the greater abstract concept of American national identity. While the Index of American Design was never realized as a published portfolio, its brief run demonstrates the power—and limitations—of American federalism and its attempts to create a unified national culture. Studying the correspondence, essays, press, and relationships that formed the Index expose the inherent contradictions of documenting material expressions of regional identities in order to affirm one, singular American identity.

The Great Depression was a unique moment in United States history when the federal government believed the arts contributed to social well-being. This translated to unprecedented and unparalleled amounts of federal attention to and funding for the arts. Fueled and radicalized by attitudes from the Popular Front movement of the 1930s, New Dealers created a mainstream, working-class, commercial culture in the United States. Reacting heavily against the nativist movements of the 1920s, the aesthetics of the 1930s aimed to include those marginalized or deemed un-American in the previous decade.<sup>4</sup> Influenced by changes in design aesthetics, industrialization, and the improving international standing of Americana, New Dealers decided a source book was a way to further increase the status of American design materials.

The historiography on the New Deal as a set of social, economic, and political policies to end the Great Depression is extensive, but a more limited selection focuses on its cultural programs. The majority of the literature on the New Deal's Federal Art Project has been dedicated to the murals or photographs, at best mentioning the Index as a brief aside. Art historian Erika Doss' chapter on New Deal art in *American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries* focuses on the FAP's formalist stylistic changes, big name artists, and most famous artworks. Sharon Ann Musher's *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* approaches New

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Verso Publishing, 2010); Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).

Deal art from the perspective of a cultural historian rather than an art historian. She splits the art of the New Deal into five categories, and classifies the Index as “Art as Experience.” She argues “Art as Experience” elevated the status of everyday objects in the hopes of creating a collective national culture.<sup>5</sup> Doss and Musher both claim that the New Deal art administrators’ ideologies can be linked to the government’s attempts to foster unity through a found, or constructed, collective national culture in the crisis of the Depression. Their analyses of New Deal art – both formal and historical – help us think about the Index as a means of finding cultural unity through disparate modes of regional expression.

The Index of American Design itself has one small but comprehensive history. In 2002, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. curated a show of the Index’s artwork. The exhibition’s catalogue, *Drawing on America’s Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design*, edited by Virginia Clayton Tuttle, includes three well-researched essays, two of which are used in this thesis: one by Tuttle, and one by Doss. The essays contain extensive research on the origins of the Index and long sections of formal analysis, as one might expect from art historians. They help contextualize the Index as an art project. They do not, however, examine the creation of the Index in the wider historical context of American government, politics, and debates over the meaning national culture.

One of the preeminent works of history on the influence of New Deal culture is *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* by Michael Denning. His book explores the relationship between the radical Popular Front movement and the American cultural apparatus during the New Deal era. Denning’s work is a social history, not a study of specific artworks or specific New Deal programs. This essay follows in Denning’s

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<sup>5</sup> Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal’s Influence on American Culture*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 147.

footsteps, but instead of mediating on how labor, culture, and politics all intertwined in the 1930s, I am analyzing one particular site of cultural production.

This thesis adds to the existing scholarship on the artistic and cultural impact of the New Deal by examining the project of documenting vernacular design as a form of artistic production. New Deal art was actual art, not simply a byproduct of a project of economic recovery. The Index of American Design is a small flash in America's history, but it has been neglected in favor of bigger, more successful, and more long-lasting government initiatives. This thesis is not an attempt to define or identify what American art, American design, or American style is – I believe that is an impossible (and quite honestly unproductive) question. It is also not an attempt to pass judgment on the Index of American Design or its administrators, the Index's failures, appropriations, or omissions. My goal is to contextualize the project, and to think about what an effort to document vernacular design during a time of crisis tells us about the potential for government sponsorship of the arts in wider debates over culture and politics.

## **The Establishment of the Index of American Design**

On May 6, 1935, under the auspices of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 7034. This allocation established the Works Progress Administration (WPA)<sup>6</sup> and, at that point, the single largest peacetime appropriation of government funds in global history.<sup>7</sup> Structured as a federally organized program, it involved states in the planning and implementation of unemployment relief programs in the Great

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<sup>6</sup> Renamed the Works Projects Administration in 1939.

<sup>7</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 125.



Depression.<sup>8</sup> The WPA employed workers around the country rather than handing out relief benefits directly. The director of the WPA, Harry Hopkins, and FDR both believed this would increase the confidence of the American work force, which was in desperate need of a morale boost.<sup>9</sup> The WPA funded a host of public works projects, from the construction of numerous bridges and roads to the beautification of municipal buildings and other public structures through art installations.

In the fall of 1935, Harry Hopkins created Federal One, a small subset of the WPA (it received only 2.5% of its funding). It was a group of programs that sought to extend relief to American artists with four branches: the Federal Theater Project (FTP), Federal Music Project (FMP), Federal Writers' Project (FWP), and Federal Art Project (FAP).<sup>10</sup> Although the artists' wages were small, approximately twenty-five dollars a week, Federal One was a significant turning point for the arts. It marked the first time the United States government deemed the arts, from experimental theater to graphic design, important enough for federal funding. The government had its motives: art was seen as a way to restore faith in the government and government systems during the hardship of the Great Depression.<sup>11</sup>

Although connected, each of these New Deal arts programs had its own unique agenda, director, vision, and imprint on American art and culture. The most famous product of New Deal arts funding is the large number of murals painted in post offices, courthouses, public schools, and other municipal buildings around the country. However, the scope of Federal One extended

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<sup>8</sup> James Ciment, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression and the New Deal* Vol. 1 (Armonk: Sharpe Reference, 2001), 405.

<sup>9</sup> Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, 124.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Erika Doss, *American Art of the 20th - 21st Centuries*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 96, 98.

far beyond these murals. The FAP alone had multiple branches: murals, graphic arts, prints and photographs, and the Index of American Design.<sup>12</sup>

In the early 1930s, two librarians at the New York Public Library noticed a change: American artists and designers were looking at domestic rather than European images for visual inspiration. Romana Javitz was an artist and the curator of the NYPL's Picture Collection, and Ruth Reeves was a textile designer. Javitz was particularly dissatisfied with the lack of materials available for American artists and designers wishing to use local inspiration. She came up with the idea of a government-subsidized art project cataloguing America's vernacular arts. Many European governments had done this – Javitz believed the United States should follow suit.<sup>13</sup>

The spring of 1935 presented the perfect opportunity for Javitz and Reeves: the launch of the Federal Art Project. In July, Javitz wrote to New York's Temporary Emergency Relief Administration formally proposing the Index; the New Deal's Index of American Design started in the fall of 1935, as a local project of the city of New York.<sup>14</sup>

Reeves believed that the Index should go beyond New York City. She traveled to Washington to convince Holger Cahill, the FAP's director, to make the Index a national program.<sup>15</sup> Cahill was perhaps the perfect person for Reeves to encounter in Washington. Born Sveinn Kristjan Bjararson in Iceland, Cahill moved to Canada and then North Dakota with his family as a child. He ran away from his abusive home as a teenager, landing in New York City through a series of odd jobs. Despite his lack of a high school diploma, he ran in the same circles as prominent artists and intellectuals due to his roommate.<sup>16</sup> In the 1920s, Cahill worked under

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<sup>12</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 1-31 .

<sup>13</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past'" in *Drawing on America's Past*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past'" in *Drawing on America's Past*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past'" in *Drawing on America's Past*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 154-5.

John Cotton Dana on the Newark Museum's Picture Collection, where he observed Dana's push to bring American art to the fore.<sup>17</sup> The Newark Museum gave Cahill an appreciation of Americana and a desire to eliminate the divide between the practical and fine arts.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the Picture Collection of the Newark Museum served as the inspiration for the New York Public Library's Picture Collection, which Romana Javitz headed. That same Picture Collection, which Reeves described as an attempt "to feed artists and industrial designers with authoritative pictorial research," helped stir the idea for the Index of American Design.<sup>19</sup>

Cahill instantly took to the idea of the Index, though he feared the project's scope too large. To make the Index more manageable, he eliminated elements from Reeves' proposal, such as architectural ornament, Native American arts, and American folk painting, reasoning other government projects were already working to preserve these elements of design.<sup>20</sup> With Cahill's adjustments, the Index was created in early 1936.

A government memo ordered, "the Index of American Design Project may be set up immediately. It will be a nation-wide project operated in the states under the regulations set down in the Federal Art Project Manual of October 1935."<sup>21</sup> The national program would have an office in Washington led by a national coordinator, and states had two options to participate in the newly created Index: pre-existing art projects in the state could reassign personnel to the

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<sup>17</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 155.

<sup>18</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 156.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Reeves as quoted in Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" in *Drawing on America's Past*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past'" in *Drawing on America's Past*, 6. There are many interesting comments that can be made on Cahill's decisions of inclusion and exclusion regarding the Index. That is, however, outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>21</sup> Federal Art Project, "Instructions for Index of American Design," January 1936, Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports from 1936, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Index, or they could fill out a WPA form to create entirely new units.<sup>22</sup> The national coordinator communicated with the various state directors, who were in charge of communicating with local and regional directors. The first national coordinator of the Index was Ruth Reeves, but Adolph Glassgold soon succeed her. Glassgold, like Reeves and Javitz, was an artist. After studying art over the first half of the 1920s, he traveled around Europe, painting and even showing a solo exhibition in Paris. After his return to America in 1926, he worked on various art magazines, eventually becoming a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1932.<sup>23</sup> From this position the Index hired him as the National Coordinator. Although he stepped down before the Index ended in 1941, he oversaw the majority of its tenure.<sup>24</sup>

The purpose of the Index was simple: “The basic work of the Index is the recording in drawings in color, and in black and white, of objects in the field of American decorative, domestic, and folk arts.”<sup>25</sup> The idea behind this was to record “a large body of materials which will illustrate the many historic styles, cultural types and regional aspects of useful and decorative arts,” with the ultimate aim of organizing “portfolios on the basis of a carefully devised editorial outline.”<sup>26</sup> After the portfolios were reproduced, they would be “made available to libraries, universities and other Public Educational Institutions.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Federal Art Project, “Instructions for Index of American Design,” Articles and Reports from 1936, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>23</sup> Index entry on Adolph Glassold in *Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* ed. by Francis V. O’Connor (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 278.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Information on Glassgold is extremely hard to find. He is almost never mentioned in secondary literature and there appear to be no biographic works on him. Because of this, I have speculated that Glassgold was a “red” member of the Popular Front.

<sup>25</sup> “The Index of American Design WPA Art Program,” February 19, 1941, Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports from 1941, 1947, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>26</sup> “Memo,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: State Reports from Illinois, 1942, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The government required a detailed process for FAP relief employees to create a portfolio of “American decorative, domestic, and folk arts.” First, employees had to search local libraries, museums, archives, and private collections to “survey [the] available material for index recording in various localities.” Next, the national office selected “material from this survey” that they felt represented “American decorative, domestic, and folk arts.”<sup>28</sup> After the government decided to record an object, an Index artist would make a pencil sketch “with color notes.”<sup>29</sup> The most common medium the Index used was watercolor, but there were situations in which black and white drawings or carefully staged photographs were used. When color was not essential to the reproduction of the image—e.g. specific cases of metal or glassware—artists used black and white drawings; when texture was not essential to the reproduction of the image—e.g. iron or pewter—artists used photographs.<sup>30</sup> If the national unit of the Index approved the sketch, the artist was authorized to create a mimetically rendered reproduction of the object. If the drawing did not receive approval, it was sent back to the artist for revision with specific comments. Accompanying all of the drawings was a research sheet complete with a brief history on the object’s craftsmen, design motifs, influences, and other relevant information.<sup>31</sup>

Government records of the Index discussed the necessity of the project. The Index sought to “record...material of historical significance...in danger of being lost.” Once these records were gathered together, they would be collected into portfolios to create a published *Index of American Design*, which would serve as “the basis for an organic development in American

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<sup>28</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1946-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C .

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1946-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C .; Watercolors are a form of paint in which pigment is suspended in water. They are also easy to use and inexpensive.

<sup>31</sup> “The Index of American Design WPA Art Program,” Articles and Reports from 1941, 1947, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

design.” The *Index of American Design* would become a “usable source-record” for “artists, designers, manufacturers, museums, libraries and art schools.” Finally, the Index program was meant “to give employment to painters, graphic artists, photographers, and commercial artists who might not otherwise find employment.”<sup>32</sup> It was, after all, part of the New Deal.

The Index of American Design sought to preserve material culture of the American past in order to help stimulate American industrial designers and manufacturers of the future, all while feeding starving artists in the Depression. Its purpose was straightforward, but the Index’s concepts of decorative, vernacular, and folk art were quite vague. Those terms have a plethora of definitions, and the government’s claims that the Index would “illustrate the many historic styles, cultural types and regional aspects” of the various forms it hoped to catalogue offered no real guidance or clarity.<sup>33</sup>

One government document attempted to provide answers. First, the time period of the Index was restricted to “the period before the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” Next, the government tried to define exactly what the Index aimed to catalogue: “In the field of domestic and household arts, subject matter will include furniture, interior decoration, rugs, coverlets, quilts, copper, brass, silver and metal work generally, ornaments of all types, costumes, objects of personal adornment, such as jewelry and other objects which, because of excellence of design or workmanship, have enriched American life in the past.”<sup>34</sup> The memo noted in a caveat: “The subject groupings in the two paragraphs above are not presented as comprehensive or definitive, but merely as suggestive of material which may be considered important or typical.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, ‘important’ and ‘typical’ are highly subjective words. Something culturally significant to three government bureaucrats might

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> “Memo,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: State Reports from Illinois, 1942.

<sup>34</sup> “The Index of American Design WPA Art Program,” Articles and Reports from 1941, 1947, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

be irrelevant to the majority of the American population. Elsewhere, the government claimed the Index was meant to record objects that can be defined as “typical, unique, or outstanding.”<sup>36</sup> But by that logic, it seemed the Index had virtually no real standards: objects that seemed to contribute to American design history would be included, and objects that seemed trivial, atypical, and common would be excluded. But that is a contradiction – objects cannot be both unique and typical.

Constance Rourke, the American historian, intellectual, and folklorist, was the editor of the Index of American Design. Her role as editor meant she was responsible for compiling the physical portfolios that would become the source-books that made up the *Index of American Design*. In her position, she wrote many pieces for and about the Index. One piece, aimed at clarifying the goals of the Index states: “In the choice of materials American origins are the basic requirement. Occasionally an object of European origin is rendered when it throws an exceptionally clear light upon similar work in the American field, either by identities or differences. These renderings are out of the main line of the Index and may be considered as footnotes.”<sup>37</sup> She also pointed out, however, “A strict dividing line between foreign and European origins is often difficult to draw.”<sup>38</sup> The Index directors set clear boundaries for a time frame as “the periods from the time of the early settlements in this country to the era after the Civil War when the machine became dominant, about 1870.”<sup>39</sup> Their specificity demonstrates that although the Index was intended to be a source-book for industrial designers, the government was interested in looking at the pre-industrial past of the United States.

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<sup>36</sup> “Index of American Design Manual Supplement,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports circa 1936 – 1941, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>37</sup> Constance Rourke, “The Index of American Design,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports circa 1936 – 1941, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

The Index of American Design had a strong research component due to its requirement that each piece have a document explaining its background, craftsmanship, design history, and object history. Research was a crucial aspect of the Index – the larger state Index units even had research directors.<sup>40</sup> This meant “miscellaneous objects, belonging to no defined portfolio or grouping” or objects with a “vague” history were to be avoided, unless they had “exceptional interest from the point of view of design.”<sup>41</sup>

At points, the government acknowledged the ambiguities in the mission of the Index. Rourke defined “the true range of the word” design as concerning “all created objects,” all “dimensional examples” and that it extends “of course into the space arts.” And finally, perhaps most liberally, she claimed, design “has to do with the fine as well as the practical arts.”<sup>42</sup> She addressed the government’s grandiose statements that the Index would make “a pictorial record of objects of indigenous American character in the decorative, provincial, and folk arts from the early seventeenth century to the close of the nineteenth,” by writing essays on the elusive subject of American design and American character.<sup>43</sup> “Have we an American Design? As also, have we a distinctively American art? Plenty of answers in the negative, from many quarters, most of all of course from those who are schooled in the great European traditions. Those so rich and well defined, so continuous through decades and even centuries, as to raise many questions as to our briefer work in the arts.”<sup>44</sup> Here, Rourke explained one of the main motives of the Index: to give the United States a pictorial record of its design traditions comparable to European powers.

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<sup>40</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1936-41, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Constance Rourke, “The Index of American Design,” Articles and Reports circa 1936 – 1941, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.



Industrial designers looked internationally for visual source materials, and the government wanted to foster domestic inspiration for manufacturers and designers.<sup>45</sup>

It seems odd that during the Great Depression, the biggest economic crisis in United States history, the government found a lack of domestic sources for industrial designers to be a pressing issue: in just four years, the GNP had dropped \$63 billion.<sup>46</sup> Other aspects of the FAP have a more obvious purpose. The murals were a demonstration of the government's investment in boosting the average American's morale. They employed starving artists, but also brightened up interior spaces of municipal buildings. Unlike the small watercolors made by the Index's artists, murals are a collective viewing experience. Murals are painted in public spaces and viewed in groups, allowing people to bond, converse, and create connections over a work of art. Works on paper are the opposite kind of viewing experience: they are small, intimate, and their beauty lies in the intricate details, not the overall composition. Furthermore, the Index of American Design's renderings were meant to end up in archives and libraries. That is very different than a mural, unavoidable in a public space.

"New institutions and values arise," cultural historian Walter Susman writes, "associations become increasingly defended not because they exist but because they fulfill a function that can be more clearly seen and understood."<sup>47</sup> The culture of the 1930s did not exist in a vacuum. The Index developed out of political, aesthetic, and cultural movements, at both ends of the political spectrum, dating as far back as the 1800s.

The integration of art and society began long before the New Deal. Progressive reformers in the 1880s and 90s believed that democratizing the museum experience and canonizing

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Doss, *American Art of the 20th - 21st Centuries*, 95.

<sup>47</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Parthenon Books, 1984), 8.

decorative arts would be beneficial for both industrial designers and skilled handworkers alike.<sup>48</sup> The need to foster, or influence, the taste of designers was a reaction to what many elite taste makers saw as a decline in public taste in the bric-a-brac of the Victorian era.<sup>49</sup> The Index continued with this mindset, working only to catalogue items until the year 1900; in other words, the project focused on a pre-industrialized past. The, at times paternalistic, tastemakers of the Progressives followed the thinking of John Ruskin, who believed that industrial machinery was detrimental to good craftsmanship, which in turn was detrimental to good morals in society.<sup>50</sup> As the movement progressed, so, too, did the activists' mindsets. Reformers moved past their belief that art and design were only for the upper echelons of society, and instead pushed for a union of art and everyday life to elevate aesthetic appreciation into mainstream activities.<sup>51</sup>

Their goal of a greater appreciation for the everyday occurred most obviously through raising decorative arts to a form of high art in the United States. Jeffrey Trask writes about the opening of the American Wing in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in his book, *Things American: Art Museums and Civic Culture in the Progressive Culture*, arguing that a new wing in the country's most prestigious museum helped increase Americana's status. Established in 1873, the "cultural insecurity" of the Metropolitan's founders led them to believe that a museum with a basis in European classics was the best way to establish New York as a cultural power to rival European cities.<sup>52</sup> But a new group of leadership at the turn of the century believed American things had the power to change contemporary American society.<sup>53</sup> They hoped that the

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<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey Trask, *Things American: Art Museums and Civic Culture in the Progressive Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>49</sup> Trask, *Things American*, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Trask, *Things American*, 6-7.

<sup>51</sup> Trask, *Things American*, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Trask, "American Things": *The Cultural Value of Decorative Arts in the Modern Museum, 1905-1931* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 291.

<sup>53</sup> Trask, "American Things", 289-90.

galleries of the Met Museum would become a “resource for industrial production” – and this ultimately transformed the status of American, decorative, and industrial arts in the art world.<sup>54</sup>

Trask argues that the establishment of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924 “legitimized American decorative arts and it popularized public history told through things. After the American Wing opened, the cultural and economic value of American things soared.”<sup>55</sup> American decorative arts were linked to American patriotism and cultural nationalism from the second they entered the cultural spotlight. At the wing’s opening, one of its founders proudly exclaimed: “Our museum is sounding a patriotic note. We are honoring our fathers and our mothers, our grandfathers and our grandmothers, because for the first time an American museum is giving a prominent place to American domestic art.”<sup>56</sup> The founders of the Metropolitan’s American Wing believed that establishing credibility in the art historical canon to American decorative arts would raise the value of objects of the everyday.<sup>57</sup> They hoped a newfound appreciation of Americana would spark a distinguished American culture or style in the decorative and industrial arts – sound familiar?<sup>58</sup>

In many ways, the ideas of the New Deal were continuations of practices and beliefs begun in the Progressive Era. Trask criticizes the Metropolitan’s use of material culture, faulting it for focusing only on “masterpieces” and thereby telling only the story of the “privileged elite.”<sup>59</sup> The Index attempted to accomplish a similar goal – to tell a history of the United States through material culture.<sup>60</sup> But, coming a decade later, the Index had the chance to correct this critique of the American Wing: it used material culture from all areas of the country and all

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Robert de Forest as quoted in Trask, *Things American*, 150.

<sup>57</sup> Trask, *Things American*, 150.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

social classes. The New Deal programs of the 1930s (and Great Society 1960s) had the opportunity to incorporate certain Progressive ideals and expand them through public funding, greatly influencing how we view cultural democracy today.<sup>61</sup>

The American Wing was founded in the 1920s, a decade that conjures images of flappers, illegal champagne, and Jay Gatsby's parties.<sup>62</sup> In reality, most Americans did not participate in the culture of the 1920s that cause us to remember it as "roaring."<sup>63</sup> In her book, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*, Linda Gordon argues that the glitzy, glamorous historical memory of the 1920s clouds the reality of the time's predominant national culture: nativist, racist, and in search of "100% Americanism."<sup>64</sup> The membership of the Ku Klux Klan reached its all time high in the latter half of 1924 and beginning of 1925: its influence had reached over four million members.<sup>65</sup> The Klan of the 1920s was very different from its previous incarnations; it worked on what Gordon describes as a "politics of resentment, reflecting but also fomenting antipathy toward those who it defined as threatening Americanism."<sup>66</sup> The KKK perceived anyone who was not a white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon as a threat to Americanism: Jews, Catholics and other strains of Christianity, Muslims, and people of color were not considered to be "true" or "100%" American.<sup>67</sup>

This racist, nativist ideology was the mainstream political view in the 1920s in the United States. People who were not members of the Klan supported and spread their ideals.<sup>68</sup> Their members reached all different ranks of American society. The majority of Klansmen were

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<sup>61</sup> Trask, *Things American*, 232; 234.

<sup>62</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 6.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

<sup>66</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 41.

<sup>68</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 3.

members of the lower and skilled working classes, but they still garnered appeal with farmers, white-collar workers, and members of the upper class.<sup>69</sup> Their pervasiveness in American society is reflected in legislation that was enacted in the Roaring 20s; one of the most restrictive immigration policies in the history of the United States, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, created hierarchies of immigrant races and imposed quotas on the number of immigrants allowed to enter from a given country based on data from 1890.<sup>70</sup> These quotas restricted immigration from what the Klan and its sympathizers believed were less desirable countries, most notably Jews from the Eastern sect of Europe.<sup>71</sup>

Historian Felix Harcourt argues that the Klan's influence on American culture was strong. Their prejudices and ideas were in many ways normalized by the mass culture apparatus of the United States.<sup>72</sup> He writes the Klan had an "ambivalent consumption of modern culture" and that modern culture had an "ambivalent consumption of the Klan."<sup>73</sup> "Klannish culture" did not leave behind any tangible record on American society; they left behind "no great works, no aesthetic marvels," but it had an unfortunate, indelible mark on the United States.<sup>74</sup> Public denunciations of the Klan allowed its outlook to spread into the greater cultural consciousness, and silent submissions streamlined their nativist calls.<sup>75</sup> Even after the decline of the KKK at the end of the 1920s, their hate-filled, nativist definition of Americanism had seeped its way into the American identity.

The Index of American Design and the Ku Klux Klan are not directly connected. But the two approach a similar issue from opposite ends of the political spectrum: how to define,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 195.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 6; 8.

<sup>73</sup> Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 179.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

categorize, and, in a way, aestheticize Americansim. The KKK looked to create national culture and identity in the United States through racism, prejudice and vigilante violence. Gordon argues that the Klan of the 1920s attempted to rewrite American history and draw on past traditions to help further their agenda. But the so-called American tradition that “Klan leaders referenced was largely a fiction, as traditions often are in popular understanding.”<sup>76</sup> The Index also attempted to find a “usable past” for the United States to draw on—much of its own literature uses that phrase. Unlike the KKK, the Index’s calls on history and tradition were founded in legitimate sources meant to construct a pluralist picture of American identity. It was not built from a fake, problematic idea of American culture that excluded large swaths of the population.

Nationalism and national identity are loaded terms, but they need not always have negative implications. Constance Rourke wrote, “I believe that we may learn just as much about the national character from our folklore and our folksongs as from files of the Federalist or the history of the Mexican War. Surely we cannot know our [full] history – and I suppose it is about our history and ourselves that we are likely to be patriotic...”<sup>77</sup> The push to create a collective cultural identity in the United States was very strong in the first half of the twentieth century. It manifested itself in many ways, some more deeply problematic than others.

Much more obviously related to the cultural politics of the Index is the Popular Front movement of the 1930s. The Popular Front is credited with being largely responsible for the vast amount of legislation and radical left-wing political action in the New Deal. Michael Denning describes it as “a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around laborist social democracy, anti-

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<sup>76</sup> Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 201.

<sup>77</sup> Constance Rourke, “American Tradition for Young People,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports from 1937, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The original text says “fully” instead of full, but I believe this is a typo. I have edited it to make the sentence easier to read.

fascism and anti-lynching.”<sup>78</sup> Just as the Klan’s exclusionary politics infiltrated the American consciousness, the Popular Front changed American culture. Working-class culture entered both high and mass cultural forms of art and entertainment, also allowing artists and writers that did not fit the 1920s definition of “100% Americanism” to come to the fore. “Black and ethnic writers, descendants of the proletarian avant-garde, dominated twentieth-century American literature, Vernacular musics like jazz, blues, and country resonated around the world,” Denning writes.<sup>79</sup> This, too, can be characterized as nationalism – it is just different than the ways in which the word is typically used.

Popular Front nationalism was what Denning describes as a “paradoxical synthesis of competing nationalisms.”<sup>80</sup> It was a period in which Americans were proud of their individual ethnic or cultural roots, but also proud to be American, a phenomenon Denning classifies “ethnic Americanism.”<sup>81</sup> The Index grew out of this strand of radical, leftist nationalism, which was in many ways, a reaction to the “true American” version of nationalism espoused by nativist, mainstream politics of the 1920s and the Klan; the people who believed in the Popular Front and “ethnic Americanism” were the very same ones that had been deemed un-American by the KKK.

The Popular Front was more than just a political ideology – it had a strong aesthetic legacy. Despite the failure of what Denning describes as the “laboring of American culture,” or the proletarianization of American art, theater, music, and literature, the Popular Front had a lasting impact on the artwork and theory of the rest of the twentieth century.<sup>82</sup> The most common aesthetic of the Popular Front was social realism: a movement characterized by a “documentary

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<sup>78</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 4.

<sup>79</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xx.

<sup>80</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 9.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 118.

aesthetic, a rearguard opposition to modernism, and a relatively straightforward representation in the arts,” Denning writes.<sup>83</sup> He argues that the most common thread in the works created by the culture of the Popular Front is “the inability to imagine a completed narrative. The knowable communities and settled social relations that provide the underpinning for realist narrative were themselves in crisis.”<sup>84</sup> The Index can be seen as one of the attempts to find a fixed or completed narrative.

Popular Front culture changed aesthetic language. A whole new host of terms came into the American lexicon: new realism, magic realism, and social surrealism to name a few.<sup>85</sup> While formally traditional, the art of the Popular Front, and by extension the New Deal, allowed for what Denning argues is one of the few “avant-gardes in US culture.”<sup>86</sup> The Index (and other similar contemporaneous arts initiatives) was not seen, nor has it been remembered, as an avant-garde movement. But, “the ‘proletarian’ movement” in the culture of the 1930s “attracted many of the artists whose careers had begun under the sign of an oppositional European modernism, the ‘exiles’ who returned. Their return, and the simultaneous emergence of a generation of depression artists, produced a counterculture” that Denning concludes, “can hardly be grasped by the term ‘social realism.’”<sup>87</sup> The documentary, utilitarian, and everyday aesthetic of the Index was shaped by the philosophies of the flourishing Popular Front culture.

“The absence of any comprehensive survey of American design, like those European publications with which students are familiar, had come, within recent years, to be felt and deplored by more than just the scholars,” wrote Adolph Glassgold in an essay on the Index. “It

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 119.

<sup>85</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 121.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 121.



was remarked that familiarity with the roots of their design tradition had given the work of European designers a rich individuality that attracted American manufacturers to the European design market with a consequent neglect of American talent.”<sup>88</sup> European nations had entire institutions, such as England’s Victoria and Albert Museum, dedicated to the preservation of design. The government believed that a compilation of “typical examples of indigenous American character” would have a huge impact on not only American industrial designers and manufacturers, but also American society at large. A prospectus for the publication of the Index that was sent to President Roosevelt explained, “The Index may be used to enormous advantage in re-emphasizing the values and meaning of our Democracy. It should be placed in every school, library, museum and art center in the country, and should be a standard reference work for art schools, craft groups, design studios, manufacturers, art shops, clubs and organizations of all kinds interested in educational and cultural fields.”<sup>89</sup> Glassgold, in a similarly patriotic vein, concluded an essay on the Index with the thoughts, “The varied character and forms of American design stand at last in the way of being presented as a comprehensible whole. What it may mean to the culture future of America one cannot at this time prophesy. That its meaning is more than mere antiquarianism is self-evident.”<sup>90</sup> It might seem lofty to claim a government-funded program to paint watercolors of decorative arts could change American culture and the future of its design. Furthermore, Glassgold was bold enough to use ‘self-evident,’ a loaded phrase from American history. But culture is a powerful weapon, and the Depression was a time in which Americans needed something to rally around.

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<sup>88</sup> Adolph Glassgold, “The Index of American Design,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports from 1937, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>89</sup> “Prospectus for the Publication of the Index of American Design WPA Art Program,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Undated Correspondence and Memoranda, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>90</sup> Adolph Glassgold, “Recording American Design, Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports circa 1936 – 1941, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Warren Susman writes that the 1930s was a decade in which “Americans began thinking in terms of patterns of behavior and belief, values and life-styles, symbols and meanings.”<sup>91</sup> Changes in American society reflected changes in colloquial language: “It was during this period that we find, for the first time, frequent reference to an ‘American Way of Life.’”<sup>92</sup> Changes in American society further manifested itself in an effort to define American life through its culture. Susman argues, “It was not, then, simply that many writers and artists and critics began to sing glowingly of American life and its past. It was rather the more complex effort to seek and to define America as a culture and to create the patterns of a way of life worth understanding.”<sup>93</sup> We can place the Index in this historical phenomenon of 1930s cultural nationalism.

Doss critiques the New Deal arts programs, claiming they were “hardly altruistic, of course,” resting “on political desires to generate national unity and restore national confidence in American forms of capitalism and democracy,” both tested by the severity of the Depression.<sup>94</sup> But should those political motives of the New Deal arts patronage be seen in a negative light? The responsibility of a government is to provide basic rights and protections for its citizens. One could argue that a government is also responsible for the happiness and well being of its citizens. This is up for debate. But, the Index was not a random Great Depression employment initiative. It was working in a larger American cultural tradition, with roots tracing back to the Progressives of the 1800s. Furthermore, the Index had the power to make people proud to be an American during one of the largest crises in American history. There is something quite magical about that.

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<sup>91</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 154.

<sup>92</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 154.

<sup>93</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 157.

<sup>94</sup> Doss, *American Art of the 20th - 21st Centuries*, 96.

Cahill believed that the *Index of American Design* would provide a comprehensive history of the American decorative and industrial arts. In this history, Colcha motifs from New Mexico, Pennsylvania Dutch styles from the Northeast, circus carvings from Missouri, Zoar materials from Ohio, Spanish-influenced styles from Texas, and many other objects were all collected and seen as contributing equally to a history of industrial design and decorative arts in the United States. There are many ways in which the Index can be accused of appropriation and omission – those claims would not be unfounded.<sup>95</sup> However, there is something unique and inclusive about the Index claiming that all of these different and disparate elements come together to create a definition of Americanism. It was a celebration of more than just geographic difference; the regional collection of materials also led to a celebration of cultural and ethnic difference.

The government hoped that the Index would “stimulate the artist, designer and manufacturer of articles of every use to build upon our American tradition, and that it will offer an opportunity to the student, teacher, research worker and the general public to familiarize themselves with this important phase of the American culture pattern.”<sup>96</sup> It did much more. Unlike the murals of the FAP, which caused endless debates over aesthetic style, potentially politically charged messages, social control, or explicit imagery, the Index’s art and mission were all palatable.<sup>97</sup> It was met with overwhelming popular support. One woman wrote that an exhibition of Index material was “proof of one good coming out of the depression, which will be

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<sup>95</sup> In this context, appropriation can be thought of as using the ideas, aesthetics, or history of another’s culture.

<sup>96</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1936-41, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>97</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 50-1.

recognized in future generations.”<sup>98</sup> There was also a sense that people felt the same sense of importance for the Index’s mission as the government. One man remarked: “An invaluable record of the multiple heritage of American design is being made available by the W.P.A. American Index of Design.”<sup>99</sup>

Public support of the Index was important; its cooperation was integral to its success. In order to catalogue American decorative, folk, and vernacular arts, the government needed to find objects for artists to document and study. The government released public memos to help accomplish their goals:

If you own any material made in America before (date) which you would like to have considered for inclusion in the Index of American Design, please list it on this form. The Index of American Design is at present particularly interested in recording pioneer furniture; household and agriculture implements; pottery; wooden figureheads and store figures; costume accessories and jewelry; toys and old coin banks; textile, woven, tufted or embroidered; metal-ware weathervanes and grillos. (Categories depend upon material wanted from your locality).<sup>100</sup>

An owner’s permission had to be secured after the government located an object for a potential Index recording. Communications with the owners of objects were meant to “include definite reference to the times when artists may be permitted to work in the collection,” so as to avoid a situation in which artists would not actually have access to the objects they were meant to paint, draw, or photograph.<sup>101</sup> Next, the material or materials were inspected to decide the proper medium: watercolor, photography, or a drawing.<sup>102</sup> The government laid out special instructions to ensure that institutions and private citizens would not be contacted on multiple

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<sup>98</sup> “Index of American Design: Comments Received,” 1936, Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960 Series: Correspondence and Memoranda from 1936, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1936-41, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>101</sup> “Interdepartmental Memo,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960 Series: Articles and Reports from 1936, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>102</sup> “Procedure of New York City Index Project,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960 Series: Correspondence and Memoranda from 1936, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

occasions about the same object. This precaution was taken both to avoid multiple renderings of the same and present a “unified and consistent impression” of the Index project.<sup>103</sup>

Each object required two sets of paperwork: an assignment sheet and a research sheet. The assignment sheets designated “each specific item to be recorded.” They also acted as a record for Index units as a “check on work in progress” and a “record of work completed and work proposed.”<sup>104</sup> Data sheets consisted of all of the research compiled on Index objects and would ultimately be used for the published *Index of American Design*. The government believed “Excellent renderings may lose value if they lack the support of identification,” and so data sheets contained extensive research.<sup>105</sup> They consisted of “essays on special subjects, bibliographies, lists of craftsmen, historical resumes on the crafts, manuscripts on the authentication and verification of attribution of the objects recorded, catalogues of references and other such lists and essays tending to give historical background of the subject of American Design.”<sup>106</sup> The Index’s research was concerned with giving readers of the *Index of American Design* a full picture of the objects catalogued, complete with historical background and other important contexts of the objects. But it was also concerned with maintaining the prestige and integrity of the project’s reputation. Officials did not want to allow the project to seem ill founded or under-researched, risking its standing.

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<sup>103</sup> “Interdepartmental Memo,” Articles and Reports from 1936, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>104</sup> “Assignment Sheet Instruction Memo,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960 Series: Articles and Reports circa 1936 – 1941, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>105</sup> “Research Instruction Memo,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960 Series: Articles and Reports circa 1936 – 1941, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>106</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1936-41, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Index assigned the objects it catalogued both an artist and a research worker.<sup>107</sup> The research workers would first go to an item's location and then fill "out a data sheet for each object on the check-list previously compiled" by the Index.<sup>108</sup> It was possible for research workers to do this "while the artists are working on the objects, but it is preferable to have this done before, so that the artist receives a data sheet and assignment sheet clipped together."<sup>109</sup> Research workers and artists maintained their relationships until the rendering was complete. Artists were responsible for creating images of the objects up to the standards of the Washington offices; research workers had to finish paperwork, ensure artists completed their tasks, and keep final renderings with the proper data and assignment sheets.<sup>110</sup>

Three different branches were needed in order to set up a functional Index unit: contact work, research and reports, and production.<sup>111</sup> The members of the contact work branch were responsible for building relationships with institutions and private citizens owning objects that the Index wanted to catalogue. The research and reports workers were responsible for organizing the paperwork of the Index. The production workers were usually artists that had been promoted to the position of administrator, tasked with overseeing the Index's artistic production.<sup>112</sup>

However, the true control of the Index of American Design lay in Washington. "The Index units were actively controlled and directed from [the] Washington headquarters of the Federal Art Program in its choice of material recorded, the techniques, exhibitions and plans for publication," wrote one official from the state government of Illinois in 1940. "This centralized

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<sup>107</sup> "Research and Reports," Articles and Reports from 1936, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> "Branches necessary to organize and Index unit," Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960 Series: Articles and Reports from 1936, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

unity of planning resulted in a rapid national growth of an endeavor which, with less of a national attitude, would surely have failed and the present Index program could never have been realized.”<sup>113</sup> The leadership of an Index project depended on its size. States with large Index programs were organized in small local units, overseen by a state director. States with smaller Index projects either operated as an independent unit with a state Index director, or under the state director of the pre-existing State Art Project.<sup>114</sup> The state director in charge of the Index unit had almost exclusive communication with the federal offices, which had the final say on all Index procedures.<sup>115</sup> Glassgold explained that the Index functioned because, “Constant interchange of new renderings is carried on between the units through the Washington office. Finished plates are sent to Washington and if not up to standard are returned for revision.”<sup>116</sup> More specifically, ‘constant interchange of new renderings’ happened with one person: Adolph Glassgold himself.

Glassgold’s influence over the Index is evidenced in his correspondence with the state Index units. He approved, or rejected, preliminary sketches for Index renderings. He wrote to the Wisconsin unit: “Eleven sketches have been approved for rendering, one disapproved and one undetermined because it was difficult to tell from the sketch whether or not the subject was well designed.”<sup>117</sup> He approved, or suggested changes for final renderings. In a letter to the Florida unit, Glassgold said, “Let me comment favorably upon the plates by Miss Wilson. The drawings

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<sup>113</sup> “Memo,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: State Reports from Illinois, 1942, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>114</sup> Federal Art Project, “Instructions for Index of American Design,” Articles and Reports from 1936, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Adolph Glassgold, “The Index of American Design,” Articles and Reports from 1937, Holger Cahill Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>117</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Wisconsin Index Unit, July 5 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Wisconsin, 1935 – 1944, Box 2819, Folder 651.3155 Wisc Jan-Aug 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

are very delicate, while at the same time, having strength and rendition. You will note from the attached list that three plates are being returned. These will reach you under separate cover with my comments and criticisms attached.”<sup>118</sup> Index units understood his importance, and sought his approval. The head of the New Mexico unit wrote to Glassgold in 1939, “Submitted herewith is a rendering done by the only Index worker now employed by us. This is the first piece of her work which I felt might pass your requirements. I would be glad if you would offer criticism freely.”<sup>119</sup>

The structure of the Index would prove to have more aesthetic implications and consequences than just the handprint of Adolph Glassgold. His leadership, and by extension, subjective, aesthetic choices, were not the only effect of the federalist structure of the Index. The contributions of each state’s own catalogue of design and vernacular expression shaped the development of the Index.

## **The Index’s Regionalism**

The combination of the Index’s broad, ambiguous language and its federalist structure created a pictorial record of American design seemingly different than its stated goals. To garner publicity for the Index, Cahill wrote in an industrial design magazine, “there have always been characteristic American patterns of selection and elimination, in the arts as well as in politics and

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<sup>118</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Eve Fuller, February 28, 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Florida, 1935 – 1944, Box 1106, Folder 651.3155 Jan 1939 – Jan 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from New Mexico Index Unit to Adolph Glassgold, July 5 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to New Mexico, 1935 – 1944, Box 1928, Folder New Mexico 651.3155 Jan 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.



economics.”<sup>120</sup> He never specified what exactly these ‘characteristic American patterns of selection and elimination’ were. The Index’s administrators took a great deal of time to define design and industrial arts, but their definitions were more ideological than practical. The Index was touted to the public as one unified, universalizing government program dedicated to finding a “usable past” for American design and decorative arts.<sup>121</sup> In reality, the government ran the Index as a program comprised of regional and state directors responsible for cataloguing. The objects in the Index did not show “characteristic American patterns,” as Cahill suggested, but rather characteristic regional patterns.<sup>122</sup>

In general, the 1930s saw a revival of folk culture and a move to regional modes of expression; recording America’s past through the vernacular puts the Index of American Design into this wider cultural and social trend.<sup>123</sup> Doss and Denning pose different explanations for the surge of regionalism in the creative expression of the Depression era. Doss argues that the United States developed a need for a new kind of artistic style in the 1930s; a \$63 million drop in the GNP rendered the triumphant imagery of American industry and modernity from the 1920s obsolete.<sup>124</sup> Regionalism allowed for what felt like realistic, albeit glorified, depictions of American life during the misfortune of the Depression. Denning claims regionalism developed out of sense of absence: liberal, leftist regionalists “pointed to the absence of culture, the lack of roots” in the United States during the 1930s.<sup>125</sup> Yet both Doss and Denning point to a similar

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<sup>120</sup> Holger Cahill, “Introduction to Art and Design Magazine,” March 13, 1941, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to New York City, 1935 – 1944, Box 2121, Folder NYC 651.3155 Jan-Aug 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>121</sup> Holger Cahill papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>122</sup> Doss, *American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*, 115.

<sup>123</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 149.

<sup>124</sup> Doss, *American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> Centuries*, 95.

<sup>125</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 133.

phenomenon – amid the dislocations of the Depression, Americans searched for a way to ground themselves. In the arts, this was done through a return to the folk and the vernacular.

The emphasis on the vernacular was present in the Index from its conception: it was created to catalogue folk arts.<sup>126</sup> The importance of the local is evident in the program's actual implementation. Folk art has a loose definition – it can be thought of as any kind of art derived from a local or indigenous culture. The name folk art is also misleading since it is generally not created as “art,” but rather as utilitarian materials that express some vernacular aesthetic. Because of this artistic tradition, the task of the various state Index units sounds deceptively simple: catalogue objects such as furniture, clothing, textiles, and metal work that represented a local aesthetic.<sup>127</sup>

Rather than asking the state Index programs for examples of common design elements, the correspondence between federal and state officials demonstrates that the federal government specifically requested states to locate objects and design motifs indigenous to their regions. Adolph Glassgold wrote the acting state director of the Kansas FAP, “May I say that it is in my firm belief that Kansas can contribute a unique and concrete body of related materials to the Index, and that this body of material will be typical of the culture and the history of the state.”<sup>128</sup> He acknowledged this was not always an easy task: “Such material, may perhaps be difficult to find but it can be found if the determined effort is made. Every other unit on the Index has succeeded in discovering or locating a body of material, especially related to the local region.

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<sup>126</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 134.

<sup>127</sup> Holger Cahill, “Introduction to Art and Design Magazine,” Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to New York City, 1935 – 1944.

<sup>128</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Verna Wear, April 11, 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Kansas, 1935-1944, Box 1368, Folder 651.3155 Jan-Jun 1939, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Kansas surely need not be the exception.”<sup>129</sup> Glassgold’s words to the Kansas unit were sharp, but he was right to be demanding. The Index saw remarkable contributions of local design and culture from all over the country. The Pennsylvania unit was extremely successful in cataloguing the history and culture of the Pennsylvania Germans; they recorded objects such as ceramics, furniture, craft tools, chalk wares, toys, and textiles so extensively that they created a portfolio titled *Folk Art of Rural Pennsylvania*.<sup>130</sup> The Ohio unit focused on the culture and materials of the German-descended Zoar community, while New Mexico catalogued Spanish Colonial motifs, which resulted in the publication of *Spanish Colonial Folk Arts and Handicrafts*.<sup>131</sup> While the collective *Index of American Design* was never created, the Index left a published record in smaller, more localized compilations.

The FAP even went so far as to reject states’ proposals of objects the federal directors found too universal. Glassgold wrote the acting state director of the Colorado Art Project, “You will note that those items which are not characteristic of your region are disapproved.”<sup>132</sup> Similarly, Index units were told to ignore objects that did not represent their regional character. Glassgold suggested the Ohio unit forgo rendering a series of glassware “unless you feel that the

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Correspondence from the Pennsylvania State Records, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Pennsylvania, 1935 – 1944, Box 2453, Folder Penn 651.3155 Nov 1939 – Aug 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>131</sup> Founded in a rural section of Ohio by German Separatists in 1817, the Zoar community was an American experiment in communal living. For further reading, consult Ohio Historical Society Department of Research and Publications, *Zoar, an Ohio Experiment in Communalism*, Columbus: 1952; Correspondence from the Ohio State Records, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Ohio, 1935 – 1944, Box 2279, Folder 651.3155 Ohio Jan – Aug, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Correspondence from the New Mexico State Records, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to New Mexico, 1935 – 1944, Box 1931, Folder New Mexico 651.3155 Jan 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>132</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Ray Goldberg February 8, 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Colorado, 1935 – 1944, Box 1008, Folder Colo 651.3155 Jan 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Zoar material is pretty well covered.”<sup>133</sup> The states reciprocated this attitude: the administrator of the Texas Index unit wrote the federal government with a prediction their completed plates would not be “of any immediate use” because they were not of the Spanish-Colonial material indigenous to the region.<sup>134</sup> The Index of American Design failed to show one, unique American style; that not seem to be its ultimate aim.

The state and federal Index units both felt that contributing examples of local identity could create a greater sense of national identity. The Washington offices of the FAP informed the acting director of the New York City WPA: “several State Art Projects have been preparing portfolios of design motifs from Index of American Design source material. The design material chosen has been selected as having particular association with the settlement and history of the state or section of the country where the portfolio is produced.”<sup>135</sup> The national offices suggested the New York City Art Project focus on the Hadley chest, a specific style of Early American chest categorized by its tripartite frontal paneling, well, and floral motifs, for their portfolio.<sup>136</sup> A federal official claimed the Hadley chest “so definitely belongs to the American tradition,” and it represents “a particularly indigenous design element to New England.”<sup>137</sup> The New York City offices rejected this request, feeling they “might easily find a better subject for a portfolio than this.”<sup>138</sup> They instead decided to make a portfolio of the Caswell Carpet, which they described to the federal offices as “a unique moment of domestic folk craft, a hand-made rug consisting of 78

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<sup>133</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Charlotte Cooper, May 1, 1939, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Ohio, National Archives.

<sup>134</sup> Letter from Thomas M. Stell to Adolph Glassgold, June 15, 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Texas, 1935 – 1944, Box 2642, Folder Tex. 651.3155 Jan/Dec 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>135</sup> Letter from Benjamin Knotts to Oliver Gottschalk, December 7, 1940, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to New York City, National Archives.

<sup>136</sup> Merriam-Webster, “Hadley Chest,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Hadley%20chest>.

<sup>137</sup> Letter from Benjamin Knotts to Oliver Gottschalk, December 7, 1940, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to New York City, National Archives.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

individually designed squares of which the most interesting would be selected.”<sup>139</sup> The Caswell Carpet, a 156 x. 147 in. wool rug, was made in Vermont in the 1830s. This one rug, however, could produce many Index plates due its design of 78 squares individually chain-stitched together. While made in Vermont, it was donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1938, one year prior to the New York City Art Project’s move to make their own individual portfolio.<sup>140</sup> New York was capitalizing on its cultural prominence by choosing an item that, although made outside of New York, was made visible to the American public through the United States’ greatest encyclopedic museum.

The New York City Art Project’s desire to focus on an object created outside of New York State highlights another inconsistency within the Index: people, objects, and ideas are all migratory. There may be certain elements of design and style that are indigenous to regions of the United States, arguably even characteristic of those regions. With advancements in transportation, manufacturing, and reproduction starting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the spread of information and materials accelerated. The United States also underwent mass urbanization; people left their rural hometowns for cities filled with industry and opportunity, bringing with them elements of their local culture. Due to all of these factors, common objects catalogued by the Index (ceramics, glassware, textiles, etc.) had histories that were quite difficult to pin down. A researcher contacted the Ohio unit with a request for information on glassware indigenous to the state. The unit sent over 16 drawings, but had to inform him “only three depict Ohio-made glass. These three were the only ones in our files. The others are of New Jersey, New York,

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Jane Adlin et al, "Textiles in The Metropolitan Museum of Art": The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, v. 53, no. 3 (Winter, 1995–1996).

Connecticut, and Massachusetts glass.”<sup>141</sup> Some New Deal era anxieties manifested themselves in an intense need to find traditions to identify with and grasp onto. Everything had to be classified and categorized, but that was not always possible.

Culture is fluid; state borders, while finite, are a product of political history. Herein lies another tension within the Index. Borders drawn by governments do not eliminate aesthetic exchange between groups, which the Index tended to ignore in its quest to find vernacular art. The fluidity of culture is especially noticeable in industrial design and decorative arts because of their practicality. Different regions of the country produce different objects because of climate, natural landscape, migration patterns, immigrant interactions, and worldviews. Why would their industrial design, folk, or vernacular art look the same? Conversely, with the exception of Hawaii and Alaska (which were not states in the union during the New Deal), every state in the United States of America borders at least one other state. Some regions of Florida have much more in common with Georgia than they do Miami. It does not matter that a state line lies between them.

The superficial boundaries of state borders are present in the work of the Index. Despite the very conscious efforts to avoid duplication of any objects in the Index’s founding guidelines, state offices in similar geographic regions of the country ran into problems. Glassgold criticized the Colorado Index unit because it was “running into the danger of duplicating material being reported elsewhere in the Southwest.”<sup>142</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, material was passed between bordering states in order to compile more detailed research histories for their catalogues. Glassgold wrote to the Minnesota Art Project, “I know you will be especially interested in

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<sup>141</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Dr. Carl Watson ATTN Mildred Thrasher, January 10, 1940, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Ohio, National Archives.

<sup>142</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Ray Goldberg, January 24, 1939, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Colorado, National Archives.

hearing that we have just received a drawing from Wisconsin which is almost a duplicate of plate Minn. MN-12 (cast iron rooster). This figure we are advised by Wisconsin is called a counterbalance and was used on a wind-mill as a balance to the sail.”<sup>143</sup> He concluded his thought with the comment, “Perhaps this bit of information may assist you in uncovering additional information about your rooster.”<sup>144</sup> Art, in all its forms, is a way to preserve the tastes, feelings, and sentiments of a place and moment in time. A specific geographic point in the United States is tied to more than the state where it is located. Aesthetic and informational exchange between similar regions in the United States helped the Index maintain consistency, and presenting a united front on the design history of similar aesthetic motifs was important for the reputation and prestige of the program.

Doss provides a critique of regionalist American art and the New Deal’s documentary aesthetic in her book *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*. She argues 1930s American regionalism attempted to link “localized contemporary social, geographic, and economic cultures.”<sup>145</sup> This aesthetic was meant to help Americans identify and embrace the “culture of their indigenous regions,” which would allow them to “discover the spiritual and communal values missing under the competitive, individualist orientation of corporate capitalism.”<sup>146</sup> But there is a big difference between the kind of regionalism that Doss describes and the Index of American Design’s regionalism. First, Doss writes about muralist painters’ figurative regionalism. This style of representation links specific kinds of people with specific geographic locations and lifestyles. Thus, many regionalist

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<sup>143</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Clement Haupers, May 1, 1939, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Minnesota, 1935 – 1944, April 12, 1939, Box 1640, Folder Minn 651.3155 Jan 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 92.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

artworks were created based on stereotypes and superficial combinations, leaving it vulnerable to criticisms of racism, appropriation, and inaccurate depictions. Index regionalism, however, was meant to show differences in design aesthetics. It catalogued objects, and did not attempt to link those objects to specific groups, but rather points in space. The Index did not try and portray “social, geographic, and economic cultures” as one homogenous entity in the same manner as many New Deal murals.

Further complicating the Index’s idealistic goal at creating a pluralist catalogue of American difference was the reality of the implementation of New Deal policies in a racially segregated Depression era United States. In *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, Ira Katznelson argues that the New Dealers allowed, or ignored, the South’s racial discrimination in order to advance their own goals. He claims the architects of the New Deal cared more about passing legislation and advancing liberal democracy than ensuring that their legislation was fairly executed around the country.<sup>147</sup> Alan Brinkley argues this shortcoming of the New Deal was due to the fact that Roosevelt was a “coalition-builder.”<sup>148</sup> FDR, a savvy politician, steered clear of issues that seemed likely to create sectional divides, even if it resulted in the New Deal’s “reluctance to tolerate racial discrimination in the administration of its own relief programs, its acceptance of racial wage differentials,” and “its refusal to endorse antilynching legislation.”<sup>149</sup>

There is no evidence, however, that the Index itself was a racially discriminatory program. As a WPA program, it was implemented federally: an unfortunate and inherent flaw in its structure. There was no way to control how regional, state, or Index art directors controlled

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<sup>147</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 17-18.

<sup>148</sup> Alan Brinkley, “The New Deal and Southern Politics,” in *The New Deal and the South*, ed. James. C. Cobb and Michael Namorato (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1984), as quoted in Katznelson, 545.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.



applications, funding or wages, and certain Southern states, such as Alabama, did not even opt into participation in the Index.<sup>150</sup> The New Deal's blind eye to racism is a flaw of which we should be cognizant and critical. But, Holger Cahill, Adolph Glassgold, and Constance Rourke—the leaders of the Index—were an immigrant, suspected member of the Popular Front and Jewish faith, and an advocate for the importance and relevancy of black folk culture, respectively. They were a progressive, open, and inclusive group of people; they were also the types of people that would have been targeted by the nativist organizations of the previous decades. The lack of evidence that the Index engaged in discriminatory practices further proves the leaders did not structure any kind of intentional racial segregation into the program. Discrimination occurred as a product of the political culture, fraught racial relations, and sectional conflict of the Depression era.

There is even evidence that demonstrates the attempted inclusivity of the Index. The New York Unit catalogued a face-shaped jug (Image 1), which the catalogue entry in *Drawing on America's Past* states is likely a rendering of a jug “created by enslaved potters of the Edgefield district of South Carolina.”<sup>151</sup> This particular style of jug was sculpted with the practical purpose of storing food and drink, but the stylistic intent of paying homage to its potters' African heritage.<sup>152</sup> Although made in South Carolina, the New York Index catalogued the piece because of its location in the 1930s.<sup>153</sup> The federal offices had complete control over the state units of the Index, and so a recording of a jug made by enslaved artists provides evidence that there was not an active attempt to exclude people of color from the Index. If the Index actively engaged in an

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<sup>150</sup> Letter from Mary Weber to Florence Kerr, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Alabama, 1935 – 1944, May 14, 1941, Box 810, Folder Alabama 651.3155 Jan. 1941, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>151</sup> “Face Jug Catalogue Entry,” *Drawing on America's Past*, 118.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

effort to eliminate the art of African-Americans, the New York Unit's initial sketch of the face jug would have been rejected.

The New York unit recording a jug that was originally made in South Carolina calls attention to another tension within New Deal federalism. This jug is a small peek of the Index's possibilities for inclusion, had it reached its full potential. The jug also shows the strengths of New Deal federalism; in spite of attempts of specific regions of the country to ignore minority groups, a jug sculpted by enslaved members of American society was included in the Index. The changing, and often exclusionary, political attitudes around the United States can be faulted as one of its biggest weaknesses. But there are situations wherein sectionalism does not allow exclusion to win.

Thus, a pictorial record of regionalist designs and styles is a much more accurate "usable" past for the United States of America.<sup>154</sup> Tuttle writes, "The question 'What is American in American art?' may never be adequately answered because it may not be possible to define any art as purely and exclusively American. The notion is just as elusive as the so-called Englishness of English art."<sup>155</sup> The very structure and implementation of the Index foreshadows this conclusion, with its states, regions, and localities all seen as separate entities, reporting back to the federal government. The Index did show, however, that the United States had talented artists in every region of the country capable of mimetically rendering objects for historic preservation. "We consider the Index of American Design one of the most beneficial and useful projects of the art program and we have enjoyed the exhibitions of this work sent to us from time

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Tuttle, "*Drawing on a 'Usable Past,'*" 3.

to time,” a director from North Carolina wrote to a federal WPA official.<sup>156</sup> There was also a sense that the Index would have a positive influence on the lives of all the workers involved, beyond the obvious economic benefits. Reflecting on the Index as New Deal funding began to dwindle, the state director of Florida Art Project wrote Glassgold: “This work takes special training, as you so well know. Meanwhile, we have the satisfaction however of knowing that this training has not been a loss given to our artists; they all are more capable and better equipped to meet sometimes an unkindly world in which to do their work.”<sup>157</sup>

## The Art of the Index

Artists hailing from all corners of the country with varying amounts of artistic training created the artwork of the Index of American Design. Nevertheless, there is a striking uniformity amongst the works the Index produced. A New York City Index worker remarked, “There is no doubt at all that to the layman a careful study of Index plates done in different regions seem to have been done either by one artist or in one technique.”<sup>158</sup> The uniformity in style was due in large part to two different influences: the *Index of American Design Manual* and Suzanne Chapman, Index employee from 1936 to 1937.<sup>159</sup>

Chapman trained as a visual artist at the school of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. After her schooling, the MFA hired her to create mimetic renderings of various textiles and

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<sup>156</sup> Letter from C.C. McGinnis to Florence Kerr, March 11, 1941, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922 – 1944. Series: Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to North Carolina, 1935 – 1944, Box 2192, Folder 651.3155 Jan 1941, Feb. 1939, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>157</sup> Letter from Eve Alsman Fuller to Holger Cahill, June 15, 1939, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Florida, National Archives.

<sup>158</sup> Leo Drosdoff, “Documentary Art,” Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports from 1936-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>159</sup> Tuttle, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” 14.

decorative arts that the museum possessed.<sup>160</sup> She introduced all of the techniques she learned at the MFA to the Index, and is credited for the high quality and beauty of Index art.<sup>161</sup>

Most of Chapman's influence over the art and artists of the Index came from her work writing the *Index of American Design Manual*. It was sent to all active branches of the Index to guide bureaucrats, researchers, and artists on how to format, research, and best render objects for the Index. It covered all kinds of material, from how to assign Index objects classification numbers to the best ways to capture light and shadow in watercolor.<sup>162</sup> The *Manual* was not meant to be an exhaustive list of instructions for artists to follow religiously, but rather a set of guidelines to help artists determine how to make renderings as accurate and aesthetic as possible. The introduction of the *Manual* states: "These outlines on technique" are "not intended to be mandatory but simply suggest methods that have been found by practice to give excellent results."<sup>163</sup>

Examples of the *Manual*'s techniques spread all over the country through "Sample plates...that were available... upon request."<sup>164</sup> There is evidence that the sample plates were in high demand, and not just an empty offer from the federal offices. Glassgold wrote the Kansas Index in February 1939: "We find that we have urgent need for these plates and, unless it is absolutely essential for you to retain them, we would appreciate having them sent [to] us as soon as it is convenient."<sup>165</sup> Chapman's influence extended far beyond the major metropolitan centers

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> "Index of American Design Manual," Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960 Series: Articles and Reports from 1946-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C .

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Letter from Adolph Glassgold to Verna Wear, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Kansas, National Archives.

of the east coast—artists from all corners of the United States used her sample plates to learn her tricks of the trade.

Art historians and contemporaries of the New Deal share the sentiment that Index renderings are remarkable works of art. “The techniques Chapman introduced to the project enabled Index artists to produce renderings that defied viewers’ certainty as to whether they were looking at watercolor plates or the real objects,” Tuttle remarks.<sup>166</sup> One observer at an Index exhibition in 1936 wrote in the *New York Times*, “The work of the ‘Index’ has brought to notice some unusual artistic talent: many of the color sketches are skillfully done. In some remarkable pictures of old crewel work the artist has reproduced the effect of the original so exactly that the visitor is tempted to touch the painting to convince himself that it is not actual embroidery.”<sup>167</sup> The techniques seemed to give artists the ability to blur the distinction between object and painting, reality and art – a reflection of an idea the Index had hoped to achieve.

Even as a present day viewer, I find the renderings to be a shocking experience. For example, Mae A. Clark’s (Image 2) 1938 rendering of a cotton quilt that was made in 1865 is so realistic that it is hard to believe it is not a present-day, high-resolution photograph.<sup>168</sup> The three-dimensional quality is especially present in the white and red chevron detailing on the central edges of the design. In the close up of the image (Image 3), one can see how Clark used slight variations in hues to achieve a rippled effect in the textile. The illusion is layered with delicately applied white strokes to show stitching. The trompe l’oeil used to demonstrate the indentations that stitches on fabric create allow a viewer to envision a hand sewing together all the small triangles that make up the quilt’s pattern. There is virtually nothing that gives away the image’s

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<sup>166</sup> Tuttle, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” 14-15.

<sup>167</sup> Walter Rendell Storey, “An American Heritage of Antiques: The Record of Colonial and Early Republic Designs Assembled in a Federal Project,” *New York Times*, 1936, sec. magazine.

<sup>168</sup> Virginia Clayton Tuttle, “Quilt: ‘Birds in the Air,’ or ‘Old Maid’s Ramble,” in *Drawing on America’s Past*, 158.

status as a watercolor besides the very faint pencil lines around the border of the illustration. The markings are noticeable only to the most attentive of viewers.

Watercolors are an unexpected choice to chronicle American decorative and folk arts and design. However, a close examination of the work renders the Index's reasoning clearer. An antique magazine explained, "the gathering of illustrative material could have been accomplished with the aid of photography more quickly and at less cost than by dependence upon hand renderings. In that case, however, the essential element of color [would] have been neglected or quite suppressed."<sup>169</sup> It is hard to imagine a black and white photograph capturing the texture, feeling, and detail of the quilt in the same way as Clark's brushstrokes. One of the most beautiful aspects of her image is the use of color. There are playful blue stars over deep red; purple-maroon polka dots over light pink; and swirly nature motifs in greys, reds, yellows, and burnt oranges. The contrast between the shades on each individual triangle is subtle, but a great deal of the image's character would be lost without them. "The camera, that modern miracle box, is nevertheless limited to the function of reporting appearances," a man commented on Index renderings at an exhibition of Federal Art at the Museum of Modern Art. "Such report...must include not an image of the object alone but everything besides of a transient or accidental nature that may at the moment have its imprint upon the object—distorting highlights, obscuring shadows and what not. Nor does it seem likely that by this means the true color of objects could be so dependably negotiated."<sup>170</sup> There were exceptions to the use of watercolor; the *Manual*

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<sup>169</sup> "The Editor's Attic," in *Antiques: A Magazine for Collectors and Others Interested in Times Past & In Articles of Daily Use & Adornment Devised by Our Forefathers*, Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Series: Articles and Reports from 1937, January 1937, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

<sup>170</sup> Edward Alden Jewell, "Extending our Horizons: A Year's Federal Art Activities Surveyed In Museum of Modern Art Exhibition," *New York Times*, 1936. I have changed the text of the original source from "must haves" to "would" because I believe it to be a typo.

specified the situations in which photography was more suitable for an object.<sup>171</sup> Artists should be careful, however, to make sure that the photographs gave “an accurate statement of the object recorded.”<sup>172</sup> The photograph could not compromise the depiction of the object’s form, texture, color, or shape.

The government declared, “The problem of the Index artist is to render as faithfully as possible the object before him, recording accurately not only its form and structure but also its substance. The last is gained most readily by a careful study of texture.”<sup>173</sup> Artists accomplished this by working in-person, in front of the objects they were rendering.<sup>174</sup> The Index, unlike other programs of the FAP, required artists to demonstrate their artistic ability before assigning them to projects; they were only assigned to a project after proving their qualifications to a local or state supervisor.<sup>175</sup>

The localized nature of the Index and its assignments makes it all the more surprising that there is so much uniformity among the works.<sup>176</sup> Two renderings of textiles, one by Jenny Almgren, an artist from the New York unit, and the other by Charlotte Angus, an artist from the Pennsylvania unit, demonstrate the coherence (Image 4 and Image 5, respectively).<sup>177</sup> Despite the aesthetic differences of the two quilts, there are many similarities in the style of their painting. They both, along with Clark, use subtle variations in shade to replicate the real texture

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<sup>171</sup> See page \_\_\_\_ of thesis for specifications.

<sup>172</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1946-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute.

<sup>173</sup> “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1946-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute.

<sup>174</sup> Tuttle, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” 11.

<sup>175</sup> This was done either “through a qualifying test administered by the state art director, or by showing samples of their work,” Tuttle, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” 11; “Index of American Design Manual,” Articles and Reports from 1946-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Virginia Clayton Tuttle, “Caroline A. Lusk’s Album Quilt,” in *Drawing on America’s Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design*, 162; Virginia Clayton Tuttle, “Appliqué Sampler Quilt Top,” in *Drawing on America’s Past*, 165.

of cloth. This is most noticeable in Almgren's rendering along the bottom edge, where she does a fantastic job of depicting texture and variation in an all-crème stretch of fabric. Angus' watercolor uses the same effect: in the crème stretches of her quilt's design in the middle of the circular motifs, one can see that the two artists employed the same tactics to create depth and texture. The likeness between the works is easily understandable: artists have used similar trompe l'oeil techniques for centuries for illusion. The *Manual* alone can hardly receive credit.

The images' borders have noteworthy similarities. First, the signatures of Almgren and Angus are quite alike: they both used pencil to sign their works in blocky print in the bottom corner of their works. The Index's *Manual* went so far as to instruct artists on how to sign the paper: "The artist's signature, or lettered name, may appear on the lower corner of the plate."<sup>178</sup> Almgren, Angus, and Clark to a lesser extent, accentuated the three-dimensionality of their textiles with grey-blue shading. The subtle application of paint along their borders helps distinguish between the white of the paper and the white of the fabric, which adds to its naturalistic appearance. Tuttle argues, "Isolating the images on blank sheets of paper would most often contradict any attempt to convince the hapless viewer that this was the real object, not a watercolor. It is probably because textiles were often mounted for display on white backgrounds that renderings of textiles were most frequently mistaken for the actual pieces."<sup>179</sup> And artists, regardless of their location, knew how to play up this relationship between image and background.

The standardizations, rules, and restrictions caused many similarities in the works of the Index, but there are also moments in which traces of the artist's hand and own personal aesthetic

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<sup>178</sup> The *Manual* specified "The 'wet' method is effective for textiles, since it softens both the upper and the brush strokes." For further descriptions of the "wet method," consult the *Index of American Design Manual*, Holger Cahill Papers, Series: Articles and Reports from 1946-41, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

<sup>179</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 25.



choices can be found. The works of Almgren and Clark are extremely similar: they have similar color palettes, and to someone who is not familiar with the history of quilting or quilt techniques, fairly similar designs (Image 4 and Image 2, respectively). Both images are rendered with precision; the details of their work even look similar. The white stitching in a chevron pattern on top of crème fabric in Clark's image looks almost indistinguishable from the details of white swirls of infinity signs and other looping motifs on crème fabric in Almgren's. Upon further inspection, one notices the two used watercolors quite differently. Clark's image shows no sign of the medium—when painting, she must have dipped her brush in thick amounts of paint after dipping it in water to attain such bold swaths of color on her paper. Almgren, on the other hand, diluted her paints with much more water. Her different handling of the medium resulted in the drippy application of paint in her image. This is most easily spotted on the left-hand side of the image in her blue album leaf. Artists all have their own individual comforts and ways of working; they all handle media differently. No amount of government bureaucracy, regulation, or standardization can change that.

These variations in the work of the Index are admittedly very subtle. Only a trained eye or an attentive viewer would notice all of the nuances that either link or separate these images; they look like pretty watercolors of quilts. Furthermore, although talented, Index artists are difficult to find information on. Other divisions of the FAP boast famous alumni such as Jackson Pollock and Louise Nevelson, but it does not appear that any Index artists had significant careers after working for the WPA. The art of the Index was created with a documentary purpose, not to glorify individual artists; it was meant to preserve aspects of American culture for future artists and industrial designers. The Index's main concern was not in launching artists' careers— it was

meant to serve the greater art and design communities in the United States. This was a very new kind of relationship between the artist and society.

The art world noticed the relationship between artist and world changing as it transpired. Stuart Davis, famed American modernist, wrote, “The experience of the American artist during the last half dozen years has done much to increase his social consciousness and open his eyes to the importance of his art as an essential public service.”<sup>180</sup> His explanation for this ongoing societal shift was greater government patronage of the arts: “This experience is divided into two parts, the pre-government-project period and the post-government-project period. In the first period the artist saw his world crumble and experienced disillusionment and despair, and in the second period he found a new orientation and a new hope and purpose based on a new sense of social responsibility.”<sup>181</sup> Because of American artists’ increased social consciousness, artists engaged in greater interaction with the general public. Einar Heiberg, the head of the Minnesota Artists Union, wrote, “Artists throughout the country were beginning to realize that modern life demanded a relinquishment of their traditional aloofness from everyday affairs and trends. They decided to do something about it.”<sup>182</sup>

The arts community felt and expressed these changes internally and to the American public. On a weekly Federal Theater Project radio program titled “Through the Art World,” artists, art historians, critics, and others involved with the New York City arts scene discussed

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<sup>180</sup> Stuart Davis, “American Artists’ Congress,” in *Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* ed. by Francis V. O’Connor (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 249.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Einar Heiberg, “The Minnesota Artists’ Union,” in *Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* ed. by Francis V. O’Connor (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 243.

“the many schools of painting in America and abroad.”<sup>183</sup> On a segment titled, “The Future of Art in America,” critic Pierre Loving echoed Heiberg when he stated, “Practically up to this decade there seems to have been a sort of conspiracy to keep artists and people apart. Artists were queer fish and being regarded as such made them queerer. They even felt they had to dress and act the part along Montparnasse in Greenwich Village.”<sup>184</sup>

Loving commented that the anonymity of many New Deal artists was neither a new, nor problematic phenomenon in the history of public art. He explained, “Art has always had its lesser men who work well and honestly and often their work survives a thing of beauty, although their names are lost. Remember, the important thing is the work of art and not the man. Whole civilizations like the Egyptian were produced by men who are anonymous today.”<sup>185</sup> His point is important: the artist was not the critical part of the Index of American Design, but rather the greater pictorial record that would someday be available to future industrial designers and the American public. Artists understood as well: “The artists of America do not look upon the arts projects as a temporary stopgap in an emergency situation, but see in them the beginning of a new and better day for art in this country,” wrote Stuart Davis.<sup>186</sup> The art world felt that the FAP was creating a new social consciousness in American artists, changing their relationship to society in a positive, altruistic manner.

The American public also felt that the FAP was changing the way that artists interacted with society, bringing a positive new force into daily life. “Indeed, what periods of human history stand more desperately in need of such understanding and appreciation than those during

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<sup>183</sup> “The Future of Art in America” by Pierre Loving and Leah Plotkin, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922-1944. Series: Records of the Federal Theatre Projects, Radio Scripts of the New York City Federal Theatre Project, 1936-1939, December 23, 1936, Box 33, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Stuart Davis, “American Artists’ Congress,” *Art for the Millions*, 250.

which destructive forces make head?” wrote one person in the *Boston Daily Globe*, “Only in a society careless of values and indifferent to its own welfare is the artist treated as stranger or outcast.”<sup>187</sup> Another celebratory article in the *New York Times* declared, “These various activities of the Federal art project are planned in the belief that the artist’s contribution to a ‘full and abundant life’ for the American people is both vital and significant and that a discriminating and sympathetic public is necessary to the development of a national art.”<sup>188</sup> The times of the Great Depression called for a program like the FAP more so than other moments in America’s history. “The interesting exhibition of art which has been opened at Norwood under supervision of the Federal Art Project is a timely reminder that, even in times so disheveled as ours, there is growing a healthy appreciation of the importance to society of the creative impulse of man,” quipped an article in the *Daily Boston Globe*.<sup>189</sup> The products of the FAP created a sense of hope that the United States would move towards being a country with a greater appreciation for the arts. Daniel Catton Rich, a chief curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, wrote to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “If you examine the great periods of art you will find they have one thing in common: many artists at work. America has never given enough support to produce a great generation of artists. But with the broad base of this national project for the first time an opportunity exists.”<sup>190</sup> Widespread government support would manifest itself in a newfound love of the arts, both socially and economically.

The FAP, like all government programs, had its critics. But it was also a rare moment in time when the views of the government, many artists, and the public were more or less aligned.

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<sup>187</sup> “Art and Public Interest.” *Daily Boston Globe* (1928-1960); *Boston, Mass.* October 17, 1938.

<sup>188</sup> “Federal Relief Aids in Service of: Writers and Specialists Are to Be Enrolled Along With Musicians And Many Stage People Uncle Sam as Patron of the Muses: WPA Art and Music Projects.” *New York Times*.

<sup>189</sup> “Art and Public Interest.” *Daily Boston Globe* (1928-1960); *Boston, Mass.* October 17, 1938.

<sup>190</sup> Rich, Daniel Catton. “Voice of the People: Mr. Rich on Wpa Art.” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); *Chicago, Ill.* December 28, 1940.

The Index, as one of the most universally loved aspects of Federal One, served a much greater purpose in society than allowing artists to become rich or famous: cultural nationalism. A review of an Index exhibition in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* raved that it was “the first federal art project to command universal approbation,” and “The artistry found in this exhibit is unbelievable.”<sup>191</sup> The artists of the New Deal aimed to do more than create art that was aesthetically pleasing; they were attempting to inspire a country desperately in need of a sparkle. “The hope is to achieve a high level of practical consciousness and effective expression among artists, so that they may become a force in the political and economic world of which they are a part, and thus fortify the growing trend toward recognition of the cultural needs of a great democracy and develop the means for their fulfillment,” wrote artist and art historian Lincoln Rothchild.<sup>192</sup> During the New Deal era, ‘fulfillment’ for American artists did not mean fame and recognition; it meant changing and inspiring the world around them.

On the final program of “Through the Art World,” Leah Plotkin, the series’ moderator, gave a lecture titled “The Social Basis of the Arts.” She concluded her lecture with a question that I think still haunts debates around art today: “If it does not matter what you paint but how you do it, why cannot the artistic idea be coupled with the social idea and thus give greater meaning to both?”<sup>193</sup> The Index of American Design (along with the rest of the art of the New Deal) forced Americans to think about problems of self-identity, regional identity, and national identity. The watercolors, drawings, and photographs it left behind might not be the most

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<sup>191</sup> Jewett, Eleanor. “Water Colors Write History of U. S. Design.” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963); *Chicago*, III. March 16, 1937.

<sup>192</sup> Lincoln Rothchild, “The American Artists’ Congress,” in *Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* ed. by Francis V. O’Connor (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 252.

<sup>193</sup> “The Social Basis of Art” by Leah Plotkin, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922-1944. Series: Records of the Federal Theatre Projects, Radio Scripts of the New York City Federal Theatre Project, 1936-1939, January 20, 1936, Box 33, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

innovative additions the art world has ever seen, but as Plotkin points out, that does not mean they are without their uses.

## Cultural Nationalism and its Effects

“Some will ask, that’s all very well for the artist, but what do we get out of it, we, that well-know figure the taxpayer. The taxpayer does get a lot out of it in the way of enjoyment and if I may use this trite word – spiritual uplift,” Pierre Loving stated on his segment of “Through the Art World.”<sup>194</sup> New Deal arts programs showed the endless possibilities of publicly funded art in the United States. Art brings people together; it is an activity that people of all ages, demographics, and social classes can enjoy—something the New Deal and Federal One proved. An article in the *Nation* gushed that the FAP destroyed “the false concept of art as a luxury and put it in its natural place as a free and democratic expression of the life of a society.” And the FAP “does serve as a blueprint to indicate the function that art might and should perform in a civilized society.”<sup>195</sup> Still, there is no *Index of American Design*, and in 2018 the government’s initiative to create a pictorial record of America’s folk, decorative, and vernacular style is not a well-known historical phenomenon.

The Index’s records and correspondence repeatedly state the intention to publish the *Index of American Design*. As late as October of 1939, Index operatives were still optimistic. “The Index is plowing right along,” Glassgold wrote in a letter. “We have not yet published but things look bright in that direction and I should have a good word to pass along before long.”<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> “The Future of Art in America” by Pierre Loving and Leah Plotkin, Radio Scripts of the New York City Federal Art Project, National Archives.

<sup>195</sup> Margaret Marshall, “Art on Relief,” *Nation* 143, no. 10 (September 5, 1936): 271–75.

<sup>196</sup> Correspondence from Adolph Glassgold to Felix Payant, October 14, 1939, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Minnesota, National Archives.

But as work on the Index continued, administrators faced continuous obstacles to publication. It was difficult to find an acceptable, yet cost-effective, medium to on which to reproduce the Index, and administrators wished to publish a large number of high-quality renderings complete with accurate and detailed research sheets.<sup>197</sup> Their hopes proved unrealistic.

From the Index's inception publication seemed improbable. The Index was established in 1936; in 1937, the FAP faced a serious budget cut of twenty-five percent, reducing the number of workers by over 10,000.<sup>198</sup> In 1939, the Works Progress Administration was renamed the Works Projects Administration; the Project became state-run rather than a federal initiative, thus drastically reducing its available funds.<sup>199</sup> In 1942, America was fully involved in World War II; mass mobilization towards the war effort solved unemployment in the ways the New Deal had never been able to. In April of 1942, Congress officially terminated the Index of American Design, despite the fact that its work was not yet complete.<sup>200</sup> After the termination of the Index, it was briefly transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The renderings were shortly moved thereafter to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where they still remain today. The work created in the Index was federal property and as such their home had to be a federal institution.<sup>201</sup> Unlike other works created under Federal One, the Index was never published, making it impossible for the government to use it as wartime propaganda. Perhaps this is one of the many reasons it was not memorialized. Despite one National Gallery exhibition of Index materials that ran from November 2002 – March 2003, the Index has received very little attention.

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<sup>197</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 17-18.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 18-9.

Although the FAP and other Federal One programs were adored, the New Deal ultimately failed to transform the attitudes toward government patronage of the arts in the United States. This was due to a combination of political, artistic, economic, and social factors. In the economic boom of the postwar period, it was much harder to make a case that culture needed government subsidization.<sup>202</sup> Advocates, in their attempts to revitalize arts funding, attempted to raise money within communities rather than lobby the government to create a permanent arts program comparable to Federal One.<sup>203</sup> The emerging hostile political climate of the Cold War, coupled with the failed revival of funding, would prove disastrous for a continuation of government arts patronage. As tensions with the Soviet Union grew, Americans became obsessed with shielding its citizens from Communist propaganda, and the leftist energies of the Popular Front gave the art of the New Deal a decidedly red tint.<sup>204</sup> Internal divisions also began amongst the former workers of the FAP. Some New Dealers continued to believe in the power of publicly funded art, advocating for the National Gallery to expand its collection and facilitate more interaction with the public; educational programs for arts and music; greater government involvement in the State Department's international exchanges of culture; and more art in public buildings.<sup>205</sup> Others, such as Holger Cahill, were dubious of these plans.<sup>206</sup> Former New Dealers' failure to present a united front only added fuel to the fire. The contemporary art world largely glosses over the art of the 1930s, treating it as what Musher describes as a "brief interlude between modernism and abstract expressionism."<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 211.

<sup>203</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 5.

<sup>204</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 210.

<sup>205</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 211.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.



The Index of American Design, with its focus on documentation, pluralist Americanism, and standardized depictions of culture rather than innovation and expression, made it particularly susceptible to all the aforementioned criticisms in the postwar period. “Employing an aesthetic akin to documentary photography (many Index plates are extraordinarily photographic),” Doss argues, “the Index’s focus on information gathering and recording, as well as data classification, further meshed with the New Deal’s larger bureaucratization of modern American culture and society.”<sup>208</sup> However, in the culture wars of the postwar period, the United States was desperate to prove that it was the land of the free and the home of the brave. America wanted to show the world that its culture was not ‘bureaucratized,’ and that government programs and government funding did not construct its national identity.<sup>209</sup>

The New Deal *did* use culture to construct various ideas of American national identity. The Index of American Design is only one example. The folk songs of the Federal Music Project attempt to speak to the so-called American Experience; the Federal Writers’ Project’s *America Guides* attempted to catalogue every inch of the United States, giving a full representation of what every corner of the country looked like, felt like, and could offer.<sup>210</sup> Unfortunately for a Federal One revival, other countries around the world were also creating state-sponsored art programs: Nazi Germany, Mussolini’s fascist Italy, and the Soviet Union. Their versions of cultural nationalism were quite different from the New Deal’s.

The documentary aesthetic of Index artworks was in direct opposition with what was in vogue in the booming postwar American arts scene. Musher explains, “Because New Deal art

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<sup>208</sup> Erika Doss, “American Folk Art’s ‘Distinctive Character’: The Index of American Design and New Deal Notions of National Culture,” in *Drawing on America’s Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design*,” (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2011).

catered to lay people's interests, it was sometimes kitsch and mediocre."<sup>211</sup> Her use of the word 'kitsch' is perhaps unintentional, but nonetheless an automatic reminder of the most influential art historian of the twentieth century: Clement Greenberg.

In 1939, Greenberg wrote his first major essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." It was published in the *Partisan Review*, and it immediately launched him into the international arts scene. His view of modernism dominated the art world for decades, with art made in either direct response or direct opposition to Greenbergian Modernism. His importance in the American art world in the latter half of the twentieth century cannot be understated.

Greenberg defined kitsch in his seminal essay as "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc."<sup>212</sup> The Index might not obviously fall under Greenberg's category of "kitsch," but it most certainly fits his definition. The Index was created to help future American industrial designers and artists come up with an American aesthetic and style. This was art for commercial and mass cultural applications—kitsch. The Index meant artists were not using their creative expression from an isolated status in society for individual glorification and artistic innovation—also kitsch.<sup>213</sup>

Greenberg's true problem with kitsch lay not in its appearance or potential lack of artistic merits, but in its ability to be appropriated and controlled by fascistic governments. Kitsch is the culture of the masses, and mass culture, rather than avant-garde culture, is much easier to spin. "If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy, and Russia," Greenberg argued, "it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is

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<sup>211</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 4.

<sup>212</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 9.

<sup>213</sup> Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."

the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else. The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects.”<sup>214</sup> His accusation of kitsch culture as cheap or easy reintroduced the dichotomy between a lowbrow and highbrow aesthetic eliminated by much New Deal art, while simultaneously reinforcing his arguments on the susceptibility of kitsch to political manipulation. This may sound absurd today, but Greenberg was writing at a moment of intense political strife, when art was involved in political debates and movements. Hitler was organizing Degenerate Art exhibitions of European Modernists in Nazi Germany; Stalin was employing artists to create propaganda galore; the Italian futurists of Italy wholeheartedly supported Mussolini and created nativist, troubling images in honor of his cause.

Greenberg believed that visual art had to be abstract and nonrepresentational; it could not be something that was easily derived from mass culture, and thereby easily applicable to the masses. It could not, for example, be something like the Index of American Design, which took objects from the homes of everyday Americans and elevated their status. Greenberg wrote, “Kitsch keeps the dictator in closer contact with the soul of the people,” and American culture listened.<sup>215</sup> The art and culture that came into prominence in the aftermath of World War II had to be “all that fascist and communist totalitarian art were not,” Tuttle argues. It had to resemble the art that the Nazis and the communists despised: universalist, nonrepresentational, and abstract. American art in the immediate Postwar period had no tolerance for political messages, nationalism, or mass culture.<sup>216</sup> The Index of American Design does not fit any of those qualifications.

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<sup>214</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 11.

<sup>215</sup> Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 19.

<sup>216</sup> Tuttle, “Picturing a ‘Usable Past,’” 33.

## Conclusion

The Index failed to meet its ultimate aims of publication. It did not generate a complete pictorial record of American folk, vernacular, and decorative arts, nor did it transform the future American industrial design of everyday objects. It also failed to enter the United States' collective historical memory. Nevertheless, it still had a profound impact on American culture. In the 1930s, the Index saved thousands of American artists from the greatest economic crisis in American history. The Index also demonstrates the potential, beauty, and hope that a series of paper sized watercolors can inspire in a population. Perhaps the notion of a permanent public art program in a faction-filled, bureaucratic government such as the United States is fantasy. However, I believe the arts do not have to be such a divisive topic: they have a unique power to unite people and demonstrate the ties that run throughout our common cultures, while simultaneously highlighting the beauty in our differences. A program like the Index of American Design calls for cultural unity out of a great many; there are problems and tensions within a goal such as this, of course, but that does not mean it is without its benefits.

Although there is no official or exhaustive *Index of American Design*, the individual renderings created still make up the largest and most diverse record of American folk, vernacular, and popular arts.<sup>217</sup> Proving the point of Cahill, Rourke, and Glassgold, many of the original items preserved by Index renderings have either been lost or destroyed. Their Index pictorial representations are the only link we have to them in the present day.<sup>218</sup> The importance of American folk art is understood and respected in the United States, even if the mission of the Index of American Design has been long forgotten.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Tuttle, "Picturing a 'Usable Past,'" 34.

“Indifference to artists’ accomplishments will not improve their art, nor will it stop that art from existing. A recognition that our artists’ work, though often crude, represents a struggle towards a national cultural expression will be in itself a substantial contribution toward greater creative achievement,” FAP administrator Richard C. Morrison wrote.<sup>220</sup> His anti-Greenbergian worldview of art, culture, and society presents a different way to think about the legacy of the New Deal. Publicly funded art in the United States can be viewed as a failed experiment that lost out to greater socio-political forces in the postwar period. Or, the New Deal and Federal One can be seen instead as policies that helped ease insecurities about America’s status in the international cultural world. It also sparked a new age and interest in American art and culture.<sup>221</sup> The Index can be seen as a culmination of all of these goals: it proliferated the notion that the United States’ inner spirit could be located, or constructed, through material culture.<sup>222</sup>

The arts programs of the New Deal did not only benefit the artists and administrators, but also deeply impacted the American public. The programs of Federal One had the ability to reach all over the country, bringing the arts to whole new swaths of the population.<sup>223</sup> The Index had an added layer to spreading arts around the United States. Not only did it “decentralize our cultural centers” and “do much more to raise the cultural level of this country,” as Harry Gottlieb, artist, observed of the FAP on his segment of “Through the Art World,” but the Index also legitimized the pre-New Deal art and culture of the United States outside of its major

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<sup>220</sup> “Federal Art in New England,” Records of the Works Project Administration, Series: State Project Reports and Research Publications, 1935-1943, 1937, Box 603, N 6512 A5M6, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>221</sup> Doss, “American Folk Art’s ‘Distinctive Character’: The Index of American Design and New Deal Notions of National Culture,” in *Drawing on America’s Past*, 63.

<sup>222</sup> Doss, “American Folk Art’s ‘Distinctive Character’: The Index of American Design and New Deal Notions of National Culture,” in *Drawing on America’s Past*, 65.

<sup>223</sup> Musher, *Democratic Art*, 3.

metropolitan centers.<sup>224</sup> The Index provided a space in which chests, glassware, and textiles that had been collected and stored in the homes of average Americans were considered just as important as the artifacts preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>225</sup>

“Art should be as easily understood by the people at large as it is by those self appointed high-brows who to gain personal prestige and commercial profit now enshrine it as something very precious and esoteric,” American artist George Ault remarked on a segment of “Through the Art World.”<sup>226</sup> Most of the art of the New Deal, in its heroic depictions of the common man and everyday experience, speaks to Ault’s point. But it also simultaneously presents a bit of problem—the American experience is not the same for everyone. Farmers cannot connect to a mural hailing American industry; industrial workers cannot connect to a mural hailing American agriculture. Textiles, toys, and other small elements from daily life – those are things that everyone, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, hometown, or socio-economic class can recognize, relate to, and understand.

The Index had a unique power, separate from other programs of Federal One, in its form of shared cultural nostalgia. A foreword from an exhibition catalogue of Index materials concluded, “Rather they record and give remembrance to a time and place. Those of us who were brought up in similar surroundings will probably feel nostalgia of one kind or another as we repeat to ourselves, ‘I remember that.’”<sup>227</sup> The Index’s emphasis on both the quotidian and the

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<sup>224</sup> “Contemporary American Painting” by Harry Gottlieb and Leah Plotkin, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922-1944. Series: Records of the Federal Theatre Projects, Radio Scripts of the New York City Federal Theatre Project, 1936-1939, December 16, 1936, Box 33, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>225</sup> Correspondence of Benjamin Knotts and Dr. Carl Watson, ATTN Mildred M. Thrasher, December 14, 1940, Administrative and Operational Correspondence Relating to Ohio, National Archives.

<sup>226</sup> “Subject Matter in Art” by George Ault and Leah Plotkin, Records of the Works Progress Administration, 1922-1944. Series: Records of the Federal Theatre Projects, Radio Scripts of the New York City Federal Theatre Project, 1936-1939, November 25, 1936, Box 33, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>227</sup> “I Remember That: And Exhibition of Interiors of a Generation Ago,” Records of the Works Project Administration, Series: State Project Reports and Research Publications, 1935-1943, Box 603, N 6512.A5N4 no.(2), National Archives, Washington, D.C.

local allowed for easily found emotional connections; the toasters, weathervanes, furniture, and other aspects of material culture were relics of childhood homes, schoolhouses, and family memories. The Index was an attempt to catalogue American life and identity through material culture rather than depictions of people and daily life. This is very different than the modes of artistic expression typically used to represent a messy democratic culture, which qualify people as “American” based on how they look or act. Those depictions can unfortunately easily lend themselves to exclusion, hate, and anger. I think the Index gives hope that there are ways of answering questions such as “Who are we?” and “What represents us?” in alternative, inclusive ways.

“We know that many painters works are historical documents of the era in which they were produced,” Gottlieb stated on “Through the Art World.” “We know also that in order to discover the meaning of dead civilizations, we dig up the art which was produced at the time.”<sup>228</sup> Regardless of the hardship of the Great Depression, the United States was not an extinct civilization in the 1930s, but there was still a sense that its culture was lost. The Index provided an outlet to ‘dig up the art’ and culture of the past to ‘discover the meaning’ of what it meant to have a material culture that looked distinctly American. Constance Rourke wrote, “As a result, if this work is carried to full completion, the questions ‘What is American design?’ or ‘Have we an American design?’ may answer themselves, possibly with some surprises, certainly with a wealth of fresh materials. In any event, these many-sided and many-colored evidences will represent basic traditions in design which, as a people, in the past, we have chosen as our own.”<sup>229</sup> The administrators of the Index never believed that it would provide an answer to something as

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<sup>228</sup> “Contemporary American Painting” by Harry Gottlieb and Leah Plotkin, Radio Scripts of the New York City Federal Theatre Project, National Archives.

<sup>229</sup> Constance Rourke, “What is American Design?” in *Art For the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* ed. by Francis V. O’Connor (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 166.

complex as 'American design'. But they understood that in a moment such as the Great Depression, there was value in attempting to create a definition, no matter how blurry or incomplete it might be.



## Images



Image 1



**Image 2**



**Image 3**





Image 4



Image 5

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