

2015

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### Recommended Citation

Cummins, Victoria H. (2015) "Prejudice and Pride: Women Artists and The Public Works of Art Project in East Texas, 1933-1934," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol53/iss2/7>

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## **Prejudice and Pride: Women Artists and The Public Works of Art Project in East Texas, 1933-1934**

BY VICTORIA H. CUMMINS

When the first New Deal program for artists' relief came to Texas in late 1933, women artists' experiences with it varied greatly. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), which lasted only a few months from late 1933 until the summer of 1934, constituted one of the least known relief projects of the New Deal. Nevertheless, it enjoyed the historical distinction of being the first time in the nation's history that the Federal government paid stipends from public funds directly to artists in order to underwrite the creation of art, in this case works destined for government buildings and other public places throughout the United States. The Roosevelt Administration implemented the PWAP to give work to unemployed artists as part of a larger relief effort designed to provide employment for laborers on public construction projects. In Texas, this art program was also ground-breaking because it involved an unusually large number of women artists.

This proved noteworthy because, up to the early 1930s, the world of professional art had been mostly a man's domain and cherished notions about "woman's proper place" hindered their acceptance as equals by their male counterparts. The inclusion of women artists in the Public Works of Art Project can be clearly seen in the case of East Texas, especially in the cities of Houston and Dallas. The administrators of the PWAP in Texas (all men) openly debated among themselves the role that women should play in the program. Differences in the existing attitudes of male program administrators in Dallas and Houston towards professional women in the visual arts impacted rates of participation and levels of compensation. Because women artists

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were better established as professionals in Houston than in Dallas, they gained more benefits under this locally administered program. Because of the opportunity the PWAP offered its participating artists, Texas women artists, older as a group than their male counterparts, were able to further their professional careers, thus advancing the role of women professionals in the visual arts.

By the winter of 1933-34, Texas was firmly in the grip of the Great Depression. At first Texans had not been hit too hard by the stock market crash. The East Texas oil field had brought a measure of prosperity to the area. Rural Texans felt the farm economy could weather the downturn, and had little sympathy for the growing ranks of the unemployed in the cities. In 1930-31, private charities had addressed the needs of the growing numbers of the urban unemployed, but the rapid expansion of unemployment had overwhelmed these sources of aid by late 1931. City governments created work programs like beautification projects to put more people to work and augment the relief programs of the private charities. At this point, many Texans were opposed to government relief programs because they objected to tax money being used to help individuals with economic problems, especially if it would help minorities. The economy contracted, state revenues fell, and economic desperation soared in 1932 and 1933, and the Texas legislature wouldn't pass a relief bill.<sup>1</sup>

The depression was a particularly hard time for creative artists, "as the economic crisis deepened after the stock market crash of 1929, collectors stopped collecting, galleries went out of business and museums across the country found their sources of money dwindling."<sup>2</sup> In 1932, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts lost seventy-five percent of its subsidy from the city due to budget cuts. In San Antonio, the Witte Museum had to slash employee salaries, cut its days and hours of operation, and begin charging admission on certain days in order to survive.<sup>3</sup> Established artists found commissions and sales diminishing, but the situation was dire for those just starting out. "Cut off from contact with an interested public and unable to sell their work, unestablished painters and sculptors faced the alternatives of starving or turning to other occupations."<sup>4</sup> Work relief programs forced artists away from their vocation and into manual labor in order to survive.

Times were hard for Texas artists too. The Dallas Artists League met weekly at the Alice Street Coffee Club in the home of May and Cyril Wyche. Each Tuesday meeting started with "cheap meals for depression stricken artists"<sup>5</sup> for which the artists donated what they



could afford. Dinner was followed by a program and discussion. Often the conversation turned to how hard it was to earn a living as an artist. Some artists had to barter their work for needed services. Starting in June 1932, the Dallas Artists League sponsored a several day long art carnival to give the artists a venue in which to sell their work directly to the general public. Prices were low; prints and sketches sold for as little as \$.50 and seldom for more than \$5. The seventy-six exhibitors at the first Alice Street Art Carnival took in just over \$500.00 in three days. This was considered successful enough that the carnival became an annual event until World War II.<sup>6</sup>

The first relief program in Texas targeted especially to help visual artists was sponsored by the Federal government. The Public Works of Art Project was a program designed to meet the needs of artists such as those that met on Alice Street in Dallas. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March of 1933, national level recovery measures began. In 1933, the Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) which operated through two separate agencies, the National Recovery Administration (NRA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA). The PWA, headed by Harold Ickes, was an agency that built major Public Works projects in order to create jobs and create infrastructure. Ickes was very cautious in issuing contracts; he moved slowly and carefully. However, times were desperate and voices in the Roosevelt administration, (especially that of Harry Hopkins, a former social worker), were calling for an immediate relief program. FDR agreed and in late 1933 authorized the creation of the Civil Works Administration (CWA) to be funded with part of the allocation for the PWA. The CWA would put people to work rather than supply direct relief. Some participants would come from relief programs in the states, others benefiting would be those who could not meet the states' qualifications for direct aid. The CWA would give the unemployed an income, and the dignity of working for it. The program was shut down by FDR in June of 1934 due to charges of excess and maladministration, and because FDR was worried that American workers would become dependent on these work programs. However, in its short life, the CWA employed some 239, 264 Texans,<sup>7</sup> over ninety of them artists hired through the PWAP.<sup>8</sup>

Out of CWA funds, the United States government introduced a pilot program targeting the needs of artists, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). This relief program was the brainchild of lawyer George Biddle, a prep school friend of President Roosevelt. Biddle was

also a painter and had visited Mexico, where he had met mural painter Diego Rivera. Biddle was impressed by the results of the government supported Mexican mural renaissance of the 1920's and 30's. He also believed that artists as a group had been neglected in terms of relief programs and deserved special attention. Biddle proposed copying the Mexican government's program of paying "plumbers' wages" to artists to create public art for public buildings.<sup>9</sup> He proposed to President Roosevelt a relief program for artists similar to those being offered for other workers in the winter of 1933-34 under the Civil Works Administration (CWA). The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), authorized in December 1933, was the first attempt of the New Deal to do this.<sup>10</sup> This program, funded at a little over \$1,000,000, was administered by the Treasury Department under the direction of Edward Bruce, technical director Forbes Watson, and assistant technical director Edward B. Rowan. Bruce and Rowan were both avocational painters. Like Biddle they had been impressed by the Mexican muralist movement of the 1920's and 1930's, Forbes Watson was a well-known art critic.

In original conception, the PWAP was an economic relief program. It was designed to pay weekly wages for up to two months of work. The PWAP paid unemployed artists weekly wages which were equivalent to those the Civil Works Administration paid to skilled laborers. Each section head was allotted funds for quotas of artists divided into three categories: Class A artists were to be paid \$42.50/wk., Class B would be paid \$26.50/wk., and Class C, the equivalent of laborers' helpers, \$15.00/wk.<sup>11</sup> The regional directors were told to "classify in groups according to experience and financial needs."<sup>12</sup> Maximum numbers of artists in each category were assigned to each region.<sup>13</sup> The artists hired by the PWAP then created art work for the decoration of buildings of institutions supported by federal, state or local taxes.

To create an administrative structure quickly, PWAP administrators divided the country into sixteen geographical sections and invited regional arts administrators to serve without pay as the heads of the sections. Each head then assembled a committee of volunteers (also unpaid) to help him/her identify artists and dole out the money. There were no funds for office space, but limited funds were granted for secretarial help.<sup>14</sup>

To apply for the weekly wages, individual artists had to present proof of artistic production and of need to the regional committee. Once an artist was granted support by the regional director, oversight



was fairly loose; artists were allowed great freedom in choosing the style, subject and medium, and they were encouraged to participate in arranging where the work(s) of art would be installed.<sup>15</sup> All art work produced under the PWAP would be the property of the US government, which legally had the final say on placement. However, in practice the regional committees were allowed to place the art, as long as it went to institutions that were at least partially supported by state, local, or federal taxes and the permission of the head of the institution had been secured –whether post office, library, courthouse or school.<sup>16</sup> Artists could create easel paintings, prints, drawings or sculptures, but the PWAP particularly encouraged artists to paint murals for public spaces. Inspired by the nationalism of the Mexican muralists, artists were encouraged (although not required) to use local society and culture, even possibly local history, as themes. Regional directors were told that, “the American Scene should be regarded as a general field for subject matter for paintings.”<sup>17</sup> They were advised to solicit local input regarding the choice of subjects.

While many female artists were in need of this aid, nationally three-quarters of those employed under this program were men.<sup>18</sup> This disparity reflected prevailing ideas about women and work and about women artists as professionals.

The Depression was a difficult time for almost all Americans, but women who worked for a living, whether single, married, or widowed, could face particular problems due to commonly held assumptions about woman's proper place being at home. Men were the breadwinners and women were supported by them. By 1933-34, in the face of double-digit unemployment, many Americans questioned the presence of any women in the workforce. The prejudice was that women were taking jobs that men needed to support their families, even though numerous studies, done then as well as now, indicate that in economic hard times downwardly mobile male workers do not move into jobs identified as “women's work.”<sup>19</sup> It was also assumed that women did not need to work, since men took care of their economic support. Married women especially, whatever their personal accomplishments, were assumed to be supplied with income by their husbands' labors and not in need of work. Not only men, but also many non-working women held these same ideas about acceptable roles for women.

This prejudice effected women artists, who were additionally disadvantaged by assumptions that, while they might be talented amateurs, they were not dedicated professionals like the men. Of course,

amateurs would not need or deserve government aid. Since woman's proper place was in the home, not the workplace, involvement in the arts was acceptable only if it did not challenge this notion of the proper female sphere. Women could participate in arts advocacy and even in arts management at the volunteer level, but while an avocational interest in art was considered acceptable and ladylike, the desire to be a professional and compete with men was not. Housewives banding together to "civilize" Texas communities by promoting the visual arts was acceptable as it was good for business and the community, but professional women artists were perceived as taking on male roles. Women artists were sometimes called "strong" or "virile" which could be a compliment, but more likely was meant to convey that they were mannish or unladylike.<sup>20</sup>

These notions shaped public perceptions of women artists so strongly that even as committed a professional as Emma Richardson Cherry, Houston's first professional artist, would carefully couch her career in terms acceptable to the general public. This pragmatic and independent professional artist presented herself in the mid-1930's as being a successful woman because she did not allow her painting to interfere with her proper roles of wife and mother. She admitted that there were conflicts between these roles, but these were resolved by subordinating the role of artist. A newspaper reporter observed, "She says without complaint that she never in her life felt that she was just on the verge of doing something really big in her work but that some one in the family became sick or just "something came up."<sup>21</sup>

Regarding her studies in France and the various study trips to Europe without her husband the same article explained, "She has made many trips abroad. She says it is because her family was so good to her. There was always a sister or brother, or a niece or nephew, also her daughter around to look after her family and her husband was always ready to give the extras for the trips."<sup>22</sup> The article goes on to declare her "an inspiration for young artists" because "beginning in a day when women were considered to have no life outside of her home interests, Mrs. Cherry kept her art and home both going and intertwined them..."<sup>23</sup>

Cora Bryan McRae, writing of Mrs. Cherry in the *Houston Chronicle* a few years later (1941) held her up as an example: "Mrs. Cherry is the rare example of a woman's career being successfully moulded (sic) with the happiness and care of her family."<sup>24</sup>

Despite the PWAP's origins in CWA funding, Edward Bruce,



Forbes Watson, and E.B. Rowan wanted to stress artistic production over relief for their own reasons. Unlike other relief programs, there was no means test to establish need. Edward Bruce only asked that the money not be spent on "...people of affluence," but on "...competent artists...who are out of work."<sup>25</sup> Bruce conceptualized it more like economic stimulus than relief "...what we want is to put money into the hands of men who will spend it and who genuinely need the employment."<sup>26</sup> The program for artists was not to compete with relief agencies work, "...so that sentiment or need should not be the prime factor in selection of artists."<sup>27</sup> Most artists had seen their incomes diminish in the early 30's and some were in dire financial straits. Yet many that participated had some work, perhaps enough to feed themselves and their families. The need for work in a time of no demand seems to have motivated some artists to participate in the PWAP as much as a dire need for money.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of both its administration and participants, the PWAP was mostly a male affair. The federal workforce reflected the gender divisions and discrimination found in the general workforce. In fact, the federal government in the depression would not employ married couples, causing many women due to their holding lower paid jobs than their husbands to quit the workforce. Thus, most federal employees, and virtually all above the rank of stenographers and secretaries, were men; only with the appointment of Frances Perkins as Labor Secretary in 1933 did women reach cabinet-level appointments for the first time. The personnel at Treasury in charge of the PWAP, Edward Bruce, Forbes Watson and E.B. Rowan, were all men.<sup>29</sup> Among the sixteen regional directors only one was female, Mrs. Juliana Force (the Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art) who administered Region II comprising the New York Metropolitan area.

The PWAP money was allocated quickly. The first Texas projects were proposed in Dallas in mid-December 1933 and approved in early January of 1934.<sup>30</sup> By March the money was running out and by May the PWAP was shutting down. Committee members recommended known artists for A-level pay positions and beginning artists were recommended by their teachers as B-level artists or C-level helpers. Because the PWAP was a short-lived program, administered by volunteers in haste before funds could run out in Washington, the fastest way to identify worthy artists was to use the existing networks of Texas artists. In particular, those artists in the networks of friendship



and patronage of Dallas Museum of Fine Arts Director Dr. John Ankeney and Museum of Fine Arts Houston Director James Chillman, Jr. benefitted from the PWAP. Between them, Ankeney and Chillman were responsible for securing employment for just over half the Texas artists put on the federal payroll.<sup>31</sup>

Ankeney and Chillman's approach to hiring reflected the gender differences in the Dallas and Houston arts communities. Art historian Susie Kalil has described the difference between the acceptance of women in Dallas and Houston in her article "Pioneer Artists 1836-1936." Regarding Dallas, she wrote:

From the outset, Dallas was a male-dominated art colony. This is not to suggest that women in Dallas were denigrated or excluded from the art scene, but neither was there an effort to liberate them. For many years women were caught between the shifting roles of Sunday painters, educators and society mothers. The families who sent their little girls to art clubs were the same ones who later regarded their female "bohemian" artists as a social stigma.<sup>32</sup>

By way of contrast, MS. Kalil observed that:

Unlike Dallas, art in Houston was a woman's concern. As the men transformed Houston into a commercial city, culture was invariably provided by the women – the schoolteachers and local "ladies" who had attended the finer Eastern institutions. Organizations were largely spearheaded by a few strong-willed women who set their sights on pushing forward an art movement... energetic Houston women formed collectives dedicated to raising aesthetic consciousness and hell-bent on reinforcing creative activity.<sup>33</sup>

Kalil's characterization of the Houston arts community in the early twentieth century echoed James Chillman Jr.'s own assessment. Writing in 1971, he remembered that,

during the first two decades of the twentieth

century the development of music and the visual arts was initiated, encouraged and promoted by women. Of course, there were men who understood the significance of the arts in a healthy society and lent moral and some practical support to what we have come to call the cultural aspects of life, but art in Houston was a woman's concern.<sup>34</sup>

For example Mrs. E. Richardson Cherry, Houston's first professional artist, in 1900 was one of the founders of the Houston Public School Art League which later led to the foundation of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The earliest art teachers in Houston were E. Richardson Cherry, Penelope Lingan, Stella Hope Shurtleff and women teaching art in the public schools. Stella Hope Shurtleff was the first person to teach art appreciation and art history at the Museum of Fine Arts of Houston.<sup>35</sup>

PWAP Region XII, comprising Texas and Oklahoma, was headed by Dr. John S. Ankeney, the director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Art. His official advisory committee of nine museum directors, academics, architects and arts administrators was all male, although at least one woman was consulted regarding Texas artists.<sup>36</sup> His most influential committee member was James Chillman, Jr., head of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. Ankeney put Chillman in charge of Houston, Beaumont and east Texas, while he directly administered Dallas and north central Texas.

Dr. Ankeney's official correspondence reflected some of the gender prejudices current in the U. S. At one point he wrote to his advisory committee members, "In some parts of our region a few contracts were let to people who really were not eligible. We must watch in the future and absolutely eliminate those who have other resources of livelihood, such as a husband or wife employed who is earning a living wage."<sup>37</sup> A woman was much more likely to have an employed spouse than a man. In his correspondence Ankeney also seemed ambivalent about whether women should be treated as professional artists equal to the men. However, James Chillman, Jr. MFA Houston Director and Ankeney's expert on east Texas artists thought differently.

John Ankeney had a tendency to refer to all of his artists as men, e.g. "I believe the experiences the men are getting will mean that in some years from now we will get some very fine work if the people will



just respond and employ our best artists to put their work in banks and other buildings where art work is very much needed”<sup>38</sup>

Ankeney was particularly committed to producing murals. He wrote PWAP Technical Director Forbes Watson, “I feel we must not lose this chance to give our artists the experience of doing serious work in public buildings and also of showing our public what can be done.”<sup>39</sup> Projects that Ankeney controlled, whether carried out by men or women, were almost all murals. In fact, Region XII, comprising Texas and Oklahoma was the only region in which the majority of the artists employed produced mural works. Most murals were not frescos, but were painted on wood or canvas panels and later affixed to walls. Lack of money to pay for materials, lack of experience with fresco technique, and limited funds to pay laborers dictated this. For the same reason, not all completed sculptures were cast into statues. Only if local money was available to pay for the casting could the clay sculpture be turned into a finished work.

Because of his emphasis on mural work, which Ankeney felt required “strong” (i.e. masculine) artists, he seemed to think that his best and most deserving artists were men and sought them over women: “...we want to get good work from artists who are in need of work.

Fortunate for me in my section of the state practically all of our best men have suffered terrible cuts in their income and really need the work.”<sup>40</sup> He chided James Chillman for hiring so many women in East Texas: “Of the artists who seemed eligible when I was in Houston, the majority seem to be women. If you would care to consider having any of the strong men [from Dallas] who would take an appointment in one of your schools, City Hall, etc. with some of your local people to help him please advise me.”<sup>41</sup> Later in the project, frustrated by the slow pace of the women doing murals for the Houston Public Library, he told Chillman, “I feel very much interested in the work of the young men who are starting projects, as they should do something quite strong and good. I regret that the women have undertaken such large things, as it does not seem that they have enough power to carry it through.”<sup>42</sup>

James Chillman, Jr. disagreed with Ankeney on these points, reflecting his knowledge that women had been largely responsible for the promotion of the visual arts in Houston up to the 1930’s.<sup>43</sup> He not only selected both single and married women to receive PWAP

support, but also defended the quality of their artistic output. When Ankeney suggested that women were not strong enough to complete mural projects, Chillman wrote back, "I don't know that I agree with your inferences that women would not be able to carry out strong and successful murals..."<sup>44</sup> He went on to explain that the delays were due to one artist's illness, and lack of money to pay for materials and installation. He also cited the work of Grace Spaulding John, a Houston artist with enough commissions not to qualify for PWAP work, as an example of a strong woman artist who painted murals.<sup>45</sup> In Chillman's final report on the artists working on projects in Houston and southeast Texas, in aggregate he rated the women as high or higher than the men.<sup>46</sup>

Because of Chillman's advocacy, overall the PWAP provided good opportunities for women in Texas. Region XII reported one of the highest percentages of women employed in any region, about thirty-six percent, while the national ratio was only one-fourth to one-fifth of the total. Women were much better represented in relation to their population than either Native Americans with only five artists or African American with none at all.<sup>47</sup>

Whatever John Ankeney wrote about women having problems completing murals, Region XII sponsored mural projects for a number of women in East and north central Texas, among them Virgie Claxton and Stella Shurtleff for Houston Schools, Adele Brunet and Laura Buchanan at the old Parkland Hospital, Ruby Stone and Maud West at the Highland Park Town Hall, Maurine Cantey for the Fair Park Auditorium, Emma Richardson Cherry, Ruth Pershing Uhler, and Angela MacDonnell for the Houston Public Library, Bertha Louise Hellman for the Houston post office, Katherine Green for a Beaumont High School, and Hellen Spellman for the Library at The College of Industrial Arts, now TWU.<sup>48</sup>

Established women artists from other parts of the state like printmakers Mary Bonner of San Antonio, Elizabeth Keefer Boatright of Austin, and Blanche McVeigh of Fort Worth; sculptor Evaline Sellors and painters Margaret Littlejohn and Sallie Mummert of Fort Worth; and Leola Freeman of El Paso also were hired. Other well-known artists like painter Grace Spaulding John of Houston and sculptor Allie Tennant of Dallas were excluded only because they lacked financial need and did not apply to the program.

A comparison of age groups among female and male PWAP



artists for whom birthdates are available (91% of women and 85% of the men) shows an interesting pattern. The women employed under the PWAP were considerably older than the men. Nearly half (47%) of the women were mid 40's or older, having been born before 1890. At 75, Emma Richardson Cherry was the oldest artist employed by the PWAP in Texas. Only about one third (31%) of the women were born in the twentieth century and thus were under age 34. There were equal numbers of women aged 45-54, 35-44 and 25-34.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to this, only one fifth (20%) of the men with known birthdates were born before 1890 and more than half of them (53%) were born in the twentieth century and under age 34. Forty percent were young men aged 25-34, born in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

What could explain this difference? Two things come to mind: household responsibilities and professional status. The large number of women artists over 40 speaks to a reality of female existence. Women with dependent children had little time to devote to a vocation or avocation in art. There were many fewer women in their 20's and 30's (child bearing age) and less than half were married.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned earlier, it was still more socially acceptable in the 1930's for women artists, especially if married, to present themselves as talented amateurs whatever their training. In Dallas, public exhibits in the early 1930's, the majority of artists showing work were women, but the ranks of professional artists and the arts establishment were dominated by males. The PWAP offered no employment to amateurs.

The number of women employed in relation to men and the equity of pay differed around the state. In Dallas, where John Ankeney took charge himself, less than thirty percent of the artists employed were women, below the average of thirty-eight percent for Region XII. By way of contrast in East Texas, where James Chillman, Jr. made the recommendations, just over half the artists employed were women.<sup>52</sup> In Dallas, two-thirds of the women artists, without regard to age or status in the arts community were paid as B-level artists, but forty percent of the men were on the A list. In Houston, most women were treated like the men. About half were paid at the A level and the rest were paid B- or C- level wages.<sup>53</sup>

The demographic profile of the artists chosen by Ankeney and Chillman are also different. North Texas and Dallas reflect the general pattern throughout the state. 34% of the men were born before 1900,

and 43% were born in the first decade of the twentieth century. In contrast, 80% of the women were born before 1900 and were thus older than 34. 60% were over age 44. In Houston, the distribution of ages is far more equitable than either in north Texas or statewide. 55% of the women and 50% of the men were born before 1900. Half of both the women and men hired by Chillman were under age 34.

A sampling of women artists working in the Houston area and North Texas illustrates their diversity in age and experience as well as the range of artworks they created. At 75, Emma Richardson (Mrs. Dillin) Cherry had worked as an artist, art teacher, and arts activist for over half a century when she went to work for the federal government in 1934. She had joined the Art Students League in New York in 1883 and had studied with William Merritt Chase. She arranged the meeting that organized the Houston Public School Art League and was an early leader in the campaign to found an art museum in Houston. She made numerous trips to Europe to study and sketch,<sup>54</sup> had mastered modern trends in painting including abstraction, and was attracted to cubism, but mostly painted floral still lifes and landscapes because that was what people wanted to buy and she needed to sell her work.<sup>55</sup> Mrs. Cherry let her own instincts govern her artistic choices. When she received her contract for PWAP murals for the lobby of the Houston Public Library, she heard the project leadership's directives and ignored them. She declined to paint the contemporary "American Scene" in favor of historical subjects, did not adopt the social realist style favored in Washington, and even failed to consistently depict Texas. She produced four large oil on canvas murals for the second floor lobby of the Houston Public Library (now the Ideson Branch) painting the homes of Robert E. Lee in Arlington Virginia and Jefferson Davis in Biloxi, Mississippi as well as Sam Houston's home and the first Capitol building in Texas. She surrounded each with a border of flora appropriate to the location of the home. In addition to Mrs. E. Richardson Cherry, the other older women had had long careers as professionals, not amateurs. Martha Simkins, called Mattie by family and friends, was 65 years old when she participated in the PWAP. She had had a 30 year long career as a portrait and still life painter, splitting her time between New York and Dallas (University Park). She returned to Texas for good in 1934, just in time to participate in the PWAP. The most likely reason for her return may have been a financial move, since she appears to have been in reduced financial circumstances. However,



it might have been to care for her elderly mother at the family home on McFarland Blvd., or at age 68 and single, to retire in the town where she grew up.

Although she wished to be an artist as a girl, Simkins attended the University of Texas in the 1880's and took a degree in English to prepare for a career in teaching. By 1892, however, she traveled to New York City to begin training as a student at the Art Students League. She also studied in Europe and opened a studio in New York.<sup>56</sup> In Dallas she cultivated women's organizations and groups to attract commissions. She painted many children and civically prominent men based on these connections, but her strong association with women's voluntary groups may have marginalized her as a "painting woman." The advent of the regionalist movement in Dallas from the late 1920's to the early 1940's also marginalized her in the arts scene. She wasn't interested in the American Scene and her style owed more to William Merritt Chase than social realism. Still, she combined the artistic credentials with financial need required for a PWAP contract. Since she specialized in portraits she was commissioned to paint a portrait of Edwin J. Kiest, owner of the Dallas Times Herald, Director of the First National Bank, leader of the Dallas Art Association, and patron of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>57</sup>

Angela MacDonnell was also a well-established artist, although relatively new to Houston. Originally from Galveston, MacDonnell studied art in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago. She worked in the New Orleans area from the beginning of the first decade of the century to the late 1920's.<sup>58</sup> In the mid-1930's she had a studio in Houston teaching private students and working in a range of media from plaster reliefs and prints to oils and watercolors.<sup>59</sup> Her three lunettes (half-moon shaped murals to fit into arched hallway recesses) "Toledo," "Avila," and "La Rabida," addressed the contribution of the Hispanic heritage to Texas. MacDonnell had spent a year researching and sketching in Spain in the early 1930's. That influenced her to create these historical lunettes. She had a decorator's eye for detail. As James Chillman, Jr. observed at the time, she chose her color scheme to blend with the wall color of the hallway!<sup>60</sup>

Women aided by the PWAP included mid-career artists in their 30's and 40's struggling as teaching jobs and commissions dwindled, trying to maintain careers begun in the 1910's and 1920's. Ruth Pershing Uhler was an established artist nearly 40 years of age when

she received permission to paint a mural for the Houston Public Library. Born in Pennsylvania, her family moved to Texas when she was a child and she grew up in Houston. She returned to Pennsylvania for advanced education, taking a bachelor's degree at the Philadelphia School of Design in 1921.<sup>61</sup> She taught in Pennsylvania for several years and returned home to Houston in 1926 to set up a studio. Uhler later recalled being invited by James Chillman, Jr., along with "Mrs. Cherry and Miss MacDonald (sic)," to do murals for the Houston Public Library.<sup>62</sup> For her library mural she chose to depict the efforts of the community to start a library in the 1860's. She researched her mural carefully. She read the minutes of the Lyceum Committee which raised money and sought book donations to start the library. She borrowed daguerreotypes from old Houston families in order to depict furniture and costume accurately. Because the Lyceum committee excluded women, and she wanted to recognize the contributions of women to founding the library, Uhler painted committee members visiting a family in search of subscriptions. The central panel of "The First Subscription Committee 1864" was begun in January 1934 in her Houston studio. She special ordered a large piece of canvas sailcloth for the 11' x 18' panel and worked out a recipe for an adhesive to adhere it to the staircase wall.<sup>63</sup> She planned two smaller panels about 2 ½' x 10' each for the sides and at least one was painted, but these were never installed.<sup>64</sup>

Ruby Stone was about 36 when she painted her two historical murals "Pioneer Life in Texas," and "The Perils of the Trail" for the Highland Park Town Hall.<sup>65</sup> A native of Louisiana, she arrived in Dallas with her first husband in the mid-1920's and began taking classes at the newly established Dallas Art Institute. She showed an early ability in portraiture and by 1930 was invited to teach at the Dallas Art Institute. Soon she won one of the Art Institute's first scholarships to study in Europe. She returned to teaching in Dallas and later studied in New York.<sup>66</sup> She had a studio at the Stoneleigh Court Hotel in the 1930's, where she painted her 4' x 6' murals on wood panels.<sup>67</sup> Her mural "The Perils of the Trail" was honored by having a photo of it hung in the *National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project* at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington D.C. in the spring of 1934.

A very few younger women in their 20's and early 30's who were trying to start their careers in a tough art market were hired. Maurine Cantey, 33, was from Fort Worth but making a name for herself in



Dallas in the 1930's. Her painting "Pagan Holiday" had won a purchase prize at the 1933 Allied Arts Show in Dallas.<sup>68</sup> She worked with architect William Anderson on the largest single item produced for the PWAP, the 2 ½ ton 65' x 37' front drop curtain at Fair Park Auditorium. She replaced an earlier painted decoration with the mural "Modern Texas," providentially done in silver and blue.<sup>69</sup> John Ankeney singled out Maurine Cantey's project for praise noting that "the great curtain (26 by 60 feet) is being repainted from an atrocious piece of crude naturalism to a really fine symbolic decoration."<sup>70</sup>

Bertha Hellman, 34, was an unmarried professional. She had lived in Houston for a number of years, had studied at Rice, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and with cubist painter Andre l'Hote in Paris.<sup>71</sup> The 6' x 10' allegorical mural she painted on canvas in her Houston studio and then installed at the Post Office had as its central figures Peace and man.<sup>72</sup> In her early 20's Helen Spellman, from Forney, was a recent graduate of the Texas State College for Women/ College of Industrial Arts (now TWU) in Denton. Her older sister, Coreen, was a young faculty member at the college. For the college library Helen painted scenes of campus life: "the May fete, the Christmas assembly and choral singing, the Christmas dinner, and commencement exercises," surrounded by lettered borders.<sup>73</sup> A notable aspect of the work was the fact that "Yards and yards of strips of invisible tape served as the immediate background of the paintings; the strips were crossed causing the appearance of different color tones on the hundreds of squares noticeable in the paintings."<sup>74</sup> Sadly, not even an image of this murals still exists.

The Public Works of Art Project extended economic relief to female Texas artists. It put almost 40 under- and unemployed women artists to work producing murals, paintings and other art objects which utilized and showcased their talents in a way beneficial to themselves and the public. Libraries, courthouses, hospitals, and schools all over Texas received murals, easel paintings, and a few sculptures created by PWAP artists. In many cases the income from a month or two of work with the PWAP sustained them in their chosen careers despite the hard times of the early 1930's.

There were also psychological benefits for the women artists. For example Bertha Louise Hellman, 34, was recommended by James Chillman, Jr. both because "she needed the work badly" and because he liked her sketches for a proposed series of murals for the Houston

Post Office.<sup>75</sup> Hellman had sketched a series of murals on the theme of world peace for the lobby, but there was only enough money to pay her to create one of them for the post office.<sup>76</sup> Yet she was not frustrated but found the experience exhilarating. She wrote to John Ankeney, about "...the thrill I get in being a part of this really historical event for the advancement of art in America....I wish to express my gratitude to you for helping me to have this opportunity."<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Angela MacDonnell wrote to the editor of the *Public Works of Art Project Bulletin*, "Have fully enjoyed my work with the P.W.A. (sic) and feel that it is the greatest opportunity that artists have had, and certainly not one, that in the wildest moments of imagination hoped to experience."<sup>78</sup>

However, not all the women were completely happy with the program. Some quietly accepted whatever classification was awarded them; others did not. When Angela MacDonnell was asked to accept B-level pay for a month in order to finish her lunettes for the Houston Public Library she was so indignant that John Ankeney decided to pay her for 3 weeks at A level instead of 4 at B level "to salve her pride."<sup>79</sup> When Virgie Claxton of Houston was recommended to work at the B rate by Chillman, she objected on the grounds that her financial need and professional status were equal to male artists she knew to be paid in the A category. She did add, however, that she would do the work at whatever rate she was paid.<sup>80</sup>

The most extreme complaint about treatment was lodged against Dr. John Ankeney. Maud West, a widow of about 50 originally from Cleburne, arrived in Dallas in 1933 after decades of work as an art educator in the public schools of Houston and New Mexico.<sup>81</sup> When assigned in January 1934 to paint a mural, "Indian Dance" for the Highland Park Town Hall<sup>82</sup> as a B level artist she sent an irate telegram to President and Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt at the White House charging Dr. John S. Ankeney with "discrimination" and "professional jealousy." She complained that "amateurs" had been put to work at the \$42.50 a week class A wage and were assigned helpers, while she was classified a B artist at \$26.50 and refused the helper she requested. Claiming extreme financial need due to illness and the foreclosure on her home, she asked FDR to secure an A classification for her and make Ankeney give her the differential in back pay.<sup>83</sup> When she did not receive a prompt reply (the White House having referred the complaint to the wrong government office) she sent a second telegram a few weeks later.<sup>84</sup>



The matter was mistakenly referred to FERA, so it took some time for it to pass to the head of the CWA (which funded the PWAP), who contacted Edward Bruce the Head of the PWAP Advisory Committee. Ankeney had written Bruce characterizing West as a crank and malcontent as well as being a mediocre artist at best.<sup>85</sup> Bruce's response took Ankeney's side. The PWAP directors agreed and she was written off as a difficult person.<sup>86</sup> Undeterred, West then wrote Eleanor Roosevelt an even more detailed complaint: "His rating me class B was an insult to my standing as an artist and was an effort to embarrass (sic) me and hurt my standing as an artist before the Dallas public - where I have to paint for a living."<sup>87</sup> She also charged that Ankeney gave her only one month with no helper to paint her panel (either true or dry fresco) while "able-bodied men" got two months' pay and a helper (presumably she was referring to the massive City Hall mural project undertaken by two young men with helpers).<sup>88</sup> Nothing further seems to have come of this, either because it had already been referred and answered, or because the PWAP was about to end in April 1934.

The PWAP was also a success in terms of the aesthetic goal of producing quality art for the masses. In the project's national newsletter women artists were praised for their mural work: "...they are turning out distinguished work, a number of them undertaking murals. In many cases they are setting a high standard for most of the men. American women in the past four years have had a chance to show their caliber and they have not been found wanting."<sup>89</sup>

Although in Texas PWAP artists did produce some pedestrian artworks, on the whole both the administrators in Washington and the committee members in Texas found the level of accomplishment to be very high. James Chillman, Jr., in his final report rated Cherry, Uhler and Green's mural work as of excellent quality.<sup>90</sup> Even Angela MacDonnell's lunettes, which Chillman considered to be of average quality, he explained away as being designed with a color palette to match the already painted walls of the hallway. He also wrote that "the work of Bertha Louise Hellman looks very well in the Post Office."<sup>91</sup> Emma Richardson Cherry, Ruth Pershing Uhler and Bertha Hellman, inspired by the excitement generated by even this modest level of government patronage, chose to spend additional time off the payroll to complete more ambitious and higher quality works than they were required to do to get their paychecks.<sup>92</sup>

Much of the PWAP art in Dallas and Houston has been lost

or destroyed, including Hellman, Green, Cantey, Stone, West and Spellman's murals, but the Houston Public Library murals still exist. The opportunities that the PWAP provided to undertake public art projects gave a tremendous boost to women artists in Texas. Most were able to establish or continue careers in art. Ruby Stone continued as a professional portrait artist in Houston and New York.<sup>93</sup> Helen Spellman married and moved to east Texas. She became an art teacher in the Beaumont public schools. Maurine Cantey moved to Port Arthur in 1935 when her husband got a job with the PWA and established herself there as a portrait and landscape painter. She continued to show her paintings in Texas with success throughout the 1940's. Moving back to Dallas, she was giving individual art instruction to children and teenagers in the early 1950's.<sup>94</sup> Emma Richardson Cherry and Martha Simkins continued to teach private students and paint well into the 1950's. At age 95 Simkins was still able to spend time in New York attending classes at the Art Students League.<sup>95</sup> Angela MacDonnell remained an active artist at least into the 1940's.<sup>96</sup> Ruth Pershing Uhler gave up painting in the early 1940's to become the full-time Curator of Education for the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. She taught classes in and ran the museum school, gave talks, organized tours and gallery talks for groups of all ages, ran an evening program and, in short, became a fixture around the museum for the next 25 years. Grateful Houstonians created a scholarship fund named in her honor.<sup>97</sup> These represent careers in art, launched or sustained by federal help in the depths of the Great Depression.

Sadly, the recognition women artists enjoyed during the PWAP did not last. The PWAP existed for only six months between December 1933 and June 1934, but it led to further federal support for the arts; it was succeeded by broader, better funded programs designed to bring relief to artists and create high quality art for government buildings. The most important of these programs for Texas was the Section of Painting and Sculpture of the Treasury Department. In October 1934, 1% of the funding for new federal buildings was set aside for decoration. Commissions were awarded nationwide through anonymous competitions.<sup>98</sup> These federally funded programs proved a great stimulus to mural painting in the southwestern United States. Almost 100 murals and reliefs were produced for Texas post offices and federal buildings under this program between 1934 and 1943. However, few women artists succeeded in securing commissions for



Texas.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, in his analysis of women artists' participation in the 1936 Texas Centennial Exhibition, Dr. Jack Davis found that prejudices against women as non-serious amateurs persisted. Although sixty percent of the artists displayed were women, Men were more prominently highlighted in press releases and the catalog. The best locations in the exhibition were also dominated by the art of male artists.<sup>100</sup>

### Endnotes

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35 Lucy Runnels Wright, "A Woman Extraordinary," *The Texas Outlook* 4, no.5 (May 1937): 28-29; Marie Lee Phelps, "City-Wide, City-Wise. Mrs. Cherry's too Busy Getting Pictures Painted to Notice the Years Rolling By," *Houston Post* April 12, 1953 Vertical file H-Artists H-F HMRC; "Pioneer Artists 1836-1936," 125 -126;"Houston," 14.

36 The Committee comprised Dr. John S. Ankeney (Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, director); James Chillman, Jr., (Museum of fine Arts Houston); Atlee B. Ayres (architect, San Antonio); Professor Goldwin Goldsmith (chairman University of Texas Architecture Department), Rev. Harris Masterson, Jr. (President, Texas Fine Arts Association); David Williams (architect, Dallas); Professor Florian Kleinschmidt (Texas Tech Architecture Department); George Dahl (architect Dallas); Arthur Kramer (President,

Dallas Art Association); Prof Oscar Jacobson (Head, School of Fine Arts, University of Oklahoma). Public Works of Art Project, *Report of the Assistant Secretary of the treasury to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration December 8, 1933 – June 30, 1934* (Washington: USGPO, 1934).

37 Memo to the Region XII Advisory Committee, March 1, 1934, NARA, RG 121, AAA roll DC-13.

38 John Ankeney to Edward Bruce, February 2, 1934, Ibid.

39 John Ankeney to Forbes Watson, December 20, 1933, Ibid.

40 Memo to the Region XII Advisory committee, March 1, 1934.

41 John Ankeney to James Chillman, Jr., March 1, 1934, NARA, RG 121, AAA DC-13.

42 John Ankeney to James Chillman, Jr., March 24, 1934, Ibid.

43 "Houston," 11.

44 James Chillman, Jr. to John S. Ankeney, March 28, 1934, with attached clipping, NARA RG 121, AAA roll DC-13.

45 Ibid.

46 Attachment to letter, James Chillman, Jr., to John Ankeney, May 31, 1934 Ibid.

47 Over the life of the program, total numbers of artists working, and male/female breakdowns differed. This is the highest percentage I found in any specific report. In others the percentage was in the low 20%'s. "Reported working March 28, 1934" National Archives, record Group 121. Records of the Public Buildings Service. Selected Records of the Public Works of Art Project. AAA roll DC 1 frame 0893; "Material on Women Artists for Sigrid Arne – AP Release" 12/12/34, NARA RG 121 AAA DC-1 0139..

48 Information from a List of Texas PWAP artists able compiled by the author from various sources.

49 Statistics from a List of Texas PWAP artists able compiled by the author from various sources.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.



52 Ankeney was responsible for placing 34 artists in Dallas, northeast and north central Texas. Ten were women. Chillman, in charge of Houston, Beaumont and environs, enrolled 9 women and 8 men. Together, they were responsible for enlisting 51 of the 95 Texas artists on the PWAP's rolls. Statistics are from a List of Texas PWAP artists compiled by the author from a number of sources.

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