

BRIEF RENAISSANCE: A DEPRESSION MEMORY

By Alan Lawson

A recent opinion survey on memory reveals that a large percentage of the general public cares little about remembering what went before them. Only 1% describe themselves as past-oriented, compared to 33% choosing to be future-oriented, 9% rooted firmly in the present, and the largest number, 57%, precariously balanced in some sort of demimonde between present and future.¹ This turn away from memory has been tacitly endorsed by the trend in science of casting doubt on the reliability of memory. Rather than holding to the classic notion that memory is an indelible imprint stored intact in the brain's recesses, psychologists and neurologists now argue that memories are crucially shaped by the outlook of the person remembering and changed subsequently through experience. Memory, then, is mainly what present recollection thinks about the past, not a replica of what actually happened. Some historians have drawn a skeptical lesson from the new science. As one of them put it, "Memory and modern historiography stand...in radically different relations to the past. The latter...recreates an ever more detailed past whose shapes and textures memory does not recognize." To which an ally has added triumphantly that we are witnessing the "eradication of memory by history."²

Dismay over the discounting of either personal or social memory has helped fuel recent campaigns by nation states to memorialize their history and character. Anxious about fading allegiance to the traditions that give them legitimacy and the globalization trends that threaten their authority, the French, British, and Brazilian governments independently in 1980 devoted a year to formal celebrations of their patrimonial heritages. Shortly afterward, Germany and Austria joined the lists of commemoration, in their cases not so much to preserve as to recapture the stature they had lost during the Nazi years. In Israel and among Jews elsewhere memory has fastened on just the years the former Nazi states would surmount, lest the forgotten Holocaust might be repeated

elsewhere.³

In America there has been a special tension between the urge to remember the nation's founding as a brilliant achievement that conferred stability and national power and the equally traditional goal of individual Americans to gain freedom from the constraints of that revered institutional achievement. Over the course of America's national existence that tension has primarily manifested itself within three conflicted aspects of cultural life: 1) the place of art in the civic sphere 2) the importance of national memory 3) the relation of diverse sub-groups to the ideal of national unity.

John Bodner, the leading historian of ethnic acculturation in America, sees the situation in terms of group, rather than individual, resistance to central authority. In his view there have been two types of cultural memory in America. One is what he calls "official memory," orchestrated by those in leadership positions; the other, with his populist blessing, is what Bodner calls "vernacular memory", that of persons outside the circles of power and, often, the mainstream trying to hold on to the cultural memory of their groups when that memory differs from or opposes the officially sanctioned version.⁴

Bodner and the other leading chronicler of American memory, Michael Kammen, fear that homogenization promoted by official creeds, increasingly dominated by popular and commercially driven culture, has eclipsed the idiosyncrasies of vernacular culture and individual distinctiveness. And, since the aspirations of commercial popular culture are to seize profitable opportunities in the present and future, that homogenization has had much to do with the loss of public interest in past memory.

It is in the face of the amnesiac blank wall arising that historians must bear their burden of trying to recover the past. Kammen, Bodner, and other custodians of memory spur the task on with a warning that forgetting threatens a loss of authenticity, variety, creativity, and self-protective perspective on conventional myth. In turn, that loss leaves both individuals and sub-groups vulnerable to the entrenched power of the homogenizers.⁵

To counter the fading of memory historians are blessed with a rapidly increasing storehouse of data - both in terms of archives of written records and, as technology improves, firsthand recollections recorded in sound and sight. Experiments with electronic measures of brainwaves even suggest that memories might be directly accessed by strategically placed brain electrodes. Thus, historians are well positioned to counteract public indifference to memory. But to what effect? Who will note their efforts outside specialized circles; and what will come of recovered memory? Is there realistic hope of averting the dire consequences stemming from historical amnesia?

Critics who lament the American inclination toward amnesia can take little solace in the American approach to memory. From the outset Americans dismissed the feudal oppressiveness of their European past and looked for a new day. Henry Adams in his essay on "America in 1800" imagines a typical encounter between an English visitor and an American frontiersman. The visitor recoils before the squalor of the rude clearing and bristles at his host's pretension. "Look at my wealth!," the ragged squatter cries. "Look at this continent of mine, fairest of created worlds....See how she glows with youth, health, and love!" To which Adams' Englishman retorts, "Nothing of the sort! I see nothing but tremendous wastes...swamps and forests choked with their own rotten ruins! nor hope of better for a thousand years! Your story is a fraud, and you are a liar and swindler!"⁶

The most famous foreign observer of nineteenth century America, Alexis de Tocqueville had a more sanguine view of the American situation than Adams' imaginary traveler, but was far more temperate in his expectations than the American pioneer. Tocqueville found Americans materialistic and conformist, devoid of artistically creative tendency. Yet they had a mighty future. "The day will come," Tocqueville predicted in 1835, "when one hundred and fifty millions of men will be living in North America, equal in condition, all belonging to one family, owing their origin to the same cause, and preserving the same civilization, the same language, the same religion, the same habits,

the same manners, and imbued with the same opinions, propagated under the same forms."⁷

The eminent English visitor, James Bryce, who distilled his impressions in two stout volumes of *The American Commonwealth* (1891), echoed earlier visitors on America's lack of an impressive past and the artistic inspiration that would have gone with it. He extolled America's clean and pleasant ways, but, like Tocqueville, lamented its uniformity. The vast spaces of middle America depressed Bryce: "everywhere the same nearly flat country...the same fields and crops, the same rough wooden fences, the same thickets of the same bushes...; the same solitary farmhouses and straggling wood-built villages." American cities and towns offered nothing better: "they are all alike, both great and small....In all the same shops, arranged on the same plan, the same Chinese laundries, with Li Kow visible through the window, the same ice-cream stores, the same large hotels with seedy men hovering about in the dreary entrance-hall...." Pained because he liked his American acquaintances and wished he could be more complimentary, Bryce concluded that "It is the absence in nearly all the American cities of anything that speaks of the past that makes their external aspect so unsuggestive. In pacing their busy streets and admiring their handsome city halls and churches, one's heart sinks at the feeling that nothing historically interesting ever has happened here, perhaps ever will happen."⁸

But over the course of time there occurred at least one instructive, perhaps even repeatable, moment when the persistent tensions and disregard for the past were eased. The record depth of the Depression of the 1930s, combined with the unique character of the New Deal reform effort brought on a new urgency to reexamine the past in order to find causes for the national calamity and prompt memories of cultural values that would bolster restorative wisdom and virtue. Hostility toward the rich and powerful who presided over the debacle, set against the grim backdrop of destitution in every part of the country, swung popular sympathy toward Depression victims who had formerly been

neglected and despised. To express a new Common Man ethic, the New Deal touted its aim of providing "Art for the Millions" of a sort that would demonstrate and promote a common heritage, rooted in cooperation among social groups, each of whose distinctive ethnic, racial, and regional cultures should be preserved and shared.⁹

The New Deal orchestration of this unprecedented fusion of official and vernacular culture had to overcome two contrary objections that had long impeded government involvement in art and other cultural programs. On the one hand, believers in self-reliance argued that genius is individual and would be sullied by governmental interference. From the opposite pole, those less confident about American genius chronically resisted government patronage to adorn and instruct public life on the grounds that no artists worthy to depict the glories of American democracy had as yet arisen. The New Deal finessed these zero sum objections by insisting that its arts policy did not seek to regiment artists or commit the government to any particular artistic vision. Rather, the administration favored a commonplace governmental effort to provide relief to those in need, including artists who would be given the opportunity to use their talents, rather than simply idle on the dole or waste their skill on pick and shovel make work. The art that resulted would be a bonus, a gift to public institutions and local communities that would help a spiritually, as well as materially, disheartened people reclaim their morale.¹⁰

The focus of spiritual concern was mainly on three questions about the meaning of the Depression: Was it the bad end of mistaken American premises -- to which radicals answered "yes" and called for revolution. Or was the Crash the result of a lapse from faith into the orgy of experimentation and self-indulgence that reached its peak during the Twenties? That view appealed more to moralists and critics on the right. Still others, less inclined to find fault, took the third view that the decline indicated an era had come to its natural end.

As for the artists who might alleviate pain and inspire recovery, they had little cause to lament the passing of the New Era. Most had long felt alienated from a commercial

society in which they had little stake. A substantial group of artists and writers who subscribed to the view that the Crash had brought a discreditable system to earth signed a statement in support of the Communist Party candidates in the 1932 election. The less political sort could agree with the discerning photographer of Depression life, Walker Evans, that the "awful society damn well deserved [the Crash]." Evans recalled how "I used to jump for joy when I read of some of those stock brokers jumping out of windows! They were really dancing in the streets in the Village the day the banks all closed...."¹¹

For those with less bitterness than Evans toward the philistine mainstream of the Twenties - "women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay" - the mood was more one of liberation than vengefulness. Literary and social critic Matthew Josephson remembered how "this dismal year 1932 became for many of us a time of hope.... Here I would like to cross my heart and deny that the mood of the intelligentsia of the 1930's was in any way... melancholy or grim...." Josephson's fellow critic, Malcolm Cowley, extended the upbeat argument by contending that "The 1930's were a vigorous age for criticism, an experimental age for the drama, a really brilliant age for the realistic novel." It was, Cowley concluded, an "age of faith" which encouraged artists and writers to believe that they could express a vision that would draw the general public up into "the golden mountains" where "a revolutionary brotherhood" would usher in a new society of social justice and beauty.¹²

That faith, following in the wake of discredited conventional wisdom, inclined radical impulses toward the forgotten past. For a time Josephson, Cowley and many others sought guidance from the fashionable Marxism of the day. "The secure world of their childhood had fallen apart," Cowley recalled. "They were looking for a scheme of values, a direction, a skeleton key that would unlock almost any sort of political or literary situation...."¹³ But, as Cowley wryly acknowledged, he only *thought* of himself as a Marxist. Later he and other veterans of the left discovered that they were really Emersonians -- seekers in the American grain after transcendent spiritual values, rather

than believers in some determinist formula for revolution.¹⁴

Adrift and often confused in the search for foundational values, artists and critics during the Thirties reflected the judgment novelist Sherwood Anderson reached after a long journey across the land that the nation was "Puzzled America."¹⁵ It needed to find out how it had fallen so low and what the true nature and fate of its people were. The study of little known localities and regions thus enjoyed a vogue, as a new wave of explorers - social scientists, journalists, novelists, and critics - fanned out over the countryside to find clues to the American character and condition that had disastrously eluded the nation's leaders and interpreters in the Twenties. This sense of a need to integrate a broad, forgotten range of reality encouraged a doctrine of cultural relativism, highlighted by the anthropologist Ruth Benedict's argument that persons were so thoroughly conditioned by their various, distinctive, societies that few, if any, traits of "human nature" were universal or inborn. Their identities were created by the experiences and myths enshrined in their cultural matrix. Alongside that anthropological view the movement called "cultural pluralism" proclaimed American character to be a composite of many ethnic and racial types that need not defer to a WASP ideal. The pluralist view gained great strength from events: in the midst of hardship and witness to brutal aggression abroad, it helped define the ethic that held the New Deal coalition together and governed idealist resistance to narrow standards of racial, ideological, and national purity. Since all persons are shaped by their culture, the cultural relativists argued, it followed that every person in a society is integrally a part of that society's culture; none are rightfully outcasts, subject to discrimination and caste distinction.¹⁶

The search for inclusive, democratic roots and values spurred on the mission urged since early in the century to find a "usable past." Originally intended by cultural critics like Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne to trigger an "awakening" of the arts and intellect for a revolutionary overthrow of the guardians of genteel culture, the idea of a "usable past" came to have a more conservative thrust in the "Puzzled America" of the

Thirties.¹⁷ Critics who were troubled about what the Depression fall from grace indicated about the American character and purpose looked to the "usable past" for indication of how to recover old truths. History and biography came back in vogue, and figures from the American past, like Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had been written off during the skeptical Twenties as shills for materialism and Puritan moralism, were rehabilitated as national heroes. To place such heroes in full perspective a flood of works explaining critical periods and issues of history gave Americans their best means ever to judge where they stood in relation to the past and other cultures -- to find, as John Dos Passos put it in an historical study that marked his change from cynic to celebrant of American values, *The Ground We Stand On* (1941).¹⁸

The first influential proposal to link the new interest in cultural roots to the New Deal came from a wealthy Philadelphia artist and Groton schoolmate of Franklin Roosevelt, George Biddle. In May, 1933, Biddle wrote to tell the new President about the artistic achievements of Diego Rivera and his fellow Mexican muralists, Clement Oroszco, and David Siqueiros. Their heroic celebration of the triumph of the common man in Mexico's bloody revolution captured the imagination of the Mexican public and indicated how American artists, eager to follow similar inspiration, could express the ideals of social reformation the New Deal wished to advance. Roosevelt responded favorably and at the fervent urging of Eleanor Roosevelt and relief director Harry Hopkins, who had pressed Roosevelt during his governorship to aid desperate artists, agreed to sponsor relief for artists.¹⁹

A logical starting point for federal patronage was the Treasury Department, which had long been in charge of decorations on public buildings. But the National Commission of Fine Arts, presidential advisers since 1910, cast a cold eye on any new proposals. The Commission was vintage fogey, dedicated to the Beaux Arts classical style which they could advocate with a show of plausibility as appropriate for Pierre L'Enfant's Greco-Roman master plan for the capital. Fortunately, the Treasury staff

included a trade expert, Edward Bruce, who also happened to be a painter and defender of the arts. A man of adventurous bent typical of New Deal cultural program leaders, Bruce, after graduating from Columbia Law School, went to the Philippines and bought the *Manilla Times*. An interval plying the China trade followed before Bruce, at age 44, went to Italy for six years of art study. In 1932, looking for a way to support himself, Bruce arrived in Washington as representative of the West Coast Chambers of Commerce and then joined the Treasury as an expert of international monetary matters. Blessed with that uncommon blend of artistic and bureaucratic experience, Bruce seemed the perfect choice to organize a federal arts program.

But, although Bruce had an exotic background, he was no rebel. His artistic ideal steered a middle course between the classical "ladies in cheesecloth" and abstractionist "tripe," as he described the avant garde innovations of the Twenties. He also intended to halt the "Mexican invasion on the border." Unmoved by revolutionary art, Bruce wanted to inspire recovery and national pride through art that would give "the same feeling I get when I smell a sound, fresh ear of corn" -- a feeling well attuned to the premium the New Deal placed on the confidence and good cheer of the Common Man rooted securely in an honored past.²⁰

Under Bruce's paternalistic direction commissions were awarded through competitions judged by established experts. Only one quite benign abstract mural was selected for an Ohio post office. Otherwise art works of slightly larger than life neo-realist character were favored. An aura of excitement attended the mural program nonetheless. Several among the chosen artists expressed kinship with the great Renaissance muralists who also worked in association to express civic values; never before had there been patronage in America sufficient to carry out work of such large scale in public spaces. A sense of historic, even prophetic, mission was also generated by the directive that the murals depict some aspect of the culture of the locale in which they were done. One artist concluded that he had been sent to a certain small town in upstate

New York in order to deliver an "article of faith" - a belief in concrete visual terms that such towns embody an essential fusion of unique historical experience with the national values it was the task of the New Deal to discern and promote. For symbolizing that combination of the particular and the general the mural section's neo-realist style was perfectly suited. The effort to link day-to-day life with myth and historical destiny lent the program some cultural significance, while it conspicuously promoted its sponsor's ideal of a cooperative commonwealth that would fuse local mores with national purpose.²¹

A quite different, more free-ranging, approach to artists was followed by the later and larger arts project sponsored by the Works Progress Administration relief program (WPA). Like all other unemployed persons helped by the WPA, artists were put to work in their own specialties. The issue, at least for official consumption, was relief, not patronage of the arts. The artistic results were beside the point for bureaucratic management; and expenditures were not to be decided upon by competitive judging of artists' entries. With fourteen times as much money to spend as the Treasury program and a bias, however inadvertent, toward free expression, the WPA's Federal Arts Project (FAP) shaped the dominant pattern for federal support by giving its relief recipients the right to create as they chose.

FAP's head was Holger Cahill, who had an exceptionally diverse background even for a New Dealer. Cahill had fled his somber Minnesota farm family when he was twelve and pan-handled across Canada until, four years later, he shipped out of Vancouver as a coal shoveler. In Shanghai he jumped ship, wandered awhile, and then worked passage back to America. Night school to repair his lack of education led to a try at writing for small newspapers. But that job quickly lost its appeal; and he moved restlessly eastward as deck hand on a Lake Michigan iron ore carrier and insurance salesman in Cleveland before hopping a freight for New York City just after World War I. Content, at last, to be in Greenwich Village bohemia, Cahill listened attentively to

critiques of philistine business and corrupt politics at the New School for Social Research and joined the quest for a "usable past" in order to champion the cause of modern art and a special brand of socialism that would advance underlying American values.

Cahill's talents and fervent concern for a distinctive American aesthetic gained him a job at the Newark Museum where, from 1922 to 1929, he assembled a notable collection of contemporary American art and developed an appreciation of folk art. Successful exhibits led to his appointment in 1929 as director of exhibitions at the new Museum of Modern Art in New York. There he made a reputation with displays of American folk art -- artistry which corresponded perfectly with the general interest in becoming more aware of the American character in all its variety.

The selection of Cahill to head FAP was a natural for Hopkins, whose New York contacts extolled Cahill's New Deal sensibilities and his relevant experience. Cahill was also content with the WPA concept of placing relief needs first; and he had an appropriate concept of the role art should play in the community, taken from the argument philosopher John Dewey had made in the most important aesthetic text of the period, *Art as Experience* (1934), that art should move out of sheltered "ideal" realms, representing aristocratic taste, and draw beauty from the common life. Art, Dewey insisted, was the conveyer of society's most important news. It followed, Cahill believed, that the artists themselves should be representatives of the common life -- workers and farmers, "girls in boarding schools, old maids, lonely bachelors", people from the neglected, and therefore exotic, outlands and back rooms of society. Buoyed by that spirit, Cahill launched FAP with the explicit aim of using community-based programs to bring "art to the millions." and, in turn, draw out of the submerged masses the talents and stories hidden there.²²

As Cahill was gathering his forces, three companion programs took shape: the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Music Project. Each of them struck a distinctive balance between creativity and community service by

carrying their art into schools, parks, community centers, and mental hospitals, where WPA artists pioneered the use of music and the visual arts for therapy. All these ventures, sometimes reaching remote areas in caravans like the theater companies and circuses of centuries before, converged on a mission to discern and celebrate folk roots and shared values.

The Federal Writers Project (FWP) posed even greater problems of organization than did FAP, largely because writers, in the manner of gods or beasts, as one of them put it, tend to be loners. To find something inspiring for them to do Hopkins chose another adventurous character named Henry Alsberg. As a young man who could not fit his career as a lawyer in with his anarchist and literary sensibilities, Alsberg traveled to Russia in 1919 to witness the new revolutionary state. Disillusioned by the repressiveness of the Bolshevik "utopia", Alsberg returned to New York to become a journalist, sometime play producer, and would-be novelist. Mostly, though, he devoted himself to causes aimed at the sort of social justice the New Deal came to stand for. From various forays into the midst of labor strife and assaults on free expression Alsberg emerged, in the words of one who knew him well, as one of those rare persons "with a public sense, a feeling for broad human movements and how people are caught up in them."²³

Because the directors of the Writers Project never did manage to agree on who was really a writer, it proved hard to settle on suitable recipients and projects beyond make-work, such as classifying documents and revising manuals for government agencies. On the side, several project literary magazines gave relief recipients a chance to express themselves and so helped young writers, including some destined for fame like Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Eudora Welty, and Richard Wright, find their places as creative artists.

Fortunately, as the lack of clear direction began to seem chronic, Alsberg took to the suggestion of a project worker that a guide to the United States be the central thrust of

the program. The idea suited the prevailing enthusiasm for regional rediscovery; it also met a practical need since no comprehensive guide to the United States had been published since the British Baedeker Guide of 1893. The guidebook project proved to be a vital spearhead for the New Deal, intent on understanding what needed to be done by exploring and analyzing local economies, institutions, and cultures. Alsberg was an able and imaginative editor, and his administrative shortcomings may also have contributed to the fascinatingly diverse way the guides were prepared. Throughout the decade guidebooks won critical acclaim and took their place as a standard source. The reviewer who declared that the guides would outlast most books of the era has been borne out; and Van Wyck Brooks spoke for many seekers after the “usable past” when he wrote to Alsberg that he should be awarded a PhD by every college in the country.

The emphasis on regional discovery led beyond guidebooks to more thoroughgoing analysis of customs and values. With Alsberg's blessing, two accomplished anthropologists with active sympathies for the forgotten and downtrodden, John A. Lomax and Benjamin Botkin, established a section on folklore. In agreement with Alsberg about the value of supporting more artistic freedom than work on the state guides generally provided, they looked on folklore as a means for combining regional information with artistic sensibility. On that sensitive edge of the guidebook series appeared the *Life in America* series of 150 volumes. With titles like *Hands That Built New Hampshire* and *The Albanian Struggle in the Old World and the New*, the series sought to follow dramatic themes that would honor the rise of the Common Man. The most famous product of the folklore section, however, was Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (1945), a compilation of interviews taken with ex-slaves whose wide and contradictory memories ignited interest in the complexities of the slave experience which vast research since then has still not made wholly clear.

The Theatre Project sought nothing less than to revolutionize the American theatre; and project director Hallie Flanagan had the ardor to carry the intent through to the limit.

²⁴ The basic plains populism she had absorbed growing up in Iowa suited the realist acting style she had recently learned from the famous director of the Moscow Art Theatre, Constantin Stanislavsky. The compatibility of her outlook and skills with the New Deal focus on the "common man" scintillated in her Vassar production, *Can You Hear Their Voices?* (1931), a dramatization in a documentary form Flanagan invented of a farmers' uprising in drought stricken Arkansas, based on an account by a young radical journalist named Whittaker Chambers. Moreover, since all the elements of that novel form could be assembled cheaply, without need for highly expert talent, documentary drama was a likely vehicle for a theatre project that placed relief of the unemployed ahead of professional stage production.

Flanagan developed the theatre project with two major goals in mind: the creation of regional theatres and the development of theatrical means to project basic, even earthy, themes and so make the theatre a contributor to social progress through honoring common experience. Flanagan called for "relevance" in the charged language of the times:

In an age of terrific implications as to wealth and poverty, as to the function of government, as to peace and war, as to the relation of an artist to all these forces, the theatre must grow up. The theatre must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, or the changing social order will ignore, and rightly, the implications of the theatre.²⁵

The idea was to draw upon the regionalist emphasis of all the arts projects to set up a federation of theaters that could use federal support to produce plays reflecting local issues and distinctiveness and at the same time convey concerns the nation had in common. The federated system would also develop local talent and so have a similarly balanced local and national significance. Blessed with some remarkable members, including the 21-year-old acting and directorial genius, Orson Welles, the FTP got off to an exhilarating start. Plays in a variety of languages and presentations of local history in places far from Broadway expressed the governing ideal of folk-rooted diversity. The

Federal Theatre group also played an important part in black theater life by granting a reprieve to Harlem's Lafayette theater after its closing during the early Depression left the area without a stage. The company that subsequently came into existence grew to a total of about 140 black actors, writers, and stagehands and, with its "Swing Mikado" and "Macbeth", staged by Orson Welles in a Voodoo setting, became one of the most talked about theatrical experiments of the era.

The remaining arts program for musicians was the least committed to overt promotion of social reform. The language of music is relatively universal and formal. Moreover, the director of the Music Project, Nicholas Solokoff, was a professional with stiff standards developed as conductor of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. Yet, the music Project also got caught up in the quest for a usable past and the desire to involve the masses. Sheer need pressed in those directions from the outset. In 1933 the American Federation of Musicians estimated that about 70% of formerly employed musicians were out of work, a flood of relief applicants that made it impossible for Solokoff to audition carefully for quality. His consolations were that music was inherently a democratic art -- everyone could take part, at least to hum or whistle -- and that the Depression offered a valuable opportunity to spread music to the provinces and to encourage American composers and performers where previously most attention had been paid to Europeans.²⁶

The Project moved on a wide front to remove the barriers against American music. It commissioned new works, including the 1937 competition winners by William Schumann and Elliott Carter, later recognized as two of the most important American composers. Performances also featured many other American composers from every era.

The music program reached out to folk inspiration, as well. Under the direction of musicologist Charles Seeger, the section on folk art worked to connect formal American composition with folk customs through a broad study of regional musical cultures. By joining forces with FAP on the Joint Committee on Folk Arts, music project

researchers endorsed the proposition that folk art was an organic whole, rather than an aggregate of creative specialties. Out of the pooling of resources folk researchers were able to record in a wide array of locales, the most famous being the prison camps John Lomax and his son Alan visited throughout the south.

The reformist, inclusive effort to recover folk roots proved especially beneficial to African American music. Acute need, as well as interest in finding roots, provided especially strong reasons for helping black artists. After the heyday of the Twenties, when the world-wide discovery of African art and American jazz excited great interest in black art and life, the Crash came as a devastating reversal. Struggling black artists, even those in the relatively prosperous "Harlem Renaissance," were the least able of all groups to absorb economic shocks. Without the massive collecting carried out by the Joint Committee on Folk Arts the treasury of black folk music, jazz, and spirituals would have drifted further to the periphery, most of it to disappear utterly. Instead, black folk artistry became forever linked with New Deal cultural aims, its historic and artistic meaning interpreted and its content classified by New Deal preservationists.

The gains of black artists exemplified the outreach of the WPA projects. That even the most disadvantaged element in society should benefit indicated a sea change against the traditional view that art was the privilege of those who attained leisure. Impressed by the fall of the Old Order and by the vast domain of the New Deal coalition, artists generally agreed with the strategy of diffusing support throughout all the nation's regions in an attempt to develop new talent and a general awareness of the importance of art in defining a people and raising spirits.

What came of the arts projects in the end? Nothing less than the most massive creative outpouring ever recorded. During the first four and a half months of Bruce's Treasury art program, for example, 3,749 artists on the payroll turned out over 15,000 works of art and craft. Some 1900 competitions attracted 40,000 sketches, all on American themes. Holger Cahill's larger WPA program declared as part of its final

report that its workers had produced 2,566 murals, 17,444 pieces of sculpture, 108,099 works in oil, watercolor, tempera, and pastel, and 240,000 copies of 11,285 original designs in various media. For the highly praised Index of American Design over 22,000 plates were produced, a result that Constance Rourke, the leading scholar of folk culture, proclaimed as providing, at last, the basis for a great national art. To display these works of art to the nation, the arts program established more than 100 art centers across the country, many of them in places where art had never been exhibited. Attendance figures showed that by 1939 the New Deal had kept its promise to bring "art to the millions.

Out of the quantity came a strong measure of quality: WPA muralists won a high proportion of national competitions; FAP artists appeared on every list of Guggenheim awards between 1935 and 1943; and in 1937 no fewer than ten FAP print makers were included on the British Fine Prints of the Year list. All this is to say nothing of the indirect benefits to artistic production; for the WPA in 160 locations taught over 2,000,000 students in all phases of art. The aim of finding the sources of artistic inspiration in the common life led to the discovery and exhibition by FAP of folk artists like "Grandma" Moses, who were to have considerable influence, and to the compilation of the Index of American Design, which demonstrated in rich profusion that the imaginativeness behind America's practical and decorative crafts created a distinctive American style ranging from folk realism to abstract inwardness. In the end, nearly every artist born between 1900 and 1915 and destined to gain a high reputation found rescue on the Project - including painters who evolved socially conscious symbolism into the abstract expressionism which made New York the art capital of the world after World War II - household names like Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell.²⁷

The music project was also stunningly productive. In his final report Sokoloff included the remarkable item that his musicians had performed pieces by 3258 American composers, almost 300 of whom had worked on the Project. This was not done in isolation. By the end of the decade the FMP noted that the quarter of a million

performances under its auspices had drawn 160 million listeners. Still, in the long run the greatest stimulus to creativity may have come through the music teaching program, which ultimately employed 6000 teachers and gave instruction to over 17,000,000 students. The cause of folk music was similarly well served, and by 1945, the project had contributed some 8000 discs from every remote corner of the country to the Archive of American Folk Song in the Library of Congress.²⁸

While the art and music projects lent themselves best to quantifiable measure, the writers project inspired the most striking impressionistic evaluation by a fellow writer who had experienced and written stories and reportage about the anguish of the small town working poor in the Depression. Robert Cantwell in a report to the *New Republic* in 1939 expressed utter astonishment at what the writers project guides to states and regions had discovered.

Nothing quite like it has ever appeared in our literature. It is a country of odd contraptions and strange careers, where all the big houses have secret rooms....Nothing in our academic histories prepares you for it, and very little in our imaginative writing; none of the common generalizations about America and the American temperament seem to fit it, least of all those attributing to Americans qualities of thrift, sobriety, calculation, or commercial acumen. On the contrary, it is doubtful if there has ever been assembled anywhere such a portrait, so laboriously and carefully documented, of such a fanciful, impulsive, childlike, absent-minded, capricious and ingenious people....

Cantwell exclaimed over two novel achievements by the guide series:

How has it happened that nobody ever thought before to trace the careers of the vast majority who guessed wrong - the leading bankers who put their money in canals in 1840 and in Maine shipyards in 1856, who plunged on slaves in 1859, and bet that Florence, in Baboon Gulch, Idaho, would be the leading city of the state?

And how remarkable, he added, that

American history has never before been written in terms of communities - it has been written in terms of its leading actors, and of its

dominant economic movements, but never in terms of the ups and downs of the towns from which the actors emerged and in which the economic movements had their play.

When the state and regional guides are finished and indexed, Cantwell proclaimed, "there can be no question of the Project's value. It will revolutionize the writing of American history and enormously influence the direction and character of our imaginative literature."²⁹

But the guides never were finished. World War intruded on the New Deal, and, so the arts projects, berated for wasting money in a time of military need and disseminating a dangerously radical mix of ideas and images, were closed out in 1943. Hastily, the government stored or disposed of its huge collection of art works and manuscripts. Not knowing what to do with all its paintings, project directors stripped finished canvases from their frames and sold them to junk dealers, no doubt losing works by artists destined to become famous. Aside from the murals in public places that had not been painted over, a quarter of a century would pass before some of these buried works came to light - among them thousands of oral interviews of plain people moldering in the basement of the National Archives, more than a thousand more interviews of participants in the arts programs tucked into a warehouse in Virginia, and hundreds of unknown plays by equally unknown black authors dumped into a Quonset hut.³⁰ Neglect signaled a crucial turn from the spirit of the arts projects. Postwar modernism disdained the realist emphasis of the thirties, conveniently attributing the rise of abstract expressionism to the influence of émigré surrealists rather than acknowledging the development of abstractness on the arts project. The Cold War also chilled memories of the arts projects and the leftist associations, including the Artists Union, of many of its recipients.³¹

By mid-century, in the fog of that forgetfulness, Tocqueville's prediction that America would reach a population of 150 million was realized; and, a new wave of his

admirers were keen to point out, so had his expectation that the many millions would exist in a condition of sameness. America had established itself as a republic of consensus. Effusions such as Cantwell's about a culture of vast and disorderly diversity were no longer to be heard. The illusion had ended.³²

Or was it to be remembered the other way around?

Footnotes

1. Cited in David Gross, *Lost Time. On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 152.
2. Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. (New York: Schocken, 1989), 94; Pierre Nora, "Between History and Memory", *Representations* 26 (1989), 8-9. Cited in Gross, 107. Gross mentions a wide array of American and European historians who contend collective memory has faded within the complexities of recent years. Central to the case is the work of Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).
3. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory. The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. (New York: Random House, 1991), 3-4.
4. John Bodner, *Remaking America. Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13-20, passim.
5. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 527ff. Kammen attributes much of the post-World War II homogenization trend to the rise of popular media. Bodner takes a more hopeful view that the end of the Cold War and the pluralism of postmodernism will broaden the vernacular spectrum enough to contain the "cultural offensive of authorities." Bodner, *Remaking America*, 252-3.
6. Henry Adams, "The United States in 1800," chs. I-VI of vol. I, *History of the United States during the Jefferson and Madison Administrations* (1889), cited in Edward Saveth, ed., *The Education of Henry Adams and Other Selected Writings*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 156-7.
7. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Richard Heffner (New York: New American Library, 1956), Vol. II, 142.
8. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vol II. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), 684-88. Bryce held out some hope that when "America counts her life by centuries, instead of by decades, variety will develop, and such complexities...as European countries present, be deeper and more numerous." 594.
9. Francis V. O'Connor took the motto of the arts project as the title for his compilation of statements by artists who worked on the project, *Art for the Millions*. (New York: NY Graphic Society, 1973).
10. The primary account of the arts program is Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*. (Princeton, 1973). McKinzie adds insight to the official report on the project by William McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*. (Ohio State, 1969)

11. Statement made by Evans at a retrospective of his work at Harvard University, as reported in the *New York Times*, May 1979.

12. Matthew Josephson, *Infidel in the Temple: A Memoir of the Nineteen-Thirties*. (New York: Knopf, 1967). Malcolm Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains*. (New York: Viking, 1980). Warren Susman in the single most influential article on “The Culture of the Thirties,” in his collection of essays, *Culture as History*. (New York: Pantheon, 1984), differs slightly by emphasizing commitment as the keynote of the Depression decade.

13. Cowley, *Dream*, Introduction.

14. Interview by the author with Cowley, 1970.

15. Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America* (Mamaronek, N.Y.: P.P. Appel, 1935, 1970).

16. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934)

17. Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *Dial*, 64 (April 11, 1918), 339. Bourne’s most fervent appeal for a cosmopolitan awakening was in his “Transnational America,” *Atlantic Monthly*. (July 1916). The story of what happened to the “usable past” during the 1930s is well told by Alfred Haworth Jones in “The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era,” *American Quarterly*, XXIII (Dec. 1971), 710-24.

18. Prominent examples of a turn about from debunking of public figures to praise included Van Wyck Brooks, *Life of Emerson* (1932), originally planned to be an attack on Emerson’s disengagement from civic life; Henry Pringle’s two volume *Life and Times of William Howard Taft* (1939); Carl Van Doren’s Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Benjamin Franklin, who had been repeatedly mocked in the 1920s as a philistine opportunist; and in the most prolific display, Allan Nevins’ positive reassessments of Grover Cleveland, Hamilton Fish, and John D. Rockefeller.

19. George Biddle, *An Artist’s Story*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 267-8.

20. A concise account of Bruce’s life and work is provided in Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984). Neo-realism had appeal for a wide array of reasons: conservatives wished to preserve “sane” representational values; New Dealers, like Bruce, wished to inspire the common man with art he could readily understand; and radicals, largely following the lead of the Mexican muralists, wanted to extol an insurgent proletariat. Stuart Davis, a leftist member of the Artists Union, was one of the few who disagreed with the realist case. He argued, with little effect, that abstract art was the more democratic because it represented inspiration unfettered by conventional attitudes. Davis stated that view in O’Connor, *Art for the Millions*. Eventually, Davis’ view was adopted by the American Abstract Artists group and then by

the champions of Abstract Expressionism after World War II. For a useful discussion of social realists styles see Garnett McCoy, "Poverty, Politics, and Artists, 1930-1945," *Art in America* (Sept., 1953), 88-107, and David Shapiro, *Art as a Weapon*. (New York: Ungar, 1973). For the ideology of Abstract Expression see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. (U. Chicago Press, 1985)..

21. A subtle appraisal of mural art as an inspirational form is given by Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall Art: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982). See, also, her essay, "A note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," in Jack Salzman, ed., *Prospects*, 4 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1979), 421-440.

22. McKinzie provides an outline of Cahill's life. For the artistic concepts Cahill and Dewey shared see: John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. (New York: Putnam's, 1934), and Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

23. A full, colorful account of the writers project by a participant is given in Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal. The Federal Writers Project, 1935-1943*. (Boston: Little-Brown, 1972).

24. Jane DeHart Matthews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, 1967).

25. Hallie Flanagan, "Federal Theatre: Tomorrow," *Federal Theatre*, I (May 1936), 8.

26. Nikolai Sokoloff, "America's Vast New Musical Awakening," *Etude*, LV (April 1937). For an overall account of the music project, see Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of the Music Belongs to the Nation: the WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

27. Figures are drawn from Richard McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, chs. 2 and 7, William McDonald, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, and Milton Meltzer, *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York, 1976).

28. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, chs. 23-25.

29. Robert Cantwell, "America and the Writers' Project," *New Republic*, 98 (April 26, 1939), 323-325. Cantwell was not alone in his enthusiasm for the arts projects. Cultural critic, Lewis Mumford, and poet and playwright, Archibald MacLeish led widespread cheers for the way the projects at last connected artists with the public mainstream; and in 1963, just as memory of the projects was being rekindled, S.L.M. Barlow, an internationally recognized writer and composer who came of age during the 1930s declared in his penetrating study of the artist in society throughout the ages that the New Deal projects were "the single most civilizing event in the history of the United States." *The Astonished Muse* (New York: John Day, 1963), 297. On the effort of writers during

the 1930s to establish communal bonds between writers, readers, and civic institutions, see Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism. American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. (Duke University Press, 2000).

30. The following works indicate intensively the problems of locating and sifting through the massive scattering of New Deal arts projects achievements. Roy Rosenzweig et al., eds., *Government and the Arts in Thirties America: A Guide to Oral Histories and Other research Materials* (Fairfax, Va, 1986). Rosenzweig and Barbara Melosh, "Government and the Arts: Voices from the New Deal Era," *Journal of American History* (September 1990), 596-608. Ann Banks, *First Person America* (New York: Random House, 1980).

30. The accounts of the various arts projects cited above all explain the demise of the projects. For a trenchant case study of the suppression of one of them see John Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

31. The principal work in persuading American intellectuals to the view that America was a consensus culture, because it lacked a feudal tradition and the enriching class conflict that ensued from such a tradition, was by political scientist and Tocqueville disciple Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955). A rather lonely attempt to stir interest in the aesthetic side of that liberal tradition, while ruefully conceding widespread acceptance of Hartz's implication that artists can only fulfill themselves by distancing themselves from the dull average of the civic mainstream, is made in two essays by Alan Lawson, "The Cultural Legacy of the New Deal," in Harvard Sitkoff, ed., *Fifty Years later: The New Deal Evaluated* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 155-186, and, on a broader chronological scale, "American Art and Its Elusive Community," in Lewis Erenberg, ed., *Essays in Honor of John Higham* (Chicago: Mid-America, 2000).