In her biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in the middle of a chapter titled "He Liked People," Frances Perkins relates an intriguing story about how artists came to be included in New Deal programs to remedy the effects of the Great Depression. She modestly alludes to herself as "a cabinet officer" and goes on to tell how her daughter, also unnamed in the narrative, nagged her to ask the President to do something to help the many worthy artists who were suffering and without work in the 1930s. In relating the story, which ultimately led to the successful creation of legendary federal art, literature, and theater programs, Perkins characteristically takes no personal credit but states "When the Civil Works project for work relief was getting under way, the decision to include artists in it was Roosevelt’s own."

Perkins attributes the original idea to Alfred Barr, a respected figure in the art world, and whom her then 17-year old daughter Susanna had met while on vacation in Vermont, and then goes on to describe FDR’s immediate and positive response.

Alfred Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, conceived the idea that artists should have the relief that other people were getting. He promoted it at every hand, mentioning it to a young girl who was a member of the family of a cabinet officer. Having no particular judgment about public affairs but being ardent about painting, she persuaded her reluctant parent to take it up with the President. The President’s immediate reaction was, "Why not? They are human beings. They have to live. I guess the only thing they can do is paint and surely there must be some public place where paintings are wanted."

In her 1953 oral history she expands this anecdote into a full-scale description of her conversation with FDR and his ensuing actions. She relates that Henry Morgenthau, Jr., secretary of the treasury, came in during her conversation and that FDR said to him, enthusiastic about the idea:

“Henry, we’ve got a brand new idea. A lot of artists are out of work - painters, you know. We’ll put them all to work ornamenting and decorating the public buildings. You’ve got the Office of Procurement. Let them hire these people and put them to work at painting pictures on public buildings.” That was partly a joke. It was done partly in laughter, but partly with reality. The President’s mind was running along quickly and he said, “There’s Boulder Dam. We can cover that all over with sculptures.” His imagination was running on.

Henry Morgenthau, who is very flat-footed and very practical, said, “Well, I don’t know

---

1 Frances Perkins, The Roosevelt I Knew, (New York: Viking Press, 1946), p. 75-76 in the 1947 edition. This biography of FDR was a best seller when it was published shortly after his death in 1945. Frances Perkins served as U.S. Secretary of Labor 1933-45 during the entire presidency of FDR.
about that, Mr. President. That sounds kind of crazy to me.”
Then the President said, “Anyhow, Henry, look into it. See Frances and Harry Hopkins and see if we can't do something.”

She follows this with a narrative about Morgenthau's subsequent actions, describing how he asked around Washington and was directed to Edward "Ned" Bruce, who was to become in 1933 the director of the Treasury’s first major art program, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) stating:

Bruce was just ecstatic when he learned that anybody had ever thought that an artist too needed relief work. ...He and his wife were in comfortable circumstances, but he knew students and fellow artists who were just desperate with nothing to do, nothing to eat, and no possibility of getting any orders. To him it was a matter of ecstasy that anybody should even think that artists were also human beings, had to eat, and needed a little relief.

She continues to reminisce that after this enthusiastic response, Morgenthau recruited Bruce to run the project, noting that he is "one of these "can-do" men and a natural born administrator." She goes on to say that "We got Hopkins into it." adding that "Hopkins knew that artists must be hungry and was sure that it was better to have artists painting pictures and making sculpture than it was to have them shoveling gravel, or whatever else he had for them to do. Sure, he was for it. Sure, it was possible."

This narrative flies in the face of the conventionally held wisdom about the origin of the New Deal art programs. Contemporary chroniclers of the programs in the late 1940s as well as later historians generally cite a letter from George Biddle to FDR of May, 1933 as having prompted the President to take action. The letter made the case for employing out-of-work artists at "plumbers' wages" to paint murals in government buildings, stating that if given the opportunity. "They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve." 2 FDR replied a few weeks later to Biddle, a fellow classmate at Groton and Harvard although they were not personally acquainted, asking him to "have a talk some day with Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Robert, who is in charge of the Public Buildings' work." 3

Biddle did speak with Robert and the Public Works of Art Project was initiated in December 1933 with a grant from the Civil Works Administration, an agency created by the National Recovery Act of the same year. This short but influential project is described in a glowing 1934 report by Edward Bruce titled "Implications of the Public Works of Art Project" where he highlights its successes, noting that every state was represented and that in addition to 2,294 artists and 168 laborers hired in less than two months, it provided a "needed lift of the spirit." He adds his enthusiastic observation

---

2 George Biddle to FDR May 9, 1933
3 FDR to George Biddle May 22, 1933
that thanks to the project "throughout the country people are becoming more art-minded."  

In her recent book *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture*, Sharon Ann Musher acknowledges Biddle’s important role but notes that "He was one of many artists, dealers, and organizations petitioning the government for the creation of art projects." She comments further that Biddle was primarily emphasizing mural art as a propaganda tool to promote New Deal ideology, while others were concerned more with the great number of artists in need of relief due to the decline of private patronage. She cites in particular a public plea by Audrey McMahon, president of the College Art Association, titled "May the Artist Live?" published in October 1933, that described the desperate situation of American artists, noting that between one-third and one-half of the nation’s artists were without work or a means to support themselves. McMahon expressed the widely held concern that an entire generation of artists would vanish and asked "Shall this age be known to posterity as a dark era during which we turned all our thoughts to material fears and closed our minds to the hope and relief offered by beauty?” She thought that "It need not be so.” and offered as a model the experimental government-subsidized art project she oversaw in New York City from December 1932 until August 1933.

In Frances Perkins’ description of the art projects, she provides additional details about how the artists were selected under Bruce’s guidance because he understood that "you shouldn’t put just trash on the walls because the man was hungry, but that you should have competition between the hungry for the opportunity." She further notes how well the project succeeded with its fine murals in the Justice Department and Post Office then under construction in Washington, stating: "The visible results of the artists project in this relief are perhaps more remembered by the people of the United States, and are certainly more obvious, if they go around in public buildings at all, than almost anything else." She also describes the quality and character of paintings produced by the PWAP that she and her staff selected to hang in the Department of Labor building, whose walls were deemed unsuitable for murals. She is justifiably proud of these works which were included in an important exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in 1934, and now reside in the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum as a highlight of their permanent collection.

---


Perkins does write about George Biddle in *The Roosevelt I Knew*, quoting his comments about FDR and his role in supporting artists, but despite acknowledging that she had corresponded with Biddle, Perkins does not credit him with initiating the federal art programs.

George Biddle, the painter, once said of him, "You know, it is strange. Roosevelt has almost no taste or judgment about painting, and I don't think he gets much enjoyment out of it; yet he has done more for painters in this country than anybody ever did -- not only by feeding them when they were down and out but by establishing the idea that paintings are a good thing to have around and that artists are important."\(^9\)

Interesting enough, when George Biddle was given the commission to paint the 1936 *Society Freed Through Justice* series of murals in the Justice Department, he included a recognizable image of Frances Perkins prominently depicted as a seamstress in a panel illustrating a sweatshop. He painted himself at a sewing machine in a related panel above, along with an unlabeled but identifiable image of Stuart Chase, social theorist and author said to have coined the term "A New Deal" in his 1932 book of the same name. The Perkins portrait is clearly intended to acknowledge her role in ameliorating the terrible conditions common in the garment industry with its child labor and unsafe work places. But does it

---

also recognize her as a supporter of the arts as part of the means to correct these wrongs? The evidence is inconclusive.


The words of Henry Morgenthau, as presented in the authorized 1959 book *From the Morgenthau Diaries* by John Morton Blum, describe the Treasury art program as "an emergency relief activity to aid qualified artists in need of employment." Morgenthau attributes the idea solely to Edward Bruce, stating that he "originally suggested the project to Harry Hopkins, who willingly furnished funds from his relief appropriations." Also acknowledged in the narrative is his wife Elinor Morgenthau, who "awakened her husband's interest, and therefore the Treasury's, in art, and she constantly urged

---

Morgenthau to assist Bruce, who also benefited from his acquaintance with the President."

Frances Perkins was a great appreciator of the visual arts. Her college notebooks show that she studied art history, taking extensive lecture notes for what appear to have been serious courses. In her oral history, she relates how much she enjoyed attending museum and gallery shows as a young woman living in Greenwich Village and she speaks knowledgeably about favorite paintings by George Bellows, John Sloan and others. She says that attending the Armory Show of 1913 was "one of the most important occasions of my life." About her later years she says "I've always been concerned about the graphic arts, liked them and enjoyed them."

When she describes with great enthusiasm the New Deal arts programs that built upon the initial Treasury Department’s PWAP -- the Section of Fine Arts, the massive Federal Art Project and theater, music, and writers projects of the WPA -- we must ask ourselves why we do not know about her role in initiating these programs that are considered hallmarks of the New Deal? Granted, she did not administer them directly, but she did have responsibility for the Federal Employment Service commenting: "I continued my interest in this project, first, because I was a professional social worker, and, second, because operating the employment service as we did we had to feed in constantly to the WPA projects."

Is this another case of Frances Perkins’ extreme modesty, or was it because art of the New Deal era fell out of fashion with the rise of Abstract Expressionism and Op Art and Pop Art in the 1960s and the lack of scholarship on American art of the 1930s until many years later?

Recent museum exhibitions and books about the New Deal arts programs are calling new attention to the period and its importance to American cultural history. The Smithsonian’s 2009 travelling show and catalogue 1934 A New Deal for Artists and Roger Kennedy’s When Art Worked: The New Deal, Art, and Democracy of the same year, as well as the efforts of the New Deal Art Registry, Living New Deal, and National New Deal Preservation Association are stimulating renewed appreciation for these programs and the work they produced. Roger Kennedy stated "During those six years (1933-39), the work of professional artists was supported by a larger share of national tax revenue and buoyed by more national attention than in any other period of the nation’s life."

We may never know for sure exactly how the New Deal arts programs originated. But for those who are delighted by the colorful murals they still encounter in their local post office, or who enjoy the freshly restored panels in their office lobby in Washington, DC, at the Coit Tower in San Francisco or in many other locations throughout the country, we give our

---

11 Blum, p. 92.
thanks to the many people and organizations who harnessed the resources of our federal government to aid "the creative ones among us ...to coax the soul of America back to life".  

About the author: Sarah Peskin is a board member of the Frances Perkins Center. She holds a B.A. in Art History from Smith College and a Master’s of Urban Planning from New York University and retired from the National Park Service where she served as chief of planning and legislation for the North Atlantic region. She authored feasibility studies for the homes of two American artists that resulted in their establishment as Weir Farm National Historic Site and Thomas Cole National Historic Site.

13 From a 1933 letter from Gutzom Borglum, best known as the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, to Harry Hopkins.