



Enough to Live On

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*Music in Paint: Jacksonville, Florida Negro Federal Gallery, circa 1935
Photo from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Public Domain Photographs*

I recently watched a first-rate documentary about Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Crash of '29 and the inception and successful creation of the Works Progress Administration, better known as the WPA. *"Enough to Live On: The Arts of the WPA"* written, directed and narrated by Michael Maglaras and partner Terri Templeton is a lovingly crafted, historically significant work of art in its own right. Most Americans are aware of the ambitious effort by our federal government to employ Americans during the Great Depression of the 1930's, however *"Enough to Live On"* takes us a bit further into the role art played in our recovery as a nation and makes clear the essential nature of art for a society/culture to maintain intellectual curiosity and a political vibrancy. Suffering staggering unemployment with a national population a little more than a third of what it is today and with 1300 bank failures by 1931 and more failing every day, the future was decidedly bleak.

President Herbert Hoover preceded FDR and was in office when the crash of '29 occurred and was pitifully uninspiring and ineffective in handling the crisis. Under Hoover's watch the tragic "Bonus Army" debacle took place in the spring and summer of 1932. 43,000 souls marched on Washington, D.C., 17,000 World War I veterans, their families, and affiliated groups demanded the payments promised them at the end of the war. "Payment" for their service came in the form of Hoover sending in Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur commanding infantry and cavalry supported by six tanks and violently disbanding the marchers, burning their "tent city" and sending them packing with nothing to show for their trouble. Two veterans were shot and killed by the nation they had fought to protect.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeated incumbent Hoover in 1932. FDR and his administration felt strongly the responsibility to get people back to work as quickly as humanly possible to not only provide much needed income for American families for food and shelter, but also to prevent the kind of violence and that comes on the heels of starvation and frustration with government.

FDR tasked his trusted advisor, Harry Hopkins to create a federally funded program to get people back to work and Hopkins' creation was the WPA. Jobs to replant trees in national parks and construction of federal roadways and buildings were a sensible start on the road to recovery. A much smaller element of the WPA was the "Federal Project Number One" with a very small percentage of the overall WPA budget dedicated to employing artists, musicians, writers and actors. This drive to include art and artists in the WPA was thanks in great part to Eleanor Roosevelt, the influential powerhouse and wife of FDR.

So much is packed into this film! It informs and enlightens, but at the same time raises many questions relevant to our society today. Shouldn't we address the glaring failure of unregulated private industry to safeguard the economy to avoid crashing it into a brick wall ala 1929? Shouldn't our veterans be rewarded for their sacrifice and not be allowed to suffer when they return home? Shouldn't we ruminate on and discuss the importance of art and how it separates thriving civilized societies from the dull unimaginative dystopian existence?

Shouldn't we acknowledge the glorious contributions of black artists to the WPA and, in spite of systemic repression, how the African American artist's work is entwined and inseparable with America's great art, music and theater as a whole? To address that question, "*Enough to Live On: The Arts of The WPA*" began with African American poet, Langston Hughes' reading his poem that goes directly to the heart of being black in America:

"I, TOO"

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes worked as a busboy at the Wardman Park hotel in Washington, D. C. and as the film maker points out, Hughes had the "temerity" to leave his poems next to well known and successful poet, Vachel Lindsay's breakfast plate. Lindsay was duly impressed and Hughes went on to greatness and became a contributor in the newly formed Federal Writer's Project, one of the four artistic off-shoots of the WPA.

Painter and muralist, Aaron Douglas of "Harlem Renaissance" fame painted his masterpiece "Aspects of Negro Life" and several other paintings and murals while employed by the WPA. "Aspects..." was commissioned to be shown in the New York Public Library. Douglas artistically brought to America's attention a different perspective on the history of being black in America. "Aspects of Negro Life" is four large panels depicting African beginnings, life in the American South and the exclusively Americentric black music scene. Douglas and others of the "Harlem Renaissance" made it their mission to educate America and reveal the heretofore unknown artistic contributions of African American artists and the participation and importance of African Americans to the history of the United States. Little was known on the subject of "Black History" before this time. As actor, Morgan Freeman emphatically remarked, "There is no "Black History", there is only American History" and as such all participants should be acknowledged.

The crushing poverty created by a shameless, rapacious Wall Street did not discriminate. Both Black and White America were profoundly hurt, however conventionally the African American was the first fired and last hired, feeling that hurt just that much more. The WPA was more than ambitious and more than successful in that it not only employed Americans in dire straits it created an environment for American art and artists to thrive. "*Enough to Live On*" is a wonderful celebration of America, her people and her possibilities.

Note: "*Enough to Live On: The Arts of The WPA*" is available on Amazon.