



## Women of the Federal Art Project Poster Division

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The Federal Art Project (FAP), originally named Federal One, began in 1935 as an outgrowth of the College Art Association's efforts to help artists struggling during the Great Depression. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt provided instrumental support to FAP by urging her husband to extend New Deal benefits to the arts; she continued to support the funding even after critics looked to eliminate it as a waste of money. When he took office, President Franklin D. Roosevelt aimed to provide a new deal for everyone, including women, African Americans, and other marginalized groups.<sup>1</sup> The FAP attempted to live up to this mission but often failed to meet these lofty goals. As in other relief efforts, men—typically White men—received benefits before women, based on the men's assumed need to support families and skepticism toward women reporting that they served as the head of their household, in the case of single or widowed mothers.<sup>2</sup> There were also widespread pay discrepancies between White men and both women and people of color at the FAP.<sup>3</sup>

Dorothy Waugh, *Winter Sports / National & State Parks*, ca. 1930–40, poster.

However, the FAP offered opportunities to women and minorities that

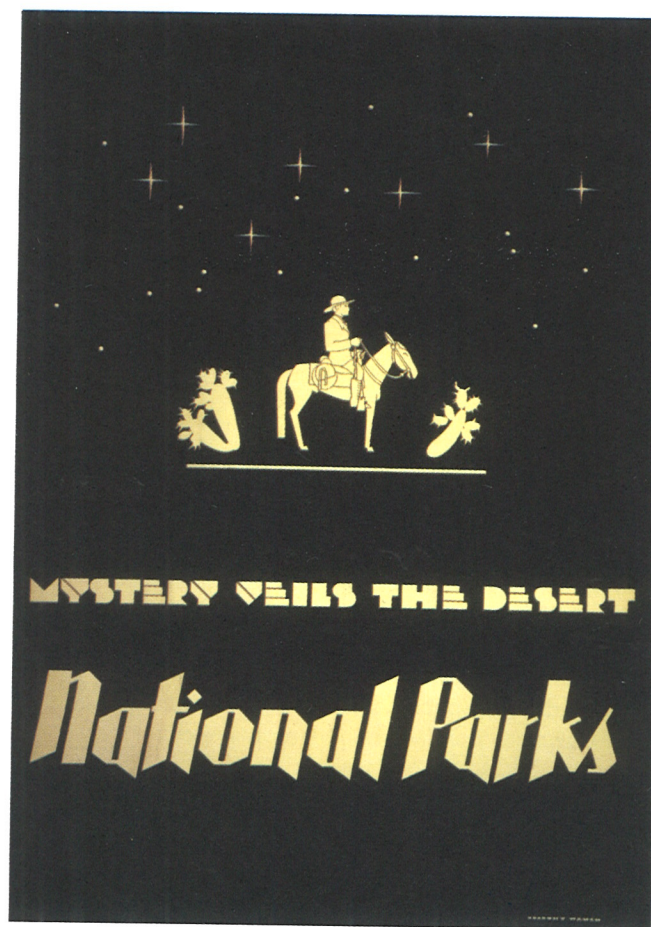
they might not otherwise have received. Women including Audrey McMahon, Increase Robinson, Florence Kerr, Juliana Force, Augusta Savage, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Ellen S. Woodward held numerous FAP leadership positions at the state, regional, and national levels. Woodward played the most significant role as director of the Women's Division of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and director of the Women's and Professional Projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Additionally, women played significant roles in producing work in all divisions of the project.

As one of the many artistic outlets supported by the FAP, the poster division allowed those formerly employed in roles like art director to find gainful employment. The division produced two million silk-screen copies of thirty-five thousand original poster designs during its operation, before being converted into an arm of the World War II propaganda efforts.<sup>4</sup> The poster division arguably chose the medium of screen printing not just to produce large numbers of high-quality prints but also because of the democratic nature of the medium.<sup>5</sup> Screen printing lent itself well to the very heart of the division's subject matter: health issues and the promotion of states, tourism destinations, and even events produced by the divisions of the FAP. The poster division represented one of the first cohesive efforts to use design, specifically posters, to educate the public about social issues and to deliver health information to the masses.

Artists such as Dorothy Waugh, Charlotte Angus, Mildred Waltrip, and Katherine Milhous used their training in the arts and previous professional experience to leave a significant design legacy. All four of these women worked at a time when the design profession was still in its infancy and women mostly existed in production roles. Most graphic design work involved hand illustration of both images and type, as was the case with the work they produced for the FAP. All four women had demonstrated deft skills as illustrators and artists working in advertising and newspapers and for the National Park Service (NPS) before joining the FAP. The project allowed them to continue growing their skills and in some cases even led to their future careers.

### Dorothy Waugh

Dorothy Waugh created several iconic posters for the Federal Art Project's poster division. Her work focused on promoting the national parks. Waugh first became involved with the NPS in 1934.



Dorothy Waugh, *Mystery Veils the Desert* / *National Parks*, ca. 1930–40, poster.

Her father, Frank Waugh, was a professor of landscape gardening at Massachusetts Agricultural College and a mentor to Conrad Wirth, who spearheaded the project for the Civilian Conservation Corps. Dorothy Waugh compiled the *Portfolio of Comfort Stations and Privies* and *Portfolio of Park Structures* as part of an effort to train new designers to create park structures in harmony with their sites. She presented examples in simple dimensioned drawings assembled in a

loose-leaf binder so that new examples could continually be added to the collection.<sup>6</sup> The project ended

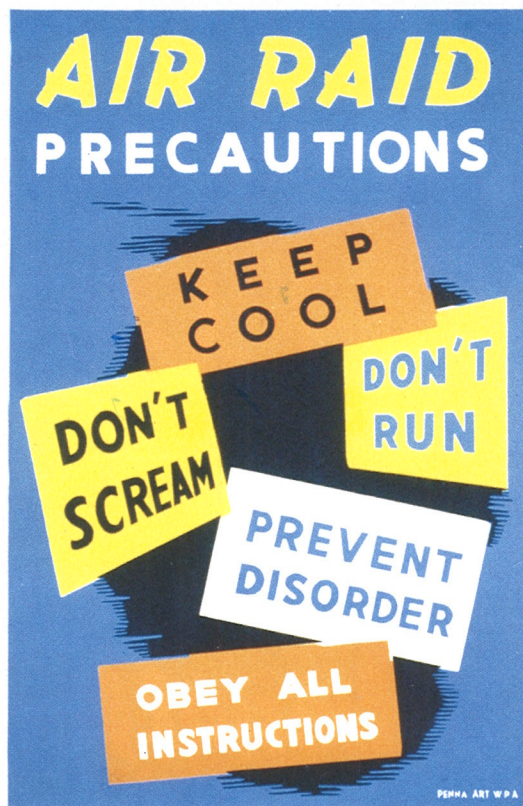
when the park service decided to pursue a different method for training designers.

Even though this project was discontinued, Wirth continued to work with Waugh on posters promoting recreational activities, including winter sports, in national and state parks as part of the FAP's efforts to promote these national resources. Waugh supervised the posters' production, wrote the copy, and designed the layouts and illustration.<sup>7</sup> The posters' distinct typography and

illustrations focused on activities within the park. They remain iconic and earned Waugh mention in an article celebrating the NPS's centennial, where the author noted, "The custom lettering in many of Waugh's posters contain unexpected and sometimes quirky anomalies."<sup>8</sup>

Waugh's lettering alone distinguishes her from others who created posters for the NPS. While most artists chose the sans serif fonts popular during the period, Waugh drew playful, unique letterforms to celebrate qualities specific to the park or activity represented. For example, the type of *Winter Sports / National & State Parks* features italicized letterforms that mimic a person skiing down the slopes. Additionally, Waugh's posters feature illustrations highlighting unique elements from each park or activities within the park. Several of her posters show the direct influence of European modernism, which gained popularity with American designers during the 1930s. Waugh contributed her quirky twists and superior lettering skills to producing posters that helped promote and excite the public about the national parks.

Beyond this contribution to the NPS and its poster division, Waugh had a long and varied career. She received her education at the Art Institute of Chicago, studying drawing, lettering, design, painting, and typography.<sup>9</sup> (The impact of these studies on her lettering and illustration for the NPS posters is clear.) After graduating, she worked at a commercial art studio in Chicago for three



Charlotte Angus, *Air Raid Precautions*, ca. 1941–43, poster.

years.<sup>10</sup> She then moved to New York and went to work in the children's book department at Alfred A. Knopf. After the FAP's poster division disbanded, Waugh wrote and illustrated several books about various scientific topics for children in the 1940s and '50s. From 1941 through 1943, she served as a special lecturer and critic in lettering and typography at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art, later Parsons School of Design and now the New School.<sup>11</sup> She also held a publicity position at the Montclair, New Jersey, library, where she coordinated several exhibitions, including a notable one on children's books. As Robert L. Leslie stated in *A-D* magazine, "If taste, high purpose, and skill add up to anything in the graphic arts—and they most certainly do—Dorothy Waugh should be considered one of our best people."<sup>12</sup> Despite her colleagues' esteem and the reputation of her work for the Federal Art Project, little of Waugh's graphic designs beyond these posters is known today.

### Charlotte Angus

Charlotte Angus produced work for several branches of the Federal Art Project. Angus started her life in Kansas City, Missouri. After moving to Philadelphia, she studied at the University of the Arts and took lessons at the Graphic Sketch Club. After school, she worked briefly for an advertising agency until she lost the job during the Great Depression.<sup>13</sup> She joined the FAP in 1936, painting sets for the Federal Theater Project. Later, she contributed to the FAP project the Index of American Design and created posters for the poster division. Her designs for the index can be viewed as part of the National Gallery of Art's collection and include drawings for various historical objects, from dishes to quilts. In 1942, as war efforts absorbed the FAP, Angus studied drafting and became a draftswoman for the Naval Air Medical Center in Philadelphia until marrying John Stefanek in 1947.<sup>14</sup> She continued to exhibit her art after settling in southwestern Pennsylvania with her husband.

Charlotte Angus's posters for the WPA feature bold typography and bright colors. Her *Don't Be a Drip! Be Patriotic... Stop Leaks... Save Water* features a simple illustration of a dripping faucet. The red and blue color scheme connects to the poster's patriotic plea. Angus chose a geometric sans serif font, a style that gained popularity in the late 1920s and into the 1930s. The combination of the graphic elements and typography creates a bold but straightforward message. In contrast, her *Air Raid Precautions* relies heavily on typography. The poster features a bright blue background with

orange, yellow, and white pops to grab the viewer. Angus uses a hand-drawn display font for the main headline and a geometric sans serif for the remainder of the type. Her bold approach to poster design made wartime messages accessible to a broad audience.

### Mildred Waltrip

Mildred Waltrip worked as both a mural painter and a graphic designer for the poster division during her time with the Federal Art Project. Waltrip studied at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1926 to 1933. After completing her education there, she traveled to Paris, where she studied with Fernand Léger. Before joining the FAP, she worked for the advertising department of Marshall Field's from 1936 to 1937, where she illustrated books on topics such as "How to Buy Intelligently."<sup>15</sup> After leaving the FAP, she worked as a commercial artist and illustrated numerous children's science books, including George Barr's Young Scientist series from the 1960s and '70s.

Waltrip's time with the FAP served as the start of her prolific career as a muralist. Creating murals, however, involved challenges for Waltrip; she required special scaffolding when working, due to leg braces she wore after contracting polio.<sup>16</sup> She created several works while working for the mural division, including one featuring episodes from Robin Hood and another depicting the history of aviation. Unfortunately, few still exist, either because the building the mural resided in was destroyed, or the mural was removed following controversy. Her mural *The Process*, in an Oak Park, Illinois, public school, incited rancor in 1995 for its racist depictions of Africans. A proposal called for preserving the art while using lesson plans to acknowledge its problematic nature, but the school board eventually voted to remove two of the mural's panels.<sup>17</sup>

Her design work for the FAP focused on creating promotional posters for art exhibitions and attractions such as the Brookfield Zoo. *Brookfield Zoo Information* features two hippopotamuses layered over a map of the African continent, speaking to the origins of the animal, and a bright green background. She chose an elongated sans serif font; the lettering of "Brookfield Zoo" features a black drop shadow to attract attention. Her poster to promote the Art Institute of Chicago's 49th Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture displays a patriotic focus, with stars and stripes serving as a background for an image of a farm and a factory. The Federal Art Project favored such imagery, as celebrating rural and urban American life during that era. She again selected a sans serif font for



Mildred Waltrip, *Information / Brookfield Zoo*, ca. 1936–38, poster.

the type. Both posters layer imagery to create a complex message.

### Katherine Milhous

Katherine Milhous created some of the most distinctive posters produced by the Federal Art Project, and she served as a supervisor



for the Philadelphia FAP from 1935 to 1940. Milhous was born in Philadelphia to a Quaker family involved in printing. She spent her early years in her father's shop, which initiated her lifetime love of art. Her love of books came from her access to her family's small library.<sup>18</sup> Before her time with the

**Katherine Milhous, *Rural Pennsylvania*, ca. 1936–40, poster.**

FAP, Milhous studied at the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She also received scholarships to attend various other art programs, including the Cresson Traveling Scholarship, which allowed her to study abroad in Italy and France. To save money for her artistic adventures, Milhous did drawings commissioned by newspapers at night.<sup>19</sup> After her time with the FAP, she began illustrating children's books. Her book *The Egg Tree*, about a family who painted eggs and hung them on a tree, was selected by the Children's Committee of the AIGA as one of the best-designed books after 1945; it received the Caldecott Medal in 1951.<sup>20</sup> Katherine Milhous spent her life creating spectacular illustrations and sharing her passion for art with children.

Milhous's work for the FAP focused primarily on promoting the state of Pennsylvania. Her works highlight the traditions of the state while enticing viewers to discover its history for themselves. The posters express her deep love for her birthplace and often depict Pennsylvania Dutch people—typically wearing traditional clothing—and symbols common to Amish culture. They feature mainly primary colors, sometimes accented with secondary colors, and they predominantly use sans serif fonts, while using a modern serif or a display font for the word *Pennsylvania*.

More of Milhous's posters exist than from most other female artists of the FAP poster division. While Waugh's work from her time with the FAP is better known, Milhous is perhaps the best-known woman from the poster division because of her extensive career and the accolades she earned after leaving the FAP. Milhous's posters led directly to her career as a book illustrator.<sup>21</sup>

### The Legacy of the FAP

The New Deal, including the FAP, sought to bring equity to everyone in the country, including women. It never quite achieved the admirable aspirations set forth by Roosevelt. Still, it did provide opportunities for women like Dorothy Waugh, Charlotte Angus, Mildred Waltrip, and Katherine Milhous to continue their artistic pursuits. It also provided the opportunity for women to take on leadership roles within the project. Their designs testify to their legacy, preserved in permanent collections along with the small number of other posters that survived from the project.