

DEFINING AMERICAN DESIGN
A HISTORY OF THE INDEX OF AMERICAN DESIGN,
1935-1942

by
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ABSTRACT

Title of Master's Thesis: Defining American Design: A History of the Index of American Design: 1935-1942

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The Index of American Design was created in the fall of 1935, as one unit of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. Although government-sponsored art projects of the New Deal era, and in particular, the Federal Art Project, have been examined extensively by historians of American art and culture, the Index of American Design has received very little attention. Yet, the Index is important because it existed during the 1930s as a popular and well-known endeavor. On however small or conservative a scale, it reflects a constellation of thought and activity which was the result of the specific circumstances of that decade. In the following thesis I will outline a history of the Index project as it was part of the Federal Art Project, and as it was part of the growing movements of decorative arts and folk arts collecting during the 1930s. I will examine the ideas of three Index administrators: Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project, Constance Rourke, Editor of the Index, and Ruth Reeves, field supervisor of the Index, in order to identify some of the underlying ideals which shaped

the project. In addition, an examination of how the Index interacted with two specific audiences: collectors of decorative arts and the artists themselves, will reveal how the Index idea was turned into reality.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Index of American Design was created in the fall of 1935, as one unit of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. The director of the Federal Art Project was Holger Cahill, and in his view the purpose of the Index was three-fold:

The Index was organized in response to several needs: the need of artists for employment, the need of the Government work program to devise projects which would maintain the skills of the unemployed, and public need for pictorial information on American design and craftsmanship.¹

Organized on a national level in Washington, D.C., Index supervisors surveyed public and private collections for objects made in the United States which they felt best displayed American design. On the State level, Index personnel turned over the selected objects to artists -- for the most part trained commercial artists -- who made precise meticulously realistic renderings of the objects.

¹Holger Cahill, introduction to Erwin O. Christensen, The Index of American Design (New York: Macmillan, 1950), p. ix.

The final product, the actual Index, was to be a series of published portfolios made from the best of the renderings, which would outline the history of American design for scholars, artists, manufacturers, and students.

The Index project, however, never reached the presses; in 1942 when the Federal Art Project was terminated, the vast collection of Index renderings and research was deposited, uncompleted, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Between 1935 and 1942, the Index project employed approximately seven hundred people from thirty-five States and the District of Columbia. Over 22,000 plates -- watercolors, photographs, pencil drawings and ink sketches -- were produced and are now housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The history of the Index project is closely linked to the history of the Federal Art Project, and in general to the history of governmental patronage of the arts during the decade of the 1930s. After taking office in 1933, President Roosevelt created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, appointing Harry Hopkins director, which supplied funds to individual States for direct relief. In November of 1933 Roosevelt created the Civil Works Administration (CWA) to initiate a program of work-relief, and again appointed Hopkins as director. Though there were private and State-funded programs for artists, the CWA provided funds for the first federal project for professional artists: the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). This project was

set up under the auspices of the Treasury Department in December 1933, and it employed artists to decorate public buildings on the basis of their artistic competence. Though the PWAP was short-lived -- lasting barely seven months -- it generated enthusiasm for succeeding projects, and it established principles for federal art patronage: that artists were workers just like any other members of society, and that art itself was an important aspect of a healthy society.¹

After the PWAP came to an end, the Treasury Department set up the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) and the Section of Painting and Sculpture (Section). The Section, like the PWAP, employed the best available artists to decorate public buildings. Also like the PWAP, artists on the Section were not required to qualify for relief, and artistic excellence was the criterion for selection for Section commissions. The TRAP, which operated until 1938, employed artists to decorate public buildings, but it hired artists who could qualify for relief.²

Between the end of the PWAP and the start of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Project Number One, there were no federally funded work-relief programs for

¹Francis V. O'Connor, Federal Art Patronage: 1933-1943 (College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland Art Gallery, 1966), pp. 8-9. See also Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, New Deal for Art (Hamilton, New York: The Gallery Association of New York State, 1977), pp. 2-5.

²Park and Markowitz, *ibid.*, p. 5; O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 13.

artists. PWAP projects were transferred to the State-run Emergency Relief Administrations which, in many cases, put artists back on direct relief.¹

Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the spring of 1935, appointing Hopkins director. the WPA replaced other Emergency Relief Administrations, and was formulated upon the belief shared by Roosevelt and Hopkins that the government could do more than support its needy workers; it could employ them; further, by employing workers in their proper capacities, from white collar to blue collar, it could preserve their morale and skills for the future. The attitude of the WPA toward art was that it was a necessity in any society and that artists were workers who should be supported along with all other workers.² Within the WPA was the Division of Professional and Service Projects; within this division was the Federal Project Number One under the direction of Jacob Baker. This consisted of the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Art Project. These four arts projects were established in August of 1935, and by October they began functioning on funds granted to -----

¹Charles Sawyer, "The Arts Projects in New England: Some Recollections," DeCordova Museum, By the People, For the People: New England (Lincoln, Mass.: DeCordova Museum, 1977), p. 13. See also O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 12.

²Milton Melzer, Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects (New York: Delacourt Press, 1976), pp. 16-19 and O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 27.

them by Roosevelt and the Congress.¹ The Index was developed under the direction of Holger Cahill as one part of the Federal Art Project. Artists had to qualify for relief to be employed, though there was a narrow margin for employing staff on a non-relief basis.

Historians of American art and culture have researched government-sponsored art projects of the New Deal and in particular, the Federal Art Project has been studied in detail. However, within the Federal Art Project, the Index of American Design has received less attention than its sister projects, easel, mural and printmaking. That the Index reflects ideas which characterize the decade of the 1930s is acknowledged by cultural and social historians; for example, it is frequently held up as evidence of Americans' desire during that decade to identify and document their past.² However, a more complete history of the Index project, and a more thorough treatment of its successes and failures, has not been attempted. In the words of one Federal Art Project researcher, the reason for this was that the Index was one of the smaller undertakings of the Federal Art Project, and as such its "individual reflection of an era and . . . influence on the general public has

¹O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 27.

²William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 104; Alfred Haworth Jones, "A Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," American Quarterly 23 no. 5 (December 1971): 710; Park and Markowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

been limited."¹

There are other possible explanations. The Index project employed commercial artists and produced objects which were not defined either by the artists or the general public as creative or "fine" art. It has therefore been of limited interest to the art historian whose aim is to relate the activity of the artistically creative units of the Federal Art Project to trends in the history of American Art.

In addition, Federal Art Project units designed to encourage artistic individuality and creativity have received more scholarly attention possibly because these units were more radical in their approach to art and culture; they provided the crucible for ideological and stylistic change, and therefore are of greater importance to researchers interested in the dynamic quality of history. The Index represents a small and essentially conservative facet of the Federal Art Project. Index workers were conscious of their mission to preserve rather than to change -- to celebrate rather than to criticize -- traditions of an American culture of the past. That mission was praised by contemporary critics, and the Index was praised specifically as the "best known of the projects" and "an outstanding example of what was accomplished over the last ten years

¹Edith A. Tonelli, foreword to By the People, For the People: New England, op. cit., p. 6.

of government patronage."¹

The Index is important because in fact it existed during the 1930s as a popular and well-known endeavor. On however small or conservative a scale, it reflects a constellation of thought and activity which was the result of specific circumstances of that decade. In the following essay I will outline a history of the Index project, and examine the ideas of three Index administrators: Holger Cahill, Constance Rourke, and Ruth Reeves, in order to establish the basic underlying ideals that shaped the project. An examination of how the Index interacted with two specific audiences: collectors of decorative arts and the artists themselves, will reveal how the Index idea was turned into reality. The Index will be approached as an extension of the Federal Art Project; it will also be approached as coming out of and contributing to the growing movements of decorative and folk arts collecting in the United States.

The field of decorative arts collecting is an important context in which to view the Index not only because the Index depended upon support from decorative arts collectors, but because it drew from this field its definitions and assumptions about the value of design. Surprisingly, there is no formal definition of design in the literature and memoranda associated with the Index. The closest that

¹n.s., "Art News of America," Art News 42 no. 9 (August 1943): 36.

Cahill came to defining "design" was to write: "with its manifold strains, its numerous transformations from original continental parentage, American design seems to escape definition." Cahill was more concerned with identifying specifically American characterizations of the American design tradition, and did not articulate exactly what he meant by "design" except to say that in America, the design tradition could be found in "the arts of everyday life."¹ He wrote, "The arts of design . . . express the daily life of a people and . . . bring order, design, and harmony into an environment which their society creates."²

Editor of the national Index project, Constance Rourke, indirectly defined "design" when she wrote that objects which exemplify the arts of design "furniture, ceramics, glass, embroideries, textiles" were "touchstones revealing widespread and instinctive uses of form."³ The word "form" is a key to understanding Rourke's assumptions about "design." Instead of looking for decorative patterns which embellish objects, Rourke concentrated on the shapes

¹Holger Cahill, "American Design," an address made at the opening of Old and New Paths in American Design (Newark, New Jersey: The Newark Museum, 1936), p. 11.

²Idem, "American Resources in the Arts," reprinted as the foreword to Francis V. O'Connor, Art for the Millions (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 42.

³Constance Rourke, "The Index of American Design," Magazine of Art 30 no. 1 (April 1937): 207-208.

and forms of objects. Since all objects have some form, and therefore some design quality, Rourke chose subjects for the Index from a wide-ranging field. She thought that examples from "the more aristocratic phases of our early design tradition" should be included, but also wrote that the folk arts represented some of the richest and most accessible pockets of material for the Index project.¹

Operating under the assumption that design would be found in the arts of everyday life, Index supervisors looked for common domestic objects made by provincial American artisans of European descent.² They chose objects from already assembled collections of objects, drawing from collections that had been made under two collecting philosophies: historical preservation and aesthetic preservation or connois-

¹Ibid., p. 211.

²Design motifs of American Indians were not included in the Index of American Design. In her report on the pilot Index project in New York City, Reeves recorded that a bibliography on the American Indian plus seventy-five to one hundred drawings of Indian artifacts had been completed at the American Museum of Natural History, but that the work had been discontinued. She added, "The above material is in a form easy to continue without lost motion should a change of policy decide to include a folio on American Indian Design." Ruth Reeves, "Index of American Design Report," 12/5/35 (Archives of American Art (hereby referred to as AAA), microfilm number DC52 (hereby referred to by title of microfilm reel only): frame number 518 (hereby referred to by frame number only)).

These renderings survive without classification numbers at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. In January 1937, Reeves wrote a proposal entitled "Project for the Extension of the Index of American Design to Include an Art Record of the Americas," but her proposal was never put into action. (AAA DC52: 590).

seurship. These two attitudes dominated the field of decorative arts collecting from the nineteenth century through to the 1930s.

Americans were interested in collecting artifacts of their own past from as early as the 1790s, when the Massachusetts Historical Society was founded. In the early part of the nineteenth century individuals and historical societies amassed objects of historical importance in an attempt to preserve them as relics of the past. From 1850 on, a small number of private collectors acquired eighteenth century objects out of their personal, even eccentric, fascination with the early American period. The 1876 Centennial contributed to a more widespread popular nostalgia for the past, and objects particularly from the colonial period were increasingly in demand by "romantic, preservation-oriented Americans."¹

Around 1900 a new generation of collectors emerged, who were affluent, competitive, and eager to acquire. Consequently the monetary value of objects increased, and decorative arts collecting became fashionable because, in part, it was expensive.² Museums began mounting exhibitions of colonial silver and furniture. Supported by an increas-

¹Richard Saunders, "Collecting American Decorative Arts in New England: Part I: 1793-1876," Antiques 109 no. 5 (May 1976): 996-998 and 1003.

²Wendy Cooper, In Praise of America (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 7.

ing supply of literature on decorative arts, and by the professionalism of the collecting Museums, private collectors of the early twentieth century became connoisseurs of American decorative arts. Men such as Henry Francis Du Pont and Francis Garvin were acquiring furniture, silver, and other articles produced by sophisticated early American urban craftsmen; they sought objects that had been made for the wealthy stratum of colonial and early American society. These "high-style" objects conformed to established aesthetic standards of beauty and propriety when they were made, and they were collected later by individuals who developed a keen appreciation for those standards of beauty. The standards of the decorative arts connoisseurs of the 1920s and 1930s are difficult to surpass even today.¹

In addition to collections of decorative arts, the Index surveyed collections of early American folk art. Folk art collecting was a relatively new activity in the 1930s; its history and aesthetic philosophy were related to the development of the modernist art movement during the early decades of the twentieth century. Following the European example, American modernists were breaking painting and sculpture into its formal components: color, line, and form. They admired primitive art of especially the more exotic cultures for its simple and expressive formal power. They were attracted to the idea that

¹Ibid., p. 7.

primitive artists had not been subjected to the discipline of urban academic training, and therefore approached their art with spontaneity that academic artists lacked. Connected to this notion is the idea that anyone, regardless of training, had the potential to make important artwork.¹ These ideas are similar to those of the collectors of American decorative arts; both parties approached objects as artworks, not regarding the contexts in which they were created, and evaluating them in terms of universal aesthetic standards. The one major difference between the groups of collectors is that collectors of decorative arts sought, in general, "high-style" objects -- objects which were made deliberately to conform to the fashions of an elite class. Collectors of folk arts rejected that particular elitism; they paid attention to objects created by untrained and unsophisticated artisans. Yet they looked for, in those folk arts objects, the same artistic qualities which were present in modern art and fine arts objects.

The collecting of American folk art began with a small group of modernist artists in New York City: Robert

¹For a thorough and provocative discussion of the place of folk art in early twentieth century American art see Daniel Robbins, "Folk Sculpture without Folk," Herbert W. Wemphill Jr., ed., Folk Sculpture USA (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1976), pp. 11-12. See also Kenneth L. Ames, Beyond Necessity: Art in the Folk Art Tradition (New York: W.W. Norton for the Winterthur Museum, 1980), pp. 13-65.

Laurent, Elie Nadelman, and Samuel Halpert among others. Artist Henry Schnackenberg organized the first public exhibition of folk art at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1924, and by 1929 Halpert's wife, Edith Halpert, began selling folk art through her Downtown Gallery.¹

Attitudes of these collectors can be summed up in the words of Homer Eaton Keyes, in one of the first articles published specifically on folk art in Antiques. Keyes was enthusiastic about folk art's "individuality, decorative effectiveness, and . . . almost irresistible charm of straightforward simplicity." He particularly praised folk artists for their intuitive sense of design: their "native instinct for method."² Keyes was typical of many collectors who were inspired by the romantic notion that the folk artist's "native instinct" was sufficient to explain his motivations, his cultural context, and his social identity.

Holger Cahill was among the most articulate of this circle of early folk art admirers. Having been educated at Columbia University and the New School for Social Research, Cahill joined the staff of the Newark Museum

¹ Beatrice T. Rumford, "Uncommon Art of the Common People: A Review of Trends in the Collecting and Exhibiting of American Folk Art," Ian M. G. Quimby and Scott T. Swank, eds., Perspectives on American Folk Art (New York: W.W. Norton for the Winterthur Museum, 1980), pp. 15-16 and 25.

² Homer Eaton Keyes, "Some American Primitives," Antiques 12 no. 2 (August 1927): 118-121.

in 1922. There he organized two major exhibitions of folk art: "American Primitives: An Exhibition of Paintings of Nineteenth Century Folk Artists" (1930) and "American Folk Sculpture" (1931). In 1932 Cahill became director of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and organized the exhibition of folk art for which he is perhaps best known: "American Folk Art, the Art of the Common Man" (1932).¹ Also in the early 1930s Cahill worked alongside Edith Halpert, assisting Abby Aldridge Rockefeller in acquiring primitive paintings, weathervanes, pottery, shop signs and other early American artifacts. He acquired similar objects for his own collection. Through Halpert, Cahill was acquainted with the circle of modernist artists in New York who were collecting folk art.²

In 1932 Cahill wrote that folk or primitive art referred to the "sincere childlike expressions" of untutored common people. Folk art, he continued, is based on feeling: "It goes straight to essentials of art, rhythm, design, balance, proportion, which the folk artist feels instinctively." Furthermore:

. . . many folk artists were true artists and so

¹O'Connor, Art for the Millions, op. cit., pp. 272-273; Rumford, op. cit., pp. 23-39. See also Josephine Herbst, "A Year of Disgrace," Saul Bellow and Keith Botsford, eds., The Noble Savage 3 (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1961), p. 128-160.

²Rumford, op. cit., p. 23.

everything they had to say in the plastic mediums has an individuality, a forthright intensity, and a sincere and direct attempt to penetrate the subject which is seldom met with in the work of secondary professional artists.

Like Keyes, Cahill admired what he perceived to be the native instinct of the folk artist. He evaluated objects on the basis of their artistic strength, and, like the modernists, valued it because of its intangible artistic spirit: in his words, its "genuine art quality." Making a connection between "native instinct" and the native artistic tradition, Cahill wrote that a fuller understanding of folk art would give Americans "a firmer belief in the vitality of the American tradition."¹

¹Holger Cahill, "Folk Art: It's Place in the American Tradition," Parnassus 4 no. 3 (March 1932): 2-4.

CHAPTER II

IDEAS OF THE ADMINISTRATORS

The idea for an Index of American Design began with Ruth Reeves and the New York Public Library's Picture Collection. The Picture Collection is a file of illustrations and photographs arranged by subject matter. It was set up in 1915 to be used by educators, advertisers, historians, and others who needed pictorial references.¹ By the 1930s this collection was used frequently by artists researching American themes for federally funded mural projects. In the spring of 1935, Reeves, an artist and textile designer, was using the Picture Collection to research a job she was doing for a pottery manufacturer. In a series of letters written fifteen years later Reeves described how she formulated an idea for a published collection of American design images through discussions she had at the library with another artist, Henry Varnum Poor (who was researching a mural project), and with Ramona Javitz, director of the Picture Collection.²

¹n.s., "Report of the New York Public Library for 1915," Bulletin of the New York Public Library 20 no. 3 (March 1916): 229.

²Reeves to Nina Collier, 1950 (AAA NDA6 (Collier Papers): 64-72).

Reeves was to a large degree responsible for creating and defining the original Index project. Born in California in 1892, she attended the San Francisco School of Design and then came to New York to attend the Art Students League and the Pratt Institute. In 1923 she travelled to Paris where she attended the Academie Moderne for three years. She returned to New York and worked as a commercial artist, teacher and textile designer. Her paintings and textiles were being exhibited in New York City by 1930. In 1934 she was sent by the Carnegie Institute to Guatemala to research materials and techniques of native American textiles. By 1935, and back in New York City, Reeves had established herself as a designer and artist. She was exploring an interest in native American design. In addition, she worked as a consultant for Frances Pollak, who was in charge of the educational programs for New York's Emergency Relief Administration, and in this way she was aware of the potential that federally funded work-relief programs had for people in the arts.¹

There were two specific sources for Reeves's idea, which she herself acknowledged.² The first was the European pattern book, which she would have used frequently in her profession. Pattern books were published in England and Europe from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries.

¹There is little published information on Reeves's life. See Who's Who in America 4 (Chicago: Marquis -- Who's Who, Inc., 1968) and Reeves to Collier, *ibid.*

²Reeves to Collier, *ibid.*

The early books were compendia of artistic ornaments illustrated with hand-colored engravings. By the middle of the nineteenth century chromolithography emerged as the most popular technique for making illustrations. Like the engraving, the lithograph was made from an artist's drawing of the object or design. However, the lithographic medium was a cheaper way to produce illustrations than hand-colored or mechanically colored engravings. It permitted a high degree of detail; it allowed for a wide variety of colors to be used; and it insured uniformity of color, since the color was printed instead of individually applied by hand. Also in the middle of the nineteenth century the subject matter for pattern books was broadening from the fine arts to include decorative domestic arts, furniture, and, by the late nineteenth century, folk and primitive arts.¹

Pattern books were used in a very practical way by designers. They were collections of visual histories of design, perused for new design ideas; in addition, plates from these books were used to teach design to students.² For an

¹The pattern books cited by Index persons as models for the Index project were M. A. Racinet, L'Ornement Polychrome: Cent planches en couleurs oret argent contenant environ 2,000 motifs de tous les styles (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot, 1869-1873; English translation, London: H. Southeran, 1873); Helmuth Theodor Bossert, Ornament in Applied Art (Half title, Weyhe's Ornament) (New York: E. Weyhe, 1928).

²This information comes from discussions with Mrs. Helen Farr Sloan. Plates from a variety of pattern books, some of which have been partially colored with watercolor and crayon presumably by design students, and which were once the property of the Pratt Institute of Art, are in the collection of Mrs. Sloan.

index of American design, Reeves envisioned a collection of illustrations which would be based on objects of American origin. Like European pattern books she envisioned that the Index of American Design would be a practical tool for contemporary American designers and artists. Reeves believed that historical information should be included in the Index but that this aspect was secondary to the purely visual design content of the Index. In her first report on the just-established Index project in New York she wrote, "Accent to be on design rather than historical elements."¹

The book that Reeves used as a model for the Index was Bossert's Ornament in Applied Art, commonly called Weyhe's Ornament.² This book contains 122 color lithographs which reproduce over two thousand decorative motifs from civilizations all over the world. The lithographs were made from hand-colored photographs; the guiding principle behind this process was absolute fidelity to the design of the original object in terms of line, form, and color. Planning the Index of American Design as a work-relief project, Reeves proposed that artists be employed to make renderings of American decorative arts, which would then be the bases for lithographs. Weyhe's Ornament exemplified how lithography could be used for reproducing design images, meticulously and uniformly.

The second source which shaped Reeves's approach to an

¹Reeves, "Index of American Design Report," 12/5/35 (AAA DC52: 518-524).

²Bossert, Ornament in Applied Art, op. cit. See also Reeves to Collier, op. cit.

index of design was her work experience as a commercial artist for the newspaper, Women's Wear.¹ From 1918 until 1920 Reeves worked as lead draftsman with a group of artists making illustrations of common household items from the collections of local museums. She was working on an advertising project the purpose of which was to demonstrate how the holdings of local museums -- holdings of everyday artifacts from all over the world -- could inspire fresh designs for American industry. This advertising project was based on the assumption that common objects from other cultures, especially more primitive cultures, could inspire contemporary industrial and commercial design. The idea that Reeves carried over into the Index plan was based on this notion; Reeves's attitude toward design was that objects from the past held -- in and of themselves, regardless of the contexts in which they were created -- design value for contemporary artists.

At the New York Public Library's Picture Collection, Reeves and Ramona Javitz drafted an outline for an Index of American Design project. Reeves brought this plan to Frances Pollak who supported the proposed project because she saw it as a good way to employ commercial artists. In August of 1935, in the midst of the consolidation of state-run relief agencies into the centralized WPA, Reeves met with Holger Cahill, Jacob Baker, Harry Alsberg who was director of the Federal Writers Project, and others in Washington, D.C.

¹Reeves to Collier, *ibid*.

She presented the draft of the proposed project and she showed them a copy of Weyhe's Ornament to demonstrate how Index plates might be rendered.¹

By October a pilot project for the Index was initiated in New York under the direction of Pollak, and there was support from Cahill for an Index of national scope, to be created under the auspices of the newly created Federal Art Project. In October and November meetings were held in Washington; in December a central committee was set up to administer the Index on a national level. Reeves was appointed superintendent or national co-ordinator; Robert Hallowell and Nina Collier were assistants; Russell Parr was taken off the Federal Art Project staff and put on the Index as business manager and art director; and in January of 1936, Adolph Glassgold, who was a former curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and also involved with the American Union of Decorators and Craftsmen, joined the Index project as a supervisor.²

According to her own account of the earliest stage of the Index project, Reeves received only a lukewarm reception in Washington, when she first proposed the project. She wrote about this to Collier:

And one of the most ironical facts in this whole picture is, as you along with Jake [Baker] and

¹Ibid.

²Cahill to Bruce McClure and Jacob Baker, 12/13/35 (AAA DC53: 170); Cahill to McClure and Baker, 1/17/36 (AAA DC53: 173).

Henry [Alsberg] remember so well, that Cahill didn't even want to take on the Index; and, according to Jake, didn't until Jake made him; not did he ever get over Jake's making him take on you and me to start the project rolling on a country-wide scale.¹

However, Cahill's early memos regarding the Index project record his initial enthusiasm, though he was aware of its potential problems. As early as August he wrote, "This is a project which is extremely interesting to me. If we can do it well we can make a real contribution. If we cannot we had better leave it alone."²

Cahill was immediately concerned with the quality of the project -- not just the quality of the renderings, but the integrity of the project as a valuable contribution to the field of American decorative arts. To this end he tried to engage specialists:

A project of this kind needs the most expert direction. We would have to get people who know the field thoroughly, who live it, and who are experts. I know a number of such people, but of course we could not get them on a relief basis nor could we afford to hire them under our usual administrative set-up.³

Cahill's training as a curator and his personal love

¹Reeves to Collier, op. cit.

²Cahill to McClure, 8/27/35 (AAA DC53: 166).

³Ibid.

of folk art are responsible for his seemingly elitist approach to the Index project. He wanted the support of highly trained people in the field, and he wanted to select the "significant or beautiful examples,"¹ that is, the finest and most outstanding pieces, to represent the American design tradition. Cahill valued folk and decorative arts objects on the basis of their design or artistic content. He was less concerned with the circumstances under which they were created than he was with the objects in and of themselves. In this way he and Reeves were like-minded.

Cahill, as the director of the Federal Art Project, did not limit himself to an elitist approach to art. On the contrary, he was preoccupied with questions concerning the interrelationships between art and society. Underlying the creation of the Federal Art Project was his belief that the most active and fertile art traditions are those which are rooted in the experiences of a whole community. He wrote, "The organization of the Project has proceeded on the principle that it is not the solitary genius but a sound general movement which maintains art as a vital, functioning part of any cultural scheme." Further emphasizing the relationship of the artist with his audience Cahill wrote, ". . . where the general level of art production is high the artist is reaching publics whose standards of taste are equal to his

¹Holger Cahill, New Horizons in American Art (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 26.

performance. Great traditions of art must have great audiences."¹

In Cahill's eyes, the Index participated in what he called "the search for a useable American past in the arts." The Index would be "a wellspring to which workers in all the arts might return for a renewed sense of native traditions in design." Cahill felt that American decorative arts preserved more than just design; they embodied "fundamental human and cultural values" which linked past to present, and artists to society.²

The Index defined the American art tradition as a series of carefully selected objects made by a body of anonymous craftspeople: the "common man". These objects, Cahill felt, represented the unconventional side of American art traditions, but a side which was honest, sensitive, and vital, and which would reveal an unpretentious, and vigorous side of American culture. Even before becoming involved with the Federal Art Project Cahill wrote, "A fuller understanding of [folk art] will give us a perspective of American art history and a firmer belief in the enduring vitality of the American tradition."³

With the Federal Art Project Cahill hoped to integrate

¹ Ibid., p. 17; Cahill, "American Resources" in O'Connor, Art for the Millions, op. cit., p. 35.

² Idem, New Horizons, op. cit., pp. 24, 25, and 27.

³ Idem, "Folk Art, Its Place in the American Tradition," Parnassus 4 no. 3 (March 1932): 2 and 4.

popular or folk arts with fine arts, to establish one rich artistic tradition. The Index fit into this plan because it would bring the best of the arts of the "common man" to fine artists, designers, commercial artists, scholars, and the general public. In a more practical vein, the Index was a suitable project for the Federal Art Project because it was a means for employing artists skilled in reproducing objects. Drawing carefully selected forms, Cahill felt, would not only help maintain these artists' skills, but also teach them new skills, and inspire them with a sense of the integrity of their own artistic heritage.¹

The third major influence on the program of the Index, next to Reeves and Cahill, was Constance Mayfield Rourke. Rourke joined the Index project as a part-time editorial consultant in March 1936, on a salary paid by the American Council on Education. In July she assumed the full-time position of Editor for the Index and her salary of \$3,600. per year came out of the WPA Federal Art Project. Like Reeves, Rourke supervised State units and helped in the selection of materials. Rourke was responsible for the editorial outline of the Index; her job was to organize the project's aims, objectives, and philosophy to prepare both the Index staff and the general public for the work that was being done on the project.² Essentially Rourke was synthesizing the

¹Idem, New Horizons, op. cit., p. 26.

²Employment record, Constance Rourke, n.d. (WPA Federal Art Project Record Group 69 (hereby referred to as WPA RG69) Box 14. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

research that was done by each State unit into a larger more generalized picture of American design and culture.

By the time Rourke came to the Index she had written several books on American culture: Trumpets of Jubilee (1927) which was about popular historical figures P. T. Barnum and Henry Ward Beecher, and American Humor (1931), in which she explored American folk culture almost as an anthropologist would, with an interest in the mythologies and values of common Americans. The essence of her ideas on art and culture is summed up in this statement written in 1935:

. . . the problem of the American artist is a cultural problem, and it is only through a full appropriation of our cultural tendencies that the sound frame of native reference, which major painting requires, can be provided.¹

Like Cahill, Rourke believed that art production was closely related to social context, and that the best art would come out of a society well educated in its artistic heritage. Both writers felt that, in Rourke's words, "the natural interpenetration of the fine arts and practical arts had been broken by the recession of guilds and the rise of the small capitalist class;"² and that one of the positive

¹Constance Rourke, "American Art: A Possible Future," Magazine of Art 28 no. 7 (July 1935): 402.

²Ibid., p. 395; see also Cahill, New Horizons, op. cit., pp. 11 and 18-19.

qualities of the Index was that it would serve to re-integrate popular art with fine art, thus infusing fine arts production with a vigorous popular tradition in the decorative arts.

Cahill's involvement with the Index bridged two worlds: the world of the fine and folk arts collector, with its elitist evaluations of artworks, and the world of the social or cultural historian in which, as director of the Federal Art Project, he had power to encourage a broad range of art activity as well as to influence social attitudes toward art. Rourke approached the Index within the latter sphere, almost exclusively as a cultural historian. The Index for Rourke was a proving ground for establishing a fresh perspective on American culture. She in fact anticipated the need of her understanding of the Index project when she wrote in 1935:

A prodigious amount of work is still to be done in the way of unearthing defining and synthesizing our traditions, and finally in making them known through simple and natural means. Beneath this purpose must probably lie fresh reconstructions of our notion as to what constitutes culture, with a removal of ancient snobberies and with new inclusions.¹

After Rourke joined the Index she wrote that the Index had been planned to provide groundwork in American traditions for contemporary designers. She then diverged radically from

¹Rourke, *ibid.*, pp. 402-404.

Reeves's conception of the Index, and even from Cahill's, when she wrote that research would form the basis for the selection of Index materials.¹ More interested in the value of objects to reveal cultural ideals than in the artistic value of objects, Rourke wrote:

If deeply clarified and thoroughly oriented [folk arts objects] may have much to say . . . to the modern designer who is seeking traditions to use or to depart from. They have, of course, their great importance for the social historian, as a corrective for stereotyped views as to ways of living in earlier periods.²

Rourke's interest in the social application of the Index accounts for her emphasis on arts unique to specific regions of the United States. For example, on her trip through New England she was enthusiastic about the Shaker materials being recorded there, and she suggested that aspects of the nineteenth century whaling industry: figure-heads, sailors' knots, and scrimshaw work, which was localized in New Bedford and Nantucket, be recorded. Less concerned with the projects's purpose to employ commercial artists, or even Cahill's idea that the recording of fine forms would educate the artists and elevate their standards, Rourke advocated the use of photography as being an

¹Idem, "The Index of American Design," manuscript, 1937 (AAA 1107 (Cahill Papers): 1078-1097).

²Idem, "The Index of American Design," Magazine of Art 30 no. 1 (April 1937): 208).

accurate and efficient method for recording objects: "If [the whaling industry] portfolio is to go forward, photography would undoubtedly be the best medium for most of these materials, and I could not emphasize too strongly the desirability of having a photographer do the work who has a fine sense of intrinsic form and of design on the page."¹

Another aspect of Rourke's concern for the cultural contents of the Index's subject matter was her definition of an index of design as being "essential and basic sequences in form,"² sequence being as important as form. The concept of design as "form" was shared by Cahill and Reeves, both of whom desired pictures of whole objects rather than surface decoration, but Rourke most clearly articulated and developed the idea. The notion that the object itself, rather than decorative patterns on the object, reveals a design tradition diverges from the notion of design that was implicit in Reeves's primary model for the Index, the European pattern book. While some plates from these pattern books illustrate whole objects, furniture or jewelry for example, the predominant number of plates consist of bands of flat ornamentation copied by artists from various surfaces: ceramics, walls, paintings, and tapestries. The plates themselves are dense with elaborate surface decorations; the three-dimensionality of form which Rourke appreciated

¹Idem, Field Report, 7/25/36 (AAA DC52: 592).

²Idem, "The Index of American Design, Magazine of Art, op. cit., p. 210.

was secondary in these source books to rich two-dimensional "artistic" designs, designs that were originally made to conform to ideals of beauty and art.

Furthermore, Rourke's concept of culture was very different from the traditional concept of culture represented in these pattern books. Pattern books were produced under the traditional assumption that the finest examples of art represent the culture of a given age. Cahill's approach to culture was in line with this more conventional sense of culture. Cahill wanted to define American culture with the traditions and products of the "common man;" however, he made the same assumptions about folk traditions as he did about "culture" in the aristocratic sense; in his evaluation of both high culture and popular culture he looked for artistic genius. Under this conventional way of defining culture American folk art was especially attractive because it was evidence of an artistic spirit, indeed, a genius which transcended its common nature and became part of the native artistic tradition.

By contrast, Rourke was influenced by the growing fields of social sciences and anthropology when she defined "culture." She wrote:

The original use of the word culture contains its most far-reaching idea; culture is tillage, a fertile medium, a base or groundwork inducing germination and growth. Surely a culture is the sum of such growth in terms of expression.

Quoting anthropologist Ruth Benedict Rourke added, "A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action."¹ Folk arts traditions provided Rourke with access to the culture -- that is, the thoughts and values -- of American rural populations.² For Cahill and Reeves the object retained its central importance as evidence of culture, while for Rourke the ideas embodied in the object were of primary importance.

Despite these differences in approach Rourke and Cahill were similar in much of their thinking; one may reasonably assume that each was influenced by the other's ideas, particularly with regard to the Index project. Both were sympathetic to the need for a defined and "useable" American past for both artists and the general public. Both were concerned with rooting American art firmly in American culture and encouraging wide-spread and varied artistic activity. Both wanted to use the Index to re-evaluate American culture in terms of, in Rourke's words, "a fresh configuration."³

Rourke travelled frequently while on the Index project. She lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and when not on a field

¹Idem, Roots of American Culture and Other Essays, ed. and with a preface by Van Wyck Brooks (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), pp. 45-46 and 49.

²Ibid., p. 13.

³Ibid., p. 52.

trip, she often travelled between Michigan and New York or Washington D.C. to do research and meet with Index personnel. In June of 1937 she cut back her work time to ten days per month, because the demands of writing outside the Index were too great to sustain a full-time job. At this time she wrote to Cahill:

It would be impossible for me to put into words how strongly I feel about the importance of the Index. It seems to me basic for the future development of the arts in this country, and for a full understanding of our cultural and social history.¹

Rourke continued to work for the Index on a part-time consulting basis for six months and then was rudely surprised to learn that her appointment had been cut completely from the Index's budget, the result of a severe reduction of funds in January of 1938.²

¹Rourke to Cahill 6/29/37 (WPA RG69, Box 14. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

²Rourke to Thomas Parker, 2/6/38 (WPA RG69, Box 14. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

CHAPTER III
CHRONOLOGY

With the success of the pilot Index project in New York city, and with support from the Federal Art Project, the Index was launched on a national scale in December, 1935. In January, the Federal Art Project issued a manual of instructions for the Index which incorporated both Reeves's and Cahill's ideas in its introduction:

There is no single comprehensive collection of pictorial data on American design comparable with the great European classics in the field. With a collection like that of the projected Index of American Design, typical examples of an indigenous American character will be made available for study.¹

The "European classics" refer to pattern books such as Weyhe's Ornament, while the notion that the Index would present an "indigenous American character" stemmed from Cahill's desire to establish a useable American past in the arts.

¹Works Progress Administration, "Supplement No. 1 to the Federal Art Project Manual: Instructions for Index of American Design," January 1936, p. 1.

The manual established guidelines for the selection of objects, excluding the "vast field of Indian arts and crafts," and setting 1900 as the cut-off date for Index subject matter. The manual suggested subject groupings within the field of "domestic and household arts," and regional crafts; it then recommended choosing "objects which, because of excellence of design or workmanship, have enriched American life in the past."¹

In addition, the manual included instructions for the proper running of the Index project in each State. The Index was especially well-suited to the administrative structure of the Federal Art Project. The central Index office in Washington was made up of Reeves, Hallowell, Parr, Collier, and in January, Glassgold. Together with Cahill, Parker, Baker, and Alsberg, the Washington staff decided on the project's overall structure; what their principle objectives were, what form the renderings would take, what kind of research would be done, and what areas of design would be covered. Field supervisors Collier, Reeves, and later Rourke and Glassgold, went out from Washington to help Federal Art Project administrators organize Index units on the State level. The January manual, plus two supplementary manuals issued in March, also guided State directors in setting up Index units.

The balance between the objectives of the Washington Index staff and the desires of local administrators was

¹Ibid., p. 2.

crucial to the success of the Index.¹ Centralized control over the production of renderings was essential for the plan to publish Index portfolios. Although there were States, "notoriously New York and Massachusetts, who hold on to their plates as if they were the wisdom teeth of St. Peter,"² each State was instructed to send final renderings to Washington, where they were screened to insure that they were of high uniform quality and that the research being done followed the national plan. The Washington staff, at least in theory, maintained very high standards for accepting renderings, and in fact frequently returned renderings to State units to be retouched or redone.³ In addition, the

¹Federal Art projects could not be set up in any State without the approval of the State's WPA administrator. In the case of the Index project this was a particular problem; the Index could not provide the States' sponsors with any tangible product because the renderings were to remain federal property. One task of the Washington Index staff was to help "sell" the Index idea to State administrators. See Cahill, introduction to Christensen, op. cit., p. xiii, and Reeves Field Report, 3/26/36 (WPA RG69, Box 4. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

²Glassgold to Rourke, 8/1/36 (AAA DC52: 620).

³Lincoln Rothschild described how renderings produced in New York City were reviewed by the New York staff of supervisors before being sent out to Washington: "The Index of American design of the WPA Federal Art Project," Francis V. O'Connor, ed., The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institute Press, 1972), pp. 188-190.

In December of 1936 Glassgold returned a shipment of Index renderings to Eve Alsmann Fuller, State Art Director of the Florida project, with the following message: "I wonder if you couldn't give these plates your personal attention and weed out those that are intrinsically poor design and have your artists redraw those items which merit recording." He forwarded a package of sample plates to be used by the artists, and he suggested that "Index artists be made to understand that the Index is meant to be a scholarly, artistic,

ultimate goal of portfolios dictated the need for centralized control over the kind of research that was to be done in conjunction with the renderings. The obvious reasons for this were to avoid duplication of efforts, and to standardize the work that was being produced.

By May, Index units had been set up in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Louisiana, Maryland, New Mexico, California and the District of Columbia. The first exhibition of renderings was held at the Federal Art Project Gallery in New York City and was enthusiastically reviewed in the New York Times: "The material from New Mexico and Massachusetts was especially brilliant although the New York project was the backbone of the show with a great deal of thoroughly competent work."¹ This was the first of many good reviews that the Index received, and by August Glassgold was writing, "You no doubt realize that the Index has come to be widely acclaimed and publically approved. In fact, it is one of the strongest phases of the Federal Art Project, . . ."²

There was also much enthusiasm within the project itself. The Index not only provided work, but it prompted in its workers a feeling of commitment to the value of what

workman-like program and that the portfolios of plates eventually to be formed must equal or exceed in quality the finest publication in design ever produced." Glassgold to Fuller, 12/28/36 (AAA 1107(Cahill Papers): 1050).

¹Unsigned review, New York Times Magazine, 6/7/36 (AAA DC53: 218).

²Glassgold to Reeves, 8/4/36 (AAA DC53: 226).

the project was trying to accomplish. One Index worker, reflecting on her experience during that first year, wrote, "Many of us, even at this point, would drop everything to go to work on the Index as we saw it. We all look back on it as -- for a year -- the best and most stimulating job we ever had."¹

The goal that guided the production of renderings was the eventual publication of portfolios. Washington supervisors with the advice of local "experts" determined what portfolios would be done in each region. For example, Reeves, with Cahill's approval, decided that textiles would be one portfolio that could be started immediately in Massachusetts under the able guidance of Gertrude Townsend and Suzanne Chapman, both at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. During the first years of operation Cahill put off the actual publication date because he wanted research and rendering work to be as complete as possible. Under pressure from Baker to produce several lithographed portfolios, probably to help insure more funding for the project, Cahill responded, "I don't believe we can do this job by June 30th, except in a very sketchy way. We must be careful not to stultify ourselves by poor works."²

However, Index workers proceeded as though publication was likely to occur at any minute. Essays and introductions

¹Phyllis Crawford Scott to Cahill, 3/28/49 (AAA NDA3 (Scott Papers): 170).

²Cahill to Baker, 4/7/36 (AAA DC53: 206).

were written and submitted to Washington for approval, and renderings were made in accordance with the outlines for each portfolio.

From the beginning Cahill acknowledged the enormous costs that publication would require. In 1937 he wrote that plans for publication were "in the wings," optimistically adding, "once the material is recorded and assembled for publication, I am sure that we will have many sponsors to undertake the cost of publication."¹

By 1938 discussions regarding publication took on a more urgent character. In Index unit in New York contacted several commercial publishers to discuss formats and methods for reproducing the renderings.² Apparently the Boston unit published a portfolio on crewel embroidery sometime in 1938, though the details of publication and the whereabouts of surviving copies are unknown at this date.³ Some Index units looked to the silkscreen units within the Federal Art Project as a possible way to publish renderings.

In 1939 the American Council of Learned Societies provided a \$1,475.00 grant toward making a series of 35mm

¹Cahill to Helen Kay, 3/30/37 (AAA 1107 (Cahill Papers): 1063).

²Lawrence Morris to Parker, 4/11/38 and Parker to Morris, 4/19/38 (AAA DC54: 115-116).

³See Cahill to Richard Morrison, 12/9/38 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts Correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.)

color filmstrips of Index renderings.¹ This fostered a flurry of activity as supervisors tried to complete and standardize the work that had been done to that point. At least seventy-five filmstrips consisting of about thirty pictures plus accompanying text and lecture notes, were prepared by Index personnel over the following year and a half.

In August of 1939 the WPA underwent a major reorganization, and States took over administrative control of the work-relief arts projects. The Index project continued to operate with its central Washington office, but staff and resources were cut severely. The quality of renderings that continued to be produced was still very high, and even with the financial setbacks, project workers were optimistically searching for publishers and sponsors.

In 1940 Benjamin Knotts succeeded Glassgold as national co-ordinator for the Index. It was becoming increasingly clear that the Federal Art Project would be terminated, along with the other arts projects under the WPA. In November of that year Archibald MacLeish, who was then Head Librarian of the Library of Congress, approached Cahill and discussed having the Index material deposited at the Library of Congress.² Cahill deferred, and through the next year,

¹Cahill to Morrison, 3/31/39 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts Correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

²Confidential Memo, Cahill to Paul Edwards, 11/15/40 (AAA 1107(Cahill Papers): 1065-1068).

without disturbing the work that was continuing to be done on the Index, Cahill tried to find a sponsor for the Index who would publish the portfolios and sustain the project for as long as possible. Through Florence Kerr, Assistant Commissioner of the WPA, he approached Eleanor Roosevelt with the FDR Library in mind as a sponsor. Though President Roosevelt himself showed interest in the project, the Library did not accept the Index material.¹

During this period, MacLeish actively pursued the Index. Cahill, however, was reluctant to turn it over to the Library of Congress, believing that a better repository would be one where the renderings would be exhibited frequently and cared for as works of art.²

In March of 1942 the Index project was terminated. Instructions were issued for the "orderly assembly, inventorying, documentation and preservation" of Index materials.³ After many negotiations, Florence Kerr, at Cahill's recommendation, asked the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to receive the Index as a loan from the federal government. According to Cahill, "the placing of the Index in the Metropolitan Museum would have the decided advantage of making it accessible to a large public which is interested

¹President Roosevelt to Florence Kerr, 11/22/41 (AAA 1107 (Cahill Papers): 172).

²Kerr to H. O. Hunter, n.d. (WPA RG69, 211.55. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

³"Instructions," 3/10/42 (WPA RG69, 211.155. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

in using material of this type."¹ There were probably other reasons for Cahill's wanting the Index to be located in New York. The New York Index unit was the most active of all the units. It was a major center for research, and the home of many enthusiastic artists and collectors who were directly involved with the Index. In addition, Cahill was personally acquainted with the director of the Metropolitan Museum, Francis Henry Taylor. In his previous post as director of the Worcester Art Museum, Taylor admired Cahill's ideas and fully supported his efforts as Federal Art Project director. It is reasonable to assume that Cahill would have been assured of Taylor's personal interest in the Index at the Metropolitan Museum.

The Metropolitan was pleased with the allocation, and immediately set about utilizing the Index material. Within the first seven months a staff of three had standardized the record-keeping system, mounted eight exhibitions of Index plates, organized twelve exhibits for national circulation, and begun preparations for the publication of a portfolio of Pennsylvania German designs which was to be illustrated with multi-color silkscreen designs adapted from the original renderings. Six other portfolios were planned for future publication.²

¹ Benjamin Knotts to Kerr, 5/7/42 (AAA 1107 (Cahill Papers): 978-992).

² Horace H. F. Jayne to Kerr, 2/27/43 (WPA RG69, 211.55. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

MacLeish, however, was not satisfied with the WPA's allocation. He believed that title to the Index should belong to a Washington agency. His reasons for this were not clearly defined. He may have wanted the Index simply for possession's sake alone; as Florence Kerr assessed the situation: "The gentleman has a bad case of the 'gimmees'".¹

MacLeish himself wrote:

My concern with the entire matter is based . . . upon the fact that the Index constitutes, as I have said, an important part of the American cultural record and that it should therefore be added at some appropriate time to the government's holdings of similar materials.²

MacLeish's understanding of the Index as a "cultural record" may have led him to maintain that its proper repository be a library. Cahill himself considered several libraries for the Index, but he chose the Metropolitan Museum because his feeling was that the Index was an artistic product. These two roles that the Index played -- as record of artistic heritage, and as artistic heritage in and of itself -- characterized the project through the course of its operation, and even at the very end the ambivalent status of the Index was never completely resolved.

¹Kerr to Hunter, n.d. (WPA RG69, 211.55. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

²MacLeish to General Fleming, Director, Federal Works Agency, 3/2/43 (WPA RG69, 211.155. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

MacLeish eventually conceded that the Index was "essentially museum material."¹ He continued to feel strongly that Washington was a more suitable place for the project, and suggested that it be brought to the National Gallery of Art. In May, MacLeish's petitions were granted; with the liquidation of the entire WPA imminent, General Fleming, director of the Federal Works Agency, decided to make the National Gallery the final depository of the Index. He notified the Metropolitan Museum of his decision, and offered them custody of the Index for five more years, before sending the material to Washington. The director of the Metropolitan, Francis Taylor, declined Fleming's offer, and decided to send the entire Index project to Washington by the first of the year, 1944.²

¹MacLeish to Fleming, 4/23/43 (WPA RG69, 211.551. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

²Fleming to Francis Taylor, June 1943, and transcript of telephone conversation between David Finley, Director, National Gallery of Art, and Fleming, 9/13/43 (WPA RG69, 211.551. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

CHAPTER IV
THE INDEX AND THE COLLECTORS

One of the most difficult tasks the Index supervisors faced was to convince collectors and the interested public of its authority in the decorative arts field. To this end, the supervisors sought the support of well-established and distinguished collecting institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

A museum could provide the Index with a number of valuable resources. First, it could give Index artists permission to record whole collections of materials, collections which had already survived the aesthetic judgements of its accessions committee. Second, museum staff could give advice and information on various aspects of decorative arts, plus they could steer Index personnel to local private collectors. By association, then, a museum could lend an air of authority to the Index by giving the Index access to its collections and staff experts. In addition, the museum could lend the Index gallery space, thus bestowing upon the Index a "stamp of approval" in the eyes of the general public, by sponsoring exhibitions of Index plates.

In practice, the degree of museum support varied from

unit to unit, and State to State. Louis Block reported on the activities at the Metropolitan Museum of Art:

. . . workers are scattered through the American wing, making drawings of furniture, textiles, silver, pewter, etc. The Museum has provided the Index workers with a room near the museum's restaurant.

. . . There is very little daylight in this room. The artists working in the galleries usually work with their drawing boards resting on their knees. They work in odd corners of corridors and rooms, and as a general thing, the light is very bad.¹

However, the poor working conditions described here stem not as much from the Metropolitan Museum's apparent indifference to the project as from internal problems within the Index itself. Block identifies the problem:

It is sufficiently established that one of the underlying reasons for the low morale and lack of interest from artist personnel stems from the original idea that the Index was to be a catch-all from other divisions. This fact is not unknown to the artists, and, I believe, many of the troubles thus far encountered can be attributed to this bad start.²

¹Louis Block to Audrey McMahan, 3/3/37 (AAA NDA 18 (Block Papers): 1022-1025).

²Ibid.

Block goes on to say that in order to succeed, the Index administration must convince its own workers that their contributions were worthwhile and important.

This state of affairs suggests that the Index personnel could have received more active support -- better working conditions and perhaps the active interest of the Metropolitan's staff -- had they been more confident of their goals, and more professional in their approach.

Senior project supervisor Charles O. Cornelius was more successful in boosting the interests of the Index by relying on his experience as former Associate Curator of American Art at the Metropolitan Museum. A field report of July 1936 records that private collectors were "violently opposed" to having renderings of objects from their collections reproduced in portfolio form, "for political reasons and also for fear of having their rare items reproduced by manufacturers." The first reason, the report states, would be overcome by an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum which would put a "seal of quality" on the renderings. The second reason would be smoothed over by Cornelius, who "expects to spend part of his vacation with Mr. [Henry Francis] Du Pont and will certainly win him over.¹

¹Edith Halpert Field Report, 7/26/36 (AAA DC52: 97-101). This problem was further dealt with by the following policy statement:
All drawings will be made available for study, but none of them will be given for publication or reproduction without the specific consent of the owner of the object. In no case will our drawings furnish specifications for manufacturers.
"Exhibition of Index Plates at the U.S. National Museum,"

In this case it is clear that Cornelius, who was an Index staff supervisor, used the Metropolitan's position, and his own authority as a former Metropolitan Museum curator, to persuade private collectors of the seriousness and validity of the Index project.

The situation in Boston, at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, illustrates the interaction between the Index and the museum in a different way. Richard C. Morrison, director of the Federal Art Project in Massachusetts, was educated at Harvard and studied with Paul Sachs, director of the Fogg Museum.¹ He therefore would have been well aware of the power of such institutions as the Fogg and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to influence public opinion. Eager to establish a connection with the Museum of Fine Arts, Morrison proposed holding an exhibition of Shaker material there where, he reasoned, it would be accessible to project artists.² It is possible that Morrison felt that the Shaker material would receive a stamp of approval at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts which might then be transferred to the Index project itself. This plan was never carried out; at a meeting with the director of the Museum of Fine Arts Morrison was told that despite "tremendous" interest in the project, the Museum was "booked up until next

(AAA DC54:556).

¹Charles Sawyer, "The Art Projects in New England: Some Recollections," DeCordova Museum, By the People, For the People: New England (Lincoln: DeCordova Museum, 1977), p. 14.

²Collier Field Report, 2/13/36 (AAA DC52: 9).

Christmas."¹ However, Morrison continued to seek ways to cultivate the support of the Museum of Fine Arts.

The connection that resulted in the most support for the Index project was made by Nina Collier of the Washington Index staff, through the suggestion of one of Cahill's numerous contacts in New England, Susan Nash. Using Nash's name, Collier asked Gertrude Townsend of the Museum's textile department for an interview. Gordon Smith, who was then being interviewed as a candidate for director of the Index project in Massachusetts, and Collier met Townsend at the Museum. Collier reported the results of this meeting to Cahill:

Townsend granted an hour interview. Her first reaction was naturally somewhat sceptical, and throughout she stressed the fact that any intelligent recording of the fabrics would necessarily have to be directed by someone who knew all about weaving, the history of textiles, the best method of presentation and record, and who was at the same time a good organizer.²

Townsend seriously considered all aspects of Collier's proposal during this interview. She showed Collier the working area and examples from the Boston Museum's collection

¹Reeves Field Report, 3/20/36 (AAA DC52: 530).

²Collier Field Report, 2/25/36 (AAA DC52: 15-33).

of textiles.¹ She took a great deal of interest in the proposed methods for reproducing the renderings:

Miss Townsend was frankly critical and pointed out that unless one knows exactly what form the reproductions will be printed in with all the limitations that there are in publishing colors, etc., it seems a waste of time to promiscuously produce textile plates.

She also suggested that the first step in such a project would be to spend several months to a year touring New England to determine what the project could and should encompass. To this suggestion Collier parenthetically noted, "Nothing daunted, Mr. Smith and myself tried to find out what she thought we could actually do in a more immediate fashion, and gradually we were able to cull some valuable information." Despite her frank criticisms and scepticism, Townsend's interest did seem to be stirred by Collier's proposals; Collier records one note of enthusiasm: "Miss Townsend felt that the whole embroidery field would be particularly interesting to deal with."²

Three days later Collier reported on an "all day

¹Collier wrote, "The room is large and contains long tables where students can reproduce the work. During our visit a number of people were engaged in making watercolor renderings." (Ibid.) This indicates that the idea of making renderings of textiles was not a new one to Townsend. The "students" referred to were probably design students from the Boston Museum School.

²Ibid.

session" during which she, Gordon Smith, who had by then been appointed director of the Massachusetts Index, Charles Flato, who was head of research, and Frank Sterner, State Art Director of the Federal Art Project, hammered out the policy, scope and general direction that the Index project would take in Massachusetts. At this meeting it was formally decided that the Massachusetts Index would concentrate on textiles and Shaker materials. At Townsend's suggestion Smith engaged artist Suzanne Chapman as a non-relief supervisor of textile renderings.¹

Collier returned to Washington in early March, and Ruth Reeves travelled up to Boston from Washington to continue to oversee the development of the project. Reeves noted a distinct change in Townsend's attitude in her first field report:

One cannot explain in words how things happen, but the long and short of it is that she [Townsend] eventually thawed and is with us, and all our problems, hook, line, and sinker, so to speak.²

Reeves then had a "very long session" with Townsend and Chapman, discussion viable techniques for recording textiles which would most successfully convey not only shape and texture but exact color as well.³

¹Collier Field Report, 2/28/36 (AAA DC52: 15-33);
Idem, 3/3/36 (AAA DC52: 33).

²Reeves Field Report, 3/17/36 (AAA DC52: 530).

³Idem, 3/20/36 (AAA DC52: 528).

Association with the Museum of Fine Arts benefitted the Massachusetts Index in several ways. Collier, Reeves and Smith relied on Townsend's experience with textiles when they were defining the scope of the textile section. Townsend's professionalism met with a similar seriousness of intent on the part of the Index supervisors which, in turn, was shared by the Index artists. The result of this was the production of plates of superior quality plus the formation of a core of artists whose work influenced other Index artists throughout the country. It was the combination of serious-minded individuals which fostered an atmosphere of mutual respect, which contributed to the successful interaction of Index goals and museum priorities, and which helped lead to the production of plates which, in Constance Rourke's words, "could not be bettered."¹

While the association with the Museum of Fine Arts is, to a certain extent, responsible for the superior quality of renderings, the exhibition of these plates at another well-established and authoritative institution, the Fogg Museum of Art of Harvard University, enhanced the Index project's activities in the public's eyes, and in the eyes of local collectors and authorities.

In January 1937, plans were made to exhibit one hundred and fourteen Index plates at the Fogg Museum. Morrison was keenly interested in the prestige that would come the

¹Rourke Field Report, 7/12/36 (AAA DC52: 598).

Index's way through such an exhibition not only through the implicit support of Paul Sachs, "the severest of critics," but also through the presence of Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the opening of the exhibition.¹ In fact, Morrison was so intent upon acting within the elitist context of the museum world that he did not invite the artists who did the renderings to the opening, thus provoking this angry telegram addressed to Cahill:

Do you condone Morrison's refusal to invite twenty-two Index of American Design artists to private opening exhibit of their work Fogg Museum to which 1000 socialites have been asked? We believe snobbish undemocratic action affront to artist and contrary to spirit of New Deal. Not too late to rectify.²

Despite this note of dissatisfaction the exhibition was a success; one critic raved about the "clever paintings almost indistinguishable from the actual objects . . . technically little masterpieces in color and drawing."³ Within the Federal Art Project the exhibition also enjoyed acclaim:

¹Series of letters between Morrison and Frederick Robinson of the Fogg Museum, 1/9/37 to 2/18/37 (AAA NDA 1: 231-261). See also WPA Federal Art Project, Index of American Design: Exhibition: January 27 - February 10, 1937 (Cambridge, Fogg Museum of Art, n.p., 1937).

²"A Group of Artists" to Cahill, 1/23/37 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts Correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

³Irma Whitney, "Fogg Museum Has U.S. Exhibit," Boston Traveller, January, n.d. (AAA NDA 1: 247).

Morrison really deserves a rousing cheer for the way he put on his Index show at the Fogg. It's the most beautifully displayed exhibition of the project material I've ever seen . . . I spent several hours at the show yesterday and while I was there the people came flocking in like visitors to a free concert.¹

The success of the Index in Massachusetts resulted in part from the successful interaction of the project and local collecting institutions. The high standards of, for example, Townsend at the Museum of Fine Arts, and Sachs at the Fogg, inspired Index workers to apply high standards to their own work. In addition, the association that was made between the Index plates and the Fogg Museum, by the 1937 exhibition, was helpful in establishing the Index as a serious and worthwhile endeavor in the eyes of the general public.

In addition to the support of public collecting institutions, the Index depended upon the cooperation of private collectors to provide objects and information to be included in the Index. One problem the Index faced was that collectors were likely to look askance as a hastily organized federally-funded work-relief project, lacking experience and authority in the decorative arts field. The project dealt with public dubiousness in two ways. First, as discussed above, it

¹Emanuel Benson to Thomas Parker, 2/7/37 (AAA DC52: 490).

established links with already established museums and other collecting societies. Second, through a network of personal friends, acquaintances, and professional associates, Cahill and the Index supervisors persuaded many collectors and noted authorities to help the Index staff. The relationship between the Index unit in Massachusetts and private collectors Edward and Faith Andrews illustrates some of the pitfalls as well as the rewards of the Index's efforts to gain support from private collectors.

The Andrews lived in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where they collected and wrote about Shaker arts and crafts. At an exhibition of their collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art, late in 1935, they were approached, probably by Audrey McMahon, then director of the College Art Association's work relief program for artists and also director of New York City's Federal Art Project.¹ Edward Andrews, hearing about the nascent Index project, responded positively to suggestions made by both New York and Boston units. By February, 1936, Cahill was authorized to employ him under non-relief status, for \$150.00 per month, to assist the Massachusetts Index in compiling a Shaker portfolio.²

Index administrators were enthusiastic about the proposed Shaker portfolio. Morrison immediately began planning for an exhibition of Shaker materials somewhere in Boston and

¹Edward Andrews to Henry Alsberg, 1/10/36 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.)

²Jacob Baker to Cahill and Bruce McClure, 2/18/36 (AAA DC 52: 762).

preferably at the Museum of Fine Arts.¹ Collier summed up the reasons why she felt the Shaker material was well-suited for the Index in her report to Cahill:

The Shaker field is comparatively unknown and, after my brief introduction to its craft examples, seems to me to be extremely interesting. The exquisite simplicity of the furniture . . . and the use of plain surfaces is all very inspiring to a modern designer. Then of course there is the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are available to do the job.²

While Collier pointed out the relationship between Shaker design and contemporary design, Cahill himself was attracted to the "severe simplicity and functionalism" of Shaker design, relating it to seventeenth century arts and crafts of the Puritans. Further, Cahill believed that Shaker crafts were "one of the remarkable fields of American indigenous design."³

Edward Andrews, at Collier's suggestion, sent Cahill a two-month and a six-month plan for getting the Shaker portfolio started. Andrews divided Shaker objects into seven categories, proposing that selected examples from any one group be done in two months, while "six months would give

¹Collier Field Report, 2/13/36 (AAA DC52: 9).

²Idem, 2/18/36 (AAA DC52: 15).

³Cahill to Morrison, 12/7/35 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

time to sample the field, or do one or two subjects conscientiously."¹ Cahill answered, "I would say by all means take furniture to start, and make as good a portfolio as possible with that. Later we can take up the other phases of Shaker work."²

By the end of April three artists and one photographer, along with Reeves from the Washington staff, travelled to Pittsfield to record Shaker furniture. Mrs. Andrews brought textiles and smaller objects like boxes and baskets to Boston where Index artists who were trained at the Museum recorded them in a studio space behind the Federal Art Gallery.³ By early May Reeves sent a detailed prospectus of the Shaker portfolio to Cahill. She projected that the portfolio would contain over ninety photographs and color reproductions of furniture, textiles, costumes, small miscellaneous objects, plus photographs not directly relating to design, for example, photographs of hands and feet operating a loom, and photographs of Shaker houses, in the Shaker settlements of Lebanon and Hancock. Reeves was specific regarding the contents of the portfolio, even planning that the cover would resemble Shaker sheets: "coarse natural-colored linen." and that the end papers would be taken

¹Andrews to Cahill, 2/28/36 (AAA DC53: 197).

²Cahill to Andrews, 3/9/36 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

³Reeves Field Report, 4/22/36 (AAA DC52: 548).

from a rendering of a Shaker woven textile.¹

Progress on the Shaker project accelerated quickly from the time of its inception for two reasons. First, because the Index project, like the entire Federal Art Project, was funded by Congressional appropriations, there was a constant threat particularly in the beginning that funds would be cut. The immediate production of plates was critical to demonstrate the value of the project for employing artists.² Second, the Index was aware that the Andrews were trying to publish a book on Shaker material through the Yale Press, and Index supervisors wanted to anticipate that publication by coming out with their portfolio first.³

However, the first suggestion of problems appeared in a field report by Reeves:

As Mr. Morrison may have told you, the Andrews are very reluctant lately to give us what we want in the way of photographing their furniture. We have already sent down two photographers both of whom, according to the Andrews, did not quite fit the bill . . . the Andrews have been consciously vague and directionless, yet they resent direction or suggestion from either the photographer or

¹Reeves Outline of Shaker Portfolio, 5/6/36 (AAA DC53: 231); see also Reeves Field Report, 4/7//36 (AAA DC52:525).

²Cahill to Jacob Baker, 4/3/36 (AAA DC53: 207-208); see also Baker to Cahill, 4/7/36 (AAA DC53: 206) and Collier Field Report, 2/18/36 (AAA DC52: 15).

³Reeves Field Report, 4/17/36 (AAA DC52: 513).

or Smith or myself. It is small wonder that we want to make provision with other Shaker material in the event that the Andrews sabotage us too much in our race for time.¹

At this time, Reeves and Smith were contacting the Hancock settlement in Pittsfield, and other Shaker settlements in Burlington, Vermont, Canterbury, New Hampshire, and New Lebanon, New York. Rourke was instrumental in securing the cooperation of Charles Sheeler, who owned a notable collection of Shaker pieces in Connecticut. Two Massachusetts artists, Alfred Smith and Ann Ger, were sent to Ridgefield Connecticut to record some of Sheeler's collection.²

By July the difficulties seemed to have been smoothed over. Reeves reported that the Andrews were satisfied with the third photographer, Noel Vicentini, who was sent to Pittsfield from New York City. Furthermore, Reeves wrote, "the Andrews are simply falling over backwards trying to help Miss Twining and me" ³

The reason for this change in attitude, according to Reeves, was that a grant for the publication of the Andrews's book was being held up. Discussing the root of the problem Reeves reported:

¹Reeves Field Report, 5/23-24/36 (AAA DC52: 551).

²Idem, 6/17/36 (AAA DC52: 564).

³Idem, 6/22/36 (AAA DC52: 568).

The important thing is to keep the Andrews sure that this government publication on Shaker craft will be done authoritatively from point of view of ethnology and aesthetics . . . I have assured them that the United States Government would not publish this Shaker portfolio, or any of the Index portfolios for that matter, unless they stacked up with similar publications got out by the Museum of Modern Art or the Metropolitan . . . There is no doubt about it, the Andrews have not up until now been on their toes for the Government because they didn't think we would do a bang-up publication job, what with relief artists and no assurance from anyone that the Index wouldn't look like the Department of Agriculture publications of American flora and fauna.¹

Apparently the Index staff -- artists and supervisors together -- were able to convince the Andrews of the value of their activities. Reeves telegraphed Cahill to relay how pleased the Andrews were when they saw the first sixty-four renderings of Shaker material,² and though the Andrews remained somewhat vague, they did become more cooperative. At the end of July the Andrews threw a party in honor of

¹Ibid.

²Telegram, Reeves to Cahill, 7/3/36 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

the work of the Federal Art Project, signalling to Reeves a "new respect on the part of the Andrews for the Federal Art Project's presentation of this Shaker material."¹

The "truce" did not last long; in August Glassgold sent this confidential warning to Reeves:

Rumor has it that much of the material in the Andrews' collection, in fact most of it, is not theirs but only being entrusted to them for preservation. It is the belief of some that these things still belong to the Shakers, that upon the death, some years ago, of some important Brethren, in the absence of a will, or through some legal oversight, this material had come into the hands of the Andrews who are now, by some, being accused of exploiting this trust to their advantage.

If this is so, it would produce a large disagreeable stench if the Government were in any way associated with a scandal and accused of aiding or conniving in what may prove to be shady practice.²

Relations crumbled from this point on. Glassgold reported: "My stay in Boston was devoted to a seemingly endless and futile discussion of the Shaker situation. Smith and Morrison seem unable to cope with the Andrews who have decided to sit tight without work or deed, mean-

¹Reeves Field Report, 7/25/36 (AAA DC53: 230).

²Glassgold to Reeves, 8/4/36 (AAA DC53: 226).

while accepting government checks." Glassgold went on to outline how the Andrews felt resentful that the Index had been recording Shaker objects, particularly from Sheeler's collection, without consulting them first. Because the Andrews did not have complete authority, Glassgold reported, they refused to cooperate with the project at all.¹

Relations deteriorated even further, until by mid-October both Andrews were taken off the project's payroll, and the costumes and textiles borrowed for Index artists in Boston were rather unceremoniously returned to Pittsfield.²

Index artists continued to make renderings of Shaker materials though not from the Andrews's collection. In January Rourke and Morrison, armed with a few choice renderings, travelled to the Shaker community in New Lebanon, New York, and received permission to send two Index artists there to record furniture and textiles.³ However, the drive behind the Shaker portfolio seems to have diminished along with the Index's dwindling faith in the Andrews. The portfolio as it was proposed by Reeves was not published and in 1942 the renderings plus the photographs

¹Glassgold Field Report, 8/31-9/1/36 (AAA DC52: 95).

²Ellen S. Woodward, Assistant Administrator, Women's and Professional Division, WPA, to Allen Treadway, U.S. Representative, Stockbridge, Mass., 10/24/36 (WPA RG69, Massachusetts correspondence. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

³Rourke Field Report 1/9/37 (WPA RG69, Box 14. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

taken by Vicentini and his assistant Hurlick all went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In March of 1937 the Yale University Press published Shaker Furniture, the Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect, by Edward and Faith Andrews.

The encounter between the Andrews and the Index illustrates some of the problems that decorative arts collectors and Index personnel had to cope with, in order to reach the mutually desired goal of publication and recognition. The Index project was set up to be the most comprehensive authoritative guide on American decorative arts to date. Private collectors, therefore, had something to gain by seeing that their own collections were represented in the Index. The Andrews, when made aware of the Index project, sought the interest of Cahill and his Index staff. Yet the Andrews felt that government workers, in particular the photographers, were not sensitive enough to the delicate aesthetics of their collection. According to Reeves, they were also afraid that the government publication of the portfolio would be less than first-rate. This attitude was one aspect of a larger fear that the collector's item, which was presumably valued as an unique artistic object, would be popularized and thus made common by the government-sponsored program.¹

¹This notion is specifically referred to in relation to the New York unit in Edith Halpert's Field Report, 7/26/36 (AAA DC52: 97-101).

Yet, in fact, the purpose of the Index was to popularize American decorative arts; the purpose of the Index, as an official selection of collected objects, was to educate the general population, to elevate their aesthetic sensibilities. The Index achieved this by organizing a series of exhibitions of the renderings on a national level, which travelled from State to State. On a more local level, too, Index exhibitions were mounted frequently in Museums, galleries and other places. In New York, for example, department stores such as Macy's and Altman's displayed Index renderings in their show windows. Illustrated magazine articles also brought renderings to the public.

In its efforts to bring artistic traditions to a broad audience the Index was fulfilling one part of Cahill's plan for revitalizing American Art. The notion that art could be -- and should be -- brought to the people was crucial to the foundation of the Federal Art Project, as Cahill wrote:

An attempt to bridge the gap between the American artist and the American public has governed the entire program of the Federal Art Project . . . Under the Project, popular art, in the best sense, has seemed highly desirable. Critics have sometimes suggested that popularization involves vulgarization, but this is not necessarily true . . . Experience under the project . . . has shown a sincere response to art, a genuine demand for

it, and a widespread popular interest.¹

The Index helped to "bridge the gap" by operating within an elitist context of decorative arts collectors and at the same time by responding to the perceived needs of a democratic society; it catered to the elite in order to bring fine art to the masses.

¹Holger Cahill, New Horizons, op. cit., p. 21.

CHAPTER V
THE INDEX AND THE ARTIST

The Index plates themselves served as one of the most effective ways of gaining support of skeptical private collectors, critics, and the general American public. By skillfully representing objects in watercolor, the best Index artists transformed the object, be it a piece of folk art or even a common kitchen utensil, into a work of art on paper. Folk art and decorative art objects were thus elevated to the realm of fine art through the means of documenting them.

Although Project administrators could have decided to use photographs to compile the Index of American Design, which may have been faster, cheaper and more mechanically accurate, they had several reasons for employing artists to make renderings. The first and most urgent reason in 1935 was to employ commercial artists. Within the Federal Art Project the easel and mural projects were devised for fine artists, who worked more imaginatively or more expressively. This left a gap for those artists specifically trained in design and in making accurate pictures of objects such as architectural elevations, or advertisement illustrations.

When the Index was first proposed to Frances Pollak of the New York Project she wrote, "I am so eager to have the Index approved since it offers a catch-all for a large number of artists not suitable and usable for any other purpose."¹ This notion of the Index as a catch-all was counter-balanced by the seriousness of the Washington staff and the staff of supervisors in New York. For example, Aline Bernstein, head of the costume section, wrote into her report: "Let us try to make something fine and lasting, a monument to our state and time. I am sure it will be a great thing for the spirit of these people who are working on relief to know that they are doing something that will have lasting value, and that will not disappear when their work is finished."² However, in 1937 Louis Block assessed the implications of Pollak's initial attitude, stating that the quality of worker on the Index was essentially the same as on any other project, but in the rush to employ workers it was widely known that the Index was a "catch-all". "This undeniably put a stigma on the personnel of the Index, which has been keenly felt particularly by the younger artists." Further, Block wrote, this notion was "one of the underlying reasons for the low morale and the lack of interest from the

¹ Pollak to Cahill, 9/24/35, quoted in Lincoln Rothchild, "The Index of American Design of the WPA Federal Art Project," Francis V. O'Connor, The New Deal Art Projects (Washington, D.C.: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), p. 179.

² Aline Bernstein, "Costumes: An Outline of Research Strategy," n.d. (AAA 1107 (Cahill Papers): 1103-1104).

artist personnel."¹

In Massachusetts the situation was different. From the start, due to the rigorous demands of Gertrude Townsend and also to the technical skill of Suzanne Chapman and other artists, the Index artists assumed a high degree of professionalism. The connection between Townsend, Chapman, and the Museum of Fine Arts was significant; both women held a great amount of respect for the other's work, and both were accustomed to the professional emphasis on quality that the Museum imposed.

Suzanne Chapman is a key artist in the history of the Index. She not only produced some of the finest Index plates, but she also taught her technique to artists who, in turn, taught artists throughout the country. She came on the project as a non-relief artist-supervisor in February 1936, at the recommendation of Townsend. Chapman was born in Louisiana in 1904 and at a young age moved with her family to Lexington, Massachusetts. She studied fine and applied arts at the Boston Museum School from 1925 until 1929, and learned under one instructor, a Miss Moss, how to reproduce textiles, ceramics, glass and other objects, by visiting different departments in the Museum, and making renderings of the collections. Through this class she became acquainted with Gertrude Townsend, and after graduating

¹Louis Block, "Report of the Findings on the Index of American Design," 3/3/37 (AAA NDA 18 (Block Papers): 1022-1033).

from the Museum School she worked for Townsend and Dudley L. Pickman, curator of European Decorative Art, making renderings of textiles and porcelains for Museum of Fine Arts publications. She also taught design at the Museum School.¹

As a result of her training, Chapman was familiar with the collection of textiles at the Museum, and she was already highly skilled in the techniques for rendering them precisely. When Reeves first saw Chapman's work she reported to Cahill, "These are I find . . . the finest and most exact renderings of an object by the human hand I have ever seen. I was simply amazed, and of course, delighted to think we had such an able artist to train and supervise the relief artists."²

Chapman's work successfully exemplified ideas about the documentation of objects which were important to the concept of the Index. These ideas introduce the second reason for employing artists instead of photographers wherever possible. Essentially, Cahill believed that artists could "see" an object better than a camera, and could reproduce more faithfully the artistic spirit of that object. Looking back to the project, Cahill explained this

¹Interview with Suzanne Chapman at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 6/4/82. See also Walter Muir Whitehill and others, In Tribute to Suzanne E. Chapman (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1970), and Collier Field Reports, 2/25/36 - 3/3/36 (AAA DC52: 19-33).

²Reeves Field Report, 3/21/36 (AAA DC52: 531).

attitude toward documentation:

The Federal Art Project tried to channel Index techniques in the direction of quality, but no one technique was insisted upon. What was insisted upon was strict objectivity, accurate drawing, clarity of construction, exact proportions, and faithful rendering of material, color and texture so that each Index drawing might stand as a surrogate for the object The best drawings, while maintaining complete fidelity to the object, have the individuality that characterized a work of art.

. . . .The camera, except in the hands of its greatest masters, cannot reveal the essential character and quality of objects as the artist can. . . . The camera cannot search out the forms of objects deeply undercut or modelled in high relief, match color as closely as the artist, or render the subtle interplay of form, color and texture which creates the characteristic beauty of so many products of early American craftsmen.¹

This passage indicates that Cahill believed that an object was not best represented by faithfully rendering its surface features alone, but by a sensitive registration of

¹Holger Cahill, introduction to Christensen, op. cit., p. xiv-xv.

the artistic beauty or spirit embodied within it. The artist, with his finely tuned aesthetic perception, is most ably equipped to search out that spiritual quality and then to record it for future viewers. Cahill realized that this was perhaps too much to demand of every rendering, yet it remained his standard for the best of the Index plates.¹

The ideals that Cahill described occasionally surfaced in the writings of other people involved with the Index. Leo Drosdoff, artist on the New York City Index project, wrote:

It is really meaningless to state that the Index artist "copies" an object. He does more. Actually, he "recreates" the object. . . . In all this original study of the object, the artist is getting the "feeling" of the object, whether it be the highly elaborate and complex design of a silver candlestick or a simple functional tinware pot. It is this process of putting himself in the craftsman's place which enables the artist to recapture the object for the finished plate.²

Far from a passive copyist, Drosdoff describes an artist who actively participates in the making and re-

¹Ibid., p. xiv.

²Leo Drosdoff, "Documentary Art," n.d. (AAA 1107 (Cahill Papers): 1202-1204), p. 1.

making of the object. Drosdoff's understanding of the documentary process involved both the notion of active participation as well as the necessity of one who is skilled at sensitive perception: the artist. He continued:

The artist's ability to visualize and his keenness of observation will determine whether his finished plate will be authentic and documentary or just the reproduction of a "kind" of article
 . . . art employed for documentary purposes can be brought to such a degree of standardization as to prove that regardless of execution, the finished product is a document. In other words, no matter how varying the technical approaches may be, the documentary demands for the completed drawing permit only one result.¹

Like Cahill, Drosdoff implied that the "authentic and documentary" plate embodied more than the reproduction of an object's physical appearance; it pictured the feeling of that object. Drosdoff maintained that many artists may render any given object but the final results, if they are truly documentary, will be uniform in revealing the object in its complete subjective and objective characters.

The idea that the artist's intuitive response to form is an important component of the documentary expression

¹Ibid., p. 2.

of that form is similar to the ideas behind much documentary photography in the 1930s. Discussing the photographs of migrant farmworkers taken by Walker Evans, James Curtis and Sheila Grannen point out how Evans manipulated his subject matter in order to express what he felt lay beneath the surface of a scene. Evans was interested in capturing the emotional content behind appearances, which would reveal the truth of the appearances.¹ This approach to documentary photography was openly acknowledged by other photographers of that decade. Arthur Rothstein, who, like Evans, was a Farm Security Administration photographer, wrote that the documentary photographer was "not only a camera man, but a scenarist, dramatist, and director as well." Rothstein went on to say that this seemingly non-objective use of the camera is justified, providing that the results are a faithful reproduction of what the photographer thinks he sees.² For both the Index artist and the documentary photographer, the desire was to capture the truth of an object, or an event, with an emphasis on the emotional content of the "truth".

¹James Curtis and Sheila Grannen, "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Photographs," Winterthur Portfolio 15 no. 1 (Spring 1980): 1-23.

²Arthur Rothstein, "Direction in the Picture Story" in Williard Morgan, ed., The Complete Photographer, 10 vols. (New York: National Educational Alliance Ind., 1942-43), 4: 1356-1357. See also William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and also Warren I. Sussman, "The Thirties" in Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner, eds., The Development of an American Culture (Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

It is difficult to determine to what extent Cahill's ideas regarding the rendering of objects influenced the actual production of Index plates. They may have elevated the morale of the artists, as they inspired Drosdoff; however, artists and supervisors on the whole seem to have been more concerned with the practical matters of rendering Index plates. Constance Rourke bowed to the "verisimilitude . . . superbly achieved" by New England artists, but she was more concerned about the renderings' usefulness for both designers and historians.¹ For example, to supplement illusionistic renderings Rourke suggested that New York artists make a series of "elevational outlines" of stoneware jugs, reasoning that they would be faster to execute and yet would still record the essential shapes. In addition, Rourke was likely to suggest the use of photography in recording objects, especially where color was secondary to form or shape. For example she wrote, "Photographs have proved their usefulness in so many ways, both of the finished plate and of the original object, that it would seem well to urge their use wherever possible."²

The Index staff developed several ways to teach artists how to make the kind of renderings they wanted. One important criterion for the finished plates was that they be

¹Rourke, "The Index of American Design," Magazine of Art 30 no. 1 (April 1937): 210-211.

²Rourke Field Report 3/6/37 and Rourke to Thomas C. Parker 3/11/37 (WPA RG69, Box 14. National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

uniformly accurate, so that the renderings in the portfolios would be consistent. To this end the first "General Rules for All Drawings" was devised in New York. Artists were told to first make small scale drawings onto graph paper and then to get approval from the artist-supervisor on the final drawing before applying color. The "General Rules" suggested typical layouts plus specific media to be used for each kind of object, for example, "furniture: use transparent washes -- do not use muddy thick or opaque colors." In addition to watercolor, this guide recommended gouache, crayon, and pencil. Silver, for example, was to be done "in light grey pencil with no color used, and stoneware in crayon or gouache."¹ In the Index manual of January 1936, written by the Washington staff, artists received little technical direction beyond setting standard sizes for the drawings, and this advice: "The drawing may be in whatever medium seems best suited for the object."²

Two months later a supplementary bulletin which established recommended techniques and formats was distributed. Cahill wrote that this bulletin was based on techniques that Suzanne Chapman had learned by studying the watercolor methods of Egyptologist Joseph Lindon Smith.

¹"General Rules for All Drawings," n.d. (AAA 1107 (Cahill Papers): 134-142).

²Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project, "Supplement no. 1 to the Federal Art Project Manual; Instructions for the Index of American Design," January, 1936.

According to Cahill, Smith had developed a "meticulous technique of documentary painting in watercolor" in order to make records of expeditions to Egypt.¹ In fact, Chapman did not study under Smith, though she knew him well. She studied with Miss Moss who, Chapman believes, was a student with Smith at the Museum School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Moss and Smith used the techniques that they were taught for different purposes. Smith, along with other members of the Museum's Egyptology staff, made renderings of objects and inscriptions which he saw while in Egypt. Smith made most of his renderings in oil rather than watercolor, though both media were used. These renderings were brought back to the Museum and studied as surrogates for the original objects; they were also used to illustrate the Museum's publications. Moss, on the other hand, was more commercially oriented. She taught the techniques to her design students, to enable them to represent any given object realistically. Chapman taught Index artists what she learned from Moss, and from her own experimentation. Cahill's confusion may have resulted from the fact that Chapman herself joined the Museum's Department of Egyptian Art in 1937, and thus employed her skills making renderings of Egyptian artifacts.²

¹Cahill, introduction to Christensen, op. cit., p. xii.

²Personal interview with Suzanne Chapman, 6/4/82; Letter received from Suzanne Chapman, 8/5/82.

Chapman's method was this: she first drew her design onto a fairly sturdy piece of paper. She tacked the paper on top of a damp blotter so that the paper itself became damp. She then applied color. Watercolor is a fairly unforgiving medium; once applied, the color permanently stains the paper. The watercolorist therefore must apply his color accurately, and because water evaporates quickly, he must work quickly to cover the surface of the paper. By keeping the paper damp for hours at a time, the applied color remained wet, and could be lifted if necessary, or pushed around, or blended into other colors. Chapman thus reduced the accidental quality of watercolor and increased her manipulative power over the medium. She painted with a great deal of control, but was also able to retain the brilliant translucence of watercolor which was well suited to capturing the light-filled quality of an object in three-dimensional space. In conjunction with the specific technical procedures, the renderings produced by Chapman required skillful drawing, a perfected sense of color, and a great deal of patience. One may assume that Chapman communicated these qualities, and in addition she transmitted her pure pleasure in painting in this manner. When asked if she enjoyed working on the Index, she replied that she was happy whenever she could paint, delighted to be working at the Museum with the textiles collection, and that the project enabled her to do just that.¹

¹Personal interview with Chapman, *ibid.*

The Index manual of 1938, written by Glassgold and edited by Rourke, included detailed instructions for the preparation of both renderings and photographs. It suggested standardized layouts and suitable scales to be used for different objects. It also included recommendations for materials: "Use the best hand-drawn paper available," and tips for making the renderings: "keep pencil sharp, sand-paper point frequently, use a light touch."¹

This manual summarized Chapman's method as "Painting--Wet Method" and included it with a list of other techniques that had been devised by different Index units. For each type of object -- textiles, ceramics, metals, and wood, the bulletin listed many instructions and suggestions for successfully revealing each particular texture. For the proper state of mind for making renderings the manual instructed:

Do not regard the task as a picture. Imagine that by means of the drawing, a craftsman is to be shown just how the parts are made and put together, exactly what the finished job is like -- not merely what it looks like from any one point of view.²

Despite the rhetoric generated by the Index administration, that the artist rather than the photographer

¹Works Progress Administration, "Index of American Design Manual: W.P.A. Technical Series Art Circular No. 3," November 3, 1938, pp. 15-16.

²Ibid., p. 23.

more truly "sees" an object, photography was used to supplement hand-rendered plates. In Pittsfield, for example, Noel Vicentini and his assistant Hurlick printed over eighty black and white photographs of room interiors, shop interiors, work benches with tools, arrangements of boxes, bonnets, and baskets, building exteriors, plus a series of studies of Shaker women whom the photographers posed at rest, in their Shaker clothing, or engaged in braiding chair seats.¹

Photography was also considered when Reeves, Chapman and Townsend were discussing the best method for recording textiles. One idea was to have artists superimpose color onto a photograph of the textile. Reeves suggested having the artist draw a detail of the textile next to a photograph of the textile, to replicate color and texture but to minimize labor. In the end, artists who worked with Chapman made life-size watercolor renderings of either a section of the textile, or the whole object, if it fit into the dimensions of the paper.

Chapman worked closely with five artists at the Museum of Fine Arts: Elizabeth Moutal, Helen Gilman, Phyllis Dorr, Lawrence Peterson and Eleanor Cunningham. Together they produced twenty-four renderings of textiles in the Museum's collection. Of this group, Moutal and Gilman made renderings of Shaker textiles and transmitted their techniques by

¹The photographs taken by Vicentini and Hurlick are located with the Index renderings at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

working with Lucille Gilchrist, Ingrid Selmer-Larsen, Lucille Chabot, Betty Fuerst, George Constantine, Joseph Goldberg, Alice Stearns and Frances Cohen.

In addition to artists working in Boston, there was a group of artists in Pittsfield, making renderings of furniture and other Shaker objects: Irving Smith, Anne Ger, Alfred Smith, Victor Muollo, and Lawrence Foster. When relations with the Andrews became strained, this group came back to Boston and made renderings of furniture in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, where, presumably, there would have been contact with Chapman and her "students." Alfred Smith and Anne Ger travelled to Connecticut to draw Shaker furniture in Charles Sheeler's collection. In 1937 they went to New Lebanon, New York, with two other artists from Massachusetts, John Kelleher and Winslow Rich, to record Shaker materials there. Alfred Smith and Elizabeth Moutal then went to Kentucky to teach artists there how to render the Shaker materials in that State.

Alongside textiles and Shaker artifacts, the next large group of renderings produced in Massachusetts consisted of woodcarvings: figures, figureheads, shop signs, and other ornamental objects. In 1936 Moutal, Gilman, Selmar-Larsen, Fuerst, and Chabot worked on renderings of woodcarvings. They were joined the following year by George Constantine, Alfred Denghausen, Hazel Hyde, Joseph Goldberg, Jane Iverson, and others, all of whom made renderings throughout eastern Massachusetts, in Boston, Peabody, Marblehead,

Ipswich, Cohasset, New Bedford, and Nantucket.

From this summary of artists' activities it is clear that artists in the Massachusetts project travelled frequently and in many cases rendered more than one kind of article. Chapman herself rendered textiles exclusively.¹ She did not travel outside of Boston for the Index project except on two occasions; she conducted classes in technique in New York City in November of 1936, and she travelled to Portland, Maine, to instruct Index artists there.² However, one of Chapman's best students, Elizabeth Moutal, became an artist-supervisor, and was most likely responsible for transmitting not only Chapman's technique but also an enthusiasm for rendering to other artists in Massachusetts. Moutal rendered textiles, woodcarvings and metalware in many locations in Massachusetts, and, in place of Chapman who preferred to remain in Boston, travelled to other States to teach technique to Index artists. Another way for teaching artists was to circulate renderings among units; for this purpose Chapman, Moutal, and others made didactic renderings showing step-by-step procedures for making the complete Index plate.

Cahill encouraged the process of artists teaching other

¹There is one exception to this statement; Chapman made a rendering of a metal pitcher with the classification number "Mass-Me-18x", which suggests that it may have been used for instructive purposes.

²Elizabeth Lane to Constance Rourke, 10/13/36 (WPA RG69, Box 14. National Archives, Washington, D.C.); personal interview with Suzanne Chapman, op. cit.

artists. In his mind it was one aspect of a healthy cultural environment. In 1936 he wrote, "one of the most interesting developments on the art project is the growth of a sort of guild organization in which groups of artists work together, the strong artists helping the weaker ones to improve the standard of their work. . . ." ¹ Cahill felt that the Index was beneficial to artists because it taught them important techniques and high standards, and also because it exposed them to the careful study of form: "there can be no question as to the indirect returns for the artists engaged in this undertaking. They are placed in a constant relationship with fine forms, with objects of great intrinsic interest or excellence in design and workmanship." ²

¹Cahill, "Summary of Report of the Federal Art Project,"
2/13/36 (AAA DC54: 222).

²Idem, introduction to Christensen, op. cit., p. 26.

Index renderings were widely praised by critics. Helen Kay of Fortune Magazine wrote, "Under the compulsion to reproduce truthfully and accurately, all artiness, all redundance, has disappeared. . . . Respect for the object to be painted was the primary rule established by art project director Holger Cahill. The result is an impersonality, a faithfulness, and an objective beauty which deserve the highest praise."¹

The reviewer of an Index exhibition at Macy's wrote, "No other phase of the entire Federal Art Project has enjoyed the unanimity of praise or has been as free from criticism as the Index of American Design." The reviewer especially noted how objects were recorded "with camera-like precision by a group of artists expert in executing faithful reproductions of fast-disappearing objects."²

The Index project also received support from major figures in the art world at that time: for example, Homer Eaton Keyes, editor of Antiques who was an active advisor of the Index project in New York City, Charles Sheeler, who praised the work of Alfred Smith, and Abby Aldridge Rocke-

¹ Helen Kay "The Index of American Design: A Portfolio," Fortune Magazine 15 no. 6 (June 1937): 103.

² n.s., "Index of American Design: Review of Macy's Exhibition," Art Digest 12 no. 18 (July 1938): 34.

feller, whose large collection of folk art was just beginning to be amassed, to name a few.

The success of the Index in its own time suggests that it was successfully fulfilling a genuine public need for the documentation and preservation of American culture. This notion is more complicated than it appears, because the definition of the word culture and the ideas surrounding the phrase "American culture" were at that time in a state of flux. Two concepts of culture were in operation simultaneously: the traditional concept of culture -- that culture is the measure of man's highest achievements -- which has elitist overtones; and a newer concept of culture, influenced by the fields of social science and anthropology, which defined culture in a broader sense, as the patterns of belief and behavior of a whole society of people.¹

The word culture, then, could connote both the highest accomplishments of a society and the most common everyday behaviors and beliefs of that society. The Index negotiated both of these senses of culture, in its attempt to document an American way of life. On the one hand, it selected from a field of objects made by the common unknown artisan in order to celebrate American culture as it is part of everyone; on the other hand, operating within the realm

¹See Warren Sussman, "The Thirties," op. cit., and Park and Markowitz, *New Deal for Art*, op. cit., for discussions regarding the notions of art and culture during the 1930s. See also Francis V. O'Connor's introduction to Art for the Millions, O'Connor, ed., op. cit., pp. 16-18.

of collectors and critics, it promoted these objects as the finest examples of American craftsmanship, and even as the high artistic achievement of an age. Simultaneously the Index focussed on the everyday lives of Americans and the quality of the artistic achievements of Americans; both foci were the result of the Index's purpose in searching for a definable American culture, or tradition in the arts.

The success of this complicated endeavor, complicated also by the fact that it was won largely unconsciously, was due to the integration of the varying ideas of people involved in the Index. Reeves's enthusiasm for the beautiful proportions of a Shaker linen sheet, for example, was countered by Rourke's insistence on broad-based research into the Shaker culture.¹ The ideas of the administrators sometimes conflicted, and even caused confusion and a feeling of lack of direction on both the administrative and worker levels.² Ultimately, the more conservative ideas regarding art and culture, represented by Reeves, Glassgold, and by the majority of collecting institutions, and to a large extent by Cahill himself, dominated the direction of the Index. Rourke, who was an articulate and forceful spokesman for the more radical understanding of artifacts as evidence of the patterns of beliefs of a group of people, was influential but finally phased out of the

¹Phyllis Crawford Scott to Cahill, 3/28/49 (AAA NDA 3 (Scott Papers): 165-170).

²Ibid.

project in 1938.

The popularity of the project was short-lived. From 1936 until it left the Metropolitan Museum for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Index received a fair amount of attention from the art world. It was publicized in magazines such as Design and Antiques. In addition, circulating exhibitions of Index materials received good reviews in local newspapers, and were well attended by the general public. After it was removed to Washington, D.C., the project fell into relative obscurity. In 1950 Erwin O. Christensen published The Index of American Design in which he selected over three hundred and fifty of the best renderings to illustrate topics of American artifacts. In 1979 Clarence Hornung published A Treasury of American Design using renderings from the Index as illustrations, and in 1980 Chadwyck-Healy published the complete collection of finished renderings in color microfiche, making the Index available to researchers, and thus fulfilling one of the original objectives of the Index project.¹

These publications, and others which have used Index renderings as illustrations, are of use to researchers

¹Christensen, op. cit.; Clarence Pearson Hornung, A Treasury of Design, with foreword by J. Carter Brown and an introduction by Holger Cahill. 2 vols. (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1972); The Index of American Design (Microfiche published by Chadwyck-Healy Ltd., Cambridge and Somerset House, New Jersey, 1979-1980) and Sandra Shaffer Tinkham, The Consolidated Catalogue to the Index of American Design (Teaneck, New Jersey: Somerset House, 1980).

in the American decorative arts. Recognition of the project itself, however, has been largely ignored. Only in the introduction to Christensen's book is the project explained; this explanation, written by Cahill, was later reprinted in Hornung's book, but was not researched or brought up to date at that time. The artists who made the renderings are commonly not credited, and in the Hornung, for example, the renderings are not distinguished from the photographs of objects. In sum, there has not been an awareness of the Index project itself, as a project of historical importance.

The reasons for this may relate to aspects of the operation of the Index project, as well as to events outside the project. Perhaps one major reason for the project being overlooked is that it was never completed and never made completely and easily accessible to the public. Had the portfolios as envisioned by Cahill been published by the Federal Art Project, then they would have been distributed through the country as the tangible finished product of the project; the portfolios themselves would have been an available document of the Index project.

Another reason for the obscurity of the Index may be that the renderings themselves have never been valuable -- valuable in the way that an artwork is historically and monetarily valuable. Though many of the renderings were very sensitively painted, and one may consider them to be artworks, the primary purpose in their creation was to document artifacts, and not to be expressive or creative

themselves. In addition, Index renderings do not have a defined market value because they have always been the property of the federal government.

Still another reason for the obscurity of the Index lies in the realm of folk art and culture studies. Folk arts studies of the 1930s are now a target for criticism by scholars of the decorative arts whose attitudes toward the study of folk and popular culture are different from those of Cahill and others involved in the Index.

Beatrix Rumford acknowledges that Cahill's work in the folk arts was seminal and that his 1932 catalogue for "American Folk Art, the Art of the Common Man" is still regarded today as an indispensable reference by collectors and curators. John Michael Vlach, however, states that folk art has not been given enough scholastic attention. "The quandary of folk art stems from a continued reliance on the enthusiastic slogans of the 1930s -- a reliance on populist declarations rather than considered investigations."¹

Daniel Robbins agrees with Vlach that current folk art study "is couched in a language astonishingly similar to that of forty or fifty years ago." This language, he adds, "fails to take into account the complexities inherent in the production of each kind of art, and is

¹Rumford, "Uncommon Art," op. cit., p. 26-36; and John Michael Vlach, "American Folk Art: Questions and Quandaries," Winterthur Portfolio 15 no. 4 (Winter 1980): 345.

especially neglectful of the careful study of folk art."¹

The notions of cultural historians toward folk and popular arts in the 1930s: that folk and popular art could be evaluated with the same aesthetic criteria as fine art, and that American craftsmen created an indigenous artistic tradition in eighteenth and nineteenth century American culture -- are now dismissed as romantic and erroneous;² the Index, aside from supplying drawings of objects, is of little value to contemporary historians of the American decorative arts. However, the Index project did make an important contribution to the field of American decorative arts by attempting the enormous job of recording all aspects of American design. Furthermore, as a catalogue of documentary drawings, it can itself be seen as an important document of the ideas and circumstances of the culture in which it was created. It is deserving of careful attention both by those interested in the history of attitudes toward decorative arts collecting and by those interested in the complex sometimes conflicting ideas of cultural investigators of the decade of the 1930s.

¹Robbins, "Folk Sculpture without Folk," op. cit., p. 14.

²Ibid., p. 12 and 13.

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