

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt delighted in the “perfect thrill” of visiting the Milwaukee Handicraft Project in her November 13, 1936 “My Day” column.¹ The day before the column was published, she spent her morning touring the facility and observing women making scrapbooks, wall hangings, costumes, wooden toys, and dolls for tax-supported institutions. This included hospitals, schools, and public libraries. The workforce that day consisted of women categorized as “unskilled” by the United States Employment Service. These women lacked prior clerical, administrative, or educational experience and largely came from backgrounds as housewives or working outside the homes as domestics. Designed as a government-funded craft program with education at its core, Roosevelt marveled at the work performed by women with no formal training in education, art, or design. She praised the program administrators for their leadership, commenting on the women’s capacity for “artistic work under the most able teachers.”² Their administrators’ work training the unskilled through the production of educational goods captivated Roosevelt. “The interesting thing,” Roosevelt observed, “is that in spite of the fact that these women who have had few educational advantages and were so unskilled that they were rejected on the sewing project, they are developing taste and skill.”³ Her emphasis on taste as well as skill signaled that the training had implications for their standing as workers and as consumers. She viewed administrators as authority figures; their role as designers and instructors on the factory floor gave the women they worked with upward mobility. Improved taste would signal that the workers had absorbed the two most important lessons in the eyes of the administrators – a desire for well-designed goods and the skills to produce them.

The United States federal government faced an unparalleled labor crisis that hurt blue collar and white collar workers alike. The WPA charged the Women’s and Professional Division to create work opportunities for men and women who were skilled in clerical, medical, and educational work and those who were not. In order to fulfill this charge, the Women’s and

¹ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” November 13, 1936, The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition, George Washington University.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Professional Division created a hierarchical system by which one group would train the other. WPA programs across the country hired white collar professionals to perform skilled labor and train working class men and women in their field. “Production-for-use” was one such category in which white collar professionals prepared unemployed women for factory work.⁴ The federal government was extremely clear about this singular goal of production for use projects. The USES maintained lists of individuals for hire from the relief rolls. The WPA maintained lists of suppliers for materials, physical spaces where the work could take place, and consumers in public institutions. The administrators of “handicraft” programs funded and operated through the WPA took these resources and reallocated them to fit a craft ideology.

Eleanor Roosevelt’s observations on the Milwaukee Handicraft Project captured the ways in which Midwestern craft adherents in the mid-twentieth century reimagined the possibilities of “production for use” projects. As a longtime supporter of craft initiatives in the 1920’s and 1930’s, she championed their inclusion in WPA programming as crucial to the economic and aesthetic needs of the nation.⁵ In her eyes, the successful execution of Arts and Crafts ideology in the Milwaukee Handicraft Project led to its greatest accomplishment – uplifting and training uneducated women. Drawing from midwestern settlement houses, the WPA administrators that Roosevelt celebrated imbued their programs with theories of craft and its power to educate the working class. Elsa Ulbricht, a local artist and educator, organized and operated the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. The WPA envisioned a program that would prepare “unskilled” women for factory labor and produce educational goods for children. The program that she designed fulfilled basic government mandates, but she also envisioned a project that produced goods elevating the sense of taste of her employees and the general public.

In the process, these programs also repurposed skill-based hierarchies of labor from the craft movement that inspired the design and operation of their WPA programs. The classed and

⁴ June Hopkins, *Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 190.

⁵ Victoria M. Grieve, “‘Work That Satisfies the Creative Instinct’: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Arts and Crafts,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 42, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2008): 176.

racialized nature of the settlement house movement found its way into the WPA through the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. It was also one of the few interracial programs in the country, hiring local women regardless of race or ethnicity to produce its wares. Nonetheless, like settlement houses, at the top of its hierarchy were administrators and supervisors who were almost entirely middle class, college-educated, white women. They defined “skill” as formal training in education and design, skills that members of the working class did not have access too. The designation “craftsman” was limited along lines of education, but it became manifest through the racial and class differences between supervisors and workers.