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Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project Online Exhibit

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Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project Online Exhibit

Curated by Mary Kellogg Rice,
art director of the project,
with assistance from
Lois Marie Quinn



This exhibit was prepared by the late Mary Kellogg Rice for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Golda Meir Library in October 1997. The historic WPA photographs and examples of project work were collected by Mrs. Rice for her book **Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project**, published by the Milwaukee County Historical Society in 2003.



Mary Kellogg Rice in 1997



Mary June Kellogg in 1937

The exhibit is dedicated to the five thousand women and men who worked for the Milwaukee Handicraft Project from 1935 to 1943. These individuals were forced onto public relief to aid their families during the Great Depression. While they often used inexpensive materials and initially lacked employment skills, the workers made products of outstanding quality, beauty and education value. Their work enriched the lives of children and adults in schools, nurseries, state and county institutions, hospitals and colleges in Milwaukee County and throughout the nation.



The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was initiated by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1935 to provide public work for millions of Americans on relief. Elsa Ulbricht of Milwaukee State Teachers College agreed to develop a work program for Milwaukee County women who lacked employment skills and needed to support their families. Ulbricht envisioned a project which would offer well-designed articles for depression-starved public institutions. She suggested using young MSTC art education graduates who could not find teaching jobs to serve as both designers and foremen on the project. In 1937 Milwaukee County joined the project as a co-sponsor with MSTC.

For seven years Ulbricht (in photo, standing) maintained a full teaching load at MSTC while she guided and inspired the project workers and staff.



Ulbricht asked her fourth-year MSTC art education student, Mary June Kellogg (Rice), to serve as art director for the Milwaukee Handicraft Project and Anne Feldman to serve as general supervisor. Kellogg and Feldman assisted Ulbricht in developing plans to employ 250 women – but by the third week of operation 900 workers were reporting for work. Harriet Clinton, head of the WPA Women's and Professional Division for Milwaukee County, helped the project expand to serve increasing numbers of workers.



Mary June Kellogg



Anne Feldman



Harriet Clinton

Kellogg (who served as art director until 1942) worked with local and state governments to identify needs for product, supervised the design work and approved all new designs. Women who developed skills were encouraged to transfer to other WPA projects and women who failed at other projects were transferred to the handicraft units.



Eleven production units were eventually established for bookbinding, blockprinting, screenprinting, weaving, rugs, appliqués, dolls, cloth toys, costumes, wood toys and furniture. At its peak the project employed 1,350 workers. Supervisory staff and unit workers changed constantly as young MSTC graduates found non-WPA employment and workers gained skills useful for private industry or other WPA projects.



In spite of worker turnover, the project was able to maintain full production and secure sufficient job orders to cover nearly all of its non-labor costs. By 1940 workers were printing a ninety page catalog of products available for national distribution to governments and tax-supported institutions. Orders were received from all forty-eight states of the Union.



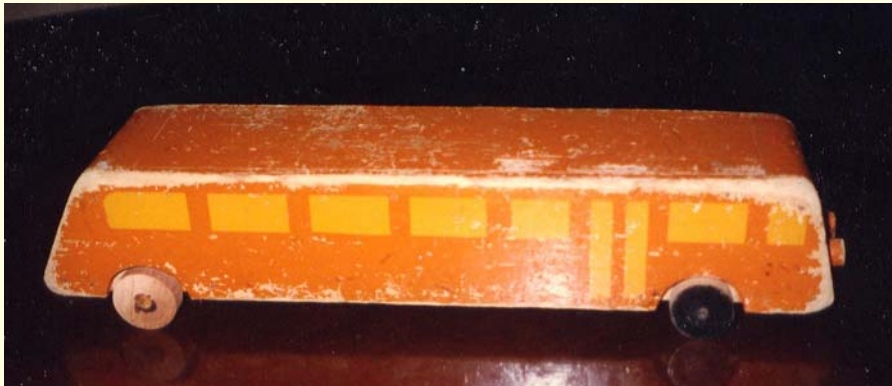
Coverlets and a wall hanging made for a WPA nursery room.

Educational Toys

Educational toys were first designed for the two WPA nursery schools in Milwaukee (one located at the Milwaukee Urban League). Project staff worked closely with the director of the nursery schools, who was a graduate of Milwaukee State Teachers College, to determine what products could help the children.

All of the WPA nurseries in Wisconsin, Iowa and Kansas were equipped with Milwaukee toys, and sample sets of toys were sent to Michigan, Illinois and Missouri. Kindergarten teachers from all over the country ordered toys from the project.







The wooden toys, forerunners of the modern educational toy, were streamlined to eliminate breakable parts.



Toys were tested in local kindergartens and WPA nurseries before they were mass produced.



Project workers made thousands of wooden toys for schools, nurseries and orphanages.





As word of the project spread, the number of orders and requests for the loan of examples of project articles increased rapidly.

Milwaukee Journal, August 30, 1936



The project's "Catalogue Number 10" listed a stock of 43 different educational toys available for order. The most popular wood animal in 1939 was the duck, followed closely by the rooster.

Doll Making

The project designed a 22 inch doll specifically for the WPA nursery schools to meet the following requirements: large enough for a small child to handle easily, completely washable, jointed to sit and stand, and dressed with clothes designed to help teach the young child to dress and undress.

The soft dolls and those with screen printed features (Katie, twins Peter and Patsy, and Honey Child) were added later.





The large dolls were hinged so that they could sit and stand.



The 22" doll head was made of ribbed cotton, cast in a plaster mould designed by Dick Wiken and painted by hand. While the same mould was used for all the 22" doll faces, workers used different skin, eye and hair colors to create a variety of doll personalities.



Carpet warp was used to make wigs of various styles. Bernice Ware, shown here, became a skilled wig maker. At a time when few black dolls were made commercially, workers produced both black and white dolls for the WPA nurseries and county institutions.



Women assigned to the doll unit were trained by Helen Clark (below), a woman in her fifties who had supported herself and her mother making dolls until the Depression.





The wide variety of doll outfits made the work more interesting and increased the number of orders. Elementary school teachers requested dolls with foreign outfits. Kindergarten teachers liked the dolls dressed as storybook and nursery rhyme characters.



During the last years of the project as more doll makers found private employment, Elizabeth Pasler (above), one of the designers, created a group of enchanting (and easier to make) cloth dolls with screen-printed features.



The largest collection of Milwaukee Handicraft Project dolls and toys is at the Milwaukee Public Museum. (MPM postcard)

Appliqué Coverlets and Curtains

Coverlets were made by the project for WPA nursery schools and at the request of Milwaukee County to improve the environment at the Children's Home. The project created a line of appliqué curtains to add color and privacy to the children's ward at County Hospital.

Appliqués were initially made entirely by hand. Later, workers were trained to use close machine stitching which was more durable.

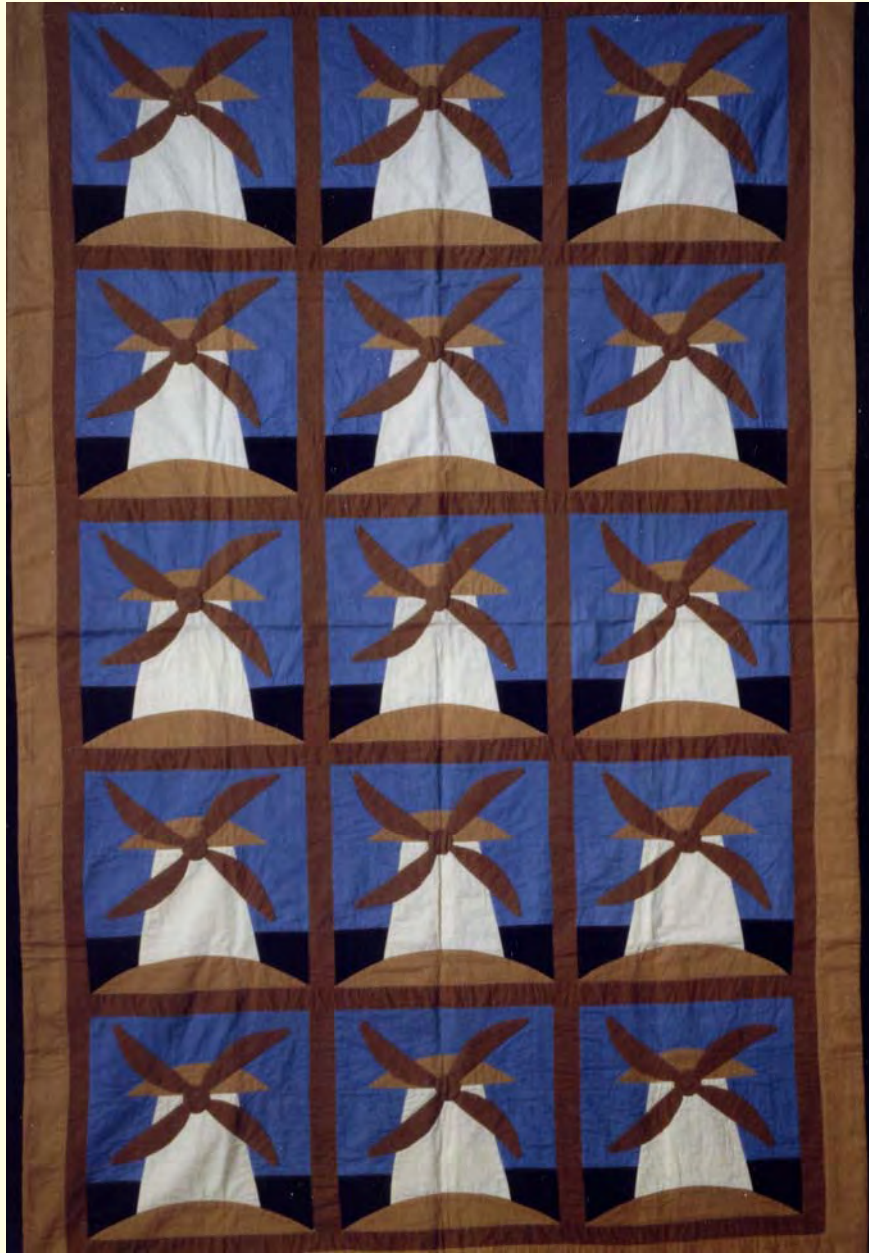




A state order to furnish coverlets to all of the WPA nurseries in Wisconsin created work for 75 women.



An order for 600 coverlets transformed the dormitories of the Milwaukee County Home for Dependent Children.





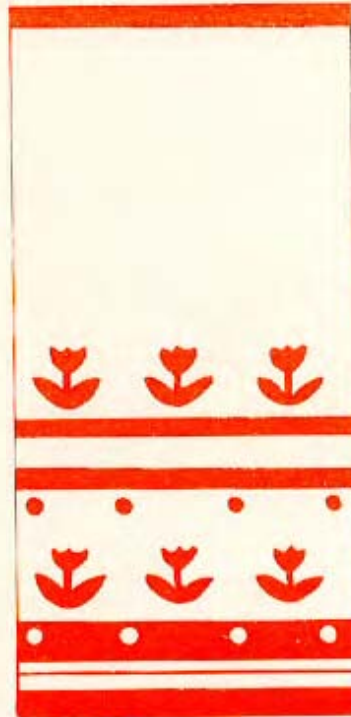
The work involved hand and machine stitching. Workers who became comfortable using sewing machines were encouraged to transfer to the WPA women's sewing project, which paid higher wages.



Julia Loomis (Knudson) designed the “Cherry Tree” curtains used in the recreation room at the Milwaukee Home for Dependent Children.



A-117



A-124



A-108



A-109



A-115



A-112

*Sample appliqué curtain designs
from the project ordering catalog*



Appliqué curtain material was available for \$1.10 for the first two yards, plus 30 cents for each additional yard.

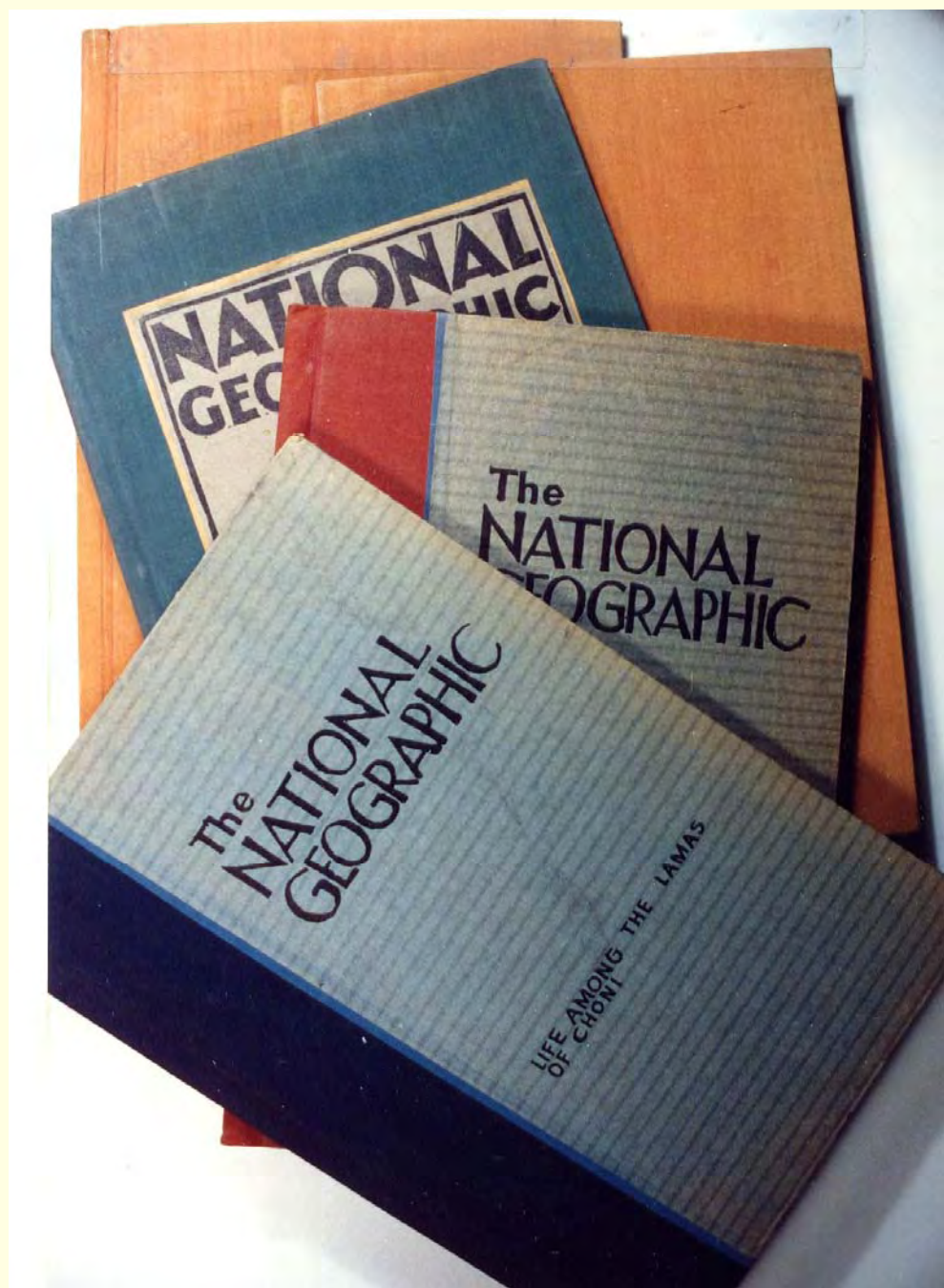
Bookbinding

One of the first activities undertaken was the production of scrapbooks with educational and recreational materials for county and state institutions who could not afford to purchase new books and magazines during the Depression. As women became skilled, more advanced book binding was undertaken. Workers mended and rebound used books, prepared an educational series on bookbinding for schools and colleges, and even published a series of children's books.





Workers in the bookbinding unit mended and rebound books, mounted collections of prints, and made boxes, scrapbooks and portfolios.

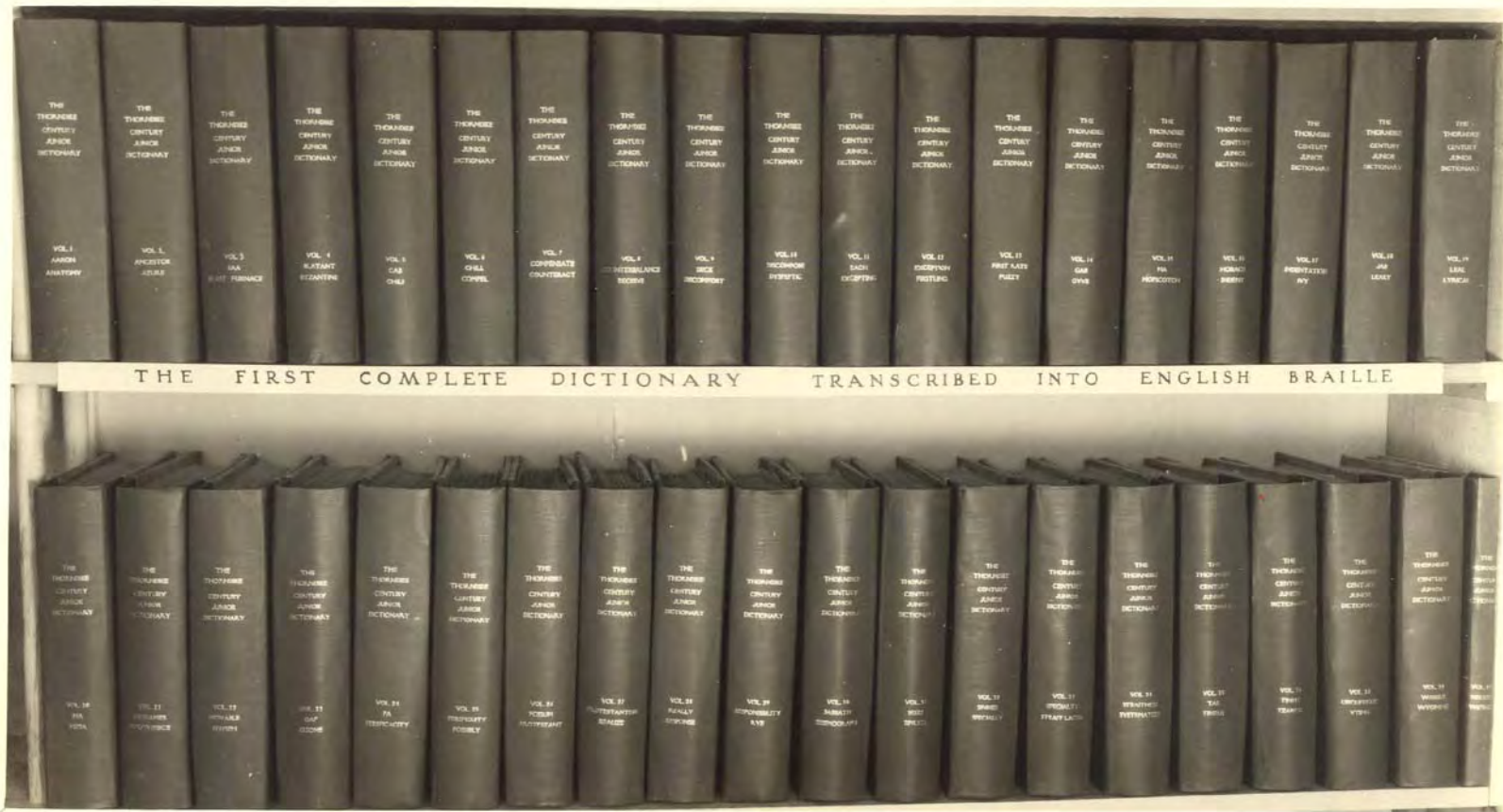




To provide reading material for county hospital and institutions, workers clipped carefully selected stories, illustrations, and feature articles from discarded magazines, pasted them onto sheets, and bound them into scrapbooks.



Under a separate WPA project, blind supervisors trained seeing workers to transcribe popular text into Braille. Braille pages were shellacked to preserve the transcriptions.



Milwaukee Handicraft Project workers bound a 39-volume Braille dictionary, the first of its kind, made for the Wisconsin School for the Blind.



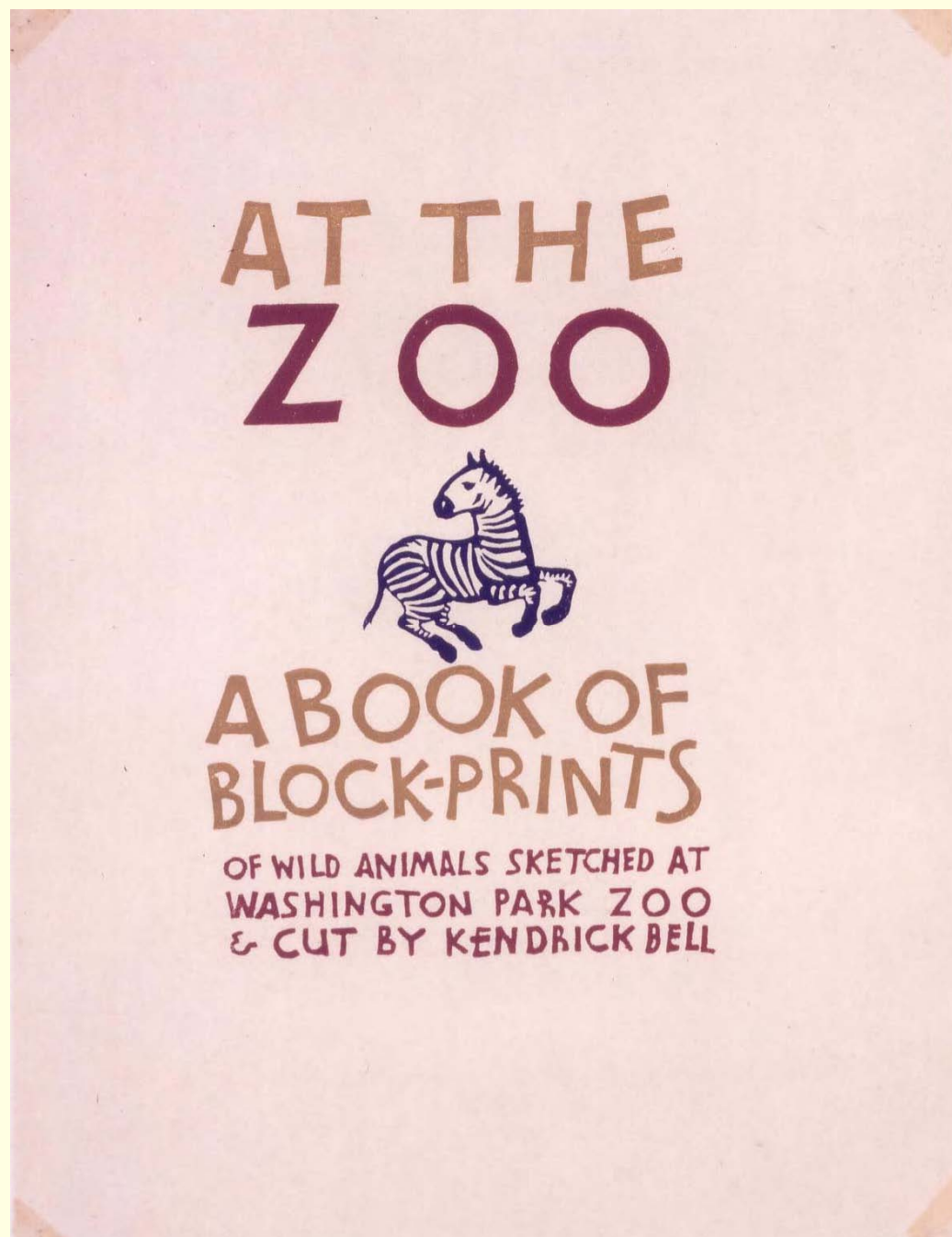
Workers prepare an illustration page for **At the Zoo**, one of a series of children's books published by the Project. Books were written and illustrated by Kendrick Bell and Ludwig Cinatl, young designer-foremen working on the Project.



First, second and third graders at Milwaukee State Teachers College wrote the words and music for a collection. Cinatl designed the illustrations and cover.



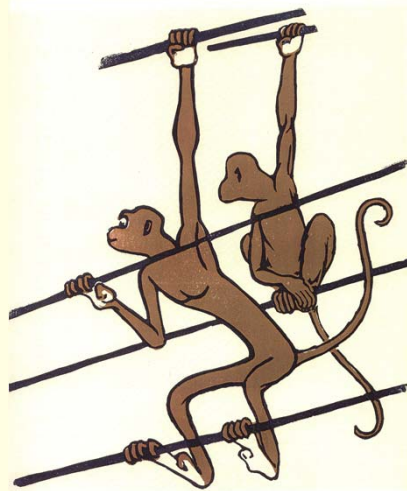
Educational kits were prepared for teachers showing different types of book binding for use in high school and college art classes.



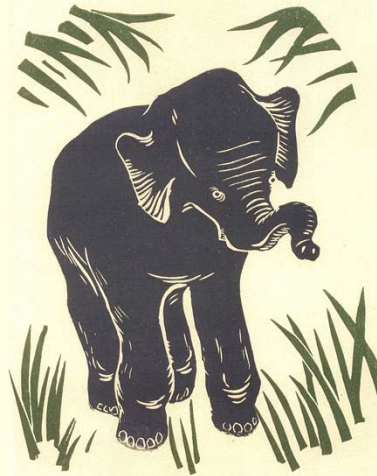
Kendrick Bell in 1935



Bell in 1997



THE MONKEY IS BUSY
AND ACTIVE ALL DAY
HE FINDS IT IS EASY
TO BE HAPPY THAT WAY



SOME ELEPHANTS
ARE VERY CARE
THEY MOVE HEAVY OBJECTS
AND THINK IT'S A GAME



BE KIND TO TIMID CREATURES
LIKE THE DEER
YOU'LL NEVER GET TO KNOW THEM
IF YOU CAUSE THEM FEAR



POLAR BEARS
KEEP VERY COOL
BY SWIMMING IN
THEIR ICY POOL.



THIS GIRAFFE, AS YOU
CAN SEE,
IS HAVING HIS DINNER
FROM THE TOP OF A TREE.



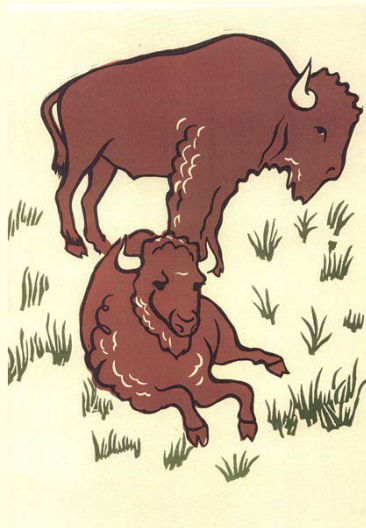
THE HIPPO WALKS
WITH A SORT OF WUDDLE!
BUT HAS TO SWIM
IN A MIGHTY BIG PUDDLE.



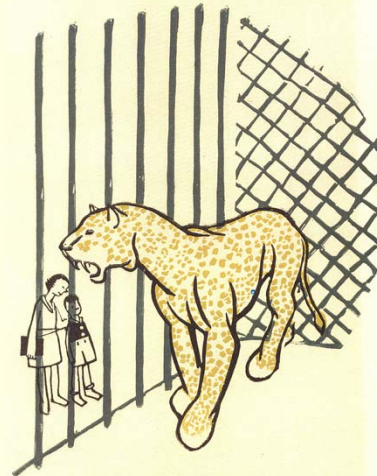
THE OSTRICH IS THE
LARGEST BIRD
HE ACCEPTS THIS HONOR
WITHOUT A WORD.



ON THE WATER'S EDGE
THIS CROCODILE
TAKES A SUNBATH
WITH A SMILE.



DID YOU EVER KNOW
THAT THE BUFFALO
USED TO WANDER
ALL OVER THE LAND?
BUT NOW ALL THE FARMERS
PUT FENCES AROUND
AND HE HASN'T A PLACE
TO STAND



OLD MR. LEOPARD ISN'T
ONE BIT POLITE
PEOPLE NEVER LIKE HIM
'CAUSE HE ALWAYS WANTS
TO FIGHT.



A LION'S REALLY
A PLEASANT CHAP
WHEN HE'S HAD HIS LUNCH
AND A NICE LONG NAP.

Costumes



Costumes were produced during the first few years of the project, starting with robes for a choral group at Milwaukee State Teachers College and costumes for a junior high operetta. Over time the costumes became more elaborate and intricate.

The project organized a community pageant of "Costumes through the Ages" which was seen by 60,000 Milwaukee area spectators. Orders were received from the University of Wisconsin Theatre Department, community players, Milwaukee and suburban schools, and institutions from other cities.



The costume unit was organized by Ruth Schoewe (Laux), shown modeling. The unit was operated in a semi-autonomous way. Each costume was unique and all designing was done within the unit.



The costume designers often consulted Milwaukee Public Library reference materials and periodicals to insure that their period pieces were authentic.

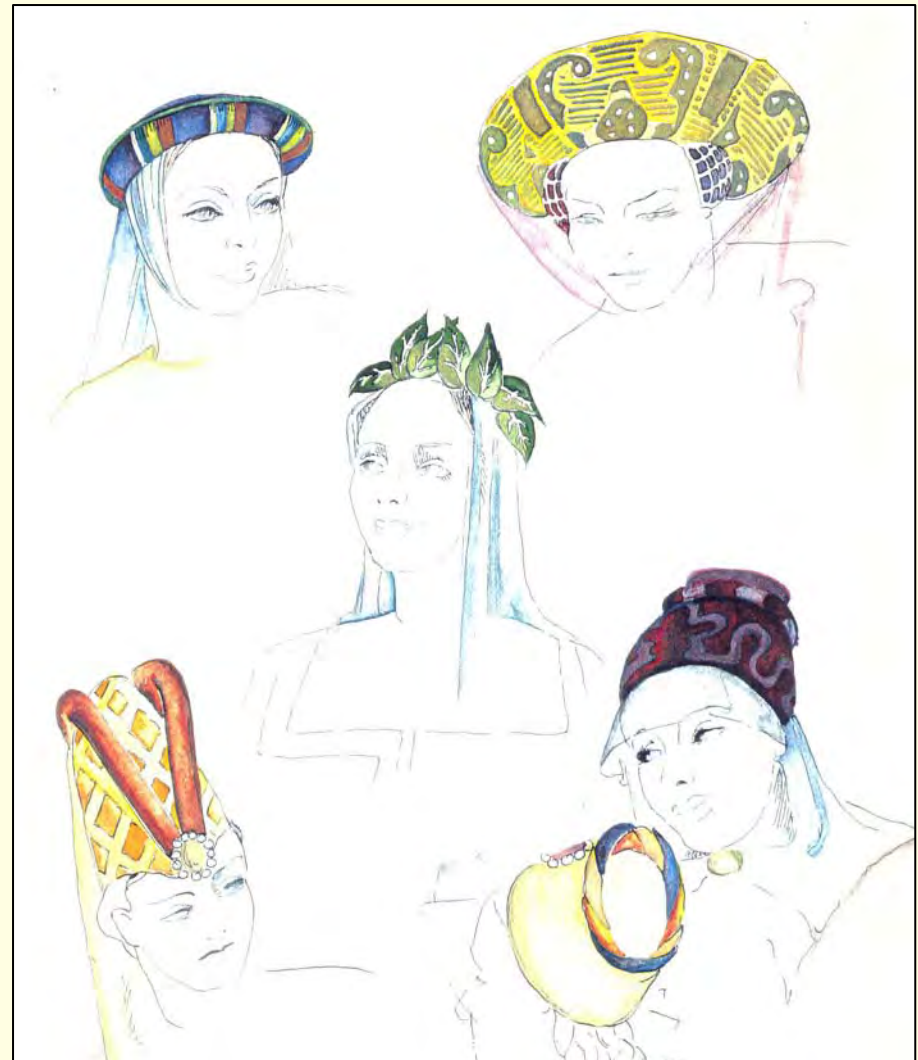




Workers made costumes for a pageant showing 5,000 years in the history of dress. At each event audience members from tax-supported institutions were encouraged to order WPA products. Here, designer Merritt Waltermire models a costume.



The fabric for WPA costumes was usually supplied by the school or theatre group. Materials for a large costume order for the Omro (Wis.) historic pageant were supplied by Hollywood studios filming the event.



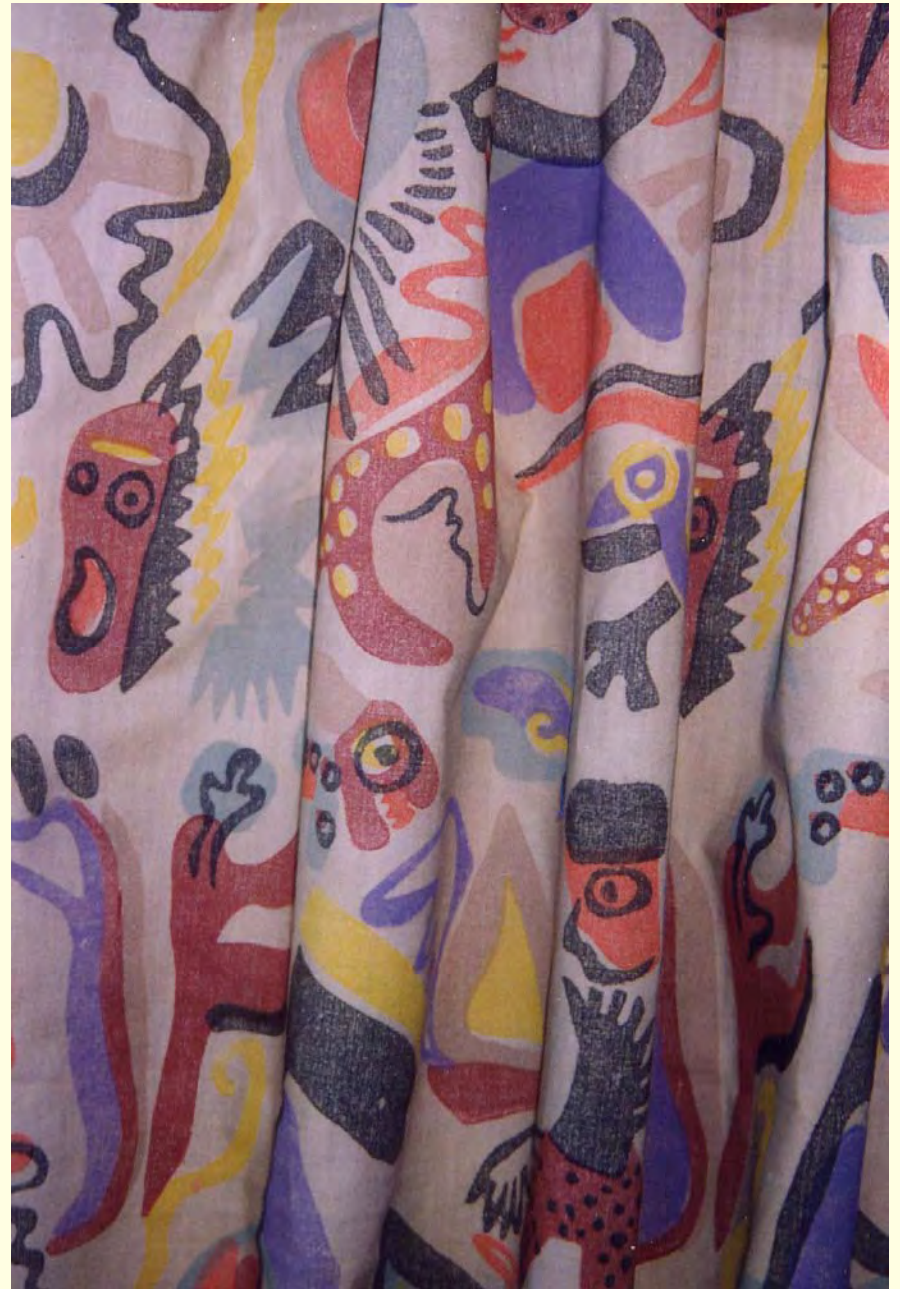
Workers made not only the costumes, but accessories, including shoes, boots, sandals, headdresses, hats, gloves, jewelry and bags.



Costumes made by the project are still in use in area high schools. These dance outfits are from Bay View High School in Milwaukee.

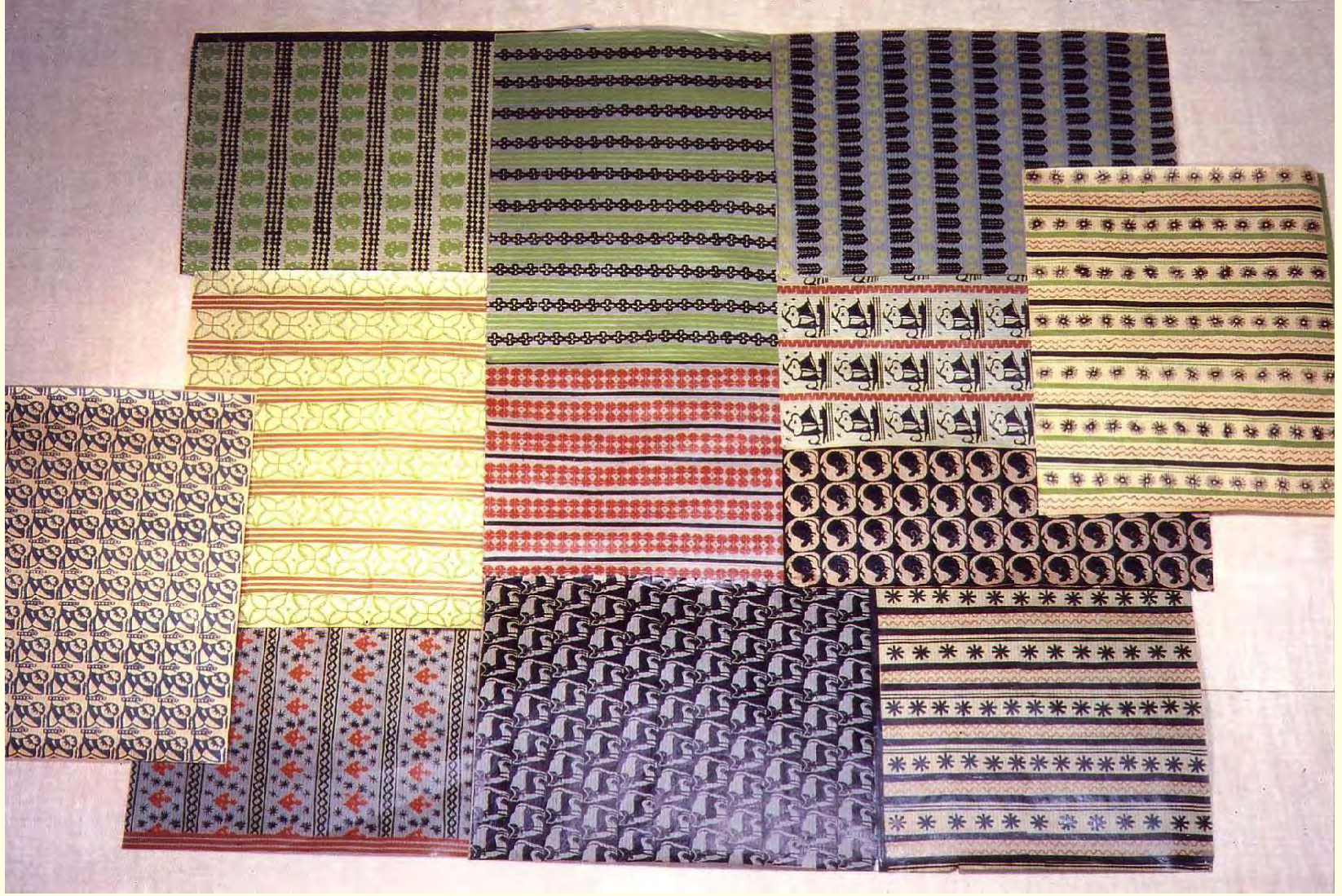
Blockprinting

Blockprinting was begun to print decorative paper to cover scrapbooks. When it became evident that the women were able to learn to print (at first with very small blocks), a separate work unit was established. The many requests the project received from schools and institutions for curtains led to the production of printed yardage. Colorful wall hangings were added later.





Workers became very skilled at printing fabrics for book covers, portfolios, wall hangings, and curtains. Samples of the printed textiles were included in an educational series for high schools and colleges.





Harold Scott, a designer-foreman, cuts a design into a linoleum block. Scott offered evening classes at the Milwaukee Urban League for workers, interested in design work, and the project distributed an educational portfolio of outstanding worker designs.





Workers mixed inks to achieve the colors specified for each design. The project was constantly experimenting to improve the appearance and washability of its blockprinted textiles.



Material was stretched over a padded table before printing. Blockprinted textiles required an even film of ink and careful overlays of colors.





For decades blockprinted curtains hung in Atwater School in Shorewood (Wis.), Whitnall Park, and the Elizabeth Waters Hall of the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Rugmaking

The production of braided rugs was one of the first activities undertaken by the project since cutting and tearing cloth, braiding, and sewing strips together were very simple tasks. The finished rugs were ordered by the county for distribution to relief clients and by the WPA nursery schools for floor mats for the children. When requests were received from public institutions for large rugs, workers were transferred to a new unit and taught to make hooked rugs. To keep costs low, these rugs used scrap wool cloth from factories making uniforms for the armed forces.







Melveda Streeter (Burns) organized and directed the hooked rug unit. She was the designer of a line of attractive standard sized rugs.



The rug unit progressed from making small floor mats for kindergarten and nursery schools to producing large rugs for the Milwaukee Public Library, the University of Wisconsin, and other public institutions.

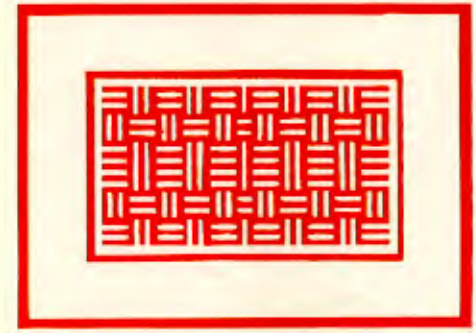


The pattern and colors used in hooked rugs were selected to meet the specific needs of the patron. Hooked rugs usually came in a combination of three to four colors, with one color predominating.

R-233



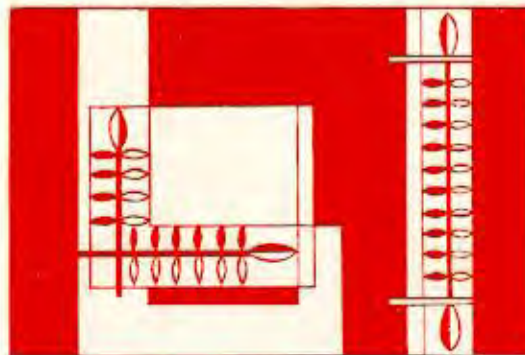
R-200



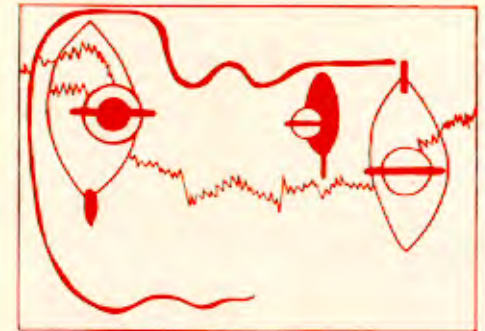
R-202



R-219



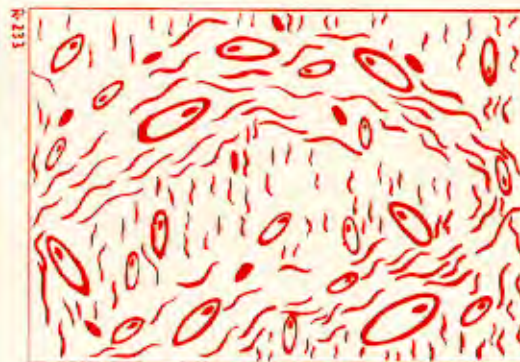
R-302



R-230



R-301



R-233



R-400

Sample rug designs from the project ordering catalog



Recycled waste wool was bleached and dyed to produce beautiful patterns like this “Fish” rug designed by Ann Krasnan. According to project art director Mary June Kellogg (Rice), “No matter how inexpensive the material used, the article will be well-designed or not made.”.



Rug designs were drawn on the foundation cloth stretched tightly on a frame. The dyed material, cut and roiled in balls, was hooked through the cloth with a small hand tool.



After the project's furniture unit began furnishing public rooms, very large hooked rugs were made lacing maximum size sections together. Several men were employed to handle the large frames. They also did some of the hooking. Elisabeth Danielson, a woman of boundless energy, supervised the work.

Counterpane Toys

To meet a request from the head nurse at County Hospital, the project developed a light-weight cloth doll that could be used by children confined to bed for long periods. The project added geometric shapes – cylinders, squares, pyramids – and later animals so the boys would have playthings.

One Christmas Milwaukee County ordered 4,000 toys to include in baskets for families on relief. The sewing unit and doll unit combined forces to produce them in record time.





A nurse at County Hospital suggested calling the project light weight cloth toys “counterpane toys.”



The counterpane dolls, made from material scraps, were washable so that they could be used as bed toys for small children and for children in hospitals.

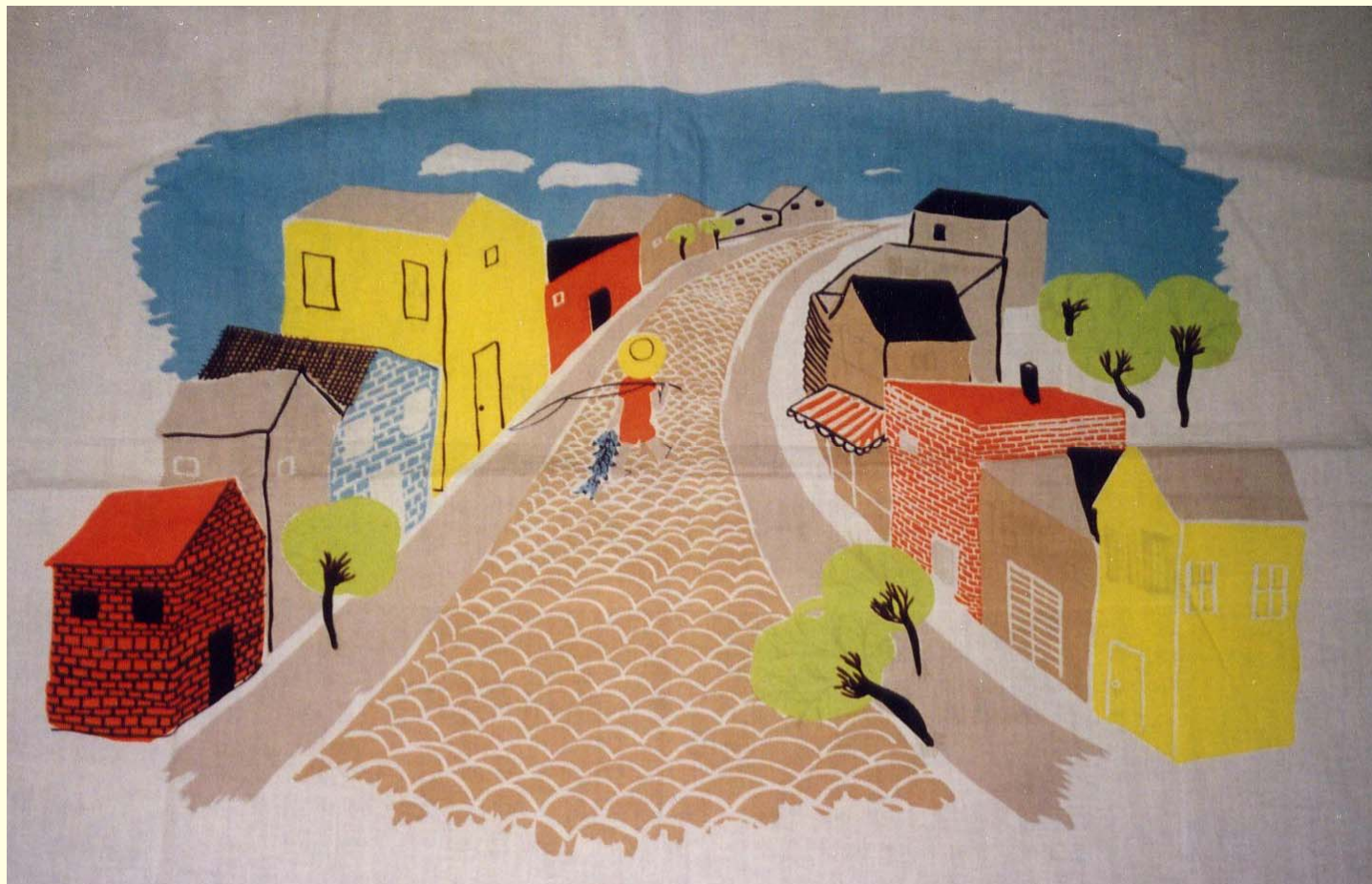


Screen Printing

An unemployed chemist working for the project developed dye pastes which would hold their color in sunlight and through washings. This allowed production of screen print fabrics which supplemented the popular curtain designs of the bookprinting unit.



Teachers ordered wall hangings to brighten their classrooms.





New drapery articles were featured in the project's display room, and samples were shown to schools and institutions.



Furniture and Interior Design

In 1938 a furniture unit was established which employed “old school” carpenters, upholsterers and shopworkers who were unable to find work because of physical disabilities or age. The unit was headed by Clarence Wescott, a young designer trained by his father in their basement shop. Workers made chairs, tables, desks, sofas and cabinets – all designed to meet the exact requirements of the institution placing the order. With this unit in place, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project was able to offer full interior design services, coordinating furniture, upholstery materials, draperies and rugs.

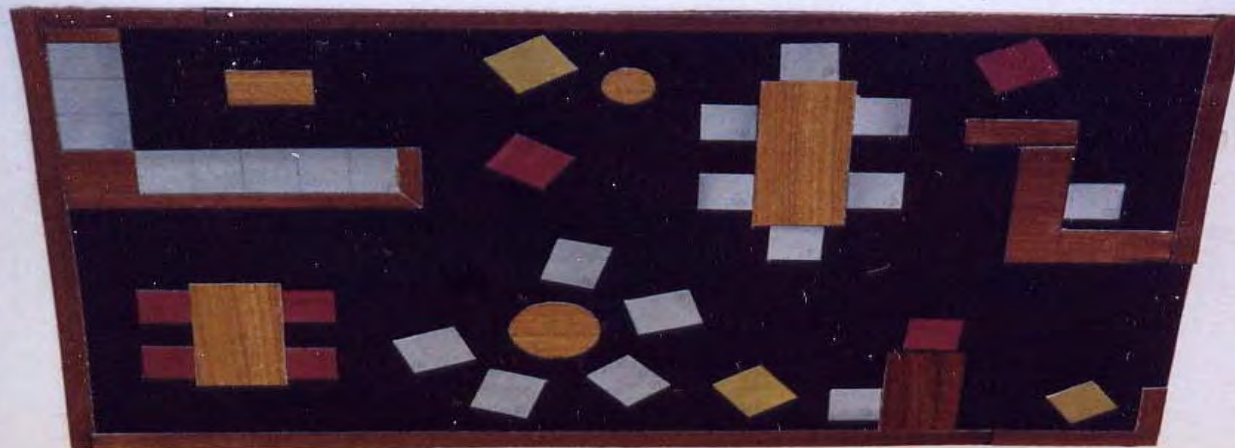






The Milwaukee Public Library is still using armchairs and sofas made by project workers for its browsing room. This armchair was designed by Clarence Wescott, woven upholstery fabric by Edmund Wichman, screen printed draperies by Camilla Travanti (Wichman), and hooked rug by Ann Krasnan.

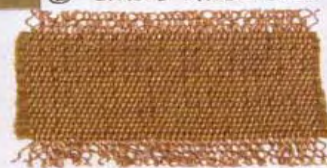
BROWSING ROOM - MILWAUKEE PUBLIC LIBRARY
FURNITURE and PLAN by WESCOTT COLOR PLAN by WICHMAN



① MAXINE



② (TO BE) SPACED TWILL - GOLD



③ MUSE WE-709 A



④ (TO BE) SPACED TWILL - RASPBERRY



DRAPERY - MAXINE



WALL COLOR - SHELL GREY #850
ENTERPRISE WAL-GLOSS



FLOOR COVERING - EGGPLANT
LINOLEUM PAT. #1004 CONGOLEUM



MAHOGANY - 600

NAT. RED BIRCH - 201

BLACK FORMICA KICKPLATE
FOR WALL CASES

CEILING - OFF WHITE



No furniture pieces were put into production until tested for comfort and appearance. The large circular rug was designed by Edmund Wichman for the music room at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Manikins

Workers prepared a set of 50 manikins in national costumes to fill a request from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Harold Milbrath, a designer-foreman in the wooden toy unit, produced a small jointed figure of wood with a featureless head. Mary Holan undertook the research and a group of workers in the costume unit created the costumes following her watercolor designs.





A request from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for small manikins dressed in authentic foreign costumes and subsequent school orders made work for a small unit of highly skilled embroiderers – many foreign born.



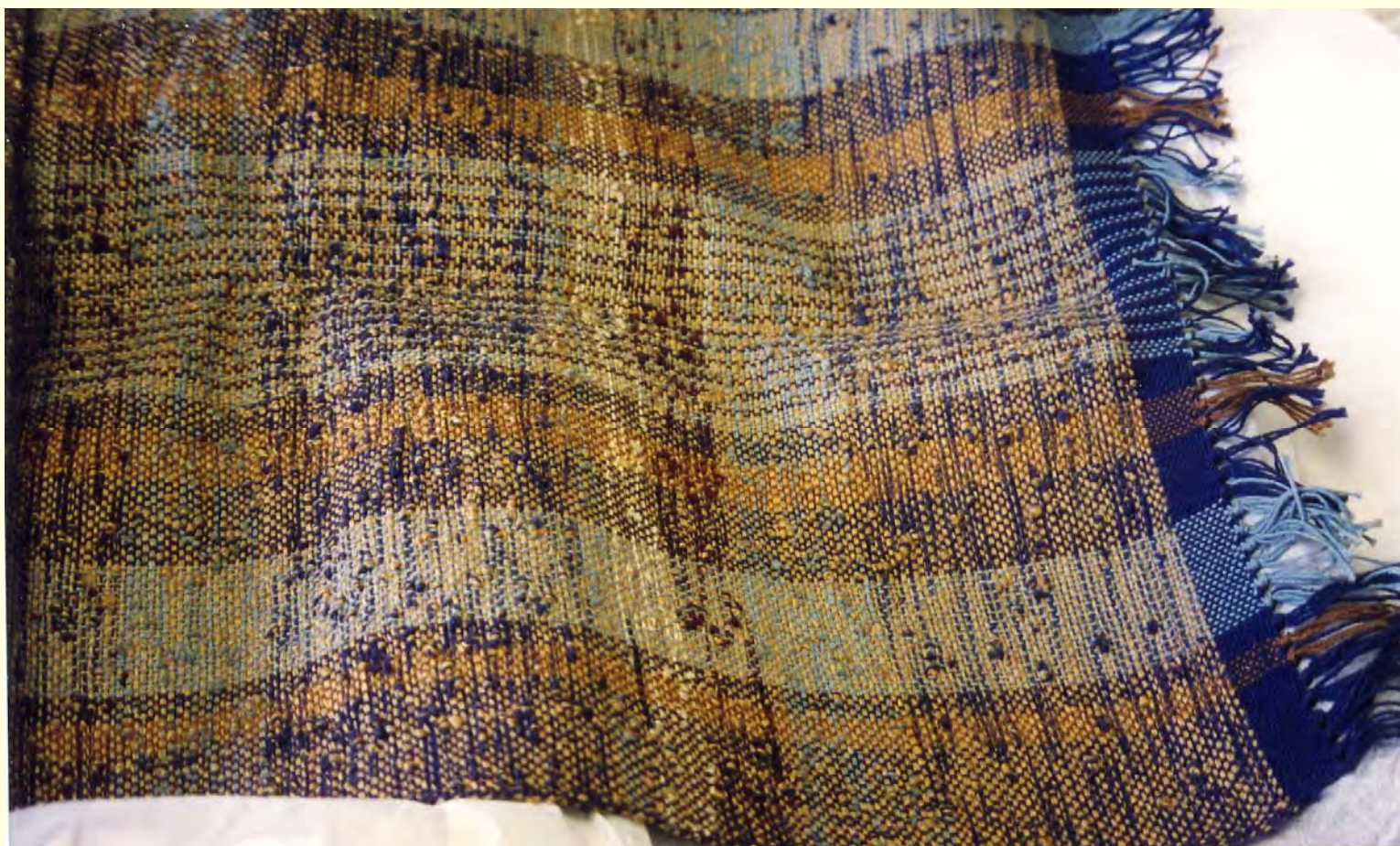
Weaving

Women were taught to weave using surplus wool waste from weaving mills and jute from surplus burlap bags furnished by the government. (At the suggestion of Victor Schmitt, who directed the unit, the bags were dyed before they were unraveled – to brighten the workplace and help women see the relationship of their unraveling work to the finished products.) In the early days project workers made table runners, mats, napkins and simple rugs. Later drapery fabric was woven.





Handwoven drapery fabric could be ordered by the yard in a variety of colors and textiles.





Since teachers often requested samples of handicrafts to use as supplementary teaching materials, workers produced educational portfolios on weaving, bookbinding and blockprinting techniques.



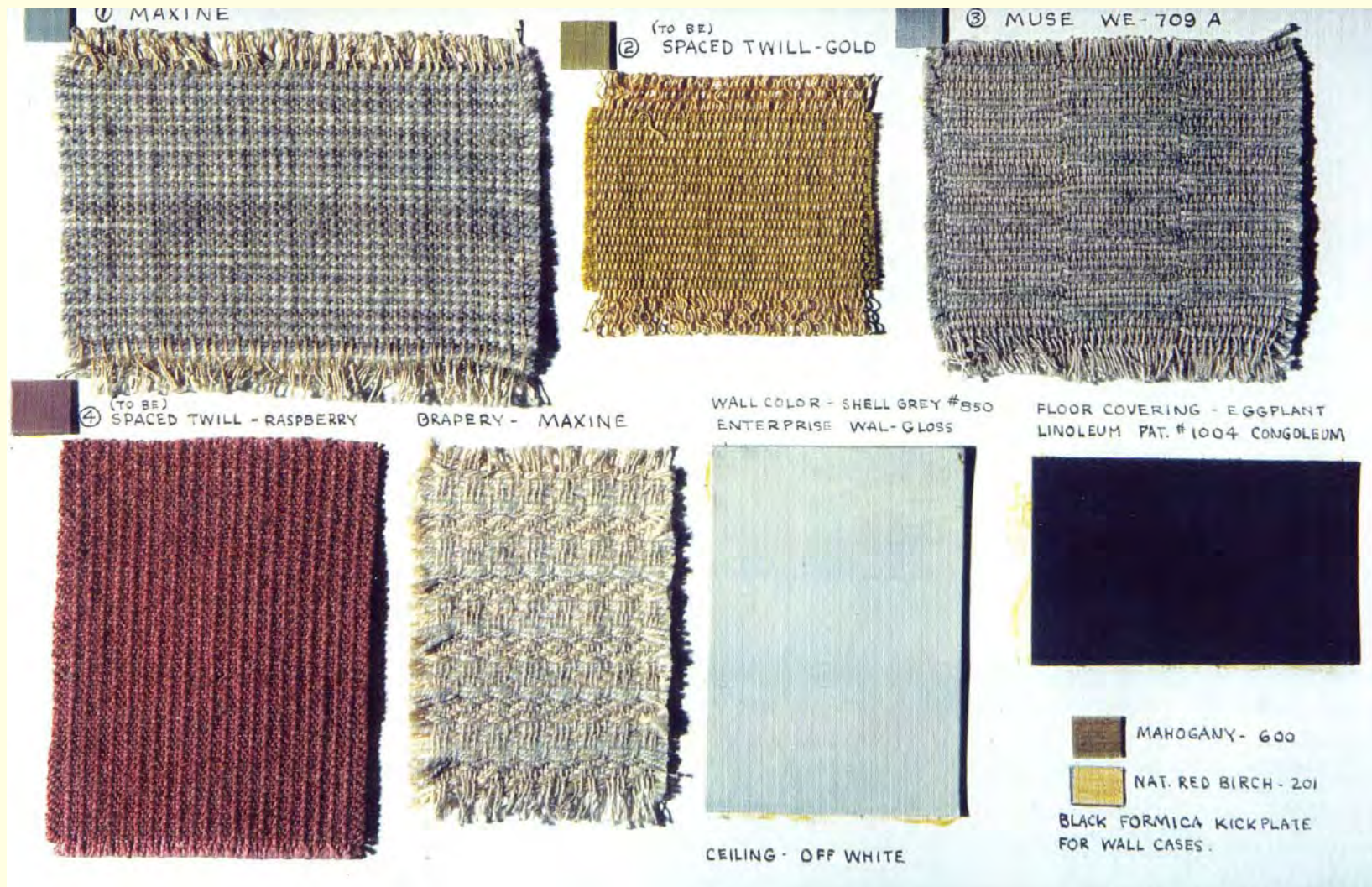
Women were frequently asked to explain their work to visitors. Workers provided a week of on-site demonstration at Schuster's Department Store.





Men built 40-inch-wide floor looms using Elsa Ulbricht's design. Small table looms were also used to experiment with new materials, weavings and color combinations.

With the introduction of furniture, sturdy upholstery materials were made.



Visitors and Exhibits

Teachers and other visitors frequently toured the project workrooms. There were so many visitors to the workrooms it was necessary to designate a staff person to guide them. The volume of requests for exhibits of project-made articles became so great that a separate unit with additional staff was needed to handle the packing and shipping.



The many compliments received on the beauty and quality of the products increased the pride and morale of the workers.



The outstanding quality of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project has been recognized since the 1930s. The project's first exhibit was held at the Wisconsin State Fair in 1936. Several hundred handicraft workers were available in shifts to demonstrate and explain their work. According to a local newspaper two thousand visitors filed past the demonstrations each hour.



An exhibit of Milwaukee products was chosen for the first federal women's art tour in 1937 even though the pieces were made by "unskilled" workers rather than artists. Milwaukee WPA workers were selected to offer demonstrations at the New York World's Fair in 1939-40. Milwaukee products were exhibited at the Chicago Art Institute, Indianapolis Museum of Art and college galleries.

This blockprinted textile of industrial workers, designed by Florence Kawa, was found among Eleanor Roosevelt's possessions at the time of her death and is now available as a poster from the National Archives in Washington.



First Lady Likes Our City



[Journal Staff Photo]

MRS. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, here for an Armistice day lecture, is shown as she inspected Milwaukee from her suite in the Cudahy tower Wednesday. The first lady said she liked the city and expressed a wish to walk in Juneau park.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Milwaukee Handicraft Project in November 1936. Roosevelt's praise of the project in her "My Day" syndicated column was a great boost to the workers and staff.



Roosevelt cherished several of the blockprinted textiles presented to her by project workers. She hung the “Rubaiyat” wall hanging (designed by Barbara Warren) at Val-kill, her cottage in Hyde Park.

See Mary Kellogg Rice, **Useful Work for Unskilled Women:
A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project** (Milwaukee County
Historical Society, 2003) for references and photo credits.