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 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.