

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

New Women's WPA Head



MRS. HARRIET PETTIBONE CLINTON, River Hills, a former newspaper woman, was appointed director of the WPA women's division of Milwaukee county Monday by Mrs. Grant Haas, Madison, state director of the women's division. Mrs. Clinton will have an office at the WPA county headquarters at soldiers' home. Mrs. Clinton is shown at the office of Irma Hochstein, county director of the women's division of the WERA, familiarizing herself with her new duties.

[Journal Staff Photo]

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.

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