

1930's 40's

The New Orleans WPA/FAP

Lawrence A. Jones

African American

My efforts to secure an art education have taken me, in the capacity of a waiter, to many American cities large and small, where I have had ample opportunity to watch the cultural progress of my people. Both as an artist and as a citizen, therefore, I feel that I can speak with knowledge on the subject of the Negro artist and what Uncle Sam is doing for him and his community.

As a high school student in Lynchburg, Virginia (1930-34), I found it impossible to secure an art education. The public schools did not offer this important course, nor did the college for Negroes. I did, however, receive criticism and encouragement from sympathetic white artists of my community. At that time there was no art program in Lynchburg giving classes to the public, so my friends advised me to pack up and go elsewhere.

My train fare to Chicago was generously contributed by appreciative Negro citizens of Lynchburg and Mrs. Bessie Lamb Woolfolk of the United Charities. In Chicago, Jane Addams gave me a job as a waiter at Hull House, and there I earned enough money to keep me going. A scholarship at the Art Institute gave me the education I had set out to get at any cost. After four years of study in Chicago, I came to Dillard University in New Orleans to serve as assistant in the Department of Fine Arts. I took some academic work at the same time toward my degree. In my second year at Dillard I won second prize in a national exhibition of Negro art. When my work at Dillard came to an end, I sought and found employment on the WPA Federal Art Project in Louisiana.

This new connection gave me a vivid realization of my social responsibility toward the underprivileged, and in New Orleans I have since followed the example of many of my race who in the North have been taking an active part in WPA/FAP art work for many years. Believing as I do that the appreciation of art cultivates in man a sincere regard for the contributions of his fellow men, regardless of race or creed, I am trying through my own painting and art teaching to create a more democratic America.

On the New Orleans art project we teach art to poor children whose undirected energy might otherwise lead to delinquency. This energy I try to divert into creative work through finger painting and simple crafts; I have been very successful with maladjusted children and general rowdies. On our project there are four artists who serve the community in specific sections of New Orleans. My colleagues are Harold Pierce, Myron Lechay, Leonard Scott, and Joseph Williams. We all feel that we have a dual duty as creative artists and as teachers. Our art classes are held in all the poorer sections of the city—for adults at night and for children on Saturdays. They have brought an enthusiastic response from the children especially, who come with lunches, prepared to wear out the teacher completely. Among our adult students are many public-school teachers.

My colleagues and I know that our work is essential both for our own development and for that of the community. We think that the country as a whole may well use New Orleans as an example of what the WPA/FAP can do for the cultural advancement of the Negro.

Source: Available in Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 204–6, 198–99.

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