

**UPENDING UNSKILLED:  
MAKING AND MARKETING THE MILWAUKEE HANDICRAFT PROJECT  
DOLLS, 1935-1943**

by

Allison L.W. Robinson

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture.

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Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Catharine Dann Roeber, Ph.D.  
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Wendy A. Bellion, Ph.D.  
Acting Director of the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
George H. Watson, Ph.D.  
Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Ann L. Ardis, Ph.D.  
Senior Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education

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## **DEDICATION**

In loving memory of Mildred Wigfall, my grandmother

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
ABSTRACT .....	xii

### Chapter

1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 FOUNDING THE MILWAUKEE HANDICRAFT PROJECT.....	15
3 MAKING THE DOLLS OF THE MILWAUKEE HANDICRAFT PROJECT AND DEBATES OVER THE “UNSKILLED” WORKER .....	33
4 DEFINING AND COMMODIFYING AMERICANNESSTHROUGH DOLLS: THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PEDAGOGIAL WORK OF THE MILWAUKEE HANDICRAFT PROJECT .....	62
5 CONCLUSION .....	92
REFERENCES.....	96

### Appendix

A IMAGE PERMISSIONS.....	102
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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	“American Girl,” private collection, Dr. Charles Waisbren. ....	3
Figure 2	“Elsa Ulbricht at loom,” Elsa Emilie Ulbricht Papers, 1905-1978, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI.....	23
Figure 3	Example of a doll drawing from the American Index of Design contemporary with the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, doll, circa 1939, water and graphite on paper, Carmel Wilson, Index of American Design, 1943.8.16660, courtesy of the National Gallery of Art. ....	30
Figure 4	Example of a doll drawing from the American Index of Design contemporary with the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, doll, “Molly Bentley,” 1936, watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on paper, Index of American Design, 1943.8.8135, courtesy of the National Gallery of Art. ....	31
Figure 5	Example of a doll produced by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, “American Doll,” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	32
Figure 6	Photograph of women sewing clothing for 22-inch dolls on the factory floor, “Three women creating textile art,” Elsa Emile Ulbricht Papers, 1905-1978, University-Wisconsin Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.....	41
Figure 7	Peter, “Children’s Doll with Red Outfit” (M2005.027.004, WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.....	44
Figure 8	Patsy, “Children’s Doll with Red Raincoat” (M2005.027.003, W.P.A. Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.....	45

Figure 9	“Blonde twin with bangs and braids,” WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.....	46
Figure 10	Unclothed 16-inch doll displaying construction techniques, Peter, “Children’s Doll with Red Outfit” (M2005.027.004, WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.....	50
Figure 11	American doll, “Navy Girl,” private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren. ....	53
Figure 12	Unpainted 22-inch doll face, “Doll face and mold,” Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	54
Figure 13	Close-up of painted 22-inch American doll face, “Navy Girl,” private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren. ....	54
Figure 14	Close-up of twenty-two inch doll hair with evidence of glue remnants once used to secure the wig to the side of the face, “American Girl” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	55
Figure 15	Close up of painted doll face attached to the doll body, “American Girl,” WPA Dolls, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	56
Figure 16	Close up of legs attached with a whipstitch on the 22-inch doll, “American Doll” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	57
Figure 17	Close up of stamp on the back of every 22-inch doll, “American Doll” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	59
Figure 18	Close-up of fastenings on the Milwaukee Handicraft Doll dresses, “American Girl” WPA Dolls, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	65

Figure 19	WPA Doll's Clothing (M2015.025.002A-B), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	66
Figure 20	"American Girl," WPA Dolls, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	69
Figure 21	"American Girl," Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	70
Figure 22	"WPA Doll's Clothing," M2015.024.004 A-B, Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	71
Figure 23	"WPA Doll's Clothing" (M2015.024.003B), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society. ....	72
Figure 24	"Polish Girl," private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren. ....	74
Figure 25	"Polish Girl," private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren. ....	75
Figure 26	Manikin of the Polish Female costume produced by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project in miniature, "Polish Female (H57871/29244)," WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum. ....	76
Figure 27	"Norwegian Doll," Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	79
Figure 28	Hat from "Norwegian Girl," Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	80
Figure 29	<i>By the Fjord</i> , Hans Dahl, 1937, public domain.....	81
Figure 30	"Negro Girl," WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.....	84
Figure 31	"Welsh Girl," Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	87
Figure 32	Hat from "Welsh Girl," Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	88

Figure 33	Close up of “Welsh Girl” hair, bonnet, and face, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library. ....	89
Figure 34	Close up of “Negro Girl” hairstyle, Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum. ....	90
Figure 35	“Women working in a studio, Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” Elsa Emile Ulbricht Papers, 1907-1978, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI .....	92

## **ABSTRACT**

In 1938, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project unveiled its latest product – a doll that combined handcrafted molding for the face with hand and machine stitching for the body and clothing. It was one of many “handicraft” objects produced by this Work Projects Administration program meant to raise the national taste in everyday goods. Inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement in the Midwest, the administrators believed that well-designed and well-crafted objects had the power to uplift the general public and the “unskilled” female laborer hired to create them.

The dolls served as pedagogical tools to teach children civic participation while training the women who made them to work in a factory setting. Examination of the dolls suggests a more nuanced narrative than that of the transformed unskilled laborer, one that centers exchange between workers and administrators in the production of dolls for children on relief across the country. Further, through three categories of dolls – American, Negro American, and Foreign – The Milwaukee Handicraft Project made an argument about who is American and who is not articulated through design. Details including skin color, hair texture, and clothing identified physical traits and cultural practices embodied by each doll, materially defining and marketing a narrative of visualized similarities and differences between Americans and European ethnic groups.

Dolls are powerful objects that connect us to the past. The dolls discussed in this thesis materially capture each moment in which a woman working on the Milwaukee Handicraft Project passed a needle through both sides of a cloth or the



moment in which cotton yarn was carefully woven and then glued into place to reproduce the human form in miniature. The women who designed the dolls are present in the carefully rendered details. The women who made the dolls are embodied in every stitch and painted feature. And by looking closely at the dolls' design, their production, and the visual language communicated through their final form, we can see the skill that went into producing them, the care with which they were designed and made, and the ideas about Americanness and the power of design to change lives.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The breakthrough moment came with the head. Or rather, a separately molded face. The women first shellacked the inside of the mold. Then, using repurposed balbriggan, a material commonly used for underwear, the women layered strips of cloth and a cornstarch paste on top of one another inside of the mold exactly three times. After the layers dried, the women shellacked the molded form once more for added water resistance – and for good measure. For strength and durability, the women inserted a wooden stick  $3/8^{\text{th}}$  of an inch thick from ear-to-ear and filled the remaining space with a sawdust and sodium silicate, colloquially known as “glass water mix.”<sup>1</sup> This assemblage of materials dried to form childlike features. It was 1938 and the Milwaukee Handicraft Project finally had its design for the face of its life-sized, jointed doll.

Program Director Elsa Ulbricht and her Art Director Mary June Kellogg struggled for months to create this design.<sup>2</sup> They responded to requests from local hospitals and day cares operated by the Work Projects Administration (WPA) that needed toys for the children under their charge.<sup>3</sup> Keeping in mind a target audience of young children in

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<sup>1</sup> Accession # H50145/28134, no date, Box 3 “Patterns and Formulas,” WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Collection, WPA MHP Collection, History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>2</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], “W.P.A. Handicraft Project 1170 Sponsored by Milwaukee State Teachers College,” [February 1938], 11, received from Graeme Reid.

<sup>3</sup> Harriet Pettibone Clinton, “The First Year of Womens and Professionals Projects, 1936,” 1936, 5, Fromkin Memorial Collection, Special Collections, UWM, Milwaukee,

hospital beds and nurseries, they began to craft a doll designed to be light-weight, sturdy, and washable. Ulbricht and Rice designed a body made of the cotton plain weave percale and stuffed it with kapoc, a firm plant fiber. This gave the body a firm, sturdy interior supported by a soft, washable exterior. They selected cotton warp yarn for hair, a material that could be washed and combed to mimic human hair, and then gave the doll partially articulating legs that were jointed at the hip. This allowed the doll to sit at a 90-degree angle, much like the children who played with her.<sup>4</sup> Ulbricht and Kellogg tried making a mold for the doll's face on the kitchen stove of Kellogg's mother, but they needed help.<sup>5</sup> So Ulbricht hired Dick Wiken. Wiken yearned to work as a sculptor before the Great Depression hit and he found himself working as a designer-foreman on the Handicraft Project in 1938. Ulbricht hired Wiken to supervise the wooden toy department, but he soon transferred to the doll department where he would create the new face.<sup>6</sup> With a body created by Ulbricht and her administrative team, this 22-inch doll encapsulated the collaborative nature of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. The workers hired on the

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WI; unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], "W.P.A. Handicraft Project 1170 Sponsored by Milwaukee State Teachers College, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Elsa Ulbricht, "Dolls \* Toys," *Design Magazine* 45, no. 6 (February 1944), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Kellogg Rice, "Interview with Mary Kellogg Rice," interview by Jewell Fenzi, January 5, 1991, transcript, 2, <https://cdn.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004ric01/2004ric01.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Passante, *Dick Wiken: Milwaukee Architectural Sculptor* (Milwaukee, WI: ElexDay Publications, 2012), 7. Wiken would be transferred to the Federal Art Project the day after Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Milwaukee Handicraft Project and witnessed his work. His move from supervisor on a project hiring "unskilled labor" to professional artist in the Federal Arts Project contributes to the narrative of uplift among those affiliated with the Milwaukee Handicraft Project.

program transformed the doll design into reality. As Ulbricht said, the dolls were “made through the efforts of many.”<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1 “American Girl,” private collection, Dr. Charles Waisbren.

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<sup>7</sup> Ulbricht, “Dolls \* Toys,” 12.

Long before the Pleasant Company released the first American Girl doll in 1986, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project put Wisconsin on the map as a center of doll production in the United States. This government-funded enterprise produced dolls on a scale of tens of thousands annually for tax-supported institutions and children on relief.<sup>8</sup> People across the country and around the globe contacted the Milwaukee Handicraft Project for its dolls, from local schools in Milwaukee to American missionaries in Northern Africa.<sup>9</sup> Some of the nation's best known politicians, artists, and architects visited the project during its operation, including Frank Lloyd Wright and Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>10</sup> While primarily focused on materially supporting local and regional institutions, this program left a national and global impact through the exhibition and distribution of its goods including dolls.

This subject is ripe for examination. Begun in 1935 to put local women back to work during the Great Depression, this Work Projects Administration program marketed thoughtfully designed objects and professionally trained factory workers as its two primary products.<sup>11</sup> The preexisting literature echoes this narrative, heralding the success

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<sup>8</sup> "Works Progress Administration Project Proposal 4D-1880," 1939, Milwaukee County, Special Committee on Works Progress Administration Programs, MSS 773, box 2, folder "Walter Bunge – Handicraft," Archive, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>9</sup> P.D. Flannery and Myra E. Burkey, "Wisconsin Work Projects Administration, 1939" 1939, 3, Fromkin Memorial Collection, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Bellais, "No Idle Hands: A Milwaukee Handicraft Project," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 84 (2000-2001): 53.

<sup>11</sup> The federal government referred to the WPA as the "Works Progress Administration" at the time of its founding in 1935. However, in 1939, it was renamed the "Work Projects

of the program as it transformed the lives of its 5,000 “unskilled” workers and its founder Elsa Ulbricht as a champion of social uplift for the workers and the child audience alike through design.<sup>12</sup> Placing the products made by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project at the heart of the story adds depth to this history. This thesis flips the narrative, tracing the evolution of this WPA program from an inchoate idea to a fully-fledged production program through its founding, manufacturing processes, and development and marketing of its multiple doll designs. Focusing on the dolls highlights the work of the women on the factory floor who made them, emphasizing the collaboration from design to production and marketing that contributed to its material success. Further, centralizing the dolls out of the thirteen categories of objects produced by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project provides an opportunity to discuss the ways in which the program developed out of and in conversation with contemporary political narratives about labor, skill, race, and immigration in the United States. Through teamwork, shared labor, and responsiveness to the needs of their customers, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project achieved its goal of making well-designed and well-crafted objects. But it also contributed to larger debates about American economic uplift and recovery through its structure, its products, and its marketing.

Thus I examine the Milwaukee Handicraft Project through three interconnected lenses, each angle explored in a dedicated chapter. Chapter One, this section, provides the

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Administration.” This thesis uses the later term in the body of the paper and, when identifying archival sources in footnotes, references the term used by that archive.

<sup>12</sup> Kirk Bates, “The Project that Made Milwaukee Famous,” *Milwaukee Journal*, May 26, 1944, UWM, MSS 59, box 3, folder 1, “Scrapbook, Biography, 1918-1970,” Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI; Bellais, “No Idle Hands”; Mary Kellogg Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project* (Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2003).

historiographical interventions of the project and an introduction to the topic and approach. Chapter Two recounts and recontextualizes the founding of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project from the traditional Elsa Ulbricht-centered narrative into a WPA program that changed and evolved with each new person and sponsor brought into its administration. Local WPA administrators first conceptualized the project as a simplified scrapbooking project for two hundred and fifty women to “cut out pictures from wall paper and paste them into books.”<sup>13</sup> However, as planning advanced, additional people joined the program’s administrative team, and the doors opened, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project quickly morphed into a thirteen-department enterprise with eight hundred employees on the factory floor and an operating structure that drew on ideas about social uplift through objects popular among Midwestern Arts and Crafts circles at the turn-of-the-twentieth century, contemporary pedagogical theory, and federal mandates about what a “production-for-use” work project needed to do to receive its annual funding from the WPA. The founders, including Elsa Ulbricht, had to negotiate with one another to bring their very different visions for the project together, including the federal government’s requirements. The founding involved multiple voices collaborating, and often competing, with one another. This narrative is far more complex than previously discussed.

The thesis then transitions into a discussion of the labor structure of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. Much like its founding, its implementation entailed

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<sup>13</sup> Elsa Ulbricht, “The Milwaukee Handicraft Project: Tape Recorded Interview with Elsa Ulbricht - June 11, 1964,” interview by Dr. Hayward Ehrlich, 1964, 3, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.; Elsa Ulbricht Papers, 1905-1978, MSS 59, box 1, folder 1 “Archives of American Art 1963-1966,” Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI.

miscommunication, negotiation, and collaborative learning among everyone involved from day one, from directors and administrators to supervisors and workers on the factory floor. Even the United States Employment Service and the WPA influenced hiring patterns through their employment categories and directives. This WPA program evolved in fits and starts but eventually blossomed into a well-oiled machine.

Chapter Three traces the evolution of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project's hiring practices, hierarchical structure, and distribution of labor. Using the doll division as an example, I argue that applying current theorists on making such as Tim Ingold to a study of the program's oral histories, written records, and physical dolls allows for a reconfigured definition of what "skill" meant on the factory floor. The process of making can be theorized as an interplay between the maker and material. Examination of the dolls, the labor of the women who made them, the tools that they used, and the materials with which they worked highlights the many skills that these "unskilled" laborers used. The chapter does two things. It rearranges the history of how the Milwaukee Handicraft Project came to operate in a hierarchical structure to give voice to those at the bottom as much as the top. Further, by looking at the dolls, it reexamines that structure in practice and considers the implications of the definitions of "skilled" and "unskilled" labor used by the WPA, United States Employment Service, and program administrations in 1930's and 1940's Milwaukee.

A discussion about making naturally leads into a chapter about design. Elsa Ulbricht intended the dolls to serve as pedagogical tools for children to teach them how to dress and take care of themselves. Through the clothing designed by Helen Clarke and made by the workers, the dolls held the material ability to shape some of the children's actions with them, namely how they put on and removed the clothing. The material form



of the dolls described in Chapter Three taught children a lesson about being active members of their families and communities through self-care.

In Chapter Four, however, I argue the Milwaukee Handicraft Project did not design, make, and market dolls within an apolitical bubble. The initiative's 22-inch doll came in three categories – “American,” “Foreign,” and “Negro American” dolls. Each of the eighteen dolls produced in these categories featured designs that communicated their unique background, from different hair patterns and skin colors to clothing in the style of a given nation's traditional dress. The program created a visual vocabulary to communicate an idealized American identity through comparison and contrast with the racial other and the ethnic foreigner. The Handicraft Project's material argument was not so simple, however; the workers used the same facial molds, fabric material, and yarn to make every single doll. The administrators may have designed, marketed, and commodified their dolls as different from one another, but the production processes created a counter-narrative. Again, the material evidence of the dolls themselves produces another perspective.

This subject intersects with three core historiographies on dolls, the Work Projects Administration, and women's wage labor in the United States. The literature on dolls in American history is populated with both collectors' manuals and academic texts. Collectors' manuals help their readers identify the material qualities of dolls to determine their date and location of production, value, and rarity.<sup>14</sup> They provide crucial knowledge

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<sup>14</sup> Foundational guides for doll collecting — discussing topics ranging from the materiality of dolls to instructions for how to identify them — include Jean Bach, *The Warner Collectors' Guide to Dolls* (New York: Warner Books, 1982); Thelma Bateman, *Delightful Dolls, Antique and Otherwise* (Washington: Hobby House Press, 1966); Evelyn, Elizabeth, and Dorothy Coleman, *The Age of Dolls* (Washington, DC: Dorothy S. Coleman, 1965); Jan Foulke *13th Blue Book Dolls & Values* (Grantsville, MD: Hobby House Press, 1997); Antonia Fraser, *Dolls: Pleasures and Treasures* (New York: G. P.

about how doll design and production changed over time. Academics, meanwhile, predominately use dolls as material evidence in the history of childhood, particularly how ideas have been transmitted to children throughout American history and the emergence of a gendered child consumer in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>15</sup> My thesis exists at the intersection of these two conversations, exploring both the materiality of the Milwaukee Handicraft dolls and using that information to better understand the context in which they were produced.

I seek to engage in a conversation with the foundational work of Robin Bernstein in particular, who argues that the material form of nineteenth-century toys created conditions for particular sets of behaviors among children. She proposes that dolls serve

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Putnam's Sons, 1963); Mary Hillier, *Dolls and Doll Makers* (New York: Putnam, 1968); Constance Eileen King, *The Encyclopedia of Toys* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1978); Wendy Lavitt, *American Folk Dolls* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Wendy Lavitt, *Dolls* (New York: Knopf, 1983); Myla Perkins, *Black Dolls 1820-1991: An Identification and Value Guide* (Collector Books, 1992); Florence Theriault, *In Their Fashion: Doll Costumes and Accessories, 1850 - 1925* (Annapolis, MD: Theriault's Gold Horse Publishing, 1994); Florence Theriault, *Perfectly Fitting: Antique Doll Costumes and Accessories, 1840 - 1925* (Annapolis, MD: Theriault's Gold Horse Publishing, 2001); and Gwen White, *European and American Dolls and Their Marks and Patents* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> Academic texts about the making of childhood and the emergence of child consumers through toys in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries include Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Karen Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900* (Boston: Northeastern University, 1992); Gary Cross, *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); William Leach, "Child-World in the Promised Land" in *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination and American Culture* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993); and Elliot West and Paula Petrik, eds, *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950* (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press, 1992).

as insight into “scripted acts,” historically located practices invited through the design of the object, that contributed to the racialization of American childhood innocence as white.<sup>16</sup> In Bernstein’s text, toys are not just passive tools through which childhood is enacted. My work shares Bernstein’s understanding that dolls shape the possibilities of play through their material form, becoming actors influencing human use through their material properties and design rather than a vessel for human imagination. However, whereas she argues that the materiality of toys writ large shapes knowledge production about race, I explore the processes before the toy was made. I examine how the component parts of the Milwaukee Handicraft Dolls interacted with their makers from design to production and marketing to create, support, and resist the original intent of their design. Bernstein looks at toys as actors in a larger racialization project in the United States; I look at dolls for and as evidence of their making. By considering the dolls as part of the production process, I can explore how narratives of the unskilled workers and the American identity marketed by the administrators of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project actually played out through the material results of the workers’ labor.

As products of the Great Depression, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project dolls also act as physical manifestations and evidence of women’s labor performed through the Work Projects Administration.<sup>17</sup> The Milwaukee Handicraft Project operated under the

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<sup>16</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Although the Milwaukee Handicraft Project administrators drew influence from theories of craftsmanship, they ran the program as a “production-for-use” program through the Division of Professional and Service Projects rather than Federal Art Project No. One. As a result, the literature about the Federal Art Project, a major hub for female artists and documentation about women’s domestic arts, does not discuss this work. Only exception mentions the Milwaukee Handicraft Project — William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969).

Division of Women's and Professional Projects (renamed the Division of Professional and Service Projects in 1937), a sub-division of the WPA. The literature about the Women's Division speaks little about the workers, their labor, or their experience on the ground. Instead, the texts provide a strong administrative history of its Washington headquarters.<sup>18</sup> I contribute to this literature by exploring one example of individuals replicating the intent and structure of this division on a local level. Just as the Division of Women's and Professional Projects hired women for each level in its administrative hierarchy, so too did the Milwaukee Handicraft Project.<sup>19</sup> It operated as "a handicraft project for women to give work to women who were out of employment, who were indigent and needed it," a need that extended to all of its workers regardless of class, both administrators and factory workers alike.<sup>20</sup> More so than influencing its structure, this

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On 373, McDonald writes with no further analysis, "Craft Projects were encouraged, among which the Milwaukee Handicraft Project was unusually distinctive."

<sup>18</sup> The texts about the administrative history of the Division of Women's and Professional projects includes June Hopkins, "Economic and Social Security," in *Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 175-200; Martha H. Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Martha H. Swain, "ER and Ellen Woodward: A Partnership for Women's Work Relief and Security," in *Without Precedent: The Life and Career of Eleanor Roosevelt*, eds. Joan Hoff-Wilson and Marjorie Lightman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 135-152; and Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put The Nation to Work* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Swain, *Ellen S. Woodward*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Elsa Ulbricht, "The Milwaukee Handicraft Project: Tape Recorded Interview with Elsa Ulbricht - June 11, 1964" by Dr. Hayward Ehrlich, 1964, 3, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.; Elsa Ulbricht Papers, 1905-1978, MSS 59, box 1, folder 1 "Archives of American Art 1963-1966," Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI.

sub-division of the WPA created policies that shaped the enactment of its local programs such as the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. With WPA funding came its mandates on hiring practices, suppliers, and definitions of who is considered skilled and unskilled within the labor pool. I delve into moments of collaboration and contestation between the Women's Division representatives and the Milwaukee Handicraft Project administrators in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. While the WPA provided the structure, the administrators wanted a program that embodied their ideas about women's labor. The two groups often had competing ideas about how the initiative should operate, which in turn shaped the possibilities of its form and implementation.

Finally, this topic intersects with the literature on women's wage labor in factories and domestic work in the twentieth century. The Milwaukee Handicraft Project straddled these two arenas of women's labor. On one hand, it operated under the WPA as a "domestic procedure" initiative, making "by hand, household objects of wood, metal, textiles, cloth, and paper." Administrators marketed their objects as befitting for schools, hospitals, and families with children in need.<sup>21</sup> They connected objects that one might find, make, and use in the home to the goods that they produced and sold at the cost of materials. In how they commodified their goods, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project existed in conversation with domestic work. On the other hand, the program divided productive labor among the women into singular, repetitive tasks. The administrators hoped that creating objects such as dolls in an assembly-line style would prepare the women to work in a factory environment. Combining these two ideas, the administrators

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<sup>21</sup> Project 1170 Application, Elizabeth O'Sullivan Papers, Box 1 (WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Documentation), History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project marketed their work as producing domestic goods and training for factory work.

Embracing and analyzing the intent and self-marketing strategy necessitates engaging with both sub-fields of the historiography. This literature is quite broad, including topics as far ranging as immigration, unionization, striking, consumption as identity creation, and political activity inside and outside of traditional party politics.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Texts about women's wage labor in the twentieth century include Xiaolan Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948 to 1992* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Rosalyn Baxandall, *America's Working Women: A Documentary History, 1600 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Dana Frank, "Girl Strikers Occupy Chain Store, Win Big: The Detroit Woolworth's Strike of 1937" in *Three Strikes: Miners, Musicians, Salesgirls, and the Fighting Spirit of Labor's Last Century*, Howard Zinn etc. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing Gender in the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997); La Guana Gray, *We Just Keep Running the Line: Southern Women and the Poultry Processing Industry* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2014); Elna C. Green, "Relief from Relief: The Tampa Sewing-Room Strike of 1937 and the Right to Welfare," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 4, 1 (March 2009): 1012–1037; Michelle Haberlnad, *Striking Beauties: Women Apparel Workers in the U.S. South, 1930-2000* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003); Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Vicky Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Mary Triece, *On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women During the Depression* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Kenneth C. Wolensky, *Fighting for the Union Label: The Women's Garment Industry and the ILGWU in Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002). These texts represent a small sample of this sub-field. Topics include cultural practices among female wage laborers,

Scholars in this field largely focus on wage-earning women on either the East Coast or the American South. The Milwaukee Handicraft Project, meanwhile, serves as a lens into employment opportunities for women in the Midwest with little to no prior factory experience during the Great Depression. It serves as a glance into government intervention in women's wage labor through programming rather than policy. The project's definition as "domestic procedure" also complicates our notion of "domestic work" versus "factory" work, including what work it could involve and where it could be practiced.

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project was a unique initiative, one that combined multiple ideas to make an impact on 5,000 women's lives and many more children across the country. This thesis considers what that impact entailed and what new details we can learn about its history by studying the design, production, and marketing of its material products, namely its dolls.

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political ideologies and self-advocacy, and their working conditions. For the purposes of this thesis, Tera Hunter's *To 'Joy My Freedom* provides a beautiful methodological framework for reading against the grain of sources produced by white middle-class women about their differences with the working class to understand the experiences of working class women, particularly women of color, in the workplace and in their personal lives.

## Chapter 2

### FOUNDING THE MILWAUKEE HANDICRAFT PROJECT

Harriet Pettibone Clinton had a problem. It was August 1935, and Clinton had just taken over the position of District Director for the Milwaukee County branch of the Division of Women's and Professional Projects. As a county administrator for this subdivision of the Work Projects Administration, she was now responsible for developing WPA programs for the women Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. Clinton faced the particularly daunting task of identifying employment opportunities for approximately 2,500 local women as soon as possible.<sup>23</sup> Every woman in want of work through the WPA had to register with the United States Employment Service. Some indicated prior clerical, administrative, or educational experience; these women were considered eligible for "skilled" work. Programs under this designation hired unemployed teachers, secretaries, and other women previously working in white-collar jobs to work in WPA-operated programs. Those who lacked this experience were labeled "unskilled." These women found themselves placed in "production-for-use" projects, making objects or food for tax-supported institutions that could not otherwise afford these goods. These initiatives involved labor by hand and did not require previous professional training.<sup>24</sup> District Director Clinton was tasked with developing programs to move both groups off

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<sup>23</sup> Clinton, "The First Year of Womens and Professionals Projects, 1936," 6; Harriet P. Clinton, "Memorandum on Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Handicraft Project," [1937-1938], 1, received from Graeme Reid.

<sup>24</sup> Hopkins, *Harry Hopkins*, 190.



of government relief rolls and into private industry. She achieved her goal by December 1, 1935.<sup>25</sup>

When Clinton started this position with the WPA, she also joined a multi-year initiative in Wisconsin that defined work for unemployed women largely along gendered lines. Sewing and cooking formed the cornerstone of these opportunities. School lunch programs in the four northernmost counties of Wisconsin hired women to prepare hot lunches as early as 1935.<sup>26</sup> The Marinette County Knitting Project trained women in “knitting, cutting, sewing, finishing, and operating of the morrow machine which joins two or more sections of knitted garments,” combining skills in clothing construction and repair with machine training.<sup>27</sup> The Women’s Division hailed its sewing rooms as the “nucleus” of its efforts to put women back to work. This program hired nearly seven hundred women with experience in sewing, operating sewing machines, and working with standardized patterns to make and repair clothing for throughout the state.<sup>28</sup> Creating programs for the unskilled, however, had been challenging for the Wisconsin branch of the Women’s Division. Women classified as skilled or capable of developing skill within this definition of “women’s work” could join one of the aforementioned projects, but those classified as too “unskilled” for this work did not yet have employment through the WPA.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Clinton, "The First Year of Womens and Professionals Projects, 1936," 1936, 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> Flannery and Burkey, "Wisconsin Work Projects Administration, 1939," 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 14-15

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>29</sup> By the late 1930’s, the Division of Women’s and Professional Service in Wisconsin would expand its offerings for the unskilled to include bookbinding and book repair for

District Director Clinton stepped in with a new idea to prepare the female laborer without factory, professional, or sewing skills for work in private industry.<sup>30</sup> In the tradition of other production-for-use programs operated by the WPA, Clinton came up with a plan that would hire women to make objects that required no previous experience with machinery or professional training to construct. She wanted the women to make scrapbooks. This was not an innovative practice in the 1930s; people from varying classes, professions, and educational backgrounds made scrapbooks as a way to consume, process, organize, and preserve information in personalized sources since the American Civil War.<sup>31</sup> Public figures and people in positions of “relative powerlessness” alike produced scrapbooks.<sup>32</sup> The inspiration behind her idea is known. Perhaps Clinton practiced scrapbooking in her personal life or owned a scrapbook made by a friend or family member. Perhaps she learned how to scrapbook as a child, a lesson frequently taught in schools beginning in the late 1800’s.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the scrapbooks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to process information, however, Clinton proposed that the women “cut out pictures from wall paper and paste them into books and make

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local libraries, training in household tasks as household aids, and choral robe production in addition to the aforementioned programs. For more information, see P.D. Flannery and Myra E. Burkey, "Wisconsin Work Projects Administration, 1939," 1939, 9, Fromkin Memorial Collection, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>30</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4, 10, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Garvey, *Writing with Scissors*, 10.

scrapbooks.”<sup>34</sup> She simplified the process. By focusing on wallpaper rather than newspapers, Clinton made scrapbooking accessible to women who could not read English. She wanted to use scrap material to teach women to work outside of the home.<sup>35</sup>

Clinton met resistance for her idea. She needed to find a sponsor to provide the funding and necessary equipment for the program to carry out its mission. She also needed a sponsor’s agent to direct the initiative and act as an intermediary between herself, the sponsor, and operations on the ground. But she found it difficult to identify a sponsor and sponsor’s agent who supported her vision and who were willing to see it carried through. She turned to the Milwaukee State Teachers College as a potential sponsor, but the institution wanted a WPA project that was more educational than Clinton initially proposed. It would only contribute funding “providing the project would be organized and conducted in a manner to stress educational values.”<sup>36</sup> Further, Frank E. Baker, President of the Milwaukee State Teachers’ College, insisted that the products of the worker’s labor “conform to the highest possible artistic standards.”<sup>37</sup>

In doing so, he and his institution challenged Clinton’s goals, pushing her to create an employment opportunity that would to do more than fill a labor need and teach

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<sup>34</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], “W.P.A. Handicraft Project 1170 Sponsored by Milwaukee State Teachers College,” 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 1; Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs, “Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” February 1943, Box 6, WPA MHP Collection, History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>37</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], “W.P.A. Handicraft Project 1170 Sponsored by Milwaukee State Teachers College,” 1.

employees how to work in a factory. President Baker and the Teachers College wanted to use the program to give the workers and the general public an arts education in how to appreciate well-made goods. Hiring women to paste wallpaper clippings into books would not be enough. The two parties could either negotiate or walk away. Clinton came up with a solution to their stalemate. In a meeting with President Baker, she insisted that a particular person take the position as sponsor's agent and director, one capable of carrying out the institution's vision of an arts education program and her own for a labor program. District Director Clinton proposed that they hire a professor at the Milwaukee State Teachers College – Elsa Ulbricht.<sup>38</sup>

Ulbricht had a combination of professional training and experience that made her uniquely suited to lead the initiative. She had a long, pre-existing relationship with the Milwaukee State Teachers College; in fact, she trained in kindergarten education there, graduating in 1906.<sup>39</sup> As she taught kindergarten in Milwaukee over the next three years, Ulbricht also took evening classes at the Wisconsin School of Art operated by the Wisconsin Art Students League. There, Ulbricht received her first taste of design training. Perhaps inspired by the experience, Ulbricht left Milwaukee to receive a degree art education at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. After graduating in 1911, she returned to Milwaukee as a professor at the Wisconsin School of Fine and Applied Arts, a

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<sup>38</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ulbricht formally graduated from the Milwaukee State Normal School before the college changed its name to the Milwaukee State Teachers College. For more information, see: Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 3; Peter C. Merrill, "Elsa Ulbricht: A Career in Art." *Michigan History* 16 (1993), accessed on April 7, 2018, <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa88.htm>.

school absorbed by her alma mater that same year.<sup>40</sup> Ulbricht's training from three different schools in Milwaukee and New York City gave her familiarity with the pedagogical philosophy, design theory, and passion for "crafts as an art form" that prepared her to teach on the college level. Those same skills and experiences grounded her vision for the Milwaukee Handicraft Project.<sup>41</sup>

In the years before she directed this WPA program, Ulbricht also spent her free time in professionalized artists' circles in the Midwest. She had a finger in practically every pot of the arts community in Milwaukee, with a social and professional sphere extending to Michigan and Chicago. She founded the Wisconsin Society of Applied Art and served on the board for the Public Works of Art Project in Milwaukee.<sup>42</sup> She was an ardent supporter of the local theater for years.<sup>43</sup> Also, in 1913, she began her annual pilgrimage to Saugatuck, Michigan, a town frequented by Chicago-based artists seeking a summer retreat.<sup>44</sup> There, Ulbricht attended the Summer School of Painting, perhaps more

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<sup>40</sup> Darcy Evon, *Hand Wrought Arts & Crafts Metalwork & Jewelry 1800-1940* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2014), 263; Mary Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 3-5; Peter Merrill, "Elsa Ulbricht: A Career in Art," *Michigan History* 16 (1993), accessed on April 7, 2018, <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa88.htm>; "UW-Milwaukee's Predecessor Institutions: Milwaukee State Normal School, 1885-1927," accessed April 7, 2018, <http://guides.library.uwm.edu/c.php?g=56484&p=363324>.

<sup>41</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 6; Gertrude M. Copp, "Elsa Ulbricht: She Conceived and Guided the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," *Design Magazine* 45, no. 6 (February 1944), 4.

<sup>43</sup> Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 6; Merrill, "Elsa Ulbricht: A Career in Art," accessed on April 7, 2018, <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa88.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 5.

famously known as the Ox-Bow School of Painting.<sup>45</sup> Artists gathered each summer to practice figure and landscape painting.<sup>46</sup> Ulbricht developed a deep attachment to the school. In total, she spent sixty years worth of summers in Saugatuck, Michigan as a student, teacher, and eventually as director of the Summer School of Painting.<sup>47</sup>

Her time at Saugatuck among Chicago-based artists likely exposed her to ideas and practices circulating in the regional Arts and Crafts Movement. Chicago was an epicenter of this design reform movement at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> Adherents were largely middle-class reformers who worked to uplift the working class through well-made goods, including annual exhibitions of local craftsmanship at the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>49</sup> Many of the artists attending the Summer School of Painting were affiliated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>50</sup> Some of the artists with whom

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<sup>45</sup> Peter C. Merrill, "Summers at Ox-Bow: The Early Days of a Michigan Art Colony," *Michigan Historical Review* 22 (1996): 110-112.

<sup>46</sup> Merrill, "Summers at Ox-Bow," 116.

<sup>47</sup> Merrill, "Elsa Ulbricht: A Career in Art," accessed on April 7, 2018, <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/3aa/3aa88.htm>; Merrill, "Summers at Ox-Bow," 119.

<sup>48</sup> Here, I borrow Kenneth R. Trapp's term "design reform" to describe the centrality of well-designed goods as a means political, social, and labor reform across the trans-Atlantic Arts and Crafts ideology. Kenneth R. Trapp, "Introduction," in *Art with a Mission: Objects of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, Patricia J. Fidler, author (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1991), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce Robert Kahler, "Art and Life: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Chicago, 1897-1910," (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1986), 11-14; Judith A. Barker and Monica Obniski, "Chicago: A Bridge to the Future," in *Apostles of Beauty: Arts and Crafts from Britain to Chicago*, Judith A. Barter, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 158, 176-177.

<sup>50</sup> Merrill, "Summers at Ox-Bow," 110-114; Barker and Obniski, "Chicago: A Bridge to the Future," 176-177

she worked may have participated in these exhibitions; others may have merely been aware of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the city. However, the Art Institute was so deeply intertwined with Saugatuck that its alumni association sponsored the Summer of School of painting.<sup>51</sup> Ulbricht spent little time in Chicago; her known time in the city is limited to the bookbinding class that she attended at Hull House.<sup>52</sup> However, with the Chicago proponents of Arts and Crafts theory and Practice, she shared ideas about the importance of design, attention to materiality, and the capability of the machine to alleviate the drudgery of craft that formed the core of her ideological contribution to the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. Her professional and personal experiences in Milwaukee, New York, and Saugatuck made her an attractive candidate to serve as program director also influenced her work with the WPA.

With Ulbricht leading the helm, Clinton's WPA program could finally begin to come to life, albeit now significantly altered to accommodate the visions of her sponsor and program director. While President Baker insisted that the workers receive an arts education through their labor, Ulbricht envisioned an art project that employed women to design a wide variety of goods.<sup>53</sup> In fact, she refused to take the position of sponsor's agent and program director unless the workers under her supervision could make more than scrapbooks. When Clinton offered Ulbricht the job, Ulbricht replied, "Well I don't think that would be interesting enough for me and if that's what we're going to do I don't want this job."<sup>54</sup> This made fulfilling WPA's mandates as a labor initiative more

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<sup>51</sup> Merrill, "Summers at Ox-Bow," 114.

<sup>52</sup> Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 36.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 3.

challenging, however, as federal regulations under the Division of Women's and Professional services stated that it had to operate as a "production-for-use program," a category designed to hire women to make objects or food for tax-supported institutions that could not otherwise afford these goods.<sup>55</sup> This designation emphasized that the WPA considered teaching the workers skills to prepare them for private industry as the Handicraft Project's primary purpose, not art education or production. Through "sensitive cooperation" and negotiation, however, Clinton allowed Ulbricht to design and implement the program as an unofficial art project.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 2 "Elsa Ulbricht at loom," Elsa Emilie Ulbricht Papers, 1905-1978, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 36.



With Clinton's blessing in hand and a thorough lesson on federal regulations, Ulbricht set out to plan the Milwaukee Handicraft Project. She selected two women with whom she had previously worked to help her design this program. Ulbricht hired Mary June Kellogg, one of her current students at the Milwaukee State Teachers' College, for her knowledge and training in arts education and for her exceptional skill in design.<sup>57</sup> She also hired Anne Feldman for her administrative experience.<sup>58</sup> Both women were familiar with Ulbricht's ideas about art education and design; Kellogg learned it in her classroom and Feldman previously worked as Ulbricht's classroom assistant at a local vocational school.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps this shared base of knowledge between Ulbricht and her two associates encouraged her to draw on prior experiences in artistic and Arts and Crafts circles in the Midwest when outlining their pedagogical goals outside of teaching women to work in a factory.

Like the Arts and Crafts movement in Chicago, Elsa Ulbricht and her design team emphasized quality of design as a means of social uplift. They believed that the production and distribution of well-designed and well-crafted objects had the power not only to uplift their creators but also the general public. This idea was common in Chicago. Both Hull House, where Ulbricht briefly spent time, and the Chicago Society of Arts and Crafts based there preached objects as a form of uplift, particularly among the

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<sup>57</sup> Elsa Ulbricht, "The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," *Design Magazine* 45, no. 6 (February 1944), 6; Elsa Ulbricht, "Mary Kellogg Rice: And Those who Aided in the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," *Design Magazine* 45, no. 6 (February 1944), 5.

<sup>58</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 8; Ulbricht, "The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," 5-6.

<sup>59</sup> Ulbricht, "The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," 6; Ulbricht, "Mary Kellogg Rice," 5.

poor.<sup>60</sup> Businesses based in Chicago such as Sears, Roebuck, and Company; Stickley Furniture; and Montgomery Ward pioneered mass-producing “simple, undecorated, and inexpensive objects” for the general public.<sup>61</sup> While innovative within the WPA, the administrators of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project drew upon a tradition among Midwestern enterprises to embrace Arts and Crafts in practice or in design to reach a broad audience. Guided by President Baker’s insistence that objects be produced to a high standard, Ulbricht and her team made it their mission to “raise the standards of taste in the crafts of everyday use” through their program.<sup>62</sup> As Kellogg later wrote, “If it was worth making at all, it was worth a good design.”<sup>63</sup>

Ulbricht, Kellogg, and Feldman further drew on the earlier Midwestern Arts and Crafts movement in their plan, embracing the machine as a tool in the production of “handicraft” objects. Surprising for a program hiring women deemed too unskilled to operate a sewing machine, the administrative team for the Milwaukee Handicraft Project embraced the loom, the sewing machine, and screen printing tools in the design and execution of its objects. Their decision to market their goods as “handicraft” despite being made from a combination of work by hand and by machine can be traced to the

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<sup>60</sup> Barker and Obniski, “Chicago: A Bridge to the Future,” 152; Kate Swisher, “Crafting Americans: Immigrants and Textile Crafts at the Hull House Labor Museum, 1900-1935 (MA Thesis, Winterthur Program in American Material Culture, University of Delaware, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> Barker and Obniski, “Chicago: A Bridge to the Future,” 152

<sup>62</sup> Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs, “Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project”; Mary Kellogg Rice, “The Policy of Good Design,” *Design Magazine* 45, no. 6 (February 1944), 15.

<sup>63</sup> Rice, “The Policy of Good Design,” 15.

Midwestern Arts and Crafts Movement, in particular an ideological branch of the Chicago Arts and Crafts Society. Pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright and Oscar Lovell Trigs, two charter members of the group, this idea stated that a craftsman could use machines to eliminate the drudgery of his work.<sup>64</sup> While the two men did not agree on the effect of the machine on the worker, they did both support the use of the machine in craftsmanship. Ulbricht and the Milwaukee Handicraft Project embraced a similar line of thinking. To be “handicraft” did not limit the workers tools if the worker chose the best and “most essential” tools for the job.<sup>65</sup>

With their ideological tenets set, the three women combed through catalogs of government-approved providers for materials and equipment for two months.<sup>66</sup> The federal government insisted that the program receive its material through surplus materials, scraps, and selvages from other WPA programs and government-approved providers, a fact that put the women at odds with the WPA throughout the life of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project.<sup>67</sup> By November, Ulbricht, Rice, and Feldman finished

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<sup>64</sup> Barker and Obniski, “Chicago: A Bridge to the Future,” 176-177; Lionel Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsmen: The Arts and Crafts Movement for the Cotswolds to Chicago* (Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1980), 159-160.

<sup>65</sup> Elsa Ulbricht, “Problems of Organization,” *Design Magazine* 45, no. 6 (February 1944), 11.

<sup>66</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 6.

<sup>67</sup> The administrative team argued that they needed particular materials to produce particular goods and found it frustrating to go through the government procurement system for their materials and equipment. In fact, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project found these regulations so frustrating, that they set up a “Citizens Advisory Board” made up of local officials to manage the federal regulations for them and ensure that the program followed WPA guidelines. This Citizens Committee expanded in 1937, at which point they began to advise on the educational aspects of the Milwaukee Handicraft’s Products and on their exhibits. For more information, see Wisconsin Work Projects

designing the final WPA program and Ulbricht promoted both women to her administrative team as her seconds-in-command. Kellogg became the Art Director, in charge of object design and managing the supervisory team on the factor floor, and Feldman became the Administrative Director, in charge of shipping and logistics.<sup>68</sup>

As Ulbricht designed the initiative, Clinton contacted local public institutions and other local WPA funded-projects to determine what products they needed. Rather than focusing on the production of scrapbooks as Clinton originally intended, products would be based on the needs of the Milwaukee community. She organized the results of her survey into categories “according to the nature of the materials to be employed - wood, cloth, and paper” rather than the objects that the workers would make.<sup>69</sup> She soon added metal to the list as well.<sup>70</sup> Clinton used this information to structure the program, training the women to work with particular materials rather than producing whole items from start to finish.<sup>71</sup> This survey influenced the ways in which the women who were hired produced objects, including dolls.

Combining the federal regulations on women’s manual labor, Ulbricht’s desire for an art project, Baker’s request include arts education elements, and Clinton’s survey, the

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Administration Division of Service Programs, “Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” February 1943, Box 6, WPA MHP Collection, History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>68</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], “W.P.A. Handicraft Milwaukee State Teachers College,” 1-2.

<sup>70</sup> Project 1170 Application.

<sup>71</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], “W.P.A. Handicraft Milwaukee State Teachers College,” 1-2.

administration of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project applied for funding in the category of “domestic procedure.”<sup>72</sup> Perhaps this was a strategic choice to repackage this significantly changed idea as manufacturing objects that could have been made or used in homes. Perhaps the administrative team believed that the goods they made would give tax-supported institutions a homier ambiance. Or perhaps hiring women to make objects in production-for-use programs came with the gendered assumption that these objects were related to housewifery or skills performed in a domestic space. Ulbricht interpreted this designation to include “design and crafts training, as well as painting and lithography and all the other arts” and proceeded to design an art project.<sup>73</sup> It would not be until two years later, on a funding application filed with the WPA in 1937, that the Milwaukee Handicraft Project explicitly stated that training women to “acquire skills by which they can become partially or wholly self supporting” was one of its primary goals.<sup>74</sup>

While both Ulbricht and Baker emphasized public arts education and raising public taste through well-crafted goods, the WPA already had an art project on a national scale designed to achieve that goal. The Federal Arts Project Number One hired professional artists across the country to lead art classes and produce art that raised the national taste for American-made artwork.<sup>75</sup> The two programs were not in direct competition with one another, however. One operated on the local and state level and the

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<sup>72</sup> Project 1170 Application.

<sup>73</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 11

<sup>74</sup> Project 10235 Application, Elizabeth O’Sullivan Papers, Box 1 (WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Documentation), History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>75</sup> Hopkins, *Harry Hopkins*, 190-191.

other operated on a national level. The Milwaukee Handicraft Project prepared women for factory work through “domestic procedure” while the Federal Arts Project portrayed domestic goods made by women to capture the female makers as central to American cultural production. Both programs considered dolls as a subject; however, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project produced dolls for public consumption while the Federal Arts Project No. One painted dolls produced before 1820 for the Index of American Design as examples of the American domestic arts.<sup>76</sup> In this respect, both programs also engaged with the subject of women’s labor, but one program hired women to produce goods while the other cataloged the products of their labor. While the two programs shared common goals, their method of achieving that goal and the audience within their reach differed exponentially from one another.

And so, formally funded as “Project 1170,” the Milwaukee Handicraft Project was born, uniting the visions of District Director Clinton, President Baker, Elsa Ulbricht, and the WPA. These multiple visions, however, did not meld together seamlessly; they continued to resist one another throughout the conceptualization, design, and operation of the program. Closely examining the Milwaukee Handicraft Project dolls serves as an opportunity to explore how these often contradictory ideas unfolded. The hiring process and making the dolls, then, became sites of development, construction, and conflict, where the women in the administration and on the factory floor negotiated different understandings and practices of labor, skill, and production.

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<sup>76</sup> Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 97-98.



Figure 3 Example of a doll drawing from the American Index of Design contemporary with the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, doll, circa 1939, water and graphite on paper, Carmel Wilson, Index of American Design, 1943.8.16660, courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.





Figure 4 Example of a doll drawing from the American Index of Design contemporary with the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, doll, "Molly Bentley," 1936, watercolor, graphite, and pen and ink on paper, Index of American Design, 1943.8.8135, courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.





Figure 5      Example of a doll produced by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, “American Doll,” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

### Chapter 3

#### **MAKING THE DOLLS OF THE MILWAUKEE HANDICRAFT PROJECT AND DEBATES OVER THE “UNSKILLED” WORKER**

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project opened its doors on November 6, 1935, “a bitter, icy day” in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.<sup>77</sup> “In spite of the biting wind,” nearly two hundred and fifty women between twenty and sixty-five years old lined down the block, each tightly bundled her in coat and holding a small white slip that read, “Report at 8 a.m.” These women had been standing, shivering, in the cold for nearly half an hour, waiting for their opportunity to start at temporary position with the Work Projects Administration.<sup>78</sup> These women did not know what the position entailed. The slip they received from the WPA indicated little more than an address.<sup>79</sup> They may have felt excitement about their new position and the promise that it held for a steady paycheck. They may have felt nervous or afraid, because the slips were printed so close to the first day that they did not include a start date.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, they gathered, for a chance to work and a chance to support themselves and their loved ones.

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<sup>77</sup> Clinton, “The First Year of Womens and Professionals Projects, 1936,” 3

<sup>78</sup> Ibid; Project 1170 Application; Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs, “Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project”; Clinton, “Memorandum on Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Handicraft Project,” 1.

<sup>79</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 5

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

The work force on the opening day of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project was predominately, if not fully, white. Like most of the programs operated by the WPA, the majority of the work opportunities in Milwaukee operated on a segregated basis. Programs throughout the city turned away black women, skilled and unskilled, from their program because of their race.<sup>81</sup> Black women in Milwaukee needed work, too. Recognizing this labor need, District Director Clinton approached Ulbricht to ask whether she was open to hiring black as well as white women; Ulbricht had no objections.<sup>82</sup> Within days, word quickly spread that the program was open to *all* women regardless of race, ethnic origin, or language. This included immigrant women who did not speak English.<sup>83</sup> The details of this social network are unknown, but evidence suggests that word of this integrated WPA program spread like wildfire throughout the city. Black women joined the program in droves, groups of two hundred at a time.<sup>84</sup> Within two weeks the program ballooned from two hundred and fifty women to nearly eight hundred.<sup>85</sup> The demand for work among black women was so substantial that twenty-five percent of this first workforce for the Milwaukee Handicraft Project was black.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], "W.P.A. Handicraft Milwaukee State Teachers College," 3.

<sup>84</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 7; Ulbricht, "The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 11

<sup>86</sup> Clinton, "Memorandum on Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Handicraft Project," 1; Rice, interview, 2.

As the doors opened promptly at 8 AM, the program administrators welcomed the women into two rooms of the Veteran Administration Building.<sup>87</sup> The room was cold and dimly lit. Through the darkness women may have been shocked to see upon entering that the space in which they would work was nearly empty. While the federal government provided the Milwaukee Handicraft Project with a unit in which to operate, the equipment had not arrived in time. The room was sparsely populated with tables and chairs and a few tools such as scissors and paper, materials that Ulbricht had borrowed from her classroom at the Milwaukee State Teachers College to provide the women with work to do that week.<sup>88</sup>

On this first day, each woman met with Ulbricht and her administrative team to formally register for the project; the unheated room would become uninhabitable before the day was done due to cold. They needed to complete the registration as soon as possible. Ulbricht reacted strongly to the appearance of the women hired to work for the handicraft project, commenting that they looked “careworn and harassed,” “gaunt, sort of underfed and undernourished.”<sup>89</sup> As she further summarized, “Their clothes were poor; their hairdressing was bad; everything was that of an indigent person who had no hope in the world.”<sup>90</sup> The written record did not record how the women reacted to her disdain for their appearance. Perhaps they could sense these attitudes and did not initially trust the

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<sup>87</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 4; Ulbricht, “Problems of Organization,” 10.

<sup>88</sup> Clinton, “The First Year of Womens and Professionals Projects, 1936,” 4; Ulbricht, interview, 7; Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 16.

<sup>89</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

administrative team; perhaps the feelings went unnoticed or that the promise of work and Ulbricht's desire to help made the matter unimportant. In fact, upon seeing these women, Ulbricht insisted that the paperwork be completed so the women could receive their first paychecks before Thanksgiving.<sup>91</sup>

The following day, Ulbricht and her team began to assign the women work. Ironically, due to the limited materials, the women ended up performing the exact work envisioned originally by Clinton – scrapbooking. The paper, scissors, glue, and rulers that Ulbricht gathered from her classroom left few other options. Thus, the first task on the Milwaukee Handicraft Project that the women completed involved “cutting out pictures and other usable material” and pasting these images to a support.<sup>92</sup>

Ulbricht felt discouraged watching the woman work; while likely familiar with the practice of cutting with scissors, many of the women held and used the tool far differently than Ulbricht and her team. Ulbricht expressed frustration about these first days, commenting that the women “did not know the best way of holding the scissors, much less use paste and hold paste brush; — and the ruler, that bane of every school teacher's life, was practically an unheard of instrument.”<sup>93</sup> What Ulbricht meant by the “best way” to hold scissors is unclear. Regardless of how they are held, between two hands or in one, the user must always separate and bring together the two grips of the scissors to make the blades to open and close – and thus to cut.<sup>94</sup> However these women

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<sup>91</sup> Clinton, "The First Year of Womens and Professionals Projects, 1936," 4.

<sup>92</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 8.

<sup>93</sup> Ulbricht, “The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” 7.

<sup>94</sup> Bruno Latour championed the agency of objects to affect human actions with them. For an example of his work, see: Latour, “Where Are the Missing Masses? The

were performing, their practice did not suit Ulbricht's needs. These first differences in making revealed that the workers and administrators would need to talk to one another and exchange knowledge in order to communicate what needed to be done, how it should be done, and where they needed help. As a trained kindergarten teacher, Ulbricht was no doubt familiar with teaching children to use scissors in "the best way." Working with fully-grown women, however, a few of whom had less than an eighth grade education, required a different set of pedagogical tools.<sup>95</sup>

Ulbricht wanted individuals with a particular set of skills to work on this WPA project that she did not see in the workers. She could no longer assume that she and the women selected for the Milwaukee Handicraft Project shared her knowledge about tools and construction, let alone design. If the women working on the factory floor were going to successfully make objects in a way that matched Ulbricht's vision, they needed to work closely with people who shared Ulbricht's technical knowledge, who understood her ideas about design, and who could train others in construction.<sup>96</sup> Mary June Kellogg, as Art Director and one of Ulbricht's former students, was the first hired in this capacity. But with eight hundred women and counting on the factory floor, she could not train all of the workers. Ulbricht and Rice needed people to fill an intermediary position to guide the workers through day-to-day construction, people who had training in arts education,

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Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," in *The Object Reader*, eds. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London: Routledge, 2009), 229-254.

<sup>95</sup> Clinton, "Memorandum on Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Handicraft Project," 1-2.

<sup>96</sup> Ulbricht, "The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," 6.

design, and making.<sup>97</sup> In short, they needed more people with professional backgrounds like their own.

Ulbricht turned to the Milwaukee State Teachers College to find the pedagogical and technical skill necessary to translate her vision into small, teachable steps. As a professor there, she knew plenty of college students and recent graduates with experience in the pedagogy of arts education that needed work.<sup>98</sup> The Great Depression affected trained professionals as much as it affected the working class; teaching positions were in short supply in 1930's Milwaukee. Federal law insisted that at least 5% to 10% of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project's supervisors come from federal relief roles, so Ulbricht initially interviewed seventeen artists not hired by the Federal Arts Project Number One for the position. However, she hired none of them as designer-foremen. As later recorded in a report, "[I]t was found impossible to secure them from the certified lists."<sup>99</sup> Without the pedagogical knowledge and training in classroom psychology that Ulbricht wanted, these artists were not qualified for the position.<sup>100</sup> Instead, Ulbricht and Rice hired students trained in art education as their designer-foremen, people who shared their skillset, in ever increasing numbers as the size and complexity of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project grew.<sup>101</sup> To be "skilled" at the Milwaukee Handicraft Project was

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<sup>97</sup> Rice, interview, 2; Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], "W.P.A. Handicraft Milwaukee State Teachers College," 3.

<sup>98</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 4

<sup>99</sup> Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs, "Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project."

<sup>100</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], "W.P.A. Handicraft Milwaukee State Teachers College," 3.

<sup>101</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 14.

defined along a very fine line. While professional artists might have design training, they needed knowledge and skill in the implementation of pedagogical theory as well. Some artists, such as Dick Wiken who created the doll face mold in the introduction, fulfilled these parameters later on in the project's lifetime. But for unskilled workers, with neither training nor professionalization in these areas, skilled labor was inaccessible. Only those most adept on the factory floor were able to move up the ranks.<sup>102</sup>

Even after she hired her designer-foremen, Ulbricht's disillusionment about the workers on her WPA program had not worn off. She hoped leading up to its opening week that she would receive at least a few skilled or semi-skilled workers; instead, as she later recalled, she "didn't realize until after the project started that these would be the dregs of all WPA groups."<sup>103</sup> Rice echoed her statement, commenting that the workers were "the least skilled of the women in Milwaukee County."<sup>104</sup> Compared to the professional training of the designer-foremen and administrators classified as "skilled" labor in the program, the women on the factory floor possessed a completely different work history. Analyzing the products of that labor, particularly the dolls, complicates this notion of skill. The workers needed the ability to use a variety of tools, knowledge about the different fabric properties and their responses to manipulation, familiarity with multi-part design, and the ability to stitch and glue the final components together to make each and every doll. While the twenty-first century legacy of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project continues the narrative of the uplifted unskilled worker, material evidence of their

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<sup>102</sup> Ulbricht, "The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project," 7.

<sup>103</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 5.

<sup>104</sup> Rice, interview, 2.



lived experience on the factory floor provides an alternative notion of what it meant to be “skilled” in this program.

At its outset, the unskilled status of the women workers of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project made predicting which woman would succeed in which department nearly impossible; working together on the first scrapbooking project likely left Ulbricht and the workers alike frustrated. After the equipment finally arrived, Ulbricht and her team randomly assigned the women to different departments, each one led by a designer-foreman. The administration rotated the workers between different departments and tasks, giving the women opportunities to try their hand at a variety of skills, including sewing, weaving, or print making, and to determine through practice what they most enjoyed and where their abilities could be best utilized in production.<sup>105</sup> This division of labor also negated the possibility of “maker” status for the individual workers; as long as production was divided by task rather than product, there could never be a singular maker for the product. Instead of individual work, there was collective labor. Rather than making one whole object, each worker was assigned to one smaller task, such as braiding, to do over and over again as her contribution to the total objects made during her shift.<sup>106</sup> This gave the women an introduction into assembly-line work, a skill crucial for work in factories, but it also prevented any worker from becoming a “craftsman” as envisioned by the many of the same Midwestern Arts and Crafts proponents from whom Ulbricht built her ideology.

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<sup>105</sup> Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs. “Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project”; Ulbricht, interview, 30.

<sup>106</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 29-30.



Figure 6      Photograph of women sewing clothing for 22-inch dolls on the factory floor, “Three women creating textile art,” Elsa Emile Ulbricht Papers, 1905-1978, University-Wisconsin Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

The women working in the Milwaukee Project and the doll department changed as the years passed, rising to the occasion as available materials changed and demand for new and varied dolls increased. When the program first opened, materials were few and far between. The thirty women selected for the doll division, no doubt placed there after successful trial periods sewing, relied on scrap cotton cloth to piece together the toys, refuse produced by the WPA Sewing Project in Wisconsin.<sup>107</sup> Well before the federal government permitted the Milwaukee Handicraft Project to order cloth from approved providers, the program focused on transforming material and workers alike into saleable

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<sup>107</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 14-15; Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], “W.P.A. Handicraft Project 1170 Sponsored by Milwaukee State Teachers College,” 5.

goods for the public. The individual pieces of cloth moved from scraps into a commodity state through their use to make dolls.<sup>108</sup> This idea — using leftovers from other WPA programs and factories to make objects suitable for public institutions and to prepare workers for private industry — became foundational practices in making and marketing dolls and workers alike for this program.

No pictures or physical evidence of these first toys survive, only details about their materiality. The first dolls were small, soft, and cuddly. Stretching only eight inches tall, the rag dolls were light and fit easily into the hands of the young children for whom they were made.<sup>109</sup> Such a small object would have required workers to have nimble fingers, sharp eyes, and an intuition about how sew together cloth of different shapes, weaves, and textures to fit the given rag doll pattern. The rag doll design would have allowed some degree of flexibility and creativity from the individual workers. Without a strict design designating the position of each piece of cloth, the women working in the doll division may have had the freedom to pair colors and patterns of cloth that appealed to their sense of style and design. Much like a quilt, the rag dolls invited personalization. The workers of the Handicraft Project made between 1,800 and 4,000 dolls in their first

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<sup>108</sup> Arjun Appadurai theorized that any thing is capable of entering and leaving a “commodity state” as a good when it enters a particular, temporally and culturally specific social context where the “exchangability of things” is agreed upon between human actors. To be a commodity, therefore, is not a permanent category of thing but rather a state in the life of a thing, such as scraps used to make a sale exchanged for the cost of production. For more information, see Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things*, ed Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 7.

<sup>109</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 12-13; , “Dolls \* Toys,” 12.

year.<sup>110</sup> The women transformed thousands of shreds of fabric into thousands of desirable toys. Piece by piece, the workers of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project made dolls that reflected their creativity, suited the needs of Milwaukee's public institutions and their young charges, and practiced ideas about avoiding waste during the Great Depression. They used their talents to bring joy to children throughout the city.

The doll designs by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project changed and grew increasingly complex over the next few years, demanding new and different skills from the workers and the supervisors alike. All-cotton dolls became larger, doubling from eight inches to sixteen inches. The design became more uniform, calling for specific colors of plain weave cotton cloth to be sewn in a particular manner and in a particular order for the head, body, and clothing.<sup>111</sup> Themes evolved. The Milwaukee Handicraft Project produced pairs of fraternal twins – Peter and Patsy – who wore matching clothes in matching colors, albeit Peter in shorts and Patsy in a dress.<sup>112</sup> Ulbricht, Rice, and the designer-foremen replaced the free-form rag doll with a highly regulated design that demanded skills in measurement, cutting, sewing, and weaving. As dolls became more complex, the women working in the doll department needed to relate to the materiality of the dolls in increasingly challenging ways.

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<sup>110</sup> The numbers of total rag dolls made has been described as both 1,800 and 4,000, a sharp difference perhaps accounted for by time and inconsistencies in memory. For more information, see: Ulbricht, interview, 12-13, 16; Ulbricht, "Dolls \* Toys," 12.

<sup>111</sup> "Cutting and Sewing Instructions 'Peter' D-501," Elisabeth O'Sullivan Papers, box 2, folder 1 "Doll Construction," History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI; "Cutting and Sewing Instructions 'Patsy' D-502," Milwaukee County Special Committee on Works Progress Administration Projects, MSS 773, box 15, folder 20, Archives, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>112</sup> "Blonde twin with bangs and braids," WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.



Figure 7 Peter, "Children's Doll with Red Outfit" (M2005.027.004, WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.



Figure 8 Patsy, “Children’s Doll with Red Raincoat” (M2005.027.003, W.P.A. Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.





Figure 9      “Blonde twin with bangs and braids,” WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.

Of particular note, these twin dolls required the women in the doll division to follow precise instructions. Divided into broad categories of “Body” and “Wardrobe,” the instructions guided the workers as they made the head, body, arms, wig, shirts, shoes, underwear, socks, and bottoms. Each element came with a numbered paper pattern template corresponding to an even smaller piece of the doll. Patsy’s body alone, for instance, called for one “body back,” one “body back lining,” two pieces for the “body front,” two pieces for the “body front lining,” and four pieces for her arm, two for each limb.<sup>113</sup> This object demanded that its makers find the correct template, identify whether to use muslin or percale in a specified color for each piece. Both muslin and cotton were made out of cotton fibers, but workers used muslin, as the courser fabric, in the lining and percale, the softer fabric, for the exterior of the body. Workers then cut out the correct number of pieces, and used a wide variety of tools including scissors, pins, needles, thread, glue, and a ruler to correctly measure the fabric down to an eighth of an inch, sew each individual cut out together, and secure the wig in place to fit the design specifications. Not to mention that the workers wound cotton warp yarn 125 to 175 times on both sides of the wig winding board in a designated pattern to make the hair for every single doll.<sup>114</sup>

No longer did women glue together pieces of wallpaper for scrapbooks or sew random scraps of fabric to make rag dolls. Now, the women of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project engaged with multiple tools, fabrics with different properties and tensile strengths, and different techniques of construction. Given the assembly line style of work

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<sup>113</sup> “Cutting and Sewing Instructions ‘Peter’ D-501”; “Cutting and Sewing Instructions ‘Patsy’ D-502.”

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



at the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, it is unlikely that a single woman made a complete Peter or Patsy doll from start to finish. The collective style of work ensured that the labor was divided among the women. However, each task within production of the dolls required knowledge about the necessary tool, the ability to follow extremely precise instructions, and an intimate interaction with the material to prepare each separate segment into a doll.<sup>115</sup> While the designer-foreman may have guided the workers through the production process, it was the skill of the worker that ultimately brought the dolls to life.

Three years passed from the initial start date, and in 1938 the Milwaukee Handicraft Project introduced its customers to yet another doll design – the 22-inch doll. Described in the introduction, these dolls stood apart from earlier ones in their size, design, and manipulability. These dolls featured jointed legs that allowed them to sit at a 90-degree angle and distinctive molded and hand-painted faces designed to be “washable and unbreakable.” The design borrowed some elements from earlier models; for instance, workers hand-wove cotton warp yarn to create the wigs, cut pieces of soft percale in designated colors, and sewed the components together to form the body.<sup>116</sup> While the materiality of the 22-inch doll was the same as the 16” doll, putting together this updated

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<sup>115</sup> Tim Ingold argues for a multivalent understanding of making that expands conceptualizations of a maker’s “skill” to include knowledge of the material and its properties, capability to identify how far a craftsman can push a given material, and the ability to respond to that material. In short, his understanding of making is reciprocal with the material and the environment rather than unidirectional onto a given material. For more information, see: Tim Ingold, “On Weaving a Basket,” in *The Object Reader*, eds. Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London: Routledge, 2009), 80-91.

<sup>116</sup> Catalogue No. 10, Digital Archives, Broward County Library, Broward, Florida, accessed April 3, 2018, <http://digitalarchives.broward.org/cdm/ref/collection/WPAMHP/id/291>.

design presented the workers with new challenges and required new skills. They needed to learn, execute, and master these skills quickly and to an extremely high scale. The doll was massively popular. Within one year of its release, demand was so high that the thirty women in this department created over 10,000 of these dolls, a rate they would continue for the next five years.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps even more astounding, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project suffered from high turnover rates, creating a constantly fluctuating workforce that needed training while responding to work orders.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps the women who left found work in private industry not reported by the written record. Perhaps the fluctuation arose as a result of high placement rates of workers from the Milwaukee Handicraft Project moving to other WPA programs. Perhaps the workforce changed due to pressures at home and a need for the women to contribute their time and labor elsewhere to support their family. Evidence states that the workforce fluctuated between 100 to 1350 women at any given moment in the history of the program.<sup>119</sup> With an inconsistent workforce and multiple, complex doll designs to produce, the fact that the women of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project created consistent dolls is a testament to the strong communication between designer-foreman and workers, precise instructions created by Kellogg and her design team, and the skills of the workers on the factory floor that transformed scraps of cloth, thread, and yarn into partially-articulating dolls.

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<sup>117</sup> “Works Progress Administration Project Proposal 4D-1880.”

<sup>118</sup> Ulbricht, “The Story of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” 7.

<sup>119</sup> Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs, “Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project.”



Figure 10    Unclothed 16-inch doll displaying construction techniques, Peter, “Children’s Doll with Red Outfit” (M2005.027.004, WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Continuing the division of work used throughout the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, the workers made the 22-inch doll assembly-line style. Analysis of the dolls suggests that up to six different women contributed to each and every doll. Similar to its 16-inch counterpart, the workers made the head, body, hair, and clothing separately from another in multiple stages and then unified their work into a singular doll. Some were assigned cutting cloth for the bodies and clothes using scissors; different women were assigned weaving and braiding hair in four different patterns; other workers were assigned sewing clothing with a sewing machine; and still others learned to sew together the body parts by hand, paying attention to the tension of the fabric and hard one could pull while stitching before the fabric would tear or the thread would break. These women worked side-by-side, each contributing their labor to the final product. All of the bodies for the 22-inch dolls were made in this manner.

The molded and painted face, as the central design element of the doll, required special attention from the workers. Cotton, a particularly absorbent material, was a surprising choice for a “washable” doll. Given that the doll mold was also filled with sand, the materiality of the facial components threatened to make the doll more waterlogged than water-resistant. Workers creating the face had to be attentive while applying shellac to each layer of cotton balbriggan. The water-resistant shellac shielded the cotton from other liquid, including the paint that brought color to the doll’s skin tone, eyes, cheeks, and lips. Too little shellac, and the balbriggan would absorb all of the paint and any water used to wash the toy. Too much shellac, however, and the color of the fabric on the face would have been altered, making the hand-painting process more challenging. The materiality of the doll’s face affected the ability of the worker to complete her job; the worker, however, had full control of the application of each layer. Creating the face required a “pattern of skilled activity” from the maker, including

knowledge about the material's properties, awareness when those materials resist human manipulation, and the ability to respond and adjust their action when resistance occurs.<sup>120</sup> The women of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project had to develop the knowledge about the properties of each component in addition to following the written instructions of the designer-foremen to make the face. Skill, in this sense, includes knowledge, attentiveness, responsiveness, and care.

The women charged with making the hair separately from the face also had to implement multiple skills and sources of knowledge in order to fulfill their job. The women first had to learn how to use a wig winding board, looping and wrapping cotton warp yarn around numerous pegs. Written instructions specified the number of times the warp had to be wrapped around the wig board to ensure the precise length of material. This action, in turn, affected the length of the hair and the number of inches down the doll's head where hair rested.<sup>121</sup> The women workers had to understand and apply skills in measurement (crucial given Ulbricht's earlier comment about their unfamiliarity with rulers) down to an eighth of an inch to ensure quality and consistency of design across all of the dolls.

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<sup>120</sup> Ingold, "On Weaving a Basket," in *The Object Reader*, 87.

<sup>121</sup> "Cutting and Sewing Instructions 'Peter,' D-501."





Figure 11 American doll, “Navy Girl,” private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren.



Figure 12 Unpainted 22-inch doll face, “Doll face and mold,” Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.



Figure 13 Close-up of painted 22-inch American doll face, “Navy Girl,” private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren.





Figure 14 Close-up of twenty-two inch doll hair with evidence of glue remnants once used to secure the wig to the side of the face, “American Girl” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Women had to be careful as they secured this wig as well, using a combination of glue and thread that closely matched the color of the hair. The liquidity of the glue caused it to collect within the ridges of the balbriggan fabric of the face. If the women applied too much it gathered in large visible globs; too little and the hair would not stay in place, easily pulled away leaving cracked residue where the hair pulled away.<sup>122</sup> Further, the thread used to secure the hair, particularly the ends of the braids, was very fine and nearly matched the color of the yarn for used the hair. Workers assigned to this task had to look

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<sup>122</sup> “American Doll” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI.



carefully at their work to keep track of where they wrapped the thread. From measurement and weaving to gluing and sewing, the wig alone combined many different tasks that could each affect the quality of the final toy.



Figure 15 Close up of painted doll face attached to the doll body, “American Girl,” WPA Dolls, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.

The body, too, was made separately from the molded face, stuffed head, and wound hair. This task, perhaps, most complicates the notion of skill vs. unskilled,

particularly within a collaborative project such as doll making. It involved a combination of cutting materials from a pattern and sewing by hand and with a machine. The workers charged with cutting the cloth with scissors did so according to the number of pieces for each body part – two for the body, four for the hands, two for each arm and leg, three for the feet, and an extra flap of cloth for the doll’s rear end. Keeping track of the multiple patterns, number of pieces, and colors of piece of percale cloth for each doll required strong organizational skills from the workers. To prevent fraying before and after sewing, the workers had to locate and cut with, rather than against, the grain of the cloth. The quality of the some of the dolls and their clothes indicate that the women tasked with this element were aware of the materiality of the cotton cloth. Some of the dolls have frayed bodies and clothing; others do not. The level of knowledge and intimacy with the material was not universal across the program. However, even those thought to be unskilled developed and practiced skills that supported production at the Milwaukee Handicraft Project.

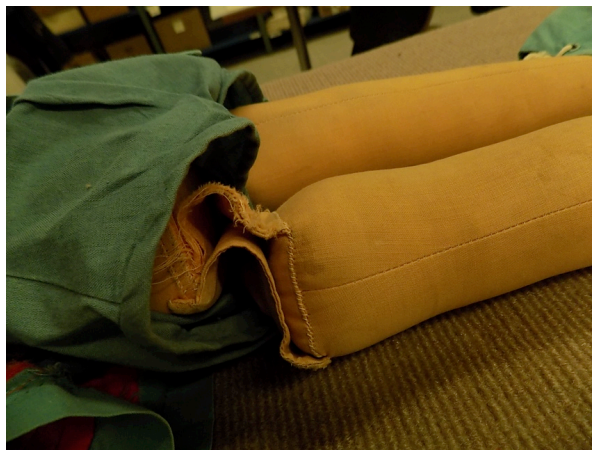


Figure 16 Close up of legs attached with a whipstitch on the 22-inch doll, “American Doll” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Once cut, the designer foreman gave these pieces of cloth to the next stage of the assembly line. Here, workers used a sewing machine join the multiple pieces of cloth into a singular body part. Using this tool required the workers to maintain the tension of both pieces of cloth while holding them together and guiding them under the needle. Using the ever-popular Singer Sewing machine, the workers also had to manage and watch the spool of thread, keeping a close eye for tangles and jams in the machine's mechanics.<sup>123</sup> Any mistake would slow down production. This work was delicate and intricate. Sewing required a close eye throughout the process, from connecting the small four pieces of cloth to make the hand to sewing the front and back half of the body together. Each scrap of fabric demanded that the worker pay attention not only to the instructions but to the materiality of the cloth itself in concert with the sewing machine used to join them together. In short, these women mastered multitasking as well as skills in sewing to produce these dolls.

Finally, once each part was stuffed, the workers whipstitched the components together. This technique reinforced the limbs so they were difficult for a child to pull off. They attached the molded and painted head and neck to the body, the arms to the torso, and the legs to the base of the doll with using the whipstitch. The legs, in particular, produced the other notable design of the 22-inch doll – she could sit up at a 90-degree angle. To create this feature, the women sewed a flap of percale cloth, matching in color, to the underside of the body. Done by hand, the women hired to do this attached the cloth

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<sup>123</sup> “Req 268 - November 30, 1940,” Special Committee on Works Progress Administration Projects, MSS 773, box 2, folder “Walter Bunge – Handicraft,” Archives, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI.

at the base of the doll's back and to the top of either leg at the back.<sup>124</sup> It is unclear whether a separate woman on the line would have completed this task over and over again or if it was part of another woman's job. Either way, the articulation of these limbs in conversation with each component of the body embodied the collaborative work that the women of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project performed and the skill involved in working collaboratively. While they were not individual craftsmen, they made a marvelous team.

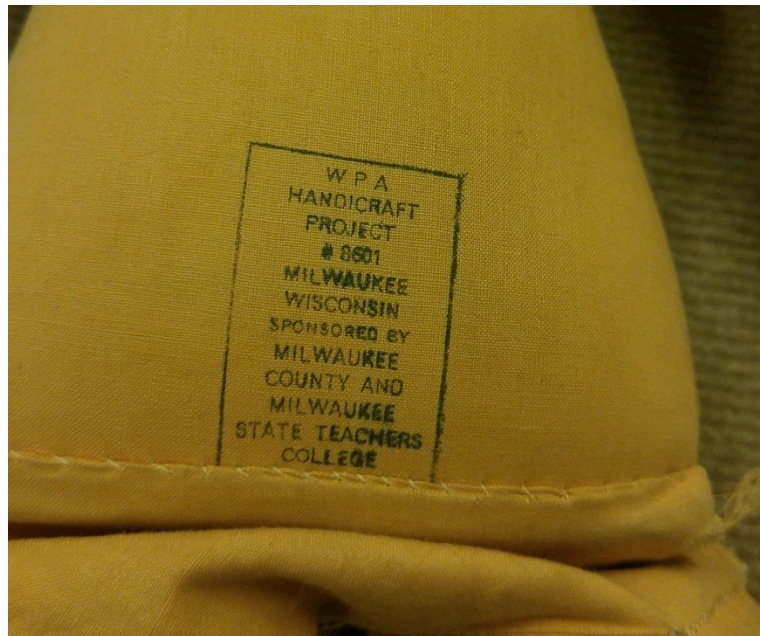


Figure 17 Close up of stamp on the back of every 22-inch doll, “American Doll” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

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<sup>124</sup> “American Doll,” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll); “Negro American Doll,” WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

Once completed, one of the workers stamped the back of the doll with a mark that read, “W.P.A. Handicraft Project, Milwaukee, WI, Sponsored by the Milwaukee State Teachers College.”<sup>125</sup> The federal government did not allow the workers to sign their products.<sup>126</sup> Despite the fact that Elsa Ulbricht designed and operated the Milwaukee Handicraft Project as an art project inspired by the Midwestern Arts and Craft Community, at its core the initiative was still a collaborative, production project first and foremost and not a space for craftsmen. And with production projects came anonymity. The label countered this anonymity to a certain extent by indicating the program name, number, location, and sponsors supporting the program. Further, the program numbers included on the stamp served as evidence of the year in which the doll was produced; they changed with every year that the Milwaukee Handicraft Project applied for funding with the federal government. The stamp on the back was Ulbricht’s compromise with the WPA, a means of acknowledging the hard work of her employees without including their personal information on the dolls.

The administrators of the program argued during and after the program’s operation that the work transformed the women from ineffective and unskilled masses to confident and capable workers. They celebrated how the program “made different human beings out of them.”<sup>127</sup> They created a program hierarchy that mirrored this narrative – handicraft workers operated at the bottom as “unskilled workers” and designer-foreman,

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<sup>125</sup> “American Doll,” W.P.A. Dolls, Jack Russel Memorial Library, WI; “American Doll” #2, W.P.A. Dolls, Jack Russel Memorial Library, WI; American doll (M2015.024.001).

<sup>126</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 34.

<sup>127</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 7.

designers, artists, and supervisors all worked as “skilled” workers.<sup>128</sup> Their definition of skill shaped the division of labor, the hiring practices, and the way in which the program was memorialized in oral and written histories. The women of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project have gone down in history as unskilled.

However, close examination of the products of their labor suggests a richer narrative. Examining the dolls allows for a subtler definition of “skill” to come to the forefront. Rather than focusing on pedagogical knowledge, correctness of tool usage, and professional training in design, the importance of an intimate relationship between the maker, the tool, and the material becomes central. These women used their senses of sight and touch to identify the color, materiality, and tensile strength of the fabric before cutting the pieces. They paid attention to the fabric, avoiding tears at the point of the needle’s entry when sewing them together. Using sewing machines, needles, thread, scissors, and their own hands, these women produced a wide variety of dolls that met the needs of children across the country for eight years.<sup>129</sup> As the design changed, they responded, using new tools, new patterns, and their own knowledge. They needed to know how to use these tools and do it well to maintain the pace and quality of production on the factory floor. The dolls embody the multiplicity of this narrative. While the pedagogical skills of the designer-foreman certainly aided in their work, the consistency of quality suggests that these unskilled women were truly quite skilled after all. As the individuals working the closest with the materials and tools, intimately tied to their making, their skill is most evident in the dolls themselves.

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<sup>128</sup> Project 1170 Application.

<sup>129</sup> Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs, “Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project.”

## Chapter 4

### **DEFINING AND COMMODIFYING AMERICANNESSTHROUGH DOLLS: THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PEDAGOGICAL WORK OF THE MILWAUKEE HANDICRAFT PROJECT**

A four-year-old child examined the lone figure in his classroom, giving her a quizzical look. His classmates still played at recess when he returned. He found the girl sitting alone in the room otherwise devoid of people. He had never seen her at his kindergarten. Unbeknownst to the children, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project administrators were testing their twenty-two inch doll for the first time in his classroom. His teacher, a friend of Elsa Ulbricht, previously reached out to the Milwaukee Handicraft Project for an all-cloth doll.<sup>130</sup> The supervisors of the program took on the challenge and experimented with the design, the workers brought it to life, and in 1938 the final twenty-two inch doll sat in this Milwaukee kindergarten. The teacher entered the classroom behind the child. He turned around, inquisitive about the small figure before him, and asked, “Who is she?”<sup>131</sup> Ulbricht credited this moment, when the child paid the doll “complimentary recognition” as another person, as the crowning achievement in the program’s doll development. She and her design team made a doll so lifelike that a child questioned her identity without also asking whether or not she was alive.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ulbricht, “Dolls \* Toys,” 12.

<sup>131</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], “W.P.A. Handicraft Project 1170 Sponsored by Milwaukee State Teachers College,” 10; Ulbricht, “Dolls \* Toys,” 12; Ulbricht, interview, 14.

<sup>132</sup> Ulbricht, “Dolls \* Toys,” 12,; Ulbricht, interview, 13

Meant to mimic the human form, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project administrators worked hard to give the twenty-two inch doll naturalistic facial features. Her molded face was key in this endeavor; Ulbricht wanted the doll to stand out from other popular toys at the time that lacked this design element.<sup>133</sup> Perhaps Ulbricht emphasized the importance of the molded face because she had a Russian doll with a similar design as a child.<sup>134</sup> Perhaps she believed that naturalistic faces encouraged children to relate to the dolls as individuals rather than objects.<sup>135</sup> Perhaps striving for high quality dolls simply aligned with the program's larger goal to create well crafted, carefully designed goods for tax-supported institutions in need, such as this local kindergarten.<sup>136</sup> While the administrators' motivations remain unclear, one reason remained central throughout the design process – Ulbricht envisioned a doll that served as both a toy and a pedagogical tool. She wanted to teach children how to clothe themselves through interactions with the dolls.<sup>137</sup>

To achieve this goal, Ulbricht hired Helen Clarke, an experienced toy maker, to design the clothing for the dolls.<sup>138</sup> Each of Clarke's designs included child-friendly

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<sup>133</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 21.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>135</sup> Ulbricht, "Dolls \* Toys," 12.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid; Ulbricht, interview, 13.

<sup>137</sup> Ulbricht, "Dolls \* Toys," 12.

<sup>138</sup> Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women*, 44.



fasteners.<sup>139</sup> All dresses, underwear, and decorative elements such as scarves called for snaps to secure them in place. Workers sewed them on either side of the interior edge of the cloth so children could easily put on and remove the doll's clothing. For outerwear, workers sewed buttons onto one edge of the clothing with corresponding buttonholes on the other side. All footwear included a pair of socks and shoes with laces, echoing the clothes that the members of an imagined child audience wore in their own lives.<sup>140</sup>

Described as "self-help type clothing" for children in nursery schools, the clothing served both a fun and pedagogical purpose.<sup>141</sup> Built into the very form of the doll and her clothing, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project developed an argument about citizenship— to be a fully participating member of American society, children should learn how to dress and care for themselves.

Well before the 1938 release of this doll, Ulbricht worked to build a program that used well-designed goods to uplift the general public. For their youngest audience, this uplift entailed lessons about how to groom oneself, by extension supporting their parents, teachers, and communities by taking on more responsibility. Perhaps Ulbricht's training and professional experience as a kindergarten teacher gave her insight into how to aid

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<sup>139</sup> Wisconsin Work Projects Administration Division of Service Programs, "Record of Program Operation & Accomplishment: Milwaukee Handicraft Project."

<sup>140</sup> "American Doll"; "American Doll"; "American Doll" (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll); "American Girl Blonde with Braids," Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI; "WPA Dolls Clothing" (M2015.024.003A-B), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI; and "WPA Dolls Clothing" (M2005.024.004A-B)," Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>141</sup> Unknown author [Harriet P. Clinton], "W.P.A. Handicraft Project 1170 Sponsored by Milwaukee State Teachers College," 11.

children as they developed these skills. Perhaps, combined with her exposure to Arts and Crafts philosophy in previous decades, Ulbricht developed saw objects as a means to improve the lives of children and train them to more actively participate in their own care. While the exact degree to which her professional and artistic training influenced the design is unknown, the dolls of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project materialized Ulbricht's initial goals for the WPA program and her understanding about the power of objects to promote personal growth among people of all ages.



Figure 18 Close-up of fastenings on the Milwaukee Handicraft Doll dresses, “American Girl” WPA Dolls, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.



Figure 19 WPA Doll's Clothing (M2015.025.002A-B), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

After the successful first test run, Ulbricht and her team spent the next year refining and expanding their design for the twenty-two inch doll. Workers continued to use the same production process for the face, body, and clothing. However, by July 5, 1939, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project produced these dolls in eighteen different designs.<sup>142</sup> Ulbricht and Clarke created designs that used different colors of fabric and

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<sup>142</sup> "The Milwaukee Handicraft Project: Material Cost List," 30, University Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archive Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI.

paint to denote ethnicity and a range of clothing styles to embody and visibly communicate cultural practices among non-American nations. They marketed the dolls as “American” and “Foreign” based on their design.

These dolls were by no means politically neutral objects. The Milwaukee Handicraft Project literally wove ideologies about race, ethnicity, and the practice of material culture in the United States and Europe into the very fabric of the toys. After establishing their exchange rate with buyers at the cost of materials, the dolls entered a commodity state and the administrative team sold these materialized ideas about who was American or Foreign.<sup>143</sup> They commodified these ideas through the material objects and sold them to the tax-supported institutions across the country at the cost of materials.

To make the “American” doll, workers painted the molded face pale pink, her lips red, and her eyes either blue or brown. The workers then used peach percale for the exterior of her body, a similar shade of pink that complimented her face. Each American doll came with a range of options for its hairstyles in black, brown, or “blonde,” including braids with “bangs, braids with no bangs, or a bob with bangs.”<sup>144</sup> The workers wove, cut, and glued the cotton yarn in a manner that simulated straight hair rather than curls. In short, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project used visual cues in skin tone, hair color, and hair texture to associate “American” girlhood with whiteness. These cues as “American” in contrast with those of the foreign dolls made a powerful argument for what Americanness looked like through this WPA program. Curiously, they only made female American dolls; the reasons for this are unknown.

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<sup>143</sup> For more information about the process by which things become commodities, see: Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value.”

<sup>144</sup> “American Doll”; “American Doll”; “American Doll” (M2015.024.001 WPA Doll); and “American Girl Blonde with Braids.

The catalog created by Ulbricht and her administrative team to describe and share their wares with interested buyers further marketed the American dolls as the standard from which other doll designs contrasted. They listed the American dolls first, highlighting the universal washability, durability, and careful construction of all of the dolls after describing for the American dolls.<sup>145</sup> The American dolls embodied the WPA programs' high standards for construction, design, and materiality as practiced in the doll department. The American dolls were also the only 22-inch dolls that the administrators described by their material components, the same components used for all of the dolls of this size; by contrast, the physical form of the foreign dolls were simply described as "made as above," indicating that they shared the same production process.<sup>146</sup> Not only did the Milwaukee Handicraft Project create a visual and saleable narrative for who was American through the physical form of the dolls, it also established that the American was the neutral identity from which the other dolls were derived. They captured, described, and commodified the design of the doll, the labor required to make it, and process by which it was made. Every part of the doll entered the commodity state once the administrators wrote and circulated a catalog.

Finally, each American doll came 10 piece wardrobe that included "1 – coat, 2 – dresses, 2 – shorts, 1 – pair of socks, 1 – pair of shoes, 1 – sleeping garment, 1 – bib or apron, 1 – hat or head scarf or 1 tam."<sup>147</sup> The workers sewed together plain weave cotton cloth in matching colors with a sewing machine to make the clothes. For example, if an

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<sup>145</sup> "The Milwaukee Handicraft Project: Material Cost List," 30; Catalogue No. 10, 55.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

American doll featured a blue hat or headscarf, the workers made her dress, undergarment, and shoes out of the same blue cloth. Their socks were always white and roughly shin-height. Supplemental wardrobes also came with the same ten pieces of clothing.<sup>148</sup> Using child-friendly snaps and buttons, these American dolls still served as pedagogical tools for children to learn how to dress, groom, and care for themselves. Built into this pedagogical design and sold to consumers, however, was a standardized narrative of what American children wore.



Figure 20 “American Girl,” WPA Dolls, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.

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<sup>148</sup> Catalogue No. 10, 66.





Figure 21 "American Girl," Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.



Figure 22 “WPA Doll’s Clothing,” M2015.024.004 A-B, Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.





Figure 23 “WPA Doll’s Clothing” (M2015.024.003B), Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Comparison with foreign dolls highlights the ways in which the Milwaukee Handicraft Project developed and marketed a visual vocabulary that defined Americanness through contrast. The workers constructed the heads, hair, and body of Foreign dolls in the same manner as the American dolls. In many cases, the workers used

the same shade of paint and percale cloth to denote skin and hair color. However, these doll designs – and the way in which administrators marketed them – came with a key written, material, and visual differences from the American dolls. Rather than being dressed in standardized “wardrobes,” these dolls came “dressed in complete costumes representing particular nationalities.”<sup>149</sup> The catalog indicated that, though these dolls were made in the same manner, their distinct styles of clothing distinguished them as decidedly not American. The design and material form of the foreign dolls echoed this written argument.

When designing the Polish girl, Ulbricht, Clarke, and other administrators used unique patterns for her clothing, accessories, and accoutrements to invoke the doll’s cultural differences with the American doll. While the American doll came with the option of a “head scarf” in a variety of matching colors, the Polish doll only came with a yellow “bandana” and matching yellow knit necklace. Rather than a dress, the Milwaukee Handicraft project administrators designed the Polish Girl to wear a “blouse”; while similarly made of plain weave white cotton, this undergarment extended down the full length of her arm, buttoned down her back, and hung to her knees. The workers further adorned this blouse with embroidery in yellow, blue, red, and green at the ruched shoulders and the cuff. The workers embroidered her black “bodice” in flowers of the same color. On top of this blouse, the Polish Girl also wore a “rust, green, [and] white (striped)” skirt with matching apron. The Polish Girl further wore “stockings” instead of “socks,” which extended much further up the leg, and black “boots” that laced up her shin rather than simply slip on “shoes” that laced at the ankle.<sup>150</sup> Her design shared the

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<sup>149</sup> Catalogue No. 10, 55.

<sup>150</sup> “Polish Girl,” private collection, Dr. Charles Waisbren; Catalogue No. 10, 60.

same basic elements as the American doll – headwear, undergarments, socks, shoes, and clothing that covered most of her body. However, the terms that the administrators used to describe them and the designs that the workers implemented to make them resulted in a strikingly dissimilar doll. In short, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project commodified their difference as the central selling point.



Figure 24 “Polish Girl,” private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren.



Figure 25 “Polish Girl,” private collection, courtesy of Dr. Charles Waisbren.





Figure 26 Manikin of the Polish Female costume produced by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project in miniature, “Polish Female (H57871/29244),” WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.

The exact origin of Helen Clarke's source base for this doll unknown; hand-written notes on sketches for costumes made by this program indicate that the designer-foreman read old issues of *Geographical Magazine* printed in the early 1930's as inspiration.<sup>151</sup> Clarke's doll design closely mimics that of the "Polish Female" costumes made by the women working in the costume department. Both designs feature the trademark yellow head covering, vests with embroidered flowers, embroidered shoulders and cuffs on the blouse, a stripped skirt and apron, and calf-high boots. A sketch of the design does not survive as they do for other costumes but the common design suggests shared origin material.<sup>152</sup>

These commodified cultural differences had their limits, however, when the time came to use the doll. For instance, with her clothing removed, the Polish Girl was indistinguishable from any other light-colored doll produced by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, whether Foreign or American. Given that the production processes were the same, any doll with blond braids and brown eyes produced on the factory floor had the potential to be marketed as a Polish or American Girl. A material narrative of sameness and the universality of the human form betrayed the commodified narrative of difference. The cultural differences portrayed by the dolls were unstable at the point of undress.

The material form of the Norwegian Girl repeats the material narrative of shared physical traits with distinctly non-American cultural practices. Like the American and

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<sup>151</sup> "H48432A/27740," BOX 8, WPA MHP Collection, History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid; H48431 A/27740" Box 8, WPA MHP Collection, History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI.

Polish dolls, the workers constructed the body of the Norwegian Girl through the same production process. Featuring straight blond braids with no bangs and blue eyes, she shared the same basic physical traits as the American Doll. Like the Polish Girl, this doll could have been sold as an American doll with a just different set of clothing. Here, again, is where the Milwaukee Handicraft Project articulated her cultural similarities and differences. The Norwegian Girl wore black shoes laced at the ankle; this design echoed that of the American doll with the exception of an additional tongue underneath the laces not found in the American Girl shoes. She wore a white, plain weave cotton blouse with front buttons stretching from her neck to her navel; the blouse had the same pattern as the Polish Girl – long sleeves and a skirt down to her knees – but the Norwegian blouse also featured a collar rather than embroidery on the ruched shoulders. Her undergarment, identified as in the catalog as “underwear” like the Polish Girl rather than “shorts” like the American Girl, all share the same design. Like the Polish Girl, the Norwegian Girl also wore “stockings” rather than socks, but the workers made her stockings out of a brilliant red cotton fabric to match her red hat and “jacket.” The marketing materials commodified the doll as different. Helen Clarke supported this idea through subtle clues in the design for the Norwegian Girl – front facing buttons on a collared blouse, a tongue in the shoes, bright red stockings that materially signaled that this doll was different.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> “Norwegian Doll,” Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI; Catalogue No. 10, 55.





Figure 27 “Norwegian Doll,” Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.



Her jacket, hat with “streamers,” and belt are perhaps the most striking and unique aspect of her “costume.” Clarke designed a two-cornered, M-shaped hat, with a peak on either end of the peak of the cap. The workers embellished this hat with a grass green trim at the hemline and cross-stitching in yellow and blue on the front. They completed the hat with a final touch – two crocheted “streamers” in dark blue with red and yellow zigzags secured by hand at the nape of the neck. The workers crocheted a belt with the same design as her streamers, albeit secured with a snap like the other doll clothing. Her matching red jacket with green trim featured yellow cross-stitching that echoed this design. Finally, this doll wore a blue denim ankle-length skirt over her blouse, also secured with snaps.<sup>154</sup> Only the Norwegian Girl included these designs.



Figure 28 Hat from “Norwegian Girl,” Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.

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<sup>154</sup> “Norwegian Doll.”



Figure 29 *By the Fjord*, Hans Dahl, 1937, public domain.

Clarke likely drew inspiration for the outfit from the national dress of Norway. The dolls design bore a strong resemblance to other contemporary images of Norwegian girls from the early-to-mid twentieth century. Artists such as Hans Dahl, a Norwegian painter famed for his landscapes of women in traditional dress, shared Clarke's distinct attention to the red and green jacket paired with a blue skirt. The precise source for her information is unknown; perhaps like the Polish Girl, the designer-foremen in the costume department shared the designs for a Norwegian costume with Clarke. Or perhaps Clarke was aware of renderings of traditional Norwegian dress, whether the art of Dahl, an issue of *Geographical Magazine*, or any number of images of ethnic typologies that circulated in the popular visual culture of the 1930's. Comparing the Norwegian Girl to

other imaginings from this period indicate a common visual vocabulary through which the artist communicated a Norwegian identity through dress. The women of the Milwaukee Handicraft project were in conversation with these images. Rather than generating idealized images of the Norwegian peasantry, however, their work served to reproduce and sell this image to an American audience to further the program's narrative of cultural difference constructed through its dolls. Although they captured the same inspiration, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project used it for very different goals.

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project introduced all three of these dolls in 1938, just after an intense period of immigration to the United States from Eastern and Southern Europe from roughly 1880 to 1920. Attempts to "Americanize" these immigrants – as well as resistance to these efforts – proliferated and programs to train newcomers in the English language, sexual health pamphlets, and immunization standards emerged throughout the United States, often forcibly. Hull House, one social program with which Elsa Ulbricht affiliated, exists in this vein. The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw many conversations about what it meant to be "American," what material and practices and skills this entailed, and which ethnicities fell under the purview of whiteness. Evidence does not suggest that the Milwaukee Handicraft Project made certain dolls for children of corresponding ethnicities; in fact, the ethnicities envisioned by the program are all the more striking because the Foreign Dolls marketed by the program were made by women from many of the same countries.<sup>155</sup> Perhaps Clarke asked the women on the factory floor for their advice on how to portray their nations of origin. Perhaps the oral histories recorded with the program administrators only hinted at the contributions of workers to the conceptualization of these dolls. Or perhaps time

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<sup>155</sup> Ulbricht, interview, 21.

exaggerated the ethnic diversity of their workforce. Ulbricht and Clarke's work to capture European ethnicities through dress essentialized the dolls before commodifying them and placed their designs in conversation with a national reaction to increased diversity in the United States.

The question of Americanness as illustrated through and marketed as material contrast was further complicated by Clarke's choice of nations to represent as foreign. In addition to Polish and Norwegian dolls, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project made dolls named Dutch Boy, Dutch Girl, Italian Girl, Welsh Girl, and Scotch Boy. Each doll came with a "costume" meant to represent the cultural practices of that nation. However, there was a notable absence – where were the German dolls? Wisconsin had a strong German presence and a long history of German immigration to the city stretching throughout the 1800's. It appears that the Milwaukee Handicraft Project never made any German Dolls, either male or female. Through absence, they argued that the German ethnicity is not foreign. Americanness included German heritage in 1930's Milwaukee.

The potential impact of this material argument for difference was limited by the medium of the dolls themselves, however. As mentioned before, the American and Foreign dolls shared the same physical design. Without the "wardrobe" or "costume" on, it would have been impossible for children playing with the dolls to distinguish the doll's designated category at the point of sale. Further, the standardization of production of doll bodies and clothing meant that the children were free to exchange clothing elements between dolls if they had access to more than one. Concepts of Americanness and Foreignness embodied by the clothing were unstable. The visual vocabulary of difference with which the program sold the doll only existed as long as the doll remained intact, a project not necessary possible in the hands of an imaginative child. Precisely through the removability of these cultural cues, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project made a two-

pronged argument about ethnic origins and whiteness – it materialized the doll designers’ ideas about visually identifiable differences between European ethnic groups while simultaneously developing a material argument about the universality of the human form. Streamlining production - using the same face mold, and body construction for all of these toys – ultimately countered the very visual vocabulary through which the dolls presented Americanness.



Figure 30 “Negro Girl,” WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project did not solely make white dolls, however. The American dolls came in one other design – the Negro American. Like the Foreign doll, the workers manufactured the American and American Negro dolls through identical processes. They used the same face mold, body patterns, and sewing techniques. Unlike the Foreign doll, however, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project did not denote difference through clothing. The program sold the American two dolls with the exact same ten-piece outfits. Instead, it emphasized the difference between American and Negro American through physical features.

The Negro American was made out of darker materials. The workers painted the Negro American doll face with brown paint for the skin and eyes and sewed the Negro doll body out of brown percale. The Milwaukee Handicraft Project further denoted race through hair texture; while the American and Foreign dolls predominately came with bobbed or braided hair, the workers wove the Negro American doll's hair in circles as opposed to plaited into braids<sup>156</sup> Still using cotton warp, the altered instructions gave the doll short, tight curls closely looped against her head. The method with which the workers engaged the wig-winding board and the colors that they used to denote skin tone and hair color classified this American of African descent and distinctly different from the "American" doll. From head to toe, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project projected clear visuals arguing that both whites and blacks were American. Clarke united the two dolls culturally through their clothing designs, and in the marketing material the Negro American doll lacked the cultural "costumes" worn by the foreign dolls. The administrators commodified the Negro American doll as simultaneously American yet

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<sup>156</sup> "Negro Girl."

different. The naming conventions signaled a particular idea; to be “American” was to be white as opposed to a named ethnic-American other.

One curious doll produced by the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, however, defied the overall pattern of similarity and difference developed through the materiality of dolls, complicating the narratives about race, ethnicity, and Americanness. The Welsh Doll, while neatly categorized as foreign, fit materially in with the other dolls in certain respects. Using the same construction techniques, the workers created the Welsh Girl with a light pink paint for the face, brown eyes, and peach percale to denote her skin tone. Like the other foreign dolls, Clarke designed her to wear a “blouse,” “stockings,” and “underwear.” She wore the same ankle-high shoes with a tongue as the Norwegian Girl and also shared her front-buttoning “blouse,” except that she featured a stiff squared collar rather than one creased neatly into triangles. The workers made her a blue denim apron over a blue skirt, both secured with snaps as was custom with these dolls. Clarke also designed a tall brimmed hat to rest on top of her white bonnet, the only doll to have this feature.<sup>157</sup> Despite her many shared traits with the other foreign dolls, however, the Welsh Doll came with one unique feature that made her stand out.

The Welsh doll had closely-woven, thick, highly textured, curly hair that workers wove close to her head. It curled even more tightly than the Negro American doll’s wig. The reason behind Clarke’s design decision remains unknown. Perhaps she sought to argue that the Welsh were distinct even among the ethnicities and races portrayed. The program identified this core difference as “short and curly” but drew no more attention to it than that of the Negro American Hair. Despite standard production methods, the Welsh

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<sup>157</sup> The shawl that the doll is pictured wearing was not part of the original design as indicated by the program catalog. A person added it to her wardrobe post-production. For a full description of the Welsh doll and her accessories, see: Catalogue No. 10, 60.



doll resisted easy categorization. Perhaps, in this respect, she is the most foreign out of the many doll offerings of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project.



Figure 31 “Welsh Girl,” Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.





Figure 32 Hat from “Welsh Girl,” Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.



Figure 33 Close up of “Welsh Girl” hair, bonnet, and face, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, WI, courtesy of the Jack Russell Memorial Library.





Figure 34 Close up of “Negro Girl” hairstyle, Milwaukee Handicraft Project Collection, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, WI, courtesy of the Milwaukee Public Museum.

The core pedagogical intent of these dolls remained present throughout the designs – snaps, buttons, and laces secured almost every piece of clothing so that children could learn how to dress themselves. However, Clarke and the women working on the factory floor of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project pushed the intended pedagogical

message several steps beyond that. Through three categories of dolls – American, Negro American, and Foreign – The Milwaukee Handicraft Project made an argument about who is American and who is not articulated through visual differences. The program defined Americanness as shared cultural practices embodied by similar clothes between the American and Negro American toys. Their identification as sharing the same “wardrobe” served as a tool to commodify this similarity. Their physical color ultimately defined their differences. The program similarly made a visual argument about a shared physicality between the American and European ethnic dolls but highlighted the different cultural practices through their clothing. The degree to which the workers agreed with Clarke’s design is unknown, but their consistency of quality and skill helped produce a steady stream of dolls that visually argued for connections and differences across ethnic and racial groups. Further, within this visual vocabulary of similarity and difference, Clarke and the workers in the doll department also made a material argument about the universality of the human form. Using the same face mold, body patterns, and construction techniques, every doll had the potential to become any nationality or ethnicity portrayed through the Milwaukee Handicraft Dolls. Perhaps primarily to streamline production, the dolls ultimately argue for a common humanity that even paint and fabric cannot deny.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION



Figure 35 “Women working in a studio, Milwaukee Handicraft Project,” Elsa Emile Ulbricht Papers, 1907-1978, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Manuscript Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project created an impact through some of its most unique features. It was one of the few interracial programs in the country in a moment in American history when most WPA programs operated on a segregated basis. The tens of thousands of dolls produced left a material impression on children around the world that outlasted their makers by decades. Mary June Kellogg (now Rice after marrying a Foreign Service officer) brought the structure of the Handicraft Project to the Philippines. She worked as a “consultant to the government,” leading an art production program in

Manila that hired locals to produce barong tagalog, traditional woven shirts made of silk, for international consumption. The United Nations AID program picked up her program after she returned to the United States with her husband.<sup>158</sup> Through circulation of goods and people alike, this enterprise left a lasting legacy.

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project closed its doors along with the Work Projects Administration Program in January 1943. As the United States entered World War II, the federal government shifted away from domestically oriented labor to producing goods necessary for the war effort. Whether war industries absorbed the women from the program is unknown; while trained in assembly-line factory labor, it is unclear what the women on the factory floor did with their skills. Many of their names, like those of many of the administrative staff, have been lost to history. But the physical evidence of their work remains as a testament to the skill, teamwork, and commitment to their work on the project.

The Milwaukee Handicraft Project did not shut down with the removal of government funds, however. The Milwaukee County board absorbed the project in 1943 to provide employment for handicapped individuals, operating it for an additional year. Milwaukee continued to celebrate the success and legacy of the program, captured by the 1944 *Milwaukee Journal* headline “The Project that Made Milwaukee Famous.”<sup>159</sup> Multiple exhibitions of the initiative’s products have occurred in the years since it closed, including Elsa Ulbricht’s “WPA+35” at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Galleries in 1970 and “Handmade for Hard Times: The Milwaukee Handicraft Project” at

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<sup>158</sup> Rice, “Interview with Mary Kellogg Rice,” interview by Jewell Fenzi, January 5, 1991, Library of Congress, 5-6.

<sup>159</sup> Bates, “The Project that Made Milwaukee Famous.”

the Wisconsin Museum of Art in 2014.<sup>160</sup> Through public history efforts, the memory of the project lives on.

The dolls have their own material legacy, as well. Slightly more than forty years later, Pleasant Rowland founded the Pleasant Company also in Wisconsin. Perhaps in the tradition of the WPA program that came before her, Rowland launched a reinvigorated effort to capture the history of the United States through dolls and their accompanying books. Today, thousands of girls and boys across the country – and perhaps the world – are learning the history of this nation through dolls, like Addy, Samantha, Kaya, or Josephina. The legacy of the Milwaukee Handicraft Project, either direct or indirect, lives on in the excitement and joy through which children continue to learn through the material world.

This thesis proposed that the Milwaukee Handicraft Project could be understood anew. Consideration of its founding along with the goals and ideas of each of its contributing founders added complexity to its narrative. Examination of its dolls emphasized the experiences of the women who made them and consideration of their design shed light on its multi-layered material argument about nationhood and the American identity. When taken from a material culture perspective, from its inception to its enactment, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project informs us about the network of ideas, actions, materials, and people all interacting together to create its most popular item for sale – its dolls. Questions about the experiences of the children who played with the dolls

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<sup>160</sup> "WPA + 35, Milwaukee Handicraft Project Retrospective Exhibition, 1968-1970" Elsa Emilie Ulbricht Papers, 1907-1975, MSS 59, BOX 3, FOLDER 8, Archive, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, WI; "Handmade for Hard Times: The Milwaukee Handicraft Project," accessed on April 7, 2018, <http://www.wisconsinart.org/exhibitions/handmade-for-hard-times-milwaukee-handicraft-project.aspx>.

still remain, but every moment of wear and tear on the surviving dolls speaks to their rich history and their continuing significance today.



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Milwaukee County Special Committee on Works Progress Administration, Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee Archive Collection, Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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WPA Milwaukee Handicraft Collection, Collections of the Milwaukee Public Museum, History Department, Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

WPA Dolls, Jack Russell Memorial Library, Hartford, Wisconsin

WPA Dolls, Special Collections, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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## **Appendix A**

### **IMAGE PERMISSIONS**

The following pages contain the image permissions given for this thesis. My sincerest thanks to Dr. Charles Waisbren, the Jack Russell Memorial Library, the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, and the Milwaukee Public Museum for their support of this project.

#### **Allison Robinson**

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**Subject:** RE: Images for MA Thesis on the Milwaukee Handicraft Project  
**Date:** Friday, March 16, 2018 at 10:25:19 AM Eastern Daylight Time  
**From:** Charles Waisbren  
**To:** Allison Robinson

Greetings. I would be happy to send you my images. Just let me know which ones you need.

Charles Waisbren, M.D.

**Allison Robinson**

---

**Subject:** Re: New submission from Digital Collections Image Order Form  
**Date:** Wednesday, March 28, 2018 at 11:04:01 AM Eastern Daylight Time  
**From:** Ask Archives  
**To:** Allison Robinson

Hi Allison,  
Happy to help!  
The permission form as you've sent it will be just fine--no need to mail anything. I'll send your request to our Digitization Department so they can prepare a download link for your images.

Kind regards,  
Heidi

Ask an Archivist  
UWM Libraries  
414.229.5402

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**From:** Allison Robinson <arobin@winterthur.org>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, March 27, 2018 9:03:13 PM  
**To:** Ask Archives  
**Subject:** Re: New submission from Digital Collections Image Order Form

Dear Ms. Anoszko:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to use these photographs in my MA thesis and for waiving the licensing and image costs. I am so thrilled to include them! I've attached the completed form with a typed signature. Should I instead print the completed form, sign it, scan it, and then send it to you that way?

Best Wishes,  
Allison

From: Ask Archives <askarch@uwm.edumailto:askarch@uwm.edu>>  
Date: Tuesday, March 27, 2018 at 8:38 AM  
To: Allison Robinson <arobin@winterthur.orgmailto:arobin@winterthur.org>>  
Subject: Re: New submission from Digital Collections Image Order Form

Dear Allison,

Thank you for your request. I've attached our permission request form for use of our images. Since this is for an academic project, I'm going to waive licensing and image costs. Please just fill out the the attached form to the best of your ability and return it at your earliest convenience. A scan of the completed form is just fine.

Kind regards,  
Heidi Anoszko



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**Allison Robinson**

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**Subject:** RE: Images for MA Thesis on the Milwaukee Handicraft Project  
**Date:** Tuesday, March 13, 2018 at 10:54:07 AM Eastern Daylight Time  
**From:** Ben Barbera  
**To:** Allison Robinson

Hello Allison,

I apologize for not responding sooner - I was out of the office for a couple days. Yes, just send me a list the dolls you would like images of and I will send them to you. If you find that the pictures you took are better, you could use those as well. A photo credit that says something like 'Courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society' should be sufficient acknowledgement. And I would definitely like a copy of your thesis for our collection when you are done.

Regards,  
Ben

Ben Barbera  
Curator and Operations Manager  
Milwaukee County Historical Society

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**Allison Robinson**

---

**Subject:** Re: Images for MA Thesis on the Milwaukee Handicraft Project  
**Date:** Wednesday, March 14, 2018 at 11:42:58 AM Eastern Daylight Time  
**From:** Jennifer Einwalter  
**To:** Allison Robinson

Hi Allison

My apologies for the late reply! It's been really, really crazy here at the library. I've thought about your request and probably what would be the easiest way to handle this is for you to use any images you took with your camera. Since you will be providing us with a copy of your final paper and you spent time here on site, I really see no issue with anything more formal for using the photos.

I look forward to reading your paper and then adding it to our local history collection!

Have a great week! And best of luck as you are in the final weeks of completing your paper.

Thanks much.  
Jennifer

Jennifer Einwalter  
Library Director  
Jack Russell Memorial Library

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**Allison Robinson**

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**Subject:** RE: Welcome to the National Gallery of Art Educational Resources  
**Date:** Wednesday, April 4, 2018 at 10:50:42 AM Eastern Daylight Time  
**From:** McPherson, Alastair  
**To:** Allison Robinson

Ms. Robinson,

Both of those images, once you click 'download' state that they're open access, so you're free to use them however you wish, in terms of resources, you're free to click on the education tab, login and start exploring and we could just send you some items we think might be appropriate for '18th and 19th Century American History,' there are never fees for late items so you could keep them as long as you wish.

Alastair McPherson  
Program Technician  
Department of Education Resources  
(202) 842-6268  
[A-mcpherson@nga.gov](mailto:A-mcpherson@nga.gov)

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**Allison Robinson**

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**Subject:** Re: Image Permissions for MA Thesis  
**Date:** Monday, April 9, 2018 at 11:16:12 AM Eastern Daylight Time  
**From:** podejko, Sara  
**To:** Allison Robinson

Hello Allison,

Thank you for providing the attached information. Because your thesis will not be published, we will grant you permission to utilize your personal images in your thesis. With each picture, please site the museum accordingly, and include catalog numbers if you have them.

Best wishes,

- Sara

**Sara Podejko**  
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