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The "New Deal" Child Artist: Textiles from the Educational Alliance Art School

by
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INTRODUCTION

Progressive educational theories, many which had their roots in the late nineteenth century, were put to the test as a result of the Federal Art Project initiative. A small collection of printed textiles at the Museum at FIT produced during the second half of the nineteen-thirties at the Educational Alliance Art School in New York City reflect philosophies relevant to the period of the New Deal. The textiles represent and illustrate major social forces in America: the late nineteenth century settlement house providing services such as language, citizenship, and skills training; Roosevelt's New Deal and the federal relief efforts of the Works Progress Administration; the period was rich in exploring how children learn, experimenting with different environments to support and enhance children's creative expression. The designs of these textiles allow the contemporary viewer to pay witness to the children's point of view and their world of the 1930s.

Fourteen textiles were purchased by the museum between 1989 and 1993. They were purchased from two dealers. These textiles proposed many questions, such as, where and how they were produced; and for what purpose; if they were sold and where; were they exhibited; how many yards of each design were printed; were there other WPA/FAP programs producing similar textiles? Primary sources from the Educational Alliance Trustees meeting records during the 1930s, the Holger Cahill papers in the collection of the National Archive, photographic documentation from the Photographic Division of the Works Progress Administration, and examination of the objects themselves, all helped answer many of these questions. One goal of the research was to determine at what level of the production were the children involved. Were they creating the initial prototypes that were then manufactured elsewhere?

Very little has been published since the 1980s on the Works Progress Administration or the Federal Art Project, and nothing has been published on the topic of textiles produced in the United States during the Federal Art Project. There is one small Educational Alliance publication from 1989 by Adam Bellow, which briefly mentions the Craft Studio, but nothing about the textile project.

THE EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE AND THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT

The Educational Alliance and the Art School was, and still is, located in Manhattan's Lower East Side at 197 East Broadway. The Alliance was founded in 1889 by German Jews as a settlement to educate Eastern European Jewish immigrants, and to help them adapt to life in the USA. The settlement operated a kindergarten, vocational and religious training, classes in theater, art, music, English, and citizenship. In 1914 an art school was founded independently from the Alliance by Mr. Abbo Ostrowsky, as a free cultural center with night classes in printmaking, painting, drawing, photography, batik, fashion design, metal work, and art glass. The art school was taken over by the Educational Alliance in 1917. Abbo served as the Director of the art school and was a faculty member who taught painting and drawing, his wife Ella Ostrowsky taught textiles and was a batik specialist. Some famous alumni from the school include Philip Evergood, Moses and Isaac Soyer. The school is thought to have fostered the Ashcan school of art.¹

¹Adam Bellow, *The Educational Alliance, A Centennial Celebration*. (New York: The Educational Alliance, 1989), 23.

In an effort to combat universal joblessness and strengthen the economy that arose from the Depression in the 1930s, President Roosevelt's New Deal sought ways to give work to millions of Americans affected by the national crisis. The Federal Art Project was one of many programs administered as part of the nation-wide relief instituted by the Works Progress Administration, the WPA, formerly the PWAP. On May 6, 1935 the WPA was created, ending the former CWA (The Civil Works Administration). Within the Federal Art Project (FAP) there was a theater program, a writers program, a music program, and the art program. Due to the large percentage of artists, writers, actors, and musicians living in New York City, Federal Art Project money was concentrated in the city. "Art instruction for children and adults undertook many experiments. Holger Cahill (the National Director of the FAP) instituted projects, and projects not classed as fine arts, should be socially useful".² Many projects within the FAP were divided into the creative and non-creative assignments. The FAP inaugurated an art teaching program which fell under the "non-creative" or "practical" work details. Probably none had greater impact on the city than the art teaching division.³

Essentially the relief artist was viewed as a social worker, whose task was to bring basic instruction in painting, drawing, photography, printmaking to the masses. Hundreds of art teachers were assigned to programs in settlement houses, social agencies, and community centers. Eighty percent of New Yorkers reached by these art teachers were children."⁴ Teaching art throughout New York existed in many make-shift places as well as established community centers and settlements.

The Educational Alliance Art School was only one of many sites in the state of New York to benefit from the WPA's FAP. Although federal records claim the CWA was abolished in 1934 a report from the Educational Alliance dated as late as 1935 claimed that the Civil Works Administration assigned 11 workers to the Educational Alliance who offered assistance in several departments including the art school and craft studio.⁵ The textiles produced at the art school remain unique. So far the research has revealed no other WPA community center in the country with a textile design and production curriculum like the Educational Alliance Art School.

The Museum at FIT textiles share many features. They are all screen printed on undyed, natural cotton or linen ground cloths. None are longer than 2 yards. The subject matter and style share elements of realism, chiefly depicted with large scale motifs and similar one-way layouts. All but two of the textiles utilized two or more screens; these two are also the only two of the group with smaller scale motifs. (see figure 1, MFIT accession # P90.60.3, for one example).

Seven of the fourteen textiles reveal the name of teacher, the child artist, the Educational Alliance Art School, and Federal Art Project, stencil printed approximately five inches from the bottom edge. The group without the printed documentation, which includes P90.60.3 and P93.2.2 (fig. 1, 2), leave more questions unanswered - such as who made it and where? But what we are not able to decipher from any of the textiles is why it was made - what it was used for and by whom - nor is the date apparent. A WPA photograph from the Holger Cahill archive at the National Archive, documents textile pattern P93.2.2 (fig. 2) exhibited in the 5th Annual exhibition of student work from WPA classes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art during May 12 - 30, 1941. The

²Francis V. O'Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects, An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972) 63 & 129.

³"Non-creative" fell under the category of art education within the FAP divisions. Under the central administration of the WPA four levels made up the Federal Project: no.1, administered the FAP. The FAP Art Program had 3 divisions: Art Production; Art Education which oversaw the establishment of community art centers including the Design Lab in New York City; and Art Research - including the Index of American Design and exhibition projects.

⁴O'Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects*, 130.

⁵Educational Alliance, *Minutes of the Committee on Education and Social Work*, (Feb. 8, 1935)

photograph also attributes the textile to an Educational Alliance student named Amy Snyder. Another photograph dated April 28, 1937, documents this same textile with the young artist in the process of designing the pattern, another MFIT textile, #P89.73.2 hangs on the wall behind the children.

PURPOSE

The textile design and production was done in the craft studio at the art school. The craft studio was re-equipped to promote greater efficiency for their "commercial" endeavors. The studio made designs and printed textiles for "large concerns" who supplied their own material and their own finishing. It was at this time that the instructor Miss Ray Euffa, whose name is printed on the MFIT textiles, relieved Abbo Ostrowsky of the responsibilities of the craft studio. She was familiar with the work and assisted making contacts with wholesalers for the distribution of the products.⁶ Report summaries from the art school outline systematic investments both financially and with personnel. Abbo discovered that no trained artist knew the complete process of dying as a whole. Therefore, textile chemists served as advisors to the craft studio where they underwent months of experimentation and investigation before they felt an education program could be approached and classes formed.⁷

In a report from November 15, 1937, Ostrowsky reported that the craft studio was "doing very well and the deficit incurred at the outset of the work is gradually diminishing to a vanishing point." Another report, dated Jan. 17, 1938, "the craft studio was well established and completely self sustaining with the initial outlay re-imbursed through sales... the studio is an activity which no other art school in the USA has - either in procedure or in method of instruction."

According to the reports to the trustees the craft studio was primarily an educational activity and the classes were composed of children of all ages. Many of these were deemed marketable and were sold, but the purely commercial aspect of the craft studio had been abandoned. Abbo felt strongly about the value of the program as a vehicle to inspire and motivate the students and their families to use their creativity in their daily lives. First a design made on a piece of paper or muslin with aniline dyes had very little practical use because it was neither lasting nor could it be cleaned or washed. However, if a design were transferred into a finished product so that either the child or adult could take it home for family use, the interest of the child and the family in art activity could become more concrete.⁸ Abbo felt that every piece of craft purchased and taken home, gains a friend for the art school and Alliance.

The functions of the craft studio met with some criticism, as the commercial aspect of the activity may have been hard to justify for some people who had more simplistic understanding of art and the creative process, which ultimately contrasts to the original Arts and Crafts theories of labor and commodities and art. Some believed that the commercial aspect of the Craft Studio be eliminated and the educational phase of the work stressed. Ostrowsky explained that the profits from the sales of the "linens" made in the studio were needed in order to permit the educational phase of the work to continue since there were no appropriations to make it happen otherwise.⁹

All of the MFIT textiles measure two yards or less, which corresponds to the art school report to the members of the board of trustees in which they provided a breakdown on costs and raw materials. The sample pieces of children's finished textiles were approximately 2 yards each. They were exhibited in the classroom and were sold from

⁶Ed. All. *Art School Report*, (February 1935) the Art School's lithography class had been discontinued 3 years prior for lack of funds would soon be reorganized in addition to the craft studio improvements.

⁷Ed. All., Report from Mr. Ostrowsky, *Minutes of the Board of Trustees Meeting*, (January 17, 1938)

⁸Ed. All. *Minutes of the Committees of Social Work and Education*, (November 18, 1936)

⁹Ed. All. Report from Mr. Brodie, Chairman of the Education Committee, October 23, 1939.

the classroom displays to visitors and members of the community. Their production cost was \$20 on the average, not including teachers' salaries. The selling price is still undetermined. The dyes cost \$5-\$10 per lb. Good imported linen and cotton were used.

There appears to be no gender separation in the textile project. Although the MFIT textiles are all attributed to girls, reports of a New York City FAP exhibition in 1937-38 lists 12 - 14 year-old boys from the Educational Alliance Art School exhibiting their textiles. Mainly men, Joseph Meyers, Julius Rohr, George Cohen, and one woman, Ray Euffa served as the textile and silk screen instructors. The teacher Ray Euffa, born in Russia, had been a student of the Educational Alliance Art School and a 10 year member of the Art Students League of New York where she took classes from 1924 through 1936. Her name is spelled both Ray or Rae at the Educational Alliance and at the Art Students League. She was an exhibitor at the Tenth Annual Exhibition of the Educational Alliance Art School in 1924. Her paintings and serigraphs (silk-screens) are in collections throughout the country.

The school lists several classes with students' and instructors' names. Some of the MFIT child artists, Clara Goldberg, Sara Hochman (fig. 3), Margaret Lato, are all listed in silk screening classes taught by Julius Rohr and George Cohen. Therefore, it is possible that two or more classes were responsible for the creation and execution of these textiles, one in which the children created their designs and the other, where silk-screens were created and the cloth printed.

It is still undetermined whether textile production as curriculum existed before 1935. As head of the art school city-wide FAP participation in art programs, Abbo Ostrowsky reported on the effectiveness and value of the FAP where there was little or none already established. When it was established he felt the presence of the WPA did not contribute much to the standard of work. As Chairman of the Visual Arts Committee of the National Federation of Settlements he sought to develop a program of cooperation between the settlement houses and the FAP. "The social settlements which have a long record of art activities should be considered the guiding authorities in this matter."¹⁰

This period marked a great deal of outreach into the larger community. Contacts were made in efforts to organize talks and traveling exhibitions, and even fashion shows to be held at leading department stores. Different departments, such as the girls department, were involved in making the contacts at museums and societies. These textiles, together with other art work from other classes, were frequently exhibited at the Alliance, the Neighborhood Housing University Settlement, and the FAP Gallery on 57th Street, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

METHODOLOGIES

The child is drawing what he/she knows, perhaps what he/she sees. The images are depictions of what each artist knows and remembers. In some, all formalism of perspective and the single point of view is abandoned. Instead interest comes from the gathering of decorative details, color, and scale. The designs give the impression of extreme spontaneity, yet the complexity of creating a textile, the nature of creating a repeating pattern, is inherently confining. The subjects illustrate the children's immediate environment — city children whose playgrounds were the city streets.

The pattern subjects illustrate the fundamental philosophies of the art school and the relief programs of the FAP. Abbo Ostrowsky spells out the Art School's approach to teaching by writing that the emphasis was not on teaching children art appreciation, instead on raising a generation....sensitive to their visual environment and capable of improving it.¹¹ The subject matter illustrates an adherence to the art school's philosophy

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹The Educational Alliance, *Tenth Annual Exhibition of the Art School*, catalog, (New York:Anderson Galleries, 1924)

whereby instruction is based upon the "stimulation of the impulse of self-expression; the child's natural creative ability finds an outlet...child approaches life and expresses his/her impressions in art with serene naiveté, amazing boldness and a freshness that is well worth preserving. The subjects also illustrate the methodologies of the instructors; along with figures of children and families, visiting parks, zoos, the waterfront, and the nearby countryside, helped provide the children with the needed stimulation. Interpretations of the daily activities at the Alliance are more sources for imagery. For example in the summer of 1936 the roof garden playground, and the numerous playrooms for boys and girls, and the gymnasium, together with excursions, had a grand total of attendance of 303,178 children. The patterns and subject matter also abide in many ways to the popular beliefs held by education reformers of the early 20th century. They promoted the idea that children are inherently self-directed and should not, in the name of education, have their inner initiatives suppressed. Education reform promoted the idea that the practice of art be a fundamental means towards honest self expression.

The Alliance project can be compared to Paul Poiret's Studio Martine. Poiret combined excursions, such as to parks and zoos, and an unstructured environment to inspire children to freely create fresh uninhibited designs in his school/studio setting. Another similar experiment was begun during the 1950s by Wassi Wissaf in Cairo, Egypt, where he established a tapestry workshop for young untrained children. He incorporated trips to sites again for inspiration and to protest against what he believed to be misguided and oppressive art education. Similar philosophies appear in relation to the value of art education and the community art centers of the WPA/FAP program in a report written in 1938 to Thomas Parker of the WPA from D.S. Defenbacher:

culture degenerates very quickly when it becomes a passive contemplation of the creations of others - like all vital experiences in life, it must by its very nature be active and include participation in the broadest human sense.... The most striking instance of our general failure is found in the museum world. Like most of the objects it exhibits, the average museum is a fragment of the past, displaying legacies of rich men's homes, thus containing an entity that does not have the social significance which it should or could have. The museum as a public institution has accomplished little in breaking the fallacy born of the industrial era, the fallacy that art speaks to a very limited number, therefore experience of art is the exclusive birthright of a few.¹²

In the same report Defenbacher continues, "to all interested in the modern art movement, the relationship between the boldness and truth of form achieved by children and the simplification of contemporary painting and sculpture offers a fertile field for comparison and study. Youngsters are both realists and surrealists, acute observers and unconscious satirists. Unconscious humor, born of directness and naive observation, also constantly appears in child art under the project.....these child art activities proved hope that artists and the general public will have a new and wholesome approach to art. They won't be indulging in it as a vicarious experience but as something directly connected with their life experience - their interest in their own communities."¹³ The language of the WPA report is very similar to the words spoken by Jane Addams in *Twenty Years at Hull House*, as well Ruskin, and the Arts and Crafts theorists, and moving to Gustav Stickly in America. Addams suggests in *Hull House* that the art studio affords many examples of the restorative power in the exercise of a genuine craft.¹⁴ The Arts and Crafts aestheticism particularly, was according to Jackson Lear's, "plagued by anxieties

¹²Reel 1107 Holger Cahill papers

¹³Ibid. 17.

¹⁴Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1910), 375.

of their class; more often they shared with other craft leaders a concern for proper character formation among working class and leadership class alike...nearly all ideologues embraced educational reform as the solvent for social tension."¹⁵ Many educators looked to the "art spirit" for its potential to liberate the individual, its ability to unlock creativity and encourage freedom.¹⁶

Equally important to teaching art and technical skills to students was imparting a strong character in each individual as well as citizenship skills. Issues of and concepts of character are reported in nearly all of the meeting summaries found in the archives at the Educational Alliance. These standards of character building were sometimes confused with teaching taste, especially among the Arts and Crafts reformers and early settlement house founders Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in Chicago's Hull House. At the Educational Alliance tastemaking classes were conducted outside of the art school, in the young mothers and women clubs instead.

CONCLUSION

The social experiments of the WPA/FAP faced tightening budgets and major curtailments in spending on children and community art centers. Before 1937 FAP reached more than 50,000 children and adults on a weekly basis, but the numbers fell steadily after that. Eventually all divisions of the FAP were drastically reduced. The WPA ceased operations on February 1, 1943. It had put 700,000 people to work for the period of seven years. It had survived a 1938-1939 inquiry by the un-American Activities Committee investigating the artists and possible communist activities which raised charges that projects were filled with propaganda for the New Deal and other "radical" causes.¹⁷ The *Art Index* published several articles following the end of the WPA, reporting that FAP paintings and other art being thrown out by the ton because their monetary value was proclaimed worthless, that may indicate why so few of these Educational Alliance Art School Federal Art Project textiles have survived.

The textiles represent a value placed on children as the upcoming generation responsible for the maintenance of a civil society. The Educational Alliance reports summon to varying degrees, the comparative merits of club work during the late nineteen-thirties to that done previously, the emphasis had changed from literary and debating clubs to an emphasis on social, group, and athletic activities. To whatever degree the social aspect of the Art School was stressed, no less important was the standard and quality of the work. The two had a very close relationship and significance. The development and progress of the technical knowledge of art was considered a result of the total sum of personality and character of the individual at the Alliance. The textiles signify the thorough integration of "character", inspiration, freedom, talent, and hope, which was the mission behind both the Alliance and the WPA commitment to society.

¹⁵Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 78.

¹⁶Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,[1985]), 85.

¹⁷Kenneth T. Jackson. *Encyclopedia of New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press)

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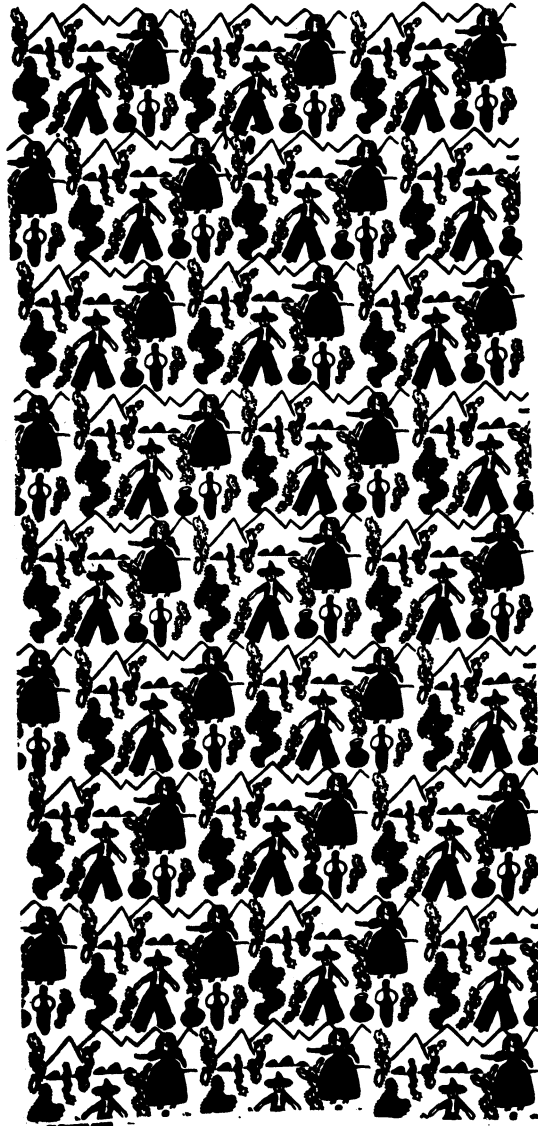


Figure 1, Museum at FIT, unknown artist, *P90.60.3*

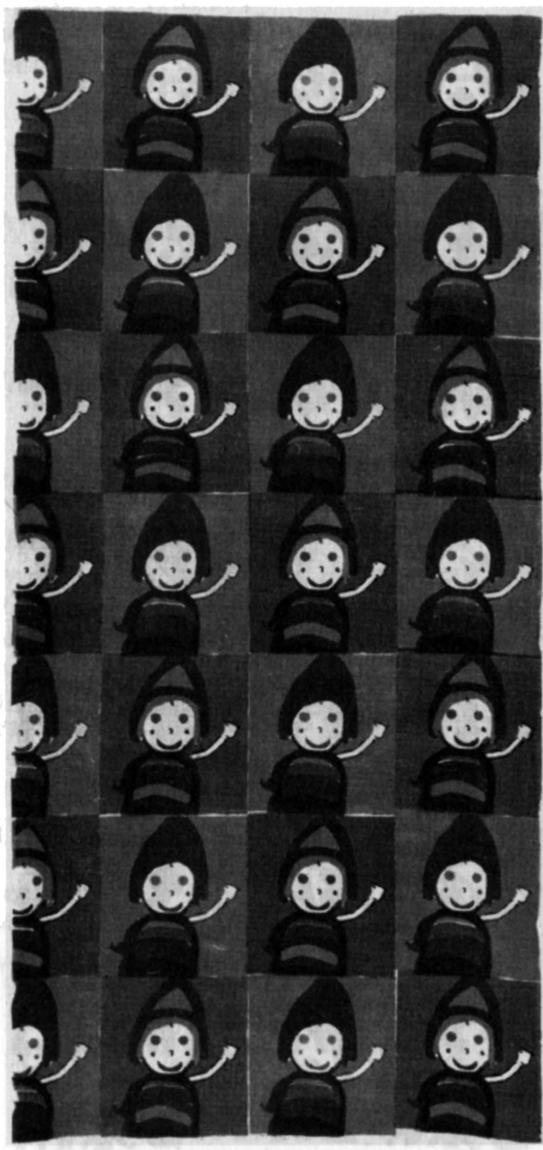


Figure 2, Museum at FIT, by Amy Snyder, P93.2.2

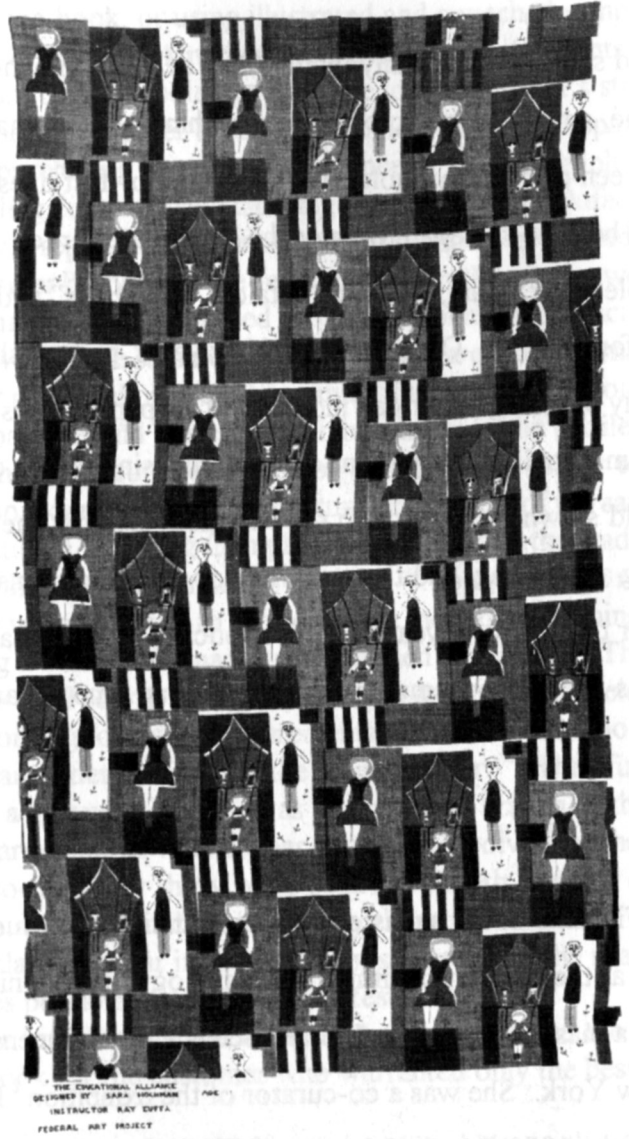


Figure 3, Museum at FIT, by Sara Hochman, P89.73.3