

## Preserving the First Presidential Library

**“A nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its people to learn from the past so that they can gain in judgment for the creation of the future.”—Franklin D. Roosevelt**

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the dominant American political figure of the 20th century, steering the nation through war and depression—and continuing to shape politics for a half-century after his election. Born into patrician privilege, Roosevelt rose to power with the support of those Americans hit hardest by the crash of 1929. By the time Roosevelt reached the White House, in the winter of 1933, the ensuing economic panic seemed intractable. And though his New Deal never restored the roaring twenties, FDR provided a burst of energy, a sense of action in the face of disaster that turned him into a popular hero. Four years later, he won reelection in an unprecedented landslide.

One of FDR’s first sweeping New Deal initiatives was instituted in December 1933: the Public Works of Art Project. The program mobilized thousands of artists across America to document the American scene through photography, paintings, and murals, on a scale never seen before or since. The program produced 15,663 pieces of art by the time it ended in 1934. FDR believed in the democratization of the arts. “...Art is not something just to be owned but something to be made: that it is the act of making and not the act of owning that is art.” And his Presidential library reflects these values.

Like all Presidential libraries, the FDR Library and Museum in Hyde Park, NY, serves as a repository of information about the Roosevelt Presidency. It houses vast collections of documents that record the numerous economic and political achievements of the FDR Presidency and the personal and social work that the President and Eleanor Roosevelt shared. Importantly though, the Roosevelt Library was first conceived as a museum. In writing about the history of the Library, the Library curators write, “For the Roosevelts, with their dedication to democratic ideals, the arts—like archives—were not to be locked away, reserved only for a privileged few.”

The first Presidential library, the FDR Library and Museum opened in 1941 with FDR’s personal artifacts serving as the

core of the collection that now contains over 34,000 objects. The curators note, “Franklin Roosevelt was a great collector. From an early age he gathered large collections of stamps, ship models, rare books, prints, coins, and drawings. By the time of his election as President, he had amassed one of the nation’s finest collections of naval art and impressive collections of Hudson River Valley art and historical prints. During the New Deal years, he collected hundreds of examples of art and crafts work produced by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other government agencies....In the years after 1941, the collection expanded to include clothing, personal items, furniture, and other materials connected to the President and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. There are also items related to their family, friends, and political associates and material that reflect the rich social, political, and cultural history of the United States during the 1930s and 1940s.”

The Library is currently in the beginning stages of a \$42 million federally funded renovation and in 2008 CCAHA was awarded a contract by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the agency that oversees the Presidential Libraries, to perform an overview survey of the painting, textile, and paper collections at the Franklin Library.

The overview survey was followed by an item specific survey of 350 textile objects, 100 paintings, and 70 works of art on paper. Rolf Kat, Senior Conservator for Project Development at CCAHA, supervised the project, creating databases for the paper, textile, and painting surveys, and coordinating the visits of textile conservator Virginia Whelan and painting conservator Steven Erisoty, both conservators in private practice and subcontractors to the project. CCAHA was awarded a second contract in 2009 by NARA to begin conservation treatment of paper, textile, and painting collections of the Roosevelt Library.



1 / Democratic Donkey Quilt, unknown, 1936  
2 / Gray Felt Hat, unknown

Elected four times, FDR served longer than any other American president. His critics were vociferous, calling him a traitor to his class. But biographers see him as a pragmatist, not an ideologue. The various programs he championed—the Public Works of Art Project, Social Security, bank regulation, stimulus spending—weren’t part of any coherent philosophy so much as they were evidence of constant experimentation as his administration tried anything, and everything, to revive the economy. The results created such institutions as NARA, and fundamentally shifted the balance between government and business in America, and, historians say, saved free enterprise from itself. FDR himself said, “One hundred years from now, my administration will be known for its art, not its relief.” But many believe that both statements are true. —KELTIE HAWKINS