

THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

June 3, 1949 (catalog date)

Description: In this segment, ER discusses the organization Allied Artists of America with sculptor Ruth Brall.

Participants: ER, Ruth Brall

(0:07)

[ER:] Thank you, Anna. Today, we have a guest who has achieved success in a field into which not many women have ventured. She is Ruth Brall, an outstanding sculptor and a member of the Allied Artists of America. Mrs. Brall, we should like to have you tell us something about your organization and the role of women in it.

[Ruth Brall:] I'm glad to, Mrs. Roosevelt. The Allied Artists of America is one of the largest of the national art organizations. It boasts 218 active members, but of those there are only seven women sculptors. These figures speak for themselves. Yes, I must admit, discrimination against women does exist in the field of art as in other fields, and I might add that there is also exceptionally keen competition between men and women artists. (0:53)

[ER:] However you did succeed in this field in spite of the prejudice and discrimination you mention, yes?

[Ruth Brall:] Yes, although for years I signed my work simply "R. Brall," but after I had received recognition of my work by a jury of men and had been voted a member, I became very brave and uh ever since I have signed my full name to my work.

[ER:] Yes, I see, you are brave. Now I would especially like to have you tell us today, Mrs. Brall, about your sculptured portraits of distinguished American Negro leaders. I know that this work has attracted a good deal of favorable comment and interest. How did you get the idea or the inspiration for doing it? (1:42)

[Ruth Brall:] Uh that is quite a story, Mrs. Roosevelt. About eighteen months ago I had a commission to sculpture the portrait of a woman who prided herself on being a liberal and a hard worker for minority groups. This woman has considerable influence, especially with adolescents. When the portrait was nearly completed, we discussed her work. Her attitude toward the Negro race as she disclosed it to me was a shock. Her idea of a solution to the Negro minority problem was a back to America movement. [ER overlapping: Back to Africa movement, isn't it?] Back to Africa movement I mean. I told her I could not work anymore that day because I felt I really had to compose myself and do some thinking. I was greatly upset that this woman, who had so much influence and such a reputation as a humanitarian, showed so little understanding and sympathy for this particular problem, that my first impulse was to destroy the portrait, because you see, in the execution of my work I am very sensitive to the character and attitudes of any of my sitters. But after a couple of days of thought, I decided to complete the portrait and to use the money received for it for a project to enlighten just such people as this woman. So that is what I did. I set aside one year to sculpture twelve American leaders of Negro race; each one to represent a different field of endeavor. Among them were Dr. DuBois, the author and educator; Mary McLeod Bethune, the president of the National Council of Negro Women; A. Philip Randolph, the labor leader; Dean Dickson,

the musician; and Channing Tobias the director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund. When I had finished, the work was exhibited at the New School for Social Research, and five hundred people, colored and white, attended the opening of the-on Lincoln's birthday. The response was overwhelming. (3:35)

[ER:] Well I'm very happy about it and I'm very fond of the one you did of Mrs. Bethune. Where are the portraits now?

[Ruth Brall:] They are being exhibited in libraries, schools, museums, and stores. And as soon as we get some organization interested in casting them in a permanent medium, um plans are being made for them to be exhibited throughout the United States. It is my hope that they will help people to learn that any minority group, given the opportunity, is capable of producing leaders, scholars, and good citizens regardless of race, color, or creed. This is my contribution to better human relations. (4:16)

[ER:] It certainly was a valuable contribution. You've answered my questions very fully and well, Mrs. Brall. Now, perhaps, there is a question you would like to ask of me?

[Ruth Brall:] Yes, Mrs. Roosevelt, there is. It happens that I am a product of the WPA art project. It afforded me the opportunity to become a sculptor and to study with some of the finest teachers in the world. What do you think can take the place of the WPA art project now? Is government sponsorship the answer?

[ER:] I don't think that there's any one uh specific thing. In the very early days, you know, some of our greatest artists um flowered because there were uh people in important positions who took them under their wings and that of course uh is still done [cough] today by people who have a love of art and like to help people-artists along the way. Um I think, of course, the government as we get uh more mature, will do the same thing. I recall that when the federal arts program put three thousand artists and writers to work there was tremendous criticism, criticism to which Harry Hopkins used to reply "Artists have to eat just like other people." But the program [cough] accomplished a great deal more than just allowing them to eat, as I'm sure Harry Hopkins himself realized. At any rate, all his life he treasured a letter from the sculptor Gutzon Borglum. In his letter, Mr. Borglum wrote "You have the only department that is free to help the creative impulses of the nation. Your department has opened the door only a crack, but opened it to this great field of human interest and thought, the field of creative impulse without which a people perish." I think that with growing maturity, we as a nation must realize that men in nations do not live by bread alone, and that the problem of the artist in our society is worthy of our consideration. Thank you, Mrs. Brall, for being our guest today and for telling us of your important work. Now back to my daughter, Anna, in Hollywood. (6:34)

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)

File(s): 80-5(73)

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