

New Deal Art 1935 – 1943

by Gina Gotsill

In recognition of the 75th anniversary of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Federal Art Project (FAP), *The American Scene: New Deal Art 1935-1943*, takes one back to the Great Depression years. During this era marked by economic strife and drought in the farmland, many people were desperate and faced losing their homes and farms as bills piled up. Elected in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced economic programs known as “the New Deal” in an effort to repair the economy and quell

the people’s desperation and fear. Dependence on relief destroyed the American spirit, he told Congress in 1935. People needed to work—and not for a few hours a week “raking leaves or picking up papers in public parks.” Likewise, the country needed roads, highways, and general improvements in many areas.

In 1935, President Roosevelt launched the WPA, the largest New Deal agency, and with the stroke of a pen put millions of people to work building dams, canals, roads and public buildings. He also approved Federal One, an offshoot of the WPA, which consisted of the FAP, as well

The American Scene: New Deal Art 1935-1943 is on view from October 3 through December 19, 2010, at the Bedford Gallery, Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek, California, 94596, 925-295-1417, www.bedfordgallery.org. The exhibition was organized by Carrier Lederer, Bedford Gallery curator, in collaboration with Harvey Smith, Board President of the National New Deal Preservation Association.

as theater, music and writing divisions.

Conceived primarily by George Biddle, who was an artist and friend of President





All illustrations are from either the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (FAMSF), allocated by the Federal Art Project or the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), WPA Federal Arts Project Allocations, unless otherwise stated.

ABOVE: Angelo A. Sattosanti, *Chinese Busman in Chinatown*, c. 1935-1943, transparent and opaque w/c on paper, 20 1/4 x 22 7/8, (FAMSF).

ABOVE RIGHT: Pedro Cervantez, *Calla Lilies*, 1937, o/Masonite, 24 x 15 3/8, SFMOMA.

RIGHT: Mine Okubo, *Old Building # 1*, 1938, w/c on paper, 15 1/4 x 20, FAMSF.

LEFT: Walter Quirt, *Obeisance to Poverty*, c. 1938, o/c, 24 x 32, SFMOMA.

Roosevelt, and WPA leader Harry Hopkins, the FAP existed in all forty-eight states and sparked new awareness and interest in American art. In fact, the scope and reach of all the Federal One projects brought art, music, theater and culture to millions of people who had never known such luxuries.

While supported by the government,



artists were encouraged to depict the world as they saw it. Through their work, artists documented everything from American

home life and the natural world to industry and labor relations. FAP artists used an endless variety of mediums, including wa-



ABOVE: Gregorio Prestopino, *American Landscape*, 1936, o/gesso board, 24 x 18, SFMOMA.

LEFT: Millaard Everingham, *Man Panning Gold*, 1940, w/c, 17 3/8 x 14, FAMSF.

BELOW LEFT: John Saccaro, *Blue Hills*, 1940, w/c on paper, 22 7/8 x 30 1/2, FAMSF.

RIGHT: John McCrady, *Returning Home*, 1937, o/c, 22 x 44, SFMOMA.

CENTER RIGHT: Jennie Lewis, *Trees in Presidio Park S.F.*, color lithograph, 11 1/2 x 15 3/4, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, William Gerstle Collection, gift of the WPA programs dispersal.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Karl H. Baumann, *Abstraction (to Richard Wagner)*, 1939, w/c and opaque w/c on paper, 15 1/4 x 22 7/8, FAMSF.



tercolor, pen and ink, woodcuts, oil on canvas, and photographic prints.

Without a doubt, the FAP served as the foundation for the future of public art and community art education in the United States. Project leaders divided the FAP into several sections: art production, art instruction and art research. First, it put unemployed artists to work creating art for public buildings, such as post offices, court houses, and schools. Second, the project increased children's interest in art by providing free, quality art education they couldn't find in public schools. Lastly, the project's art research piece employed more than 1,000 artists to compile the Index of American Design, an archive of about 18,000 watercolor renderings of American decora-



tive arts from the colonial period through the nineteenth century.

After the United States declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941, and Germany and Italy declared war on the United States just three days later, almost all WPA work was devoted to defense. Artists sketched civil defense posters, writers wrote pamphlets for military personnel and musicians played for military audiences. It was the beginning of the end of the FAP. The federal government administered the project until 1939; individual states took over operations until 1943. In June 1943, the WPA closed its doors as World War II raged on, bringing the curtain down on the FAP, and leaving behind a legacy of government-sponsored art projects.

Many people today can identify with the hardships suffered by families during the Great Depression. The pain and desperation of economic strife, which seemed so unlikely in 2003, has become an everyday reality for millions of people from coast to coast. Most know a few people who have lost their jobs and their homes since the economy and real estate market began their merciless slide in 2007. During the FAP era, artists used many different mediums to capture the realities of their time, creating art from what surely seemed like a hopeless situation. *The American Scene* is a window to an era marked by economic turmoil and creativity, and a reminder that one can survive these difficult times.

