

WPA Art: Prints and Mural Studies

College of Lake County

The Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art

May 18- June 29, 2001

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

-George Santayana

Artists, who live marginally during the best of times, were among the hardest hit by the economic upheaval following the 1929 stock market crash. During the 1930s, as America struggled to extricate itself from the Great Depression, our government made a decade long investment in American artists. For forty million dollars, less than the current selling price of certain Impressionist paintings, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal art project produced almost 18,000 pieces of sculpture, over 100,000 easel paintings, almost one quarter million prints and over 2,500 murals. From 1933 to 1943 the project succeeded in putting unemployed artists to work, and for the first time made fine art accessible to the American public.



Nan Lurie, *Park*, lithograph, Elgin Community College

During the years of the project, artists were encouraged to representationally depict the American scene in all its aspects. Project artists often portrayed American rural and urban life, American labor or American history, which resulted in a rich, visual narrative of the feelings and the events of the times. The WPA muralists were influenced by fresco painters of the Italian Renaissance as well as contemporary Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera. The aesthetic convictions of the 1930s are reflected in the WPA art. Midwest Regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood as well as "social realists" like Ben Shahn greatly affected the WPA artists' content and style. American themes underscored these works and were understood by much of the American public.

The first of the New Deal art programs was the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP: 1933-34). It was a relief program designed to decorate public buildings and parks. Following the PWAP came a program known as "The Section" (1934-43) which was originated to decorate new federal buildings with murals and sculpture. It was not a relief program. "The Section" sponsored regional and national competitions to award its commissions to artists. Often these artists created murals for public buildings such as post offices, schools, libraries and government bureaus. The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP: 1935-1939) was a relief program. Its goal was to furnish existing federal buildings with art.

The most famous of all the New Deal art projects was The Work Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP: 1935-43). Its purpose was to provide jobs for unemployed artists. The WPA employed painters, sculptors and graphic artists with a monthly stipend. The program's objectives were to preserve the languishing skills of artists and to have art play a greater role in American life. Each state had its own central office and administration. The artwork the program produced was available for allocation to any tax supported institution.

The United States involvement in World War II brought a halt to the New Deal. In the years that followed, much of the work was neglected, forgotten, or worse, destroyed. Over the past twenty-five years there has been a reassessment of this period. The art of the New Deal, appreciated again for its aesthetic and historical value, is finally being preserved as a reflection of its times and as an important period of American art history.

Source: *After the Crash, New Deal Art in Illinois*; Exhibition catalog, Illinois State Museum, Springfield, IL, 1983.

Notes on Selected Artists

Marie (Mietzi) Bleck (1911-1949)

This Oshkosh, Wisconsin native studied at Oshkosh State Teachers College and continued her education at Milwaukee State Teachers College, studying under Elsa Ulbricht and Robert von Neumann. She was named Mietzi at birth but was known professionally as Marie. In 1937 she received an award in the Wisconsin Painters and Sculptors annual exhibition. After visiting the Rocky Mountains and Arizona, Bleck created a handmade book, *Crossed Roads*, containing her poems and wood block illustrations. ³

Letterio Calapai (1902-1993)

Letterio Calapai studied the fresco technique of mural painting with Ben Shahn. Later he worked on the Mural Division of the WPA/FAP in New York. Calapai was commissioned by the WPA in 1939 to do a mural of the *Historical Development of Military Signal Communication* for the 101st Signal Battalion Armory in Brooklyn. Calapai's forte was printmaking, which he continued to do in his Glencoe, Illinois, studio.

Schomer Frank Lichtner (1905-)

Born in Peoria, Illinois, Lichtner moved with his family to Milwaukee in 1907. He studied at Milwaukee State Teachers College under Gustave Moeller in 1923, attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1924 and the Art Students League in New York City in 1926. He returned to Wisconsin in 1928 to study Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. ³

Mildred Rackley (1906-1992)

Mildred Rackley graduated from New Mexico Normal University and in 1929 moved to Taos and began teaching high school. In 1929 and 1930 Rackley's drawings were exhibited in New York, Chicago and Houston. In 1930 she went to Hamburg, Germany, to study drawing and etching. She returned to Taos in 1933, moved to California, and then returned to New York in 1935. She joined the Federal Arts Project of the WPA and worked in the lithography, woodcuts and silk screen divisions. In January of 1937 she joined the Republican cause in Spain, first as an interpreter for the volunteer physicians of the first American hospital for the Spanish republic, and then as administrator. After a year and a half she returned to New York. She was appointed to the Treasury Mural Project where she produced studies and compositions for murals, though none were ever executed. She returned to the graphics division and it was here that she recorded some of her observations of the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. *Refugee Woman*, which is shown in this exhibit, was part of this series. ⁴

Alfred A. Sessler (1909-1963)

Sessler was born in Milwaukee and graduated from Milwaukee State Teachers College. He continued his education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, earning his MS degree in 1944. In 1945, he joined the faculty of UW-Madison where he worked until his death. Under the Federal Project, Sessler produced murals for United States Post Offices in Lowell, Michigan and Morris, Minnesota. ³

Henry Simon (1901-1995)

Simon first exhibited his WPA art works at the College of Lake County (CLC) in 1987. A year later some of his prints were part of the CLC exhibition *New Deal Art: Paintings and Prints 1933-43*. Simon's pieces in the CLC collection were donated by the artist in gratitude for the gallery's preservation of his WPA artwork. Most of Simon's other WPA works reside in the collection of Northwestern University, the Library of Congress and private hands.

Two of Simon's works on display received Honorable Mentions in national mural competitions. The first, *Mark Twain and Bret Harte in San Francisco*, was part of his entry to the competition for the San Francisco Rincon Annex Post Office. His entry depicted a continuous pictorial history of California. The second, *The Visiting Nurse*, is part of a suite of paintings that Simon submitted to the Social Security Building Competition in Washington D.C. It depicts situations thought to be covered by the newly formed Social Security Act. This series is a portrait of the people most affected by the Depression. Simon's two Honorable Mentions provided commissions to paint different murals in the Osbourne, Ohio Post Office and the De Queen, Arkansas Post Office, respectively.



Marie (Mietzi) Bleck, *The Trapper*, 1937, linocut, Wustura Museum

The lithograph titled *The Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, as a form of political protest, depicts Hitler, Hirohito, and Mussolini wreaking death and destruction. It was first shown in the "Artist for Victory" exhibition of 1943 held at Kennedy Gallery in New York City. This exhibition then traveled nationally to over twenty locations. In 1983 the "Artists for Victory" exhibition was reassembled at the Library of Congress.

Simon was commissioned to paint two murals measuring four by ten feet each for the Cook County Hospital which were displayed in the Men's and Women's Waiting Rooms. *Harvesting* is a preliminary proposal; a different version was selected. ²

Raphael Soyer (1899-1987) and Isaac Soyer (1907-1981)

Raphael Soyer focused his intense vision on New York, weaving the people and their city into works that are social chronicles of the times. His twin brother, Moses, and younger brother, Isaac, were also artists. Raphael and Moses attended the Cooper Union School in Manhattan from 1914 to 1917 and later the National Academy of Design. When Moses was awarded a travelling fellowship in 1926, his younger brother, Isaac took over his class at the Educational Alliance Art School on the lower East Side. Isaac married and went to Paris in 1928.

Raphael and Isaac worked in the Graphic Arts Division of the WPA Federal Art Project in the 1930s. In 1939 Raphael and Moses painted two murals for the Kingsessing, Pennsylvania, Postal Station. Raphael held several teaching posts and won numerous prestigious awards throughout his career. ¹



Raphael Soyer, *Working Girls Going Home*, 1937, lithograph, Wustum Museum

Santos Zingale (1908 -)

Zingale, a native of Milwaukee, studied at the Milwaukee State Teachers College under Elsa Ulbricht and Gustave Moeller. He received his graduate degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1944. In 1948, he was hired to teach at UW-Madison and he remained on the faculty for thirty years. He was a member of the Wisconsin Painters and Sculptors and his work was regularly seen in exhibits across the Midwest including the organization's annual shows from 1931 through 1943, winning awards in 1935 and 1937. Zingale created a number of public murals under the Federal Project, including the United States Post Office in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin; University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; and Mitchell Junior High School in Racine. ³

Sources:

1. Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*, New York: Abrams, 1972.
2. Jones, Steven. *Henry Simon: WPA Artist*, Exhibition brochure, College of Lake County, 1987.
3. Pepich, Bruce W. and Heft, Karen. *Wisconsin WPA Art in the Permanent Collection of the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts*, Racine: Wustum Museum Art Assoc., Inc., 1998.
4. Stone, Lee. Facsimile communication to Jane Ellefson, Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art, Grayslake, Illinois. 25 April 2001.



Henry Simon
The Visiting Nurse
1940, egg tempera
College of Lake County

WPA Art: Prints and Mural Studies Checklist

Works below are from the collections of Elgin Community College (ECC), The Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, WI (Wustum), the College of Lake County (CLC), and John Lumber (Lumber).

1. **Lilian Adelman** (n.d.), *I Like New York*, n.d., Lithograph; 17³/₈" x 13¹/₈", ECC
2. **Marie (Mietzi) Bleck** (1911-1949), *The Trapper*, 1937, Linocut; 14⁵/₈" x 12", Wustum
3. **Letterio Calapai** (1902-1993), *8:30 Express (Artist's proof) #5*, 1943, Wood engraving; 5¹/₈" x 8¹/₂", CLC
4. **Earl Daniell** (1903-), *White House No. 25*, n.d., Lithograph; 10¹/₄" x 12⁷/₈", ECC
5. **Harold Mallette Dean** (1907-1975), *Stream*, 1937, Wood engraving; 5¹/₂" x 4¹/₄", ECC
6. **William Leroy Flint** (1909-1991), *Mob*, n.d., Lithograph; 10" x 9³/₈", ECC
7. **Minnetta Good** (1895-1946), *The Ruin on the Dunes*, n.d., Color lithograph; 12¹/₈" x 9¹/₂", ECC
8. **Nils Gren** (1893-1940), *Silent Men*, 1936, Lithograph; 11⁷/₈" x 14", ECC
9. **Mabel Wellington Jack** (1899-1975), *Street Excavation*, n.d., Color lithograph; 11¹/₈" x 11¹/₈", ECC
10. **Abraham Jacobs** (1904-), *Aesthetics*, 1936, Wood engraving; 8³/₄" x 6", ECC
11. **Abraham Jacobs** (1904-), *Lillies of the Field*, n.d., Aquatint; 5¹/₂" x 8¹/₂", ECC
12. **Abraham Jacobs** (1904-), *Head*, n.d., Aquatint; 7" x 5", ECC
13. **Abraham Jacobs** (1904-), *The House on the Corner*, 1936, Wood engraving; 8³/₄" x 6", ECC
14. **Sheffield Harold Kagy** (1907-1989), *American Tragedy*, n.d., Woodcut; 13⁷/₈" x 9", ECC
15. **Paul Laessle*** (n.d.), *Night Goings On, 7/35*, n.d., Lithograph; 12³/₈" x 9³/₈", ECC
16. **Paul Laessle*** (n.d.), *South 9th*, n.d., Aquatint; 8¹/₈" x 11¹/₈", ECC
17. **Schomer Frank Lichtner** (1905-), *Husking Corn*, 1938, Lithograph, no. 5; 8¹/₂" x 12". Wustum
18. **Nancy (Nan) Oestreich Lurie** (1910-1985), *Park*, n.d., Lithograph; 9³/₈" x 8¹/₂", ECC
19. **Harry F. Mack** (1907-), *New Horizons*, 1937, Etching; 7" x 4⁷/₈", ECC
20. **Beatrice M. Mandelman** (1912-1998), *Breaker Entrance*, n.d., Color lithograph; 7³/₈" x 12", ECC
21. **Samuel L. Margolies** (1897-1974), *Beware of the Dog*, n.d., Etching; 6⁷/₈" x 9⁷/₈", ECC
22. **Samuel L. Margolies** (1897-1974), *Harlem Afternoon*, n.d., Etching; 11⁷/₈" x 8⁷/₈", ECC
23. **Max Mongel** (n.d.), *Cargo Boat*, n.d., Etching; 6⁷/₈" x 9⁷/₈", ECC
24. **Arthur Murphy** (1906-1991), *Steel Riggers #2*, 1936, Lithograph; 11⁷/₈" x 15³/₈", ECC
25. **Ann Nooney** (1900-1970), *Harlem River*, n.d., Lithograph; 12³/₄" x 11¹/₈", ECC
26. **Frank K. Ominsky** (1898-1981), *Bradshaw's Wrestlers*, n.d., Etching; 7⁷/₈" x 9⁷/₈", ECC
27. **Jack Oncharov*** (n.d.), *Miner, 8/30*, n.d., Lithograph; 13" x 8¹/₂", ECC
28. **Mildred Rackley** (1906-1992), *Refugee Woman*, 1939, Lithograph; 10¹/₄" x 8¹/₈", ECC
29. **Dorothy Rutka** (1907-1985), *Conference*, 1936, Aquatint; 8⁷/₈" x 7¹/₄", ECC
30. **Dorothy Rutka** (1907-1985), *Flood*, 1936, Aquatint; 7³/₈" x 9¹/₈", ECC
31. **Alfred A. Sessler** (1909-1963), *Pageant Prelude*, 1937-1938, Lithograph, 9/11; 8" x 5⁵/₈", Wustum
32. **Henry Simon** (1901-1995), *Dust Bowl Farm*, 1939, Gouache on illustration board; 14 ³/₄" x 21", Lumber
33. **Henry Simon** (1901-1995), *Harvesting*, c.1941, Gouache on illustration board; 9¹/₂" x 40¹/₄", CLC
34. **Henry Simon** (1901-1995), *Mark Twain and Bret Harte in San Francisco*, 1941, Egg tempera on panel; 6⁵/₈" x 20¹/₂", CLC
35. **Henry Simon** (1901-1995), *Over the Wilderness Road*, c.1940-1942, Gouache on illustration board; 13¹/₄" x 34⁷/₈", CLC
36. **Henry Simon** (1901-1995), *The Visiting Nurse*, 1940, Egg tempera on panel; 8⁵/₈" x 23¹/₂", CLC
37. **Henry Simon** (1901-1995), *St. Horatio Alger Jr.*, 1941, Casein and oil on masonite panel; 23¹/₂" x 19¹/₂", CLC
38. **Henry Simon** (1901-1995), *The Three Horsemen*, c.1937, Lithograph; 8³/₄" x 13", CLC
39. **Isaac Soyer** (1907-1981), *Laundress*, c.1937, Lithograph; 12" x 14", Wustum
40. **Raphael Soyer** (1899-1987), *Working Girls Going Home*, 1937, Lithograph; 11¹/₄" x 9³/₈", Wustum
41. **Santos Zingale** (1908-), *Junk Man*, 1938, Lithograph, no. 2; 8" x 9⁷/₈", Wustum

* information uncertain

This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of Henry Simon.

The Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art thanks:

- The Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, Wisconsin; Elgin Community College; and John Lumber for artwork loaned for this exhibition.
- Lee Stone of M. Lee Stone Fine Prints, Inc., San Jose, California, for his kind assistance in providing biographical information, dates, and title confirmation for several works in this exhibition.



This program is partially sponsored by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council



★ FEDERAL ART PROJECT NO. 1 ★

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The Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art
May 18 - June 29, 2001

Reception:

Tuesday, June 5, 11:30 am-1:30 pm

Gallery summer hours:

May 18-June 1
Mon-Fri 8:00 am - 4:30 pm
June 4-29
Mon-Thu 8:00 am-9:00 pm
Fri 8:00 am-4:30 pm

For information: 847-543-2240
Email sjones@clc.cc.il.us



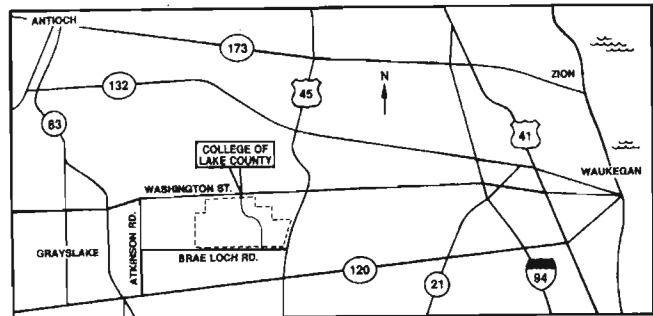
This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. The Community Gallery of Art is a project of the College of Lake County Foundation.

Obverse: Abraham Jacobs, *Lilies of the Field*, 1937, aquatint. Elgin Community College Collection

College of Lake County
19351 West Washington Street
Grayslake, IL 60030-1198

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Address correction requested.



The Gallery is located in the west wing of the main building.