Henry Simon: W.P.A. Artist

January 18 - February 8, 1987

Opening Reception: Friday, January 16 • 7:00 - 9:00 p.m.
Pianist Fred Simon will perform Jazz/Classical music.

Community Gallery of Art
College of Lake County
The W.P.A. and Art

When the Depression devastated the American economy during the 1930's, the Roosevelt administration instigated a governmental agency called the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.). Its purpose was to provide useful public work for needy unemployed persons. Artists, who usually live on the fringes of the economy in the most prosperous of times, were particularly hard hit by the Depression. In 1935 the Federal Art Project (F.A.P.) was started as a branch of the W.P.A.

The Federal Art Project 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. Often these artists created murals for public buildings such as post offices, schools, libraries and government bureaus.

The W.P.A. muralists were influenced by fresco painters of the Italian Renaissance as well as contemporary Mexican muralists. The aesthetic convictions of the 1930's are reflected in the W.P.A. art. Midwest Regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood as well as "social realists" like Ben Shahn greatly affected the W.P.A. artists' content and style. American themes underscored these works and were understood by much of the American public.

World War II put the American people back to work and brought the W.P.A. to a close in 1943. However, by radically altering the relationship of the artist to society, the W.P.A. period is a unique but crucial chapter in American art.

Sources:

Acknowledgements:
Our special thanks to the following for their participation in this exhibit: Henry and Eve Simon, Norbert and Shirley Simon, Harold Sudman, Jerry Hausman, Carol Jones and William Wells High School.
Henry Simon: W.P.A. Artist

Chicagoan, Henry Simon, a painter, printmaker, muralist, photographer and designer of electric signs, has been a prolific artist over his long career and continues to be even in his mid-eighties. This exhibition focuses on the work produced by Simon from the year 1936 through 1942. During these years, Simon was employed by the Works Progress Administration through its Illinois Federal Art Project.

Most of the paintings and drawings on exhibit are preparatory works for the Federal Art Project's national and regional mural competitions or for Simon's mural commissions. The subject matter in these series of works depicts aspects of American history, industry, agriculture, and the perceived need for Social Security. These themes reflect the main concern of the W.P.A. muralist, to create an essentially American image which was comprehensible to the general public.

Much of the art created under the W.P.A. auspices has been either lost, destroyed or forgotten. Simon himself had not seen many of his own works for over 40 years. These pictures, like the era in which they were created, can never be repeated. The works in this exhibit have suffered some of the ravages of time having been shelved for years in the corner of a basement. Most of the paintings and drawings on display are being shown publicly for the first time. The purpose of this exhibit has been to preserve and expose these historical works, and in doing so, throw light on a relatively recent but fading period of American art history.
The W.P.A.'s Federal Art Project (F.A.P.) provided Henry Simon with a small monthly stipend, yet it afforded him the luxury of time. Not since he had been a student at the Art Institute of Chicago in the early twenties had he had the opportunity to concentrate solely on his art. He was able to continue to refine his skills as an easel painter and lithographer, and to develop new skills as a muralist.

Simon's murals were first conceived and then resolved in a fully rendered pencil drawing. He would next transfer the imagery to a gesso coated masonite panel to be painted in egg tempera. (egg tempera consists of mixing dry pigment with the yolk of an egg). This Renaissance painting technique was very popular with W.P.A. artists.

Simon's submission to the Social Security Building competition in Washington D.C. presented situations in American life that were expected eventually to be covered by Social Security. His panels portray retired workers, medical care for the urban and rural poor, and homeless natural disaster victims. This series is a portrait of the people most affected by the Depression.

Artists Ben Shahn and Philip Guston were awarded the murals in the Social Security Building. Simon won an honorable mention for his submission which in turn led to a commission to do a mural for the post office of DeQueen, Arkansas.
The awarded mural was for the post office in Osbourne, Ohio. He chose to illustrate the Wright Brothers designing the first airplane. Simon's preparatory work for this 5 by 12 foot mural included the pencil drawing in this exhibit and a color version of it. This color piece was selected by the F.A.P. to hang in the east wing of the White House. Unfortunately, at about the same time, Congress scrapped the F.A.P. for the war effort and the painted version was never returned.
Simon also contributed work to the national mural competition for the San Francisco Rincon Annex Post Office. His entry depicted a continuous pictorial history of California. These panels portray scenes from the Spanish conquistadors to the gold rush and Civil War. Once again Simon received an honorable mention which led to another post office commission.

The Gold Rush: 1941. Egg Tempera
In 1941 the Maritime National Competition awarded Simon a mural project for the U.S.S. Hayes, a liberty ship used to carry supplies to the allies. That same year he also secured a commission to paint two murals for the waiting rooms of Cook County Hospital in Chicago. This exhibit contains several versions and the full scale detail Simon submitted for review. The approved sketches, “Orange Harvesting,” and “Banana Harvesting,” were realized in egg tempera on large panels. These two murals have been missing from the hospital for a number of years.

Simon exhibited lithographs in two different exhibitions entitled “Artists for Victory,” held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1942, and at the Kennedy Gallery in New York in 1943. Forty years later this second exhibition was reassembled at the Library of Congress. Fifteen of Simon’s lithographs from his W.P.A. period are now in the collection of the Library of Congress.

It is said that art contributes to history by visually depicting the times in which it has been created. This is certainly true of the works in this exhibition. Henry Simon’s career as an artist reflects a segment of American history with its triumphs and tribulations. The several lost works of Simon reminds us of the value of preserving these works of art as a part of our historical and artistic heritage. His name may never rank among the giants of 20th century art but his is an example of a more common experience, possibly one which we can all relate to, and therefore understand in the context of our own endeavors.

Steven Jones, Curator
Community Gallery of Art

The Community Gallery of Art is a project of the College of Lake County Foundation.