NEW DEAL ART

PAINTINGS AND PRINTS 1933 - 1943

Community Gallery of Art
College of Lake County
November 18 - December 18, 1988
Little over half a century ago, 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 recent selling price of a Van Gogh painting, 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.

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 first of the New Deal art programs was the Public Works of Art (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.

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. Each state had its own central office and administration. The art work 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. Recently 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.

The sixty-one pieces assembled for this exhibit afford us a glimpse at the richness and diversity of the art produced for the New Deal projects. While not attempting to be comprehensive of the entire period, this exhibit includes examples of three of the four New Deal art projects.

The artists represented in this exhibit worked in Chicago, St. Louis, and New York. Their works vary greatly in both style and subject matter yet each piece displays an American perspective and reflects the era in which it was created. Three of these artists, Letterio Calapai, Martyl, and Henry Simon, live in the Chicago area and were very generous with their work and with their knowledge of the period. Aaron Bohrod is also well represented by works provided through Sazama/Brauer Gallery of Chicago.

Ivan Albright's Self Portrait was one of two paintings he finished while working on the PWAP in Illinois. It bears the official brass tag on its frame. Although Albright was only thirty-seven years old, he painted himself as if ravaged by time. He later requested that the painting be given to New Trier High School, his alma mater, in Winnetka, Illinois.

Artist George Biddle, a friend of Franklin Roosevelt, first proposed the idea of federal support for artists. He modeled his idea after the Mexican muralists of the 1920's. His print entitled Sand! depicts an arid region which suggests a Mexican influence.

Chicago born Aaron Bohrod was a proponent of portraying the American scene before his years connected to federal art projects (1933-
Both "L" Platform set in New York City and Train Station located in Evanston are examples of his exploration of the urban scene. The painting entitled Indiana Dunes is another example of his regionalist period. In 1940, Bohrod assisted in the supervision of artists in the easel painting division of the WPA/FAP in Illinois.

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. Four WPA/FAP file photographs are included in this exhibit to document this tour de force of Calapai’s.

Also on display is Calapai’s nine panel mural study entitled Evolving America. These sketches were made for “The Section’s” St. Louis Post Office competition. This series, with great insight, poetically juxtaposes images of the major ideas, forces and personalities which forged this nation. Calapai explains this work as “an interpretation of the growth of the New World, from its inception at the entrance of the European Man, through the chaotic present, to a hope for the future”.

Calapai’s forte is, however, printmaking, which he continues to do in his Glencoe, Illinois, studio. His wood engraving, Labor in a Diesel Plant, won an award in the 1943 “America in the War” competition.

Former St. Louis artist, Martyl, secured a mural commission with her 1940 study entitled La Guignolee. This sketch, for the post office in St. Genevieve, Missouri, depicts the town’s traditional French festivities for New Year’s Eve.

Martyl was one of seven artists to win a “Section” competition for the Recorder of Deeds Building in Washington, D.C. Eleanor Roosevelt was said to have originated the subject matter which was the Contribution of the Negro to American History. Martyl’s selected panel for the mural depicts Cyrus Tiffany saving the life of Commodore Perry in the Battle of Lake Erie.

Martyl also worked in St. Louis as a WPA/FAP supervisor for a division of artists doing easel paintings. Later, moving to the Chicago area, she instructed sailors enrolled in an arts and skills program. The 1943 piece Great Lakes Naval Base was part of a gouache painting demonstration.

Before joining the Illinois WPA/FAP, Edward Millman studied fresco painting with Diego Rivera in Mexico. Rivera’s influence is evident in the lithograph Flop House. This print was derived from Millman’s 1937 tempera painting by the same name.

Chicagoan Henry Simon worked from 1936 to 1942 on the Illinois WPA/FAP in the easel painting division. In 1937, Simon explored the medium of lithography and developed a series of prints on the Spanish Civil War. This theme was a “cause celebre” among artists of the late 1930’s. From Old Spain to After the Bombardment Simon’s prints chronicle the war. Many of these prints were reproduced in New Masses magazine. In Asturian Miners the subjects hurl home-made bombs at the federal troops. This print had the distinction of being part of the Artists for Victory exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Simon’s Demonstration is a sign of the times showing a clash between the unemployed and the police. Perhaps Simon’s most telling piece of the economic hard times and the WPA’s support for the artist is an untitled gouache depicting an anti-war scene painted on the back of a WPA/FAP poster.

This exhibit includes many other notable artists who worked on the New York WPA/FAP. Names like Mabel Dwight, Kyra Markham, Jack Markow, Leonard Pytlak, Harry Shokler, and Lynd Ward are well established. Dwight’s Backyard shows her artistic insights into the everyday genre; while Lynd Ward’s tiny Company Town monumentalizes his subject through his masterfully executed wood cut.

Perhaps there is renewed interest in the art of this period because stock market upheavals and drought stricken farmers no longer seem relegated to our nation’s past. Or perhaps its because true art is timeless and speaks to all generations.

Steven Jones, Gallery Curator
College of Lake County

References:
1. Ivan Albright (1897-1983)
   Self Portrait, 1934.
oil on canvas
Collection of New Trier Township High School, Winnetka, IL

2. F. Besedick
   Untitled
   etching
Collection of Teiko Jordan, Evanston, IL

3. George Biddle (1885-1973)
   Sandl, 1936
   lithograph
Collection of Philip & Suzanne Schiller, Highland Park, IL

4. Ida Binney
   Sunday's Best
   silkscreen
Collection of Victor & Janet Freise, Evanston, IL

5. Aaron Bohrod (b. 1907)
   Century of Progress, 1933
   gouache
   Courtesy of Sazama/Brauer Gallery Chicago, IL

6. Aaron Bohrod (b. 1907)
   Indiana Dunes, 1938
   oil on gesso panel
   Courtesy of Sazama/Brauer Gallery Chicago, IL

7. Aaron Bohrod (b. 1907)
   "L" Platform, 1934
   lithograph
   Courtesy of Sazama/Brauer Gallery Chicago, IL

8. Aaron Bohrod, (b. 1907)
   Street Corner, Circa 1934
   lithograph
   Courtesy of Sazama/Brauer Gallery Chicago, IL

9. Aaron Bohrod (b. 1907)
   Train Station, 1934
   lithograph
   Courtesy of Sazama/Brauer Gallery Chicago, IL
Letterio Calapai (b. 1902)
Evolving America, 1939-40
mural study: St. Louis Post Office
casein tempera on gesso panels
Assisted By Ethel Selnick

10. Panel 1 (tribal life of the North American Indian)
11. Panel 2 (entrance of the European man and his westward expansion)
12. Panel 3 (contrast of Indian and European traits)
13. Panel 4 (the development of agriculture and the steam boat)
14. Panel 5 (exploration of resources; industrialization and scientific research)
15. Panel 6 (development of means of communication and transportation)
16. Panel 7 (the influx of immigration from Europe: Walt Whitman)
17. Panel 8 (the chaos of the present day)
18. Panel 9 (future society built on enlightened principles)

Letterio Calapai (b. 1902)
Historical Development of Military Signal Communications
101st Signal Battalion Armory
Brooklyn, NY
WPA/FAP documentary photographs

19. Top: Calapai painting Civil War Panel
Bottom: “Master Artist” on scaffold

20. Top: company room with north wall mural
Bottom: World War I panel - east wall
21. Letterio Calapai (b. 1902)
   *8:30 Express*, 1943
   wood engraving

22. Letterio Calapai (b. 1902)
   *Labor in a Diesel Plant*, 1940
   wood engraving

23. Letterio Calapai (b. 1902)
   *Self Portrait*
   wood engraving

24. Isami Doi (1903-1965)
   Untitled
   lithograph
   Collection of Kent & Ann Ijichi, Chicago, IL

25. Mabel Dwight (1876-1955)
   *Backyard*
   lithograph
   Collection James & Kathleen Hardgrove, Evanston, IL

26. Mabel Dwight (1876-1955)
   *Arabian Horse*
   lithograph
   Collection of Teiko Jordan, Evanston, IL

27. Edgar Imler (b. 1896)
   *A Man Must Live*
   etching
   Collection of Teiko Jordan, Evanston, IL

28. Benjamin Kopeman (1897-1965)
   *The Lady and the Beggar*, 1941
   lithograph
   Collection of Teiko Jordan, Evanston, IL

29. Kyra Markham (1891-1967)
   *The FIt Yourself Shop*, 1935
   lithograph
   Collection of Philip & Suzanne Schiller, Highland Park, IL

30. Jack Markow (b. 1905)
   *Janet*, 1939
   lithograph
   Collection of Rebecca McClanahan, Wilmette, IL
Martyl (b.1918)
*Contribution of the Negro to American History*, 1942
tempera on gesso panels
Collection of The Dusable Museum
of African American History,
Chicago, IL

31. *Crispus Attucks - Revolutionary War*
(1st patriot killed in the Boston Massacre)

32. *Benjamin Bannocker*
(surveyed land to be known as District of Columbia)

33. *General Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans*
(blacks assisting in the defense)

34. *Col. Shaw at Fort Wagner*
(commanded black troops)

35. *Frederick A. Douglas: First Recorder of Deeds Appointed by Abraham Lincoln*

36. *Cyrus Tyfanny Saving the Life of Commodore Peary*
(Battle of Lake Erie)
selected for Recorder of Deeds Building mural in Washington, D.C.

37. *Matthew Henson*
(part of Peary Expedition to the North Pole)

38. Martyl (b.1918)
*First Day Of Spring*, 1940
oil & tempera on panel

39. Martyl (b.1918)
*Great Lakes Naval Base*, 1943-44
Gouache

40. Martyl (b.1918)
*La Guignolee*, 1940
mural study: St. Genevieve Post Office, MO
oil & tempera on panel
41. Martyl (b. 1918)
   *Stake Drivers*, circa 1940
   lithograph

42. Edward Millman (1907-1964)
   *Flop House*, circa 1937
   lithograph
   Collection of Garrett & Julie Holg
   Mundelein, IL

43. Augustus Peck (b. 1906)
   *Draped Head*
   lithograph
   Collection of Teiko Jordan
   Evanston, IL

44. Leonard Pytlak (b. 1910)
   *Fall Day*
   lithograph
   Collection of Teiko Jordan
   Evanston, IL

45. Mildred Rackley (b. 1906)
   *Barns*
   lithograph
   Collection of Teiko Jordan
   Evanston, IL

46. Harry Shokler (1896-1978)
   *Late Afternoon*
   etching
   Collection of Teiko Jordan
   Evanston, IL

Numbers 47-54 are a series on the Spanish Civil War

47. Henry Simon (b. 1901)
   *Old Spain*, 1937
   lithograph

48. Henry Simon (b. 1901)
   *Peoples Front*, 1937
   lithograph

49. Henry Simon (b. 1901)
   *Spanish Civil War Fighters*, 1937
   lithograph

50. Henry Simon (b. 1901)
   *Asturian Miners*, 1937
   lithograph

51. Henry Simon (b. 1901)
   *Women of Spain I*, 1937
   lithograph
52. **Henry Simon** (b. 1901)  
*Women of Spain I*, 1937  
lithograph

53. **Henry Simon** (b. 1901)  
*No Pasaran*, 1937  
lithograph

54. **Henry Simon** (b. 1901)  
*After the Bombardment*, 1937  
lithograph

55. **Henry Simon** (b. 1901)  
*Demonstration*, 1937  
lithograph

56. **Henry Simon** (b. 1901)  
*Homeless*, circa 1936  
lithograph

57. **Henry Simon** (b. 1901)  
*Saint Horatio Alger Jr.*, 1941  
lithograph

58. **Henry Simon** (b. 1901)  
Untitled  
gouache  
WPA/FAP poster on back

59. **Harry L. Taskey** (b. 1892)  
*The Canal*  
lithograph  
Collection of Teiko Jordan,  
Evanston, IL

60. **J.W. Taylor** (b. 1897)  
*Sawhill Creek*  
etching  
Collection of Teiko Jordan,  
Evanston, IL

61. **Lynd Ward** (1905-1985)  
*Company Town*, 1936  
wood engraving  
Collection of Philip & Suzanne Schiller,  
Highland Park, IL

62. **Paul Weller** (b. 1912)  
*Beans*  
Lithograph  
Collection of Philip & Suzanne Schiller,  
Highland Park, IL

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Cover: Beans, Paul Weller
Collection of Philip and Suzanne Schiller, Highland Park, IL