THE NEW DEAL FOR ARTISTS: THE BIRTH OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

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THE NEW DEAL FOR ARTISTS: THE BIRTH OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

A Thesis

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Abstract

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THE NEW DEAL FOR ARTISTS: THE BIRTH OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

by

Jennifer M. Boling

This paper examines how the United States Government program, New Deal for Artists (1931-1943), provided not only jobs to thousands of unemployed artists during the Depression Era, but more importantly how it afforded young artists—especially the future Abstract Expressionists—the opportunity to work as artists, thus preserving their skill-set and allowing them to experiment independently and to develop their individual, avant-garde art. The Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) advanced the careers of young artists and was an indispensable impetus behind the new American art style: Abstract Expressionism. Because extensive government patronage allowed so many young artists to experiment in the 1930s, The New Deal for Artists helped pave the way for New York to replace Paris as the center of the international art world after WWII.

Chapter 1 provides a brief history of the temporary art programs, as well as the art programs created under the WPA spanning from September 1931 to the creation of the Federal Art Project in 1935. Next, chapter 2 explores the Federal Art Project in more depth; specifically examining how the Project allowed young artists to experiment and create works for the WPA/FAP in a variety of styles including abstract art. Lastly, chapter 3 examines the formative years of Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and Arshile Gorky; specifically looking at the young artists’ lives and their works created on the Federal Art Project.

The WPA/FAP provided young American artists opportunities for growth and independent exploration. Furthermore, the WPA/FAP created a new audience for American Art through arts awareness and appreciation initiatives such as the development of community art centers and Arts Week. Lastly, the artist-government partnership of the WPA/FAP has led to the expanded government patronage that we see today on both the state and national levels.

_________________________, Sponsor
Dr. Elaine O’Brien
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

With the Stock Market crash on October 24, 1929, 15 million Americans or one-quarter of the labor force became unemployed. The country dramatically shifted from one of the most colorful and prosperous eras known as the Roaring Twenties enriched with cinema, jazz, sports, art deco, dance and fashion to a nation darkened by loss and struck with hunger. The Great Depression took a heavy toll on not only investment bankers, merchants, big businessmen, the working class, and patrons of the arts, but also on thousands of visual artists, writers, musicians and actors who were left out of work without hope of finding a job.

To bring economic relief to artists, the Federal Government sponsored the most comprehensive art program in US history: The Federal Art Project of the Work Progress Administration (WPA/FAP). Although the WPA/FAP was the largest and best known of the WPA programs, a number of Government sponsored art programs, spanning over different years with different goals, were developed in the 1930s to bring relief to the unemployed artists of the Depression Era. Because of these programs, visual artists were given the opportunity to work as professional artists, and as a result, tens of thousands of art works for the public were created.
In 2009, the United States economy is experiencing a recession leaving 10.2% of the nation’s population unemployed.\(^1\) Where does this leave the visual artist today and is it feasible for the government to re-launch a WPA program such as the *New New Deal* under President Barack Obama? In recent months, dialogues on this topic have popped up in internet blogs and in magazine and newspaper articles comparing President Barack Obama to Franklin D. Roosevelt. The idea of launching a second New Deal program in the 21st century that could provide artists the opportunity to preserve their artistic skill-sets by working as artists peaked my interest. The exploration and proposal of a new arts policy is out of scope for this thesis; however, in order to develop sound arts policy for the future, the past must be examined. Furthermore, most people would agree that the 1930s were a turning point in the government attitude towards patronage for the arts. Prior to the 1930s, the federal government primarily commissioned sculptures and murals for public buildings. Today, the government sponsors individual artists, art organizations, museums, schools and scholars through a variety of national and state art organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the California Council for the Arts.

In this paper, I will examine how the United States government program, *New Deal for Artists* (1931-1943), not only provided jobs to thousands of unemployed artists during the Depression Era, but more importantly how it afforded young artists—

especially the future Abstract Expressionists—the opportunity to work as artists, thus preserving their artistic skill-set and allowing them to experiment independently and to develop their individual, avant-garde art. The Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) advanced the careers of young artists and was an indispensable impetus behind the new American art style: Abstract Expressionism. Because extensive government patronage allowed so many young artists to experiment in the 1930s, the New Deal for Artists helped pave the way for New York to replace Paris as the center of the international art world after WWII.

Other vital factors that contributed to New York City becoming the center of the Art World after WWII which must be considered but are out of the scope of this paper are:

- The influx of European artists to New York City during WWII
- The influence of European Modern Art on New York artists; and the
- Opening of the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1929

In chapter 1, I provide a brief history of the temporary art programs, as well as the art programs created under the WPA spanning from September 1931 to the creation of the Federal Art Project (a.k.a “the Project”) in 1935. The early federal art programs’ objective was twofold: 1) bring economic relief to unemployed artists and 2) create public art works that promoted American values and a uniquely American national heritage. During the early years of the federal art programs, the style and subject matter were limited to scenes of American life that exemplified a shared American sentiment.

Next, in chapter 2, I explore the Federal Art Project; specifically examining the Program Director and American Folk Art Historian Holger Cahill’s (1867-1960) vision
for a new American art. Under this program, artists were viewed as professionals and contributing members of society. Unlike the earlier federal art programs, artists were encouraged to experiment in new styles of art. Most importantly, the future Abstract Expressionists were able to further develop their skills and signature styles, thus developing a new American art style. In her article, “Holger Cahill and American Art,” Wendy Jeffers contends: “Under Cahill’s sympathetic leadership, artists were free to develop and experiment with little or no restriction on content, a policy that ultimately contributed to the stylistic breakthrough of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s.”

Lastly, in chapter 3, I examine the formative years of Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and Arshile Gorky; specifically examining the young artists’ lives and their works created on the Federal Art Project. Additionally, the Project was a catalyst for a more cohesive New York community of artists: the future Abstract Expressionists would get together and talk about politics and art. Because of this new artistic milieu, a new American art style was born: Abstract Expressionism.

Moreover, during the FAP/WAP, the government not only employed thousands of visual artists, but it also employed art educators and art historians. Important by-products that developed out of the Project experience include the development of 103 community art centers across the nation, Arts Week and an increase in America’s

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awareness of and appreciation for the arts. The community art centers not only worked to bridge the arts with the community, but it also worked to help democratize art and culture, as well as integrate the artist with society. To increase arts awareness and persuade Americans to buy art, The WPA/FAP offered Arts Week to the American public. President Roosevelt suggested that local artists exhibit their art works for a week or two in public settings, such as a courthouse or schoolhouse, throughout the nation’s 3,000 rural areas whose audience consisted of one-third of the nation. Thus, the WPA/FAP worked as a vehicle to bring arts to all Americans.
Figure 1. Photograph of George Biddle at work on a panel of the U.S. Dept. of Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture sponsored mural titled Society Freed Through Justice, 1936, located on the fifth floor lobby of the Attorney General’s office in the Justice Department Building, Washington, D.C.
Chapter 2

FEDERAL RELIEF FOR ARTISTS

With millions of Americans out of work, how was FDR’s New Deal (1933-1945) going to bring relief to the visual artists? Prior to the Depression Era, private patrons and corporations primarily funded art patronage in the United States with marginal support from the government. Now that many of the philanthropists’ priorities shifted away from investment in theatre, opera, and art, and since government patronage for the arts was minimal prior to the 1930s, how was the government planning to aid artists in this time of need?

With the persuasion of George Biddle—artist and Harvard classmate of FDR—it became clear to Roosevelt that an art relief program was needed for artists. On May 9, 1933 George Biddle wrote to Roosevelt:

The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregon (President of Mexico, 1920-21) allowed Mexican artists to work at plumbers’ wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican Revolution.3 The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through, and they would be eager to express these ideas in a permanent art form...4

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3 The minister of Education and leading intellectual of Mexico’s revolutionary cultural renaissance, Jose Vasconcelos, utilized his position to start an educational and cultural policy for Mexico, thus setting into motion a wave of intellectual and artistic creativity that gave Mexico a cultural prominence in the twentieth century. Desmond Rochfort, Mexican Muralists (New York, New York: Universe Publishing, 1993), 45.

To bring economic relief to thousands of unemployed artists, four main art programs were created under the Works Progress Act (WPA): Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), December 1933 to June 1934; the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (Section), July 1934 to June 1943; the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) July 1935 to June 1939; and the Federal Art Project (FAP), August 1935 to April 1943.

Prior to the WPA art programs, however, temporary art programs were established to bring relief to artists mainly in New York City where the largest population of the nation’s artists resided. The first of these temporary art programs was the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA), which was directed by Harry Hopkins and began in September 1931 and ran through 1935 until it was folded into the WPA/FAP in 1935. TERA received funds from the State of New York, and it started receiving federal funds in 1933. TERA also funded a second relief program in New York City, the Emergency Work Bureau (ERB). Furthermore, the College Art Association (CAA)—founded in 1911 as a professional organization of artists, art historians, curators, etc.—petitioned the ERB to create a program designed to help the unemployed artist. This limited relief program for artists—headed by Audrey McMahon and Frances Pollock—funded artists directly. Over the span of TERA, ERB employed 100 New York City artists. ERB and the CAA, however, failed to meet the demand for artists in need of relief. Forbes Watson, administrator of Edward Bruce’s PWAP, stated: “Over 1,400

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artists in New York City, carefully classified by the College Art Association, who were in need, are not on relief.”

To provide relief to more artists and to artists outside of New York City, the WPA Federal Art Program was developed. The main purpose of the Federal Art Program was to provide work for artists. As mentioned on the previous page, the first of the federal Art programs was the PWAP in 1933. Headed by Edward Bruce, the PWAP employed 3,749 artists nationally and more than 1500 art works were produced. Bruce not only wanted to provide work for artists, but he also wanted to create a public works program where artists would work to beautify public buildings throughout the United States. Francis O’Conner states: “The primary aim of the PWAP was to furnish work for unemployed artists in the decoration of non-federal public buildings and parks.”

Even though the PWAP only lasted six months, it was the first art program in the United States to operate on both a national as well as a local level and became a model for subsequent federal art programs. According to art historian Marlene Park, the “PWAP’s employment of artists would produce a new ‘social relationship’ with the

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world and a ‘broader and stronger’ art would grow out of this ‘understanding and sagacious attitude of the New Deal in art.’”

Unlike the earlier temporary art relief programs, the PWAP had a dual standard: the artist had to be in need and the artist had to be competent as an artist. Because of this dual standard, according to O’Connor, questions were raised regarding the program’s intentions, such as was it a relief program for artists or was it designed to acquire art for the government buildings? Furthermore, the PWAP’s administrators limited the subject matter to scenes of daily life in rural America or from local history. In a letter from Edward B. Brown, Assistant Technical Director of the PWAP, to Emmanuel M. Benson on May 23, 1934 he writes: “The one restriction, which I think was absolutely justified in view of the fact that the artists were working for the American government, was that they stress in as far as possible the American scene.”

Edward Bruce also headed the second federal art program, the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, which received commissions for murals and sculptures for post offices and federal buildings across the nation. The Section had five main objectives:

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1. To secure suitable art of the best quality for the embellishment of public buildings;
2. To carry out this work in such a way as will assist in stimulating, as far as practicable, development of art in this country and reward what is regarded as the outstanding talent which develops;
3. So far as consistent with a high standard of art, to employ local talent;
4. To endeavor to secure the cooperation of people throughout the country interested in the arts and whose judgment in connection with art has respect of the Section in selecting artists for the work to be done and criticism an advice as to their production;
5. In carrying out this work, to make every effort to afford an opportunity to all artists on the sole test of their qualifications as artists and, accordingly, to encourage competitions wherever practicable recognizing the fact, however, that certain artists in the country, because of their recognized talent, are entitled to receive work without competition.\textsuperscript{11}

Section sponsored around 1,116 murals and 300 sculptures in post offices and federal buildings. Similar to PWAP, artists were kept under a close eye and each stage of the creative process was evaluated: preliminary designs, full-scale cartoons or models, mid-way through final execution and upon execution. Close supervision of the artist’s work helped in monitoring the content of the work, ensuring that nothing too radical was chosen that could be embarrassing to the New Deal.

Additionally, under Section, Bruce planned public exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington and the Whitney Museum in New York as a showing or progress report of his accomplishments. In the United States, this was the first art program to feature painting, sculpture, and architecture. After viewing the exhibition,

\textsuperscript{11} O’Connor, “The New Deal Art Projects in New York,” 59. Quoted from the \textit{Bulletin No. 1, Section of Painting and Sculpture, Public Works Branch, Procurement Division, Treasury Department, Washington, D.C., March 1, 1935, 3:4.}
From the first exhibition of the Public Works of Art Projects, I have followed the work of the Treasury Department Art Projects under the direction of Mr. Edward Bruce with enthusiastic interest and have noted the evidence in our public buildings of the fine contributions to our national culture which have been made by the artists of the country.\textsuperscript{12}

The third federal art program, TRAP, operated under the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and was funded under the WPA. Under TRAP, 89 murals, 65 sculptures and around 10,000 other works, mainly easel paintings and watercolors were produced. Unlike Section, TRAP operated under WPA employment regulations. This meant that 90 percent of the artists were hired from relief rolls and were paid $69 to $103 a month for 96 hours of work. A 24 hour work week allowed artists leisure time for their own creative efforts. TRAP provided high quality art works, mainly for post offices and federal buildings.

The first three federal art programs: PWAP, Section, and TRAP not only provided relief for the unemployed artists, but they worked to democratize and nationalize art and culture. Politically, the New Deal was a way to satisfy the needs of multiple interest groups. In the article, “New Deal for Public Art,” Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz contend that the nationalist reformers saw the state and local governments’ inability to cope with the Depression as an opportunity to expand the power of the national government, thus unite the country around a social ideal. Businessmen saw the New Deal as a way to save capitalism by stimulating the economy and many social

reformers worked with the government to ensure a standard of living. Mainly “many socialists and communists supported major parts of the New Deal because they felt it was moving society away from an individualistic ethic toward a more socially conscious one that would lead to a collectivist future.”

Roosevelt, however, sought a way to balance left-wing collectivism and right-wing individualism.

To achieve this balance, the government utilized art as a vehicle to promote a national heritage that was uniquely American. Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz write: “The fine arts went hand in hand with a strong economy, the two together creating a distinctly American culture. Art, it was thought, might actually help the people to weather the Depression by giving them meaningful and hopeful communal (and government) symbols.”

Federal art program administrators encouraged art that related to society and a shared American sentiment. For example, in Spring Plowing, 1934 (Figure 2), Helen Dickson depicts the New Deal hope of a more abundant life and in Midwest from America Today, 1930 (Figure 3) Thomas Hart Benton, a leading American Regionalist painter, portrays the lives and history of ordinary Southern folks. American Regionalism a.k.a. American Scene Painting (1920s-50s), celebrates small town America conveying a

Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster, Critical Issues in Public Art (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1992), 129.

Seine and Webster, 131.
sense of nationalism and romanticism in everyday American life. Other prominent Regionalist artists included Grant Wood and John Stewart Curry. American Regionalism was, for the most part, conservative and was designed to appeal to the popular sensibility.

The early federal art relief programs highly encouraged the artists to paint in the American Regionalist style that portrayed an enriched American life while dissuading Social Realism and other styles of European Modernism. Was the Government, therefore, using the early federal art programs—PWAP, Section, and TRAP—as right-wing propaganda to reach mainstream America or was it Roosevelt’s vision to use the early federal art program as an opportunity to promote the arts, thus making the artist a recognized member of American society? Furthermore, if right-wing and left-wing politics were radically at odds with each other during the Depression Era, how could Roosevelt appease both sides? Lastly, if the early federal art programs prohibited modern European styles and radical theme of social protest, where did this leave the American abstract artists, such as the young future Abstract Expressionists?
Figure 2. Helen Dickson, *Spring Plowing* (1936)
Figure 3. Thomas Hart Benton, *Midwest* from *America Today* (1930)
Chapter 3
THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT

“I also have to say—it has been on my mind—that I feel the work produced on these Federal Art Projects was very influential on what happened in American art in the late ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. American artists came into their own.”

The largest and most comprehensive of the Works Progress Act programs was the Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP); (also known as the Project). The WPA/FAP operated from October 14, 1935 until it was liquidated in June of 1943. It had four main cultural programs—Art, Music, Theatre and Writing—which together comprised the “Federal One.” For the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on the Fine Art Division. Over the entire span of the Project, with an estimated cost of 35 million dollars, the WPA/FAP employed over 5,000 artists nationally and produced 2,566 murals, 17,744 sculptures, 108,099 paintings (including watercolors), 250,000 prints that included 11,285 images, and 23,000 Index of American Design plates. In addition to producing art works, the WPA/FAP supported the development of community art centers, art lessons, exhibitions, tours and lectures, framing, building dioramas, and map making.

Holger Cahill (1867-1960), an established writer and critic of American Folk Art, headed the WPA/FAP. When Cahill was offered the job as director, he was reluctant to

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take the job. Cahill’s friends—Francis Henry Taylor and Stuart Davis—persuaded him to take it. In a letter to Cahill, Taylor states:

It’s the worst job in the world. It’ll be terrible, with a dead cat coming your way every few minutes and you’ll be lucky if you dodge any of them. You’ll have to say no to so many people that you’ll never have another friend as long as you live…Congressmen will have you up on the carpet every other minute…but of course you’ve got to take the job!...An invitation from the Government to a job like this is tantamount to an order.\(^\text{17}\)

Directing the first federal art program on a national level was a tall order! Was Cahill the most qualified person for the job? Moreover, was he ready to take on this massive art program? In her article “Holger Cahill and American Art,” Wendy Jeffers’ asserts “In many ways he [Cahill] was uniquely qualified to administer a relief program for artists—his impoverished beginnings made him sensitive to the plight of the starving artists, his scholarship and museum work equipped him with a perceptive eye and a standard of excellence, and his friendships with the American modernists ensured freedom of expression.”\(^\text{18}\) Cahill’s plan for the WPA/FAP, as outlined in the operating manual, was as follows:

The plan of the Federal Art Project provides for employment of artists in varied enterprises. Through employment of creative artists, it is hoped to secure for the public outstanding examples of contemporary American art; through art teaching and recreational art activities to create a broader national art consciousness and work out constructive ways of using leisure time; through services in applied art to aid various campaigns of social value; and through research projects to clarify the native background in the arts. The aim of this project will be to work toward

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\(^\text{17}\) Francis Henry Taylor quoted in Wendy Jeffers, 8:9.

\(^\text{18}\) Wendy Jeffers, 9.
an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community, and an integration of the fine arts and practical arts.\textsuperscript{19}

The development of the WPA/FAP benefited the artist and the community on several levels. Not only was the WPA/FAP designed to shape the role of the artist in society, and bring the visual arts to all communities throughout the United States, but it also worked to develop a unique American culture.

Prior to the New Deal Art programs, the artist was seen as an isolated individual, separated from the rest of society. Program officials saw the Project as a way to integrate the artist with society, thus giving the artist a sense of professionalism and usefulness. Audrey Mahonan, a regional director of the WPA/FAP, states “this new role had given the artist ‘a new dignity,’ which came from an assurance of the artist’s ‘place in the social structure’ and from an ‘audience for his work’…From the obscurity of his own individualism the artist has emerged to see himself as a worker and to recognize his identity in the light of a worker producing art for the American people.”\textsuperscript{20}

The WPA/FAP worked to subsidize the artist through the direct commission of art works via the Fine Arts Division. Artists created easel paintings, murals and sculptures that decorated the post offices, schools, libraries, and other public buildings. Over the course of the WPA/FAP 108,099 easel paintings, 2,566 murals, and 17,744 sculptures were created that ranged from the styles of Regionalism and Social Realism to

\textsuperscript{19} Quoted from the Federal Art Manual, Works Progress Administration, October, 1935, p. 1 from O’Connor, Art Project in New York, 63.

\textsuperscript{20} Audrey McMahon quoted in Park, New Deal for Art, 8.
Surrealism and Abstraction. Unlike the PWAP that limited the subject matter to the American scene, there were no restrictions on style or content. Cahill was more focused on developing a creative art program that was much larger in scope and encouraged the American artist to freely experiment with new ideas and new styles. In 1934, in “Art in America in Modern Times,” Cahill wrote, “A sympathetic and discriminating public is a necessary element in the development of national art. It alone can create an environment in which the artist can function freely and fully...American art is declaring a moratorium on its debts to Europe, and returning to cultivate its own garden.”

Cahill believed strongly in the development of a government patronage program for the arts that worked in creating a unique American art style or American Renaissance that embodied America’s heritage and history. Cahill had three main goals for the WPA/FAP: “1) to conserve the talents and skills of thousands of artists who, through no fault of their own, found themselves on the relief rolls, 2) to encourage young artists of definite ability; and 3) to integrate the arts, in general, with the daily life of the community.”

As part of the Fine Art Division, the WPA/FAP supported artists in the production of easel paintings. At first, the Easel Division was small and was derived from the PWAP and Section where artists were hired to paint pictures for public buildings such as hospitals and schools. Representatives of the WPA/FAP—Audrey McMahon and Henry

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21 Holger Cahill as quoted in Wendy Jeffers, 9.
22 Contreras, 161.
Knight—convinced officials in Washington that the expansion of the Easel Division was needed. Artists were required to submit a painting to the government in four to eight weeks depending on the size of the canvas. For example, artists were given four weeks to complete a 16” by 20” canvas, eight weeks for a 24” by 36” canvas, and three weeks for a watercolor. Artists under the WPA/FAP were allowed, even encouraged, to experiment with a variety of styles such as Regionalism, Social Realism, Surrealism, and Abstraction. The expansion of permitted art styles really helped to open the door for young artists who were still in the stages of developing their own style. Because of the enlarged Easel Division under the WPA/FAP, several WPA Federal Art Galleries were opened displaying the artworks of young and unknown artists to the public. Joseph Solman recalls this moment with his colleague Mark Rothko:

I can’t help recalling one exhibit where Rothko and I were invited as two of the participating artists. Max Weber, once Rothko’s teacher, was one of the distinguished guests. So he called his former teacher over to show his painting of a ghostly quartet engaged in playing chamber music. Weber eyed it indulgently and yet a mite critically; then, flickering some ashes from his lit cigarette into the palm of his hand, went over and rubbed them over the face of one of the players, saying “this spot should be toned down a little.” For the moment Weber was back in the classroom. Rothko and I chuckled long after the master left. At many of these exhibitions work which was not too popular or allocable [sic] but contained originality and some creative spark, according to the administrative jury, was shown.23

The more traditional easel painting themes: landscapes, street scenes, and still life were allocated to the public institutions over the more experimental works of art. What is

23 Joseph Solman quoted in O’Connor, New Deal Art Projects, 118.
important, though, is that the WPA/FAP not only gave artists work and a paycheck, but it allowed them to continue working as artists and to develop their artistic skill-sets.

Besides the Easel Division, the Mural Division of the WPA/FAP worked toward reaching the public by representing the people’s art. This viewpoint is clearly expressed in a brochure printed in 1937: “These murals belong to the community. They are your bequest to the future; a vital, integrated expression of today, giving a permanence to our own time.” Not only was mural painting influenced by the Mexican mural Renaissance of the 1920s, but artists also drew from the styles of the Italian Renaissance murals.

Artists who mainly created easel paintings were now given the opportunity to work on a much larger scale.

Similar to Section, a committee had to review and approve the subject matter and style of a mural before execution. However, unlike Section, an artist was free to experiment with theme, form, style, and content outside of the American Regionalist style. Therefore, according to Francis V. O’Connor, the “murals created under the WPA/FAP are far more interesting and innovative as art than those created by the Section.” In addition to choosing the style of the mural, both artists and WPA/FAP

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25 Many of the murals painted in the Mural Division were not true fresco—the application of water-based paint on wet plaster—but were oil on canvas that was affixed to a wall.

26 O’Connor, Federal Support for the Visual Arts, 27.
administrators expected the murals to not only stay as a permanent part of a building, but to also work in educating the public. Stuyvesant Van Veen describes public murals as the “liaison between the structure and the people who utilize it.” Not only were the artists challenged in painting on a large scale, but they also had to depict a scene that was fitting to its location. A variety of themes were painted ranging from the American scene, American history, local history, American heroes, historic figures, as well as scenes of world history.

Lastly, the Fine Arts Division sponsored the Sculpture Division, which created nearly 18,000 works of art ranging from pedestal and architectural sculpture to small ceramic and paper mache figures for public libraries and schools to welded metal works for public buildings, parks, and housing developments. Like the painters working on the Easel and Mural Divisions, sculptors also utilized different styles ranging from the traditional to the experimental to relate their works to community life.

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To qualify for the Federal Art Project, the artist had to qualify for home relief and pass the means test or the so-called Pauper’s Oath. For example, in New York City, artists in the greatest needed were considered first. To qualify, a NYC artist would have to show proof that he/she had been a resident of New York state for at least two years and a resident of NYC for at least one year; dated, addressed documents such as bills, leases, voting records, and library cards had to be verified. In addition, the state demanded disclosures about relatives’ past and present employment, artist’s union membership,

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27 Stuyvesant Van Veen quoted in Park, 35.
lapsed and current insurance policies, past and present savings accounts, help from churches, friends, and other relief agencies, and debts. Joseph Wolins recalls: “It certainly takes away a little bit of the excitement and drama when you recognize that you were on welfare, then you applied for a job on the WPA.”

In addition to passing the Pauper’s Oath, artists were assigned one of four grades based on their ability, training, and experience. The four classifications were: A—professional and technical (artists who were experienced in their skill and who were capable of producing creative work of a high standard of excellence); B—skilled (able to produce work recognized of merit, but not of a quality equivalent of the above classification); C—intermediate (less than skilled and experienced artists and craftsmen who needed supervision and guidance); and D—unskilled (not employed as an artist but worked as gallery attendants, handymen, and office assistants). On average, most artists received around $23.86 a week or $1,240 a year. However, A grade artists made as much as $103 a week in the city and $39 in rural areas.

Even though the Pauper’s Oath, as well as other WPA/FAP guidelines and other restrictions, excluded artists who did not meet certain guidelines, the WAP/FAP provided the opportunity for lesser known and undiscovered artists to work as artists and better yet, to experiment! Cahill’s mission and vision were not about employing the very best artists

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28 Joseph Wallins quoted in Park, 15.
and producing commissioned works for the government; they were about providing relief for thousands of unemployed artists. Cahill, however, seized this opportunity as a way to not only give unemployed artists work so that they didn’t have to take up odd jobs to earn a living, but he also took full advantage by utilizing the WPA/FAP as a vehicle to bring arts to the community and to create a new American style of art. This was the first time in America’s history that the government had permitted artists to come together and work in partnership with each other and with the government. Unlike the earlier federal art programs where the artists worked for the government, the WPA/FAP was designed so the artists could work with the government.

Howard Zinn writes in *A People’s History of the United States*, “It was an exciting flowering of the arts for the people, such as had never happened before in American history, and which has not been duplicated since.” Those artists who did not participate on the Project because they were employed during the Depression Era felt left out. Barnett Newman, who worked as an art teacher, stated, “I paid a severe price for not being on the Project with the other guys; in their eyes I wasn’t a painter; I didn’t have the label.” The WPA/FAP gave young and unknown artists the opportunity to experiment in new art styles and subsequently, a new American art style emerged. The Project went beyond providing artists work during the Depression Era, it helped develop the New York School. Without extensive government patronage during the 1930s, the future

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30 Barnett Newman quoted in Jonathon Fineberg, 27.
Abstract Expressionists such as Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner, David Smith, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock would not have had the opportunity to work as artists and influence American art of the late ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. Riva Helfond, a WPA sponsored artist recollects:

They were paid for their work and, surprisingly enough for me, not only as an artist, but as something of a historian, it proved to be an impetus—I am sure the whole question of Abstract Expressionism all developed because of this momentum. The New York School and brave giants like Jackson Pollock, Rothko, and Franz Kline all came out of the Project. I can just visualize all of them sitting at an Artists’ Union meeting, all huddled up, resolving our social and economic problems. But that was one of the most important factors of the whole Project: direction, and person and emotional experiences with people I met and have loved all my life.”

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Figure 5. A photograph of Lee Krasner at the easel in Hans Hofmann’s Studio, New York, 1940.
Chapter 4

POLLOCK, KRASNER AND GORKY: A NEW AMERICAN ART STYLE IS BORN

The New Deal for Artists went beyond simply providing work for artists, it helped preserve their artistic skill set, even encouraging them to experiment and develop their own styles, and for the first time in the United States, an “artistic milieu” formed in New York City where artists could exchange ideas about art and politics.

The FAP/WAP was a meal ticket for many artists. For example, Jackson Pollock was almost completely dependent on the wages provided by the WPA/FAP. Jackson Pollock started his artistic career when he enrolled in the Arts Students League of New York in 1930 where he was a student of Thomas Hart Benton. Like Benton, Pollock painted in the Regionalist style depicting horses plowing fields, wheat threshers, and other agrarian subjects. Pollock admired the work of Benton and boasted that “Benton is beginning to be recognized as the most American painter today” and “he has lifted art from the stuffy studio into the world and happenings about him, which has a common meaning to the masses.”

The influence of Benton can be seen in Pollock’s early works such as Going West, 1934-35 (figure 6). In this scene, Pollock creates a dark, moonlight landscape where he depicts a man wearing a large brimmed hat driving a team of mules and two wagons along a road. Like Benton’s undated Moonlight Over South

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Beach, undated (figure 7), it shows a swirling landscape and glowing yellow moon. However, unlike Benton, Pollock removes the clear horizon line that divides Benton’s picture plane in half—sea and sky—and continues the swirl motif by blending the landscape and sky into a continuous flow. Even though Pollock is clearly painting in the style of Benton, he is beginning to experiment with his own style and techniques.

In October of 1934, Pollock’s brother Sande\textsuperscript{34} arrived in New York City to pursue a career as a painter. At this time, Pollock worked as a janitor and earned ten dollars a week. As a result, both Sande and Pollock were forced to depend on government hand-outs and got on the rolls of the New York Emergency Relief Administration, a state run welfare program. In February 1935, Pollock was moved from the Home Relief program to a Work Relief program where he was hired as a so-called stone carver. As a stone carver and shortly later when he was demoted to a stoner carver helper, his job was to go out with a crew of workers and clean the public monuments around the city. Deborah Solomon writes: “Jackson Pollock, who dreamed about painting frescos and exhibiting at the Feragil, spent his twenty-third year cleaning bird droppings from public statuary for sixty-five cents an hour.”\textsuperscript{35}

Politically at this time, the Artist’s Union magazine \textit{Art Front} was attacking the Regionalist style. Stuart Davis asserts, “Benton’s belligerent ‘nationalism’ was only one

\textsuperscript{34} Sanford or Sande Pollock actually changed his last name to McCoy, an ancestral name, after learning that only one member per household who shared the same last name could collect a WPA paycheck.

step removed from fascism.” Even though art critics came to Benton’s defense, the critics could not convince Benton to stay in New York and in the Spring of 1935, Benton and his wife Rita and son T.P. moved to Kansas City leaving a young, penniless, and depressed Pollock alone in New York City.

On August 1, 1935, Jackson and his brother Sande Pollock awoke to the news that “They’re hiring artists.” With paintings tucked under their arms, artists were dashing through the streets spreading the news door-to-door. May Tabak Rosenberg recalls: “They were shouting with excitement of children at a zoo” and she later wrote, “Hurry. Grab some paintings. Hurry! Grab anything you’ve got framed and come along. Hurry.”

When Pollock first joined the Project, he signed up for the Mural Division. However, he soon realized that he had no patience for teamwork and switched to the Easel Division a couple months later. Artists were required to check-in each day at eight A.M. Pollock had difficulty meeting this requirement. Jacob Kainen, a New York City artist, observed Pollock racing frantically toward the time clock seconds before the deadline, dressed in pajamas. In addition to meeting the time requirement, Pollock had trouble producing paintings in the Regionalist style and weeks would pass where he failed to check-in at the Project Office to either turn in paintings or pick up supplies.


37 Jacob Kainen quoted in Solomon, 80.
Burgoyne Diller, a Supervisor on the Project and former schoolmate of Pollock’s from the Art Students League, dropped by Pollock’s studio to check up on him. Holger Cahill recalls in a 1960 interview conducted by John Morse:

Jackson Pollock was a pupil of Thomas Benton, and he says that when he first came on the project, he was doing those brown soupy things of Benton’s, and that went on for some time. Oh, for more than a year or two, and then suddenly Jackson didn’t show up. And Diller, urged by Philip Guston, went down to see Jackson in his studio, and as Philip had said to him, he saw a lot of pieces and lot of throwing around of paint, as Guston said, and he said, ‘Why haven’t you shown up at the project? What’s wrong, what’s wrong?’ ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I can’t work for you anymore, you wouldn’t want these things anyway. Nobody wants these things of mine.’ Jackson was in a rather bad psychological state about the whole thing. And Diller said he picked out three or four things there, and he said, ‘Bring these to the project.’ And the supervisor of the project, as I said to you, was Lloyd Rollins, formerly director of the Dallas Museum. And he thought these were fine and accepted them. From that time on Jackson went on and developed his style and his great leap into the forefront of American painting didn’t take place until after the project was ended, which was in 1943.38

Not all of Pollock’s paintings were accepted by the Project, some were returned for rework and others were rejected altogether. What is important is that the Project allowed Pollock to develop and experiment his style and break free from Benton.

Jackson’s “action painting” style can be seen as early as 1936 when he and his brother Sande volunteered for David Alfaro Siqueiros. Sande admired the Mexican muralists and when Siqueiros opened up a workshop in Union Square, Sande suggested that he and Pollock volunteer. Siqueiros believed that you could not paint revolutionary pictures with old techniques and that new techniques had to be devised. He often started a canvas by placing it on the floor and then spattering paint

from a stick, as a way of generating images and getting ideas. Other times, he would work with an airbrush filled with Duco paint -- a commercial lacquer used to paint cars and large surfaces (his nickname was “II Duco”)." The main purpose of his workshops, however, was to produce posters, floats, and other props for various Communist organizations. Pollock assisted Siqueiros with odd jobs such as mixing paint, sawing wooden panels, pasting, plastering, and running errands. More importantly, however, is that Pollock was very interested in Siqueiros’ techniques and the influence that Siqueiros had on Pollock’s “action painting” technique, which became Pollock’s signature style. As B.H. Friedman states in Pollock: Energy Made Visible, “These new techniques, as well as the dream of making mural-sized paintings, would be repressed until Pollock needed them to express the subject matter he would some ten years later discover in himself.”

In July of 1937, the WPA/FAP was re-organized and a provision was added that if an artist was employed for more than 18 months, then he would be dismissed. Sande was dropped in August but Pollock managed to stay on until May 22, 1940. Sande wrote to their brother Charles Pollock (May-October 1940):

We on the project have been forced to sign an affidavit to the effect that we belonged to neither the Communist or Nazi parties. A wholly illegal procedure. And now I understand that the army is snooping around the Project finding out how the artists could fit into the ‘Defense program.’

Jack is still on the Project. It would be necessary for him to get on relief before he could get his job back. And the relief bureau is making it as miserable as possible.


40 Friedman, 38.
for single men. Trying such tricks as suggesting that the Army has openings for healthy young men… I would just as soon that Jack doesn’t get tangled up in the Relief mess and instead have a good healthy summer in the country. It makes anyone nervous to have to go through such a humiliating experience and Jack is especially sensitive to that sort of nasty business.41

Pollock was able to get back on the Project in October 1940. While working on the Project, Pollock was dropped for his continued absences due to his alcoholism and soon after was voluntarily admitted to Westchester Division of N.Y. Hospital where he stayed for six months to treat his alcoholism. It is also worth noting that, soon after his release, he re-entered psychiatric therapy under Dr. Joseph L. Henderson, a Jungian Psychologist. Pollock’s therapy would have a great impact on the subject matter of Pollock’s artworks over the next ten years.

In addition to being employed by the Federal Art Project, there were tangential events that occurred which helped influence the future Abstract Expressionists in the 1940s. For example, in November 1941, John Graham42 put together a show for the McMillen Gallery titled “American and French Painting” which included several unknown Abstract Expressionist artists at that time: Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and Willem de Kooning. At this show, Pollock was able to exhibit Birth, 1941 (figure 8)

41 Letter by Sande Pollock reprinted in Friedman, 45:46.

42 John Graham was also the author of System and Dialectics of Art (1937) which “justified abstraction as distilling the essence of reality and traced its roots in primitivism, the unconscious and the painter’s empathy with the brushstroke.” The younger American Abstract Expressionists were greatly influenced by this book and became “very conscious of their historical position and dictates.” David Anfam. "Abstract Expressionism." In Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T000252 (accessed November 24, 2009).
which embodies influences of Picasso as well as primitive art. According to B.H. Friedman in *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible*, “at this time Pollock had already moved further from Picasso than Graham himself, Krasner, or de Kooning." In the early 40s, Pollock was becoming more experimental with his work and characteristics of his signature style were starting to develop.

If Jackson Pollock was not given economic security during the Depression Era, would he still have been able to make a name for himself in the 1940s and 50s? The painter Louis Block states:

> The greatest advantage to the producing artists on the projects was the opportunity for continued work without any economic pressures. For those with more than average ability this opportunity was a choice avenue for growth and development. This is abundantly demonstrated in the subsequent careers of many project painters and sculptors.

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Lee Krasner started her work on the Project as a Mural Assistant where she met and befriended Harold Rosenberg and Mark Spivak and through her association, she became a “wholehearted leftist, even though she claimed never to have joined the

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43 Friedman, 53.


45 Krasner resented that fact that she had to carry out other people’s plans and wanted to create murals of her own. As a result, she changed her name to “Lee” from “Lenore” because she thought she would have a better chance of making her own murals if the government did not know that she was a woman. Also, she anglicized Krassner by dropping the second s. Robert Carleton Hobbs, *Modern Masters: Lee Krasner*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 19.
Communist Party.\textsuperscript{46} She participated in political rallies and was a leader of the Artists Union. During the Depression Era, many artists viewed capitalism as a failure and looked at socialism as a possible solution. The impact of her WPA and Artists Union involvement can be seen in \textit{Fourteenth Street, 1934} (Figure 9). In this painting, Krasner depicts a dark and isolated rooftop scene reminiscent of Edward Hopper’s bleak images of city life. The feelings of anxiety and alienation are reflected in not only Edward Hopper’s work of the 1930s, but also in many other artists’ works.

When de Kooning was removed from the WPA/FAP because he was not a natural born U.S. citizen, Krasner was asked to take over his project. De Kooning gave her a life-size sketch and would unofficially visit the studio to monitor her progress.\textsuperscript{47} This opportunity allowed Krasner to integrate her own ideas into de Kooning’s design and take on more of a leadership role. Furthermore, while working on the Project, Krasner befriended many artists and critics. Krasner not only learned a great deal from her fellow artists and art critics regarding art and politics, but she would also use them as contacts to introduce the New York art world to her future husband, Jackson Pollock.

In addition to being a member of the Artists Union, Krasner was also a member of the American Abstract Artists (AAA)\textsuperscript{48} and the American Artists’ Congress.\textsuperscript{49} During the

\textsuperscript{46} Hobbs, 17.

\textsuperscript{47} Unfortunately, the completed mural was lost, but it has been described as hard-edge, nonobjective, and reminiscent of art by French painter Fernand Leger, with whom Willem de Kooning had worked in 1935. Hobbs, 27.

\textsuperscript{48} The AAA met on a regular basis, published catalogs expressing their ideas on aesthetics, and held annual exhibitions. The main goal of the AAA was to transform New
1930s many young future Abstract Expressionists who worked on the Project, got together and discussed politics, exchanged ideas on art and politics, and rallied for artist’s rights. For example, artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, who were also members of the Artists Union and the American Artists’ Congress, formed groups such as The Ten which worked to bring abstract art to the mainstream through traveling exhibitions. Isabelle Dervau writes in “The Ten: An Avant-garde group in the 1930s:”

Most important in encouraging artists to band together was the formation of the Artists’ Union in February 1934. Created to improve the economic situation of artists, the Union held weekly meetings that were attended and played a vital role in the development of the WPA Federal Art Project launched in 1935…By relieving the artists of the need to take odd jobs, the WPA gave them more time, which they could use not only to paint and experiment, but also, as in the case of the Ten, to meet and organize exhibitions.50

For the first time in the United States, artists were brought together, not only on the Project but also through organizations such as the Artists Union, AAA, and the American Artists Congress. The Project also enabled artists to work as artists without having to take odd jobs. This enabled the future young Abstract Expressionists to


49 The American Artists’ Congress, founded in 1936, was formed in response to the call of the Popular Front and the American Communist party to defeat the spread of Fascism. The main concerns for the American Artists’ Congress were the economic distress of artists due to the Depression, as well as the fight against art censorship and the use of art as war propaganda. David Anfam, Oxford Art Online.

experiment in their art with little to no distraction. In addition to allowing artists to work as artists with little to no distraction, the Project gave them a social milieu and an artistic outlet to express their views, attitudes, and concerns regarding economic, social and political issues. Simultaneously, the Project provided *useful* work for artists and because artists were now becoming worthy and recognized members of mainstream America, their message, more powerful than ever, was reaching a larger public for the first time in the United States.

Furthermore, because of Krasner’s association with the AAA, as well as her work as an assistant on the mural project, Burgoyne Diller, in 1941, asked her to submit sketches for an abstract mural to be commissioned in New York City. On the Project, artists were doing avant-garde rather than socially relevant art such as Social Realism. Krasner was a key figure in this unique integration of Federal sponsored art and avant-garde values. In figure 10, *Mural Study for Studio A, Radio Station WNYC* (1941) one can see that Krasner was very much influenced by the abstract works of Picasso and by Mondrian’s Neo-Plastic compositions. At the time, Krasner worked on her design—as she did most often for her WPA assignments—at the Hofmann School and sometimes even in the studio of Hans Hofmann. In *Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonne*, Ellen G. Landau writes:

> She drew in front of a still life, set up on a long-legged table with a small surface. Analyzing and reducing the objects into interlocking planes tipped forward so that they parallel the picture plan, she created a series of decorative designs. In the final composition, some of the constituent elements are merely outlined; other
opaque shapes are juxtaposed against more transparent spaces to create a complex figuration of irregular, thrusting forms in precarious balance.\textsuperscript{51}

Diller states the importance of abstract murals as part of the WPA/FAP mural project:

Abstract murals...are particularly suited for use in a modern broadcasting studio, where everything must contribute to quiet and the uninterrupted function of the broadcast. The studio itself is a sound-proofed, air conditioned room which must permit concentration during the performance of a program. The abstract mural is the best answer to these requirements, since it does not serve to distract the observer, but rather exercises a soothing influence through the proper use of form and color.\textsuperscript{52}

In 1942, after the WPA/FAP ended, Krasner was employed as a supervisor of a new government propaganda program for the War Services Office.\textsuperscript{53} Krasner and other artists—including Jackson Pollock—made displays for department store windows in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin point out in \textit{Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years} that many of the abstract panels in several of the window displays are consistent with Krasner’s style of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{54} For example, in Cryptography, 1942 (Figure 11), Krasner mimics the Italian Propaganda works of World War I by the use of free-word verse that was used for the lettering in Cryptography. This use of lettering can be seen in the works of Futurist poet F.T. Marinetti. Furthermore, the

\textsuperscript{52} Burgoyne Diller quoted in Landau, 76.
\textsuperscript{53} In 1942, by order of President Roosevelt, the FAP/WPA program was converted to the War Services Project.
overlapping and irregular geometric background shapes are juxtaposed, thus creating a scene of dynamic tension. Abstract scribbles can be found on the right-hand side of the poster. The main content of the poster consists of a cutout of a carrier pigeon, a photograph of a man and woman at a decoding background, a soldier relaying a message over a field telephone, with other soldiers fighting, and a map of the defenses after the battle of Manila.

Krasner also took part in signing a letter to President Roosevelt in May 1942 in which she protested the deterioration of the WPA Easel Project in New York City. The Easel Project, in particular, allowed for more creative expression and freedom for abstract artists than any of the other WPA/FAP projects.

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In addition to Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, the WPA/FAP provided work for Arshile Gorky. As the 1930s progressed, the American art community—and the American public to some extent—started to become more familiar with and accepting of abstract art and thus more opportunities arose for abstract artists such as Arshile Gorky. Gorky joined the PWAP in 1933. Even though Gorky was not a natural born citizen, he was allowed to participate on the Project. Reasons are unknown why Gorky was allowed on the Project while Willem de Kooning was not. There is speculation that Gorky was allowed because he was in the process of becoming a citizen. He began the naturalization process and was granted citizenship on May 20, 1939.
In 1935, Gorky was put on the Mural Division of the WPA/FAP. His mural, *Aviations: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations*, 1936 (Figure 12) was originally designed for the Floyd Bennet Field in New York; however, it was later installed in the Newark Airport Administration Building in New Jersey.\(^5^5\) The final product was 10 large-scale panels that were mounted on the walls of the airport building and were collectively titled *Aviation*.\(^5^6\) In an essay from the 1930s, Gorky discussed the first panel of the series: *Activities on the Field*:

> I dissected an airplane into its constituent parts...to invent within a given wall space plastic symbols of aviation. These symbols are the permanent elements of the airplanes that will not change with the change of design. These symbols, these forms, I have used in paralyzing disproportions in order to impress upon the spectator the miraculous new vision of our time.\(^5^7\)

Regarding mural painting, Gorky goes on to write:

Mural painting does not serve only in decorative capacity, but an educational one as well. By education, I do not mean in a descriptive sense, portraying, cinema-like, the suffering or progress of humanity, but rather the plastic forms, attitudes, and methods that have become the heritage of the art of painting. Since many workers, schoolchildren, or patients in hospitals (as the case may be) have little or no opportunity to visit museums, mural painting would open up new vistas to their neglected knowledge of far-too-little-popularized art.\(^5^8\)


\(^5^6\) The murals were installed in 1937 but soon disappeared when the airport building was taken over for military operations during World War II. Two of the ten murals were salvaged in 1972 during an art historian’s search for the murals.

\(^5^7\) Francis O’ Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 73.

\(^5^8\) O’Connor, 73.
In Gorky’s case, the WPA/FAP allowed for three things: first, it provided work during economic hardship; secondly, it gave Gorky the opportunity to paint in the style of abstract art; and thirdly, it exposed abstract art to mainstream Americans.

Because of the WPA/FAP, young artists such as Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and Arshile Gorky were given the opportunity to preserve their skill sets and continue to experiment and develop their own signature styles. Out of the Project, a strong artistic community developed. In The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning, Dore Ashton states: “But the most compelling force that emerges is their sense of having found each other.” A very tight, close-knit community formed between the young future Abstract Expressionists that was very unique and special in American modern art history. For the first time, like-minded artists got together to talk. Artists met and exchanged ideas about art, philosophy and politics in cafes, artist studios, Union Square, and Artists Union and American Abstract Artists meetings. The WPA/FAP was a major catalyst for a more cohesive New York community or New York School; it provided growth and exploration for the young American artist. The Project really helped to pave the way for this new and unique American art style that was about to burst onto the American scene; it helped give rise to the birth of Abstract Expressionism.

59 Ashton, 44.
Figure 6. Jackson Pollock, *Going West* (1934-35)
Figure 7. Thomas Hart Benton, *Moonlight Over South Beach*, (undated)
Figure 8. Jackson Pollock, *Birth* (1941)
Figure 9. Lee Krasner, *Fourteenth Street* (1934)
Figure 10. Lee Krasner, *Mural Study for Studio A, Radio Station WNYC* (1941)
Figure 11. Lee Krasner, Cryptography (1942)
Figure 12. Arshile Gorky, Aviations: Evolution of Forms Under Aerodynamic Limitations (1936).
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The 1930s was a turning point in federal government patronage for the arts. The WPA/FAP was the most comprehensive government sponsored program to date. The WPA/FAP provided work for thousands of artists and it brought the arts to millions of Americans across the nation. Because of the WPA/FAP, artists were able to continue to work as artists and more importantly, it provided artistic growth and exploration to the young future Abstract Expressionists. Artists such as Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and Arshile Gorky were given the opportunity to continue working as artists and to experiment with their art and develop their signature styles. Unlike the earlier WPA art programs that restricted artists to work in the American Regionalist style, the WPA/FAP allowed artists to create abstract art. Moreover, the Project worked as a networking tool that allowed avant-garde artists to work together and share ideas about art and politics. The government’s support for artists to experiment in advanced styles acted as a catalyst for the development of the New York School and the emergence of Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s.

The Federal Art Project, however, went beyond providing work for artists; the project experience brought the arts to rural American communities through arts awareness and appreciation initiatives such as the development of community art centers and Arts Week. President Roosevelt and Holger Cahill had a vision to utilize the Federal Art Project as a way to integrate the arts with the daily life of the community.
Over the course of the WPA/FAP, 103 community art centers were in operation across the nation, mainly concentrated in rural communities. The community art centers worked to build cultural capital for those citizens who did not have the opportunity or means to visit a museum or attend art classes; the art centers were working towards creating a shared cultural advantage for all U.S. citizens no matter where they lived. According to WPA/FAP administrators, the Community Art Center Program was vital in arts awareness because they felt that industrialization had dwindled community life and that America’s greatest need was for “awakened social consciousness and a method of bridging the gap between doing and thinking, between theory and practice, in education and creative activity.” More importantly, however, the community art centers offered a way to continue educating and integrating the arts into public life even after the WPA/FAP ended.

The community art centers not only worked to bridge the arts with the community, but they worked to help democratize art and culture, as well as linking the artist with society. Cahill believed: “Because of the cooperation between the government, the artist, and the public we can today envisage an art for all the people.” The government worked to promote the arts through mass promotion that worked to create a

60 Hearings before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations, Appropriation for Work Relief and Relief, Fiscal Year 1940, 76 Cong. 1 Sess. (1939), 14 Quoted in O’Connor, 47.

61 Holger Cahill quoted in Park, 10.
new audience for American art. The community art centers made it possible “to achieve a vital synthesis of aesthetic values in ways that will reach millions in all sections of the country, instead of mere thousands in our ten or twelve largest cities…”62

The WPA/FAP also offered Arts Week to the American public. Beginning in 1940, with President Roosevelt as the honorary chair, Arts Week was devised as a way to persuade Americans to buy art: “a population of 130,000,000 spent less than $500,000 a year on contemporary art, and barely 150 American artists earned as much as $2,000 annually from the sale of their work.”63 To increase arts awareness and appreciation, Roosevelt suggested that local artists exhibit their art works for a week or two in a public setting, such as a courthouse or schoolhouse, throughout the nation’s 3,000 rural areas. Florence Kerr of the WPA’s Community Service Division, however, realized that the audience consisted of one third of the nation. She summarized the results as:

“art museum attendance, 20,000,000 a year; WPA art center attendance, some 3,660,000 a year; WPA Recreation Project and National Youth Administration and 4-H Club art programs, involving 500,000 a week; and the profitable publication of art books, 250 titles the previous year. Hundreds of coordinated sales exhibitions would ‘dramatize the fact that good work…appropriate for the home and for places of business and pleasure’ could be had ‘at a price within reach of the average consumer.’”64

The WPA/FAP left a lasting legacy with the thousands of sculptures and murals that decorate our local parks and public buildings. Furthermore, the WPA/FAP led to

62 Thomas Parker quoted in Park, 10.
64 Park, 121.
increased government patronage for the arts through the development of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), as well as the state and local art councils. Since 1965, the NEA has awarded more than 130,000 grants totaling more than $4 billion dollars.\(^\text{65}\)

The WPA/FAP proved to be a major turning point in government patronage for the arts in the United States. It benefited thousands of artists and affected millions of Americans during the Depression Era. With current climbing unemployment rates reaching as high as 12.2% in California and 15.1% in Michigan,\(^\text{66}\) could a \textit{New New Deal} for artists be on the horizon? Will President Obama look to the past, use elements of FDR’s WPA/FAP Program, and apply it to his Arts Policy? In 2009, would it be plausible and beneficial for the government to subsidize individual artists in the creation of art works for use in federal buildings and parks? In the age of global art, temporary museum spaces, and virtual art, the creativity and possibilities for novel art in the 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century are boundless. With a message of \textit{hope}, Obama’s art policy has the following goals:

- Reinvestment in Arts Education through the expansion of public/private partnerships between schools and art organizations, creating an Artists Corp, and publicly champion the importance of Arts Education
- Support Increased Funding for the NEA
- Promote Cultural Diplomacy
- Attract foreign talent
- Provide Health Care for artists; and

\(^{65}\) According to the National Endowment for the Arts fact sheet at http://www.nea.gov/about/Facts/AtAGlance.html

- Ensure tax fairness for artists.\textsuperscript{67}

The WPA/FAP was a very exciting time for the arts in America; it not only supported artists during a time of need, but it also fostered the arts and brought the arts and arts education to all Americans across the nation. Like FDR’s New Deal for artists, Obama’s Arts Policy recalls some aspects of government subsidization for the arts by encouraging artistic freedom and the utilization of artistic endeavor to bring arts appreciation to the community. Today, the U.S. economy is in the midst of a recession leaving 10.2% of the nation unemployed. Even though this recession is not nearly as severe as the Great Depression, the impacts of the recession, both financially and emotionally, are affecting the lives of millions of Americans including visual artists. We can only hope that Obama’s administration and future administrations will learn from the Federal Art Project and carry FDR’s and Cahill’s vision for arts policy into the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


