

## EXHIBIT REVIEW

A Common Canvas: Pennsylvania's New Deal Post Office Murals. The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg, PA, November 22, 2008–May 17, 2009. Curated by DAVID LEMBECK and CURTIS MINER.

IN THE DEPTHS OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION, the Roosevelt administration initiated an ambitious and unprecedented public art program, indicating a major shift in the U.S. government's traditional relationship to artists, art, and cultural production. Between 1933 and 1943, the federal government hired or commissioned over ten thousand artists to produce literally hundreds of thousands of paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, murals, posters, models, and stage sets—all manner of visual material—for the edification and education of the American public.

Roosevelt's "New Deal" encompassed several art initiatives. The largest and best known is the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project, which provided employment for artists already on government relief. A less well-known, but longer-lived, project was the Section of Fine Arts of the U.S. Treasury Department (known as "the Section"), which commissioned artwork for installation in new federal buildings. In the nine years of its existence, the Section awarded fourteen hundred commissions, many for the decoration of the eleven hundred new post offices that were being constructed in cities and towns—from the largest urban centers to the smallest and most remote hamlets—throughout the country.

The exhibition A Common Canvas: Pennsylvania's New Deal Post Office Murals opened in November 2008 to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the New Deal.<sup>1</sup> It celebrated an especially rich strand in the history of this "golden age" of public visual culture—the art created for post office buildings in the state of Pennsylvania, which, with eighty-

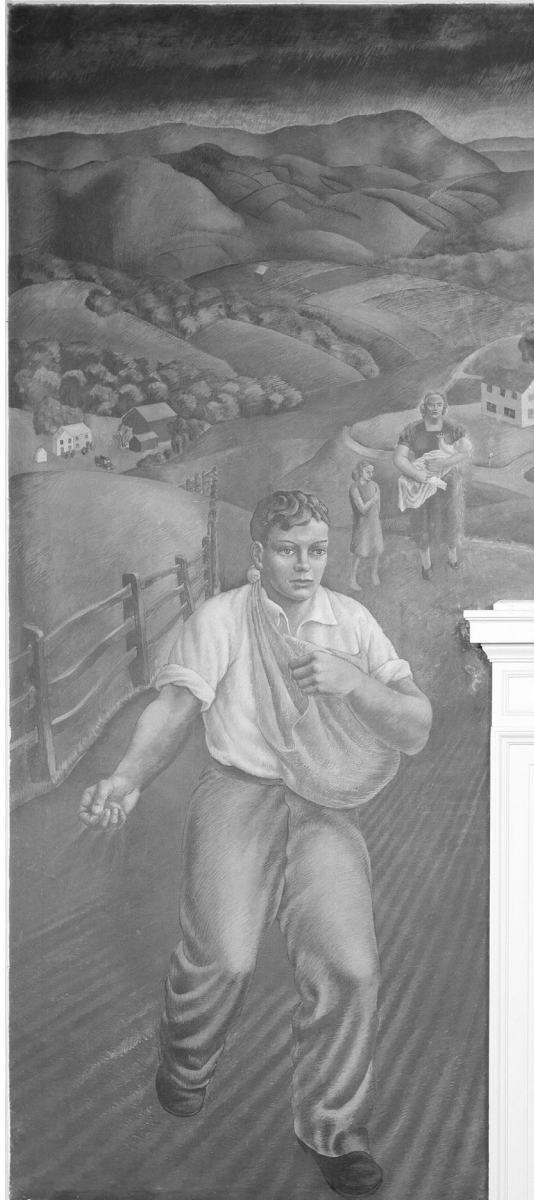
<sup>1</sup> The exhibit is intended to travel, though venues and dates have yet to be confirmed. Readers may consult the link <http://www.statemuseumpa.org/common-canvas.html> to learn more about the exhibit, including future travel dates. This site also contains a link to an interactive map that visitors can use to locate extant murals in Pennsylvania. Another link offers a video tour conducted by David Lembeck and Curtis Miner.

eight commissions, was second only to New York in the number and diversity of installations. Curated by independent scholar David Lembeck and the State Museum of Pennsylvania's senior curator, Curtis Miner, the exhibition is organized around Lembeck's voluminous research and documentation of Pennsylvania post office art; it is also made possible by Michael Mutmanský's beautiful large-scale color photographs of the extant murals, most of which are still in their original locations throughout the state. In addition to the photographs of murals, the exhibition includes sculptures and reliefs, artifacts, documents, models, and original works of art that offers a comprehensive portrait of the New Deal's groundbreaking, though never repeated, experiment in government patronage of the visual arts.

The exhibition features color images and original art from nearly half of the eighty-eight Treasury Department commissions awarded to Pennsylvania. To organize this large body of work, the curators have grouped the material according to five themes, or subjects, that captured both the diversity and specific character of social and cultural life in the state: Agriculture, Coal and Steel, History, Town and Country, and Industry. Given the unique and special status of family farming in the state's history, it was appropriate that the first major work that visitors encounter is George Rickey's brilliantly colored tempera scene of sowing and plowing for the Selinsgrove post office. Commissioned in 1938, the mural was designed to wrap around the top half of the postmaster's door, which is reproduced at actual scale in the show in order to give the viewer a feeling for how the work actually appeared in its original setting.

Wall text offers insight into the kind of collaboration fostered between an artist and the public, both in terms of the choice of subject matter and even in style. In the case of the Selinsgrove mural, we learn of Rickey's willingness to tighten his draftsmanship and revise his composition in order to ensure that the iconographic details were clear and convincing to the local residents. In an early sketch, he drew a plough turning a furrow to the right, and not to the left, which was the norm in the region. He changed it after the anomaly was pointed out, noting, "Details like that, though trivial from the point of view of composition, can rankle in the minds of those who have to look at the painting every day, and I thought I might as well get my facts straight."

Because it embodies the ideal of a close and reciprocal relationship between artist and audience, Rickey's Selinsgrove mural is an ideal start-



Detail of George Rickey's *Susquehanna Trail* (1939), Selinsgrove, PA, post office. Photograph by and courtesy of Michael Mutmanský.

ing point for the exhibition in that it is emblematic of both the artist's interest in accommodating local sensibilities and the accessible style and popular aesthetic that the Treasury murals, as well as other government-commissioned work of the period, encouraged. In most art history texts, and in the materials accompanying the exhibition, this style is associated with the "American Scene" painting of Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, and many of the murals are stylistically indebted to their work. However, the roots of the style used in New Deal commissions, and even the conception of a federally sponsored program of public mural art, may not be as "American" as it might seem.

Rickey, who was a European-trained artist, studied with the French painter André Lhote, a close colleague of Diego Rivera's in Paris in the late teens and early twenties—a period when both artists were breaking with the cubist movement and returning to the figure and representational styles. Following Lhote, Rivera, and other "defectors" from analytic and synthetic cubism, Rickey and the other New Deal muralists, many of whom had European art training, achieved a distinctly "modern" outcome by working in a representational, but not "realist," mode. The simplification of forms and anatomy, all-over composition, exuberant colors, planar flattening of perspective, and the manipulation of scale to serve symbolic or narrative ends are all hallmarks of postimpressionist and early cubist painting. Yet, the artists adapted these techniques to the iconographic demands of the "American Scene" and the local citizens' preference for recognizable subjects that reflected their everyday existence.

This careful attention to local sensibilities and historical or geographic detail is characteristic of all the murals, and the exhibition serves as a reminder of the important role that Pennsylvania's cities and towns played in the history and economic development of the United States. Altoona, founded in the 1850s, was the site of the first railroad shops in the United States. Lorin Thompson's *Growth of the Road*, painted for the Altoona post office in 1938, provides a montage of the transportation history of the state, from the Conestoga wagon, to the network of canals, to the advent of the rail system that displaced them both after the Civil War. Farther to the north in Renovo, Harold Lehman took a completely contemporary and documentary approach to representing the town's reemergence as an important site of railroad repair work during World War II. Carefully rendered details, such as a portrait of the actual foreman holding a widely recognized wartime production poster and union buttons on

the workers' caps, help to contextualize the image. Furthermore, the curators provide material from the artist's family that reveal how Thompson used a sketch from the foreman—whose photograph is included with the archival material—to ensure that he depicted the union buttons accurately. Normally, a reference to labor unions would have been a breach of Section policy, but in the small color study submitted for approval, the buttons appear to be mere flecks of paint and were overlooked.



Detail of Harold Lehman's *Locomotive Repair Operation* (1943), Renovo, PA, post office. Photograph by and courtesy of Michael Mutmanský.

The Renovo mural provides an example of how artists managed to work around and subvert the Treasury Department's insistence that commissions avoid subject matter that might spark controversy. In addition to politics and religion, nudity was forbidden. Jared French's mural for the Plymouth post office, *Meal Time with the Early Coal Miners*, however, pushed the envelope with its composition of four muscular and thinly clad male figures. A small standing figure in the distance, piloting a boat, is completely unclothed, a detail that was overlooked by Treasury Department censors because, once again, the figure was undetectable in the eight-by-ten photos submitted for approval.

While the vast majority of Pennsylvania's New Deal murals remain intact today, there are a few notable exceptions. One, Niles Spencer's mural for the Aliquippa post office, was irrevocably damaged during a 1960s renovation. Through black-and-white photographic studies and a Spencer oil of a similar subject borrowed from the Rhode Island School of Design, the curators manage to give viewers a clear idea of the lost artwork's power and quality.

Murals represented only one of the mediums that artists used to decorate federal buildings. Fully half of the Pennsylvania commissions were for sculptural work, mostly reliefs and friezes. Many of these were executed by women artists, including Alice Decker, Mildred Jerome, Concetta Maria Scaravaglione, Janet de Coux, and (Marguerite) Bennett Kassler. Kassler's four-panel plaster relief for the Mifflinburg post office deserves special mention as one of the few works created on site and not completed remotely and then installed. This situation led to an unusually close and approving relationship between the artist and the local community. Its subject matter is the gendered division of labor in preindustrial America—men hunting and farming on the left, women spinning and preparing food on the right. Stylistically, the frieze is reminiscent of the famous tile work of Henry Chapman Mercer in the Pennsylvania State Capitol Building, and wall text notes that Kassler lived very close to Mercer's Moravian Tile Works.

The importance of women artists to the New Deal's cultural agenda is dramatically showcased in a surprising and very welcome addendum to the post office art. The exhibit includes a wonderful selection of artifacts and archival material from the Pennsylvania Museum Extension Project (MEP), which was administered by the Women and Professional Work division of the WPA. The MEP employed model makers, photographers, carpenters, illustrators, researchers, and educators to produce high-quality instructional material for use in schools, museums, and historical societies. The material on display consists of an astonishing range of visual aids, including plaster models of important local monuments and historic building types, marionettes and puppets, scripts that were used to teach everything from history to hygiene, workbooks, plaster models of food for nutrition classes, geological relief maps, and quilt pattern books. Together with the post office artwork, the MEP materials are evidence of the New Deal's comprehensive approach to the deployment of visual materials in support of civic and cultural education. They also reveal an impressive commitment to the idea that the "arts" included all manner of cultural production and were, indeed, for everyone.

The exhibition narrative makes clear that the idea of commissioning artists to decorate federal buildings came from the Philadelphia artist George Biddle, who was a Groton classmate of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He also spent a month living with Diego Rivera in Mexico, where he became well acquainted with the national mural program. In a 1933 let-

ter to FDR, Biddle explicitly cited Rivera and the Mexican mural movement as a model for a government art program in the United States that would express publicly the social ideals, civic values, and cultural aspirations of Roosevelt's New Deal.

While *A Common Canvas* only touches on the radical subtext of the New Deal's art projects, this conceptual and stylistic connection to what was an explicitly socialist art movement aimed at advancing the ideals and values of a national revolution is an important clue to the broader philosophical and cultural commitments of the key organizers and administrators of the federally sponsored art projects; it also demonstrates their keen interest in promoting "vital national expression." As the national director of the WPA Federal Arts Project, Holger Cahill, noted in 1938, the other great intellectual influence shaping the New Deal's art programs was not Karl Marx, but the American pragmatist John Dewey. Dewey's insistence that both the production and consumption of art were explicitly social processes, and that art was foremost a form of communication and not merely "self-expression," authorized and encouraged the explicit collaboration between artists and the public, a process that was mandated by the New Deal arts projects.

While the goals of the exhibition are explicitly historical—to celebrate the cultural legacy of the New Deal—and not aesthetic or art historical, *A Common Canvas* makes a strong case for the artistic value of material that has long been marginalized in the canon of American "high art." The art history literature on the New Deal has made much of the ostensibly inevitable tension that develops when one attempts to democratize the relationship between artists and the public, or when the autonomy and independence of the art-making endeavor is restrained by the demands of public taste. Karal Ann Marling, who wrote the definitive study of New Deal post office murals, goes so far as to say that because representational styles were mandated, and the driving force of art production was social and civic, rather than purely aesthetic, the Section was not an art program, but "a social program that employed artists."<sup>2</sup> We should remember, however, that in the 1930s the issue of whether the most advanced modern art would be explicitly representational (as was Surrealism or Social Realism) or abstract was still an open question, and the modernist orthodoxy of "art for art's sake" advanced by Clement Greenberg, which

<sup>2</sup> Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis, MN, 1982), 25.

completely dominated art history and criticism for most of the postwar era, was yet to be formulated.

While the artists who received federal building commissions were hardly committed avant-gardists, they were indubitably gifted modern artists and clearly energized and engaged in the vital national project of making art relevant to the everyday existence of the American people. It is also important to note that many of the best and most important modernist painters—including the future “New York School” artists Jackson Pollock (who is represented by a jaunty lithograph of rural haymaking from 1934), Arshile Gorky, Willem DeKooning, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb—were nurtured and financially sustained by New Deal art programs early in their careers. They may owe their later greatness to the fact that the government cared enough about the cultural health of the nation to keep artists working, and to make their work available to millions, through troubled economic times. It is difficult not to be nostalgic for what was a “golden age” of visual culture in America and to be proud of Pennsylvania’s contribution to that noble enterprise.<sup>3</sup>

*The Phillips Museum of Art  
at Franklin & Marshall College*

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<sup>3</sup> Suggested further readings include George Biddle, *An American Artist's Story* (Boston, 1939); Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions* (Boston, 1973); and Marling, *Wall to Wall America*.