

WPA Prints - An Essay

The WPA Prints constitute one of the many collections in the Kelvin Smith Library's Special Collections Research Center. This area of the library was specifically designed to provide a protective and controlled environment for rare books, manuscripts, and special collections, which, because of their rarity, value, fragility, ephemeral nature, or because they are part of a distinctive subject or author collection, require special care and handling. Among the Center's holdings, besides rare books, early imprints, and manuscripts, there are separate collections such as the E.J. Bohn papers and the Karal Ann Marling Collection, as well as reference books and bibliographies relating to them.

Ernest J. Bohn was an important pioneer — locally, nationally, and internationally — in the field of public housing. In fact, he was directly responsible for the Ohio Public Housing Act, the very first in the nation. When Case art history professor Karal Marling donated her papers to the library, she wished that they join those of Mr. Bohn, who had assisted her research and allowed her free access to the WPA prints and to his entire collection. Mr. Bohn's papers contain records of his participation, as director of the Metropolitan Housing Authority, in the original federal New Deal art programs.

On the library website are the [Prints from the WPA](#), beautifully digitized and arranged alphabetically by artist. Additionally, there are two digital exhibits: [African American Artists in the WPA Collection](#) and [Women Artists in the WPA Collection](#). Both of these focus on the work of particular artists and provide interesting biographical information on them. This exhibit is more thematic and fills in the broad historical background behind the WPA Prints. A bibliography appears at the end, after Endnotes.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression of the thirties began in the United States with "Black Tuesday." On that day, October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed. 16 million shares were dumped in a panic wave of selling. Corporate stocks lost \$14 billion of their value in one day. The period preceding October 29th had been one of speculative excess, a very "irrational exuberance," to use the former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's favorite phrase to describe the late 1920's. It fits the late 1920's even better.

Not everyone of course was invested in stocks and not everyone who was, failed to see the signs of a bubble about to burst. There is a story about JFK's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, quite a speculator himself, who, when his "shoeshine boy tried to peddle" him stocks, knew it was time to sell. He did.

With the dramatic loss in stock values, businesses and banks were hurt as well. National income dropped from eighty-one billion to thirty-nine billion dollars a year between 1929 and 1932. Nearly a third of the established labor force roamed the streets in search of work, and one out of every six families had no income at all. In the print *No Help Wanted*, Mathew Daniels expressed the fear and uncertainty of the job seeker. He did this by placing a large man in the foreground, arms crossed, staring down at the small interviewee who twists his hat in his hands, looking nervous, scared, and uncertain. The relationship between the two is highlighted by the physical contrast of the forms, the one, powerful, solid, dominant, the other, meek, victimized, hearing "No help wanted!"



No Help Wanted by Mathew D. Daniels

The Depression, as the period was succinctly called, had a devastating effect on our country. Anyone who lived through it is more than happy to tell you that. How the Depression started and why it ended have been endlessly debated by economic historians. But in between those time brackets was perhaps the greatest attempt by government to relieve the human suffering the Depression had created. Relief, in the form of many New Deal programs, did not *solve* the underlying economic problem of the Depression (Conventional wisdom suggests that World War II did.) However, the New Deal certainly mitigated the harshest realities of the Depression, primarily by providing jobs.

But beyond the ameliorative effects of creating employment, the New Deal changed society and particularly that view of society which we can now share and experience through the art of the time. It is one thing to read about the Depression and the suffering it engendered; it is quite another thing to really see it. Art enables us to do that, and it is not just a recording or a photograph, but it is an insight into the human condition during the Depression.

Of all the artistic activities the Roosevelt administration supported, the Graphic Arts were perhaps the most important. "It was here above all that the Federal Art Project achieved the ideal integration of artist with craftsman and of both with the people." [1] As an Ohio State published discussion of Federal Relief and the Arts continues:

The natural affinity between form and content is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the achievements of the graphic arts section of the Federal Art Project. Indeed, it was not an accident of time or circumstance but a quality inherent in the nature of the medium that made the print the most democratic and the most educational of the project's endeavors in the creative arts." [2]

Consequently, looking at the WPA Prints in Special Collections of Case's Kelvin Smith Library is one of the best ways to better understand the Depression and the people who were affected by it.

History and Orientation

The first director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Frederic Whiting, believed that local artists needed to honor the city and reveal its qualities to those who lived there. He encouraged the region's artists: "Emphasis is again laid upon the responsibility of local artists to interpret Cleveland and the surrounding country to the people of this great city."

Whiting saw a "wealth of material" available to the artist but pointed out that it needed "but the artist's eye to reveal it in its true beauty." [3]

These remarks were made in 1919. A decade later, the beauty was replaced by another truth, one that was far uglier. While many of the WPA Prints show static scenes of a landscape or an industrial setting, the vast majority try to address the human condition. They tell a story, a sad story. And much of what artists saw so troubled them that the only way to reveal the "truth" was through satire.

Satire is not funny. We sometimes think of a satire as a comedy or a satiric take on a situation as laughable or amusing. But the satire in the WPA Prints is very serious business. The juxtaposition, and in fact crashing together, of

the subjects portrayed and the subjects identified by way of the titles constitute the satire. And it is *biting* satire as, writ large, the Depression itself was.

The Depression was a satire on American life, on American social, economic, political life. As Karal Ann Marling wrote in the catalog for the 1974 exhibit at the Cleveland Public Library, "Forty years ago, in the thick of the endless, deadening cycles of layoffs and outright dismissals, it was virtually impossible to make any sense of the situation." [4] Being both tragic and comic, that situation was indeed satiric. A free country, having long championed free enterprise, had produced anything but freedom. The market forces at work had worked many citizens into the ground and made them destitute, despondent, and utterly desperate.

Pleasures such as the birth of a child in Charles Campbell's *Blessed Are the Poor* had become sorrows, anything but a blessed event, *particularly* for the poor. What might be the only blessing they had was, during the Depression, their most feared and reviled punishment, with a clenched fist shaken at the heavens as the most appropriate response. The dark sky, the broken bed frame, the disturbed disarray of images also suggest an unhappy event. The fact that so private and personal and experience as birth is taking place outside furthers this impression. As a sociologist visiting poor farm women in the South wrote, "Every one of the mothers with babies of two or under, either explicitly or by inference, expresses the attitude, 'I hope this is the last one.'" [5]



Blessed are the Poor by Charles Campbell

The WPA artists saw and reflected this perversion of ideas. Meanings had changed. A *Solution* was certainly not one or was so awful as to be unthinkable under normal circumstances. In the print below, Michael Frayn suggests that a solution to the despair and hopelessness depicted in the brown and yellow work is for the debilitated and broken father to shoot his emaciated daughter. The only solution to poverty and hunger that is apparently left to his family is death.



Solution by Michael P. Franyin

In Dorothy Rutka's *Poverty*, a slightly less desperate (and distorted) a situation is depicted. The family is just barely getting by, but their domestic life may only be a step away from that portrayed in *Solution*.

Poverty by Dorothy Rutka

Competition, once healthy and normal, in fact the very essence of the free market, was now between a starving man and a starving cat for garbage. The truth about the effect of the Depression was bleak in the extreme. To talk about unemployment statistics, relief rolls, or helping the needy missed the point and did not begin to show what was really going on. Art did that, as it always does.



Competition by Abraham Jacobs

The Forms of Relief

But before further examining individual prints, some of which have been cited, it is important to have a sense of the overall nature of government relief. Remarkably, Roosevelt's New Deal included the largest patronage of the arts in the history of America. There were four programs designed to support the arts. The first of these was the Public Works of Art Project, the PWAP, established in December of 1933. It only lasted until June, 1934, but it provided for about 3750 artists to create some 15,660 works in 32 separate classifications. The "American Scene" was chosen as the guiding theme.

The PWAP was critically important to the success of federal arts funding, and because it was a success it paved the way for future programs. The PWAP also made art respectable and gave artists a new sense of dignity. Furthermore, it began to foster a democratic, nationwide art movement, a development that was as important in its own way as was either the art itself or the employment provided to artists. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

The next program was the section of Painting and Sculpture in the Treasury Department. Some thought it was too elitist, yet it was charged with securing the best available art for new public buildings. It functioned differently than a direct relief program. Rather it sponsored competitions in which artists competed for commissions. Established in October, 1934, the "Section" continued under different names until 1943.

The Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was next, although it was not formally organized until May of 1935. A basic relief program, The FAP was divided into three sections: Mural, Easel, and Graphic; it supported artists, sponsored mural and sculpture projects, and encouraged art instruction, poster making, and photography. The FAP also provided for the recording of artifacts in what became known as the "Index of American Design." Overall, the project consisted of three areas: art production, art education, and art research. The real mainstay of the government art programs, the FAP continued until 1943.

TRAP (the Treasury Relief Art Projects) was the least important of the four federal art projects. It began in mid-1935 and lasted until June, 1939. Financed through the FAP, TRAP was set up to supervise the decoration of public buildings and was directed at work for which funds had not been previously allocated.

The national government, as a sponsor of culture, was thought to be a suitable agent to introduce fine painting, music, and drama into the lives of average Americans with the hope that the arts might become "both expressive of the spirit of the nation and accessible to its people." [6] This philosophy was embraced by the director of the Federal Art Project, Holger Cahill, who translated it into a kind of personnel policy. He approached his task of creating work relief for artists with the conviction that in addition to the art itself, the artists must be integral parts of society.

Cahill further philosophized against what he saw as an Eastern approach to art, which looked outward to Europe. He wanted to look inward, in fact westward, championing regional diversity and more of a populist aesthetic: art of, by,

and for the people. But before Cahill, regional diversity meant Regionalism, as practiced by three important American artists: Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, famous for his *American Gothic*.

These three artists certainly painted the "American Scene" before the idea became embedded in the philosophy of the New Deal art projects. Also before the government support of the arts (and before the Depression), Thomas Craven, the principal writer on the American Scene, articulated three ideas that were repeated during the 1930's:

1. European artistic movements were worn out and sterile; they offered nothing new to American modernists who were using styles that were a generation old.
2. Modern European art had denied art's true function, becoming just a series of techniques rather than a means of communication (This concept becomes particularly important for understanding the WPA prints, as we shall later see.)
3. American artists were not persuaded by metaphysical speculations and would not create art based on abstract aesthetic theories. If they tried, they would merely be copying European styles. [7]

A Nationwide Art Movement

As noted earlier, in addition to providing employment for artists and influencing the nature of art in continuing the American Scene orientation, the federal art projects affected the whole cultural context for art in America. Making it more democratic meant making art broader, more accessible, more influential on the general populace. This is a somewhat less recognized but extremely positive result of the New Deal art programs. Helping the people didn't just mean helping those that needed material help; it also meant helping all the people by furthering and fostering that spiritual sustenance which art provides. And in an economic sense, it stimulated demand. As people learned to care about and better understand the relevance of art in their lives, they grew to want it more.

Besides wanting it more, they came to disdain it less. Part of the change, which was foundational to a nationwide art movement, was a change in societal attitudes towards American artists. Before the 1930's, before the Depression, and before the FAP saw artists as fellow citizen-workers, "Artists were commonly regarded with suspicion." As a Case research paper on the history of the Kokoon Club goes on to point out:

In a country where it was a man's duty to find good and wholesome work, artists seemed somehow un-American. This perception was corroborated by the prevailing rumors of exotic artists' orgies in Paris, a city known to most Americans for its unorthodox bohemian population. Any artist who lived strictly for "arts sake," particularly the "new art," was regarded as a bohemian. Many American artists therefore turned to commercialism, not only for economic stability, but as a concession to societal coercion." [8]

When "commercialism" began to fail with the Stock Market Crash of 1929, the federal programs re-created economic stability through relief. But as many WPA artists have attested, government patronage also provided considerable artistic freedom, and living for "arts sake" again became a possibility. Jacob Kainen, a printmaker in the New York program stated:

More than six years of constant work in an atmosphere of complete artistic freedom brought my career to maturity in a gradual and natural manner. I did what I chose to do and thus came to rely heavily on my personal feelings rather than on the pressures of the market, which might have resulted in a loss of faith in my own identity." [9]

There is a counterintuitive aspect to all of this. The New Deal, often criticized for "creeping socialism," actually fostered freedom in artistic expression. But there was somewhat of a government agenda in encouraging the American Scene as a theme. Yet it was a theme which already had gained considerable momentum, as earlier noted. So it wasn't much of an agenda. "Paint the American Scene" was really tantamount to "Paint what you see around you." This charter took an ironic (and satiric) turn when the WPA printmakers "painted" some very disturbing images. As one Case art historian, Professor Jennifer Neils, observed, this might even seem subversive: Here they were being funded by a government that wanted them to laud the American Scene, yet the American Scene during the Depression was, as we shall soon see, anything but laudable.

Perhaps more important than the art itself was the aforementioned improvement in the status of artists, as seen by average Americans. When Harry Hopkins, WPA Director, expressed the belief (initially unfashionable) that "a violinist who could not find employment with a symphony orchestra should not be forced to dig ditches as an alternative," he was strongly affirming the value of artistic endeavors and the importance of treating artists as equal to any other worker. [10] Hopkins wrote an early (1936) history of federal relief with a revealing title, "Spending to Save." It wasn't just about saving money by providing productive employment instead of welfare but about saving America's cultural heritage. The Nationwide Art Movement was as much a result of attitudes in Washington as it was the newfound acceptance of artists and art out in the country.

The "American Renaissance," as it was called, optimistically imagined a "golden age of nationwide artistic fulfillment." [11] Ironically, this optimism coincided with the beginning of the Depression. But the idea of an American renaissance was picked up by Cahill and the Federal Art Project and fueled by government funding. In an amusing reversal of what really happened, a contemporary writer observed, "the American Renaissance itself was not the result of good taste but rather the agent by which good taste would be spread throughout the land." [12] Americans were encouraged by various periodicals to support American art. In a homely aphorism, *Art Digest* wrote, "A home is not culturally complete unless it contains good pictures." [13]

The Cleveland Scene

The Flats (see below) were certainly emblematic of the Cleveland Scene. Grace Leonard's print combines life at home and life at work in a scene that would be familiar to Clevelanders. Since the 1820's, the Flats served as a major source of industrial growth for the city, with steel mills and manufacturing plants filling up the open land.



Across the Flats by Grace V. Leonard

Nearby too was the *Cleveland Dock*. Together these pictures suggest the dependence of Cleveland life upon industry and imply the extreme effect the loss of that industry would have upon individual lives.



Cleveland Dock by Paul Kucharyson

"Good pictures" culturally completing a Cleveland home often meant prints. The renaissance of local art was largely based on the commercial success of lithography. "It is a rare instance of commercialism ennobling itself to something higher, rather than the reverse process of art degrading itself to commercial exploitation." Moreover, it was the prestige of lithography that convinced many good artists to live in Cleveland. To satisfy their own self-fulfillment in art, these artists desired something more than the daily drudgery of poster design. The most disgruntled and talented of these men banded together in 1911 to form the Kokoon Arts Club. [14]

The observation is from the conclusion of the Case research paper on the Kokoon Club. Although the club's members worked in a variety of media, most of them, as well as the three most prominent, were all lithographers: the president Carl Moelman, William Sommer, who is represented in the library's WPA prints (also in the well-known mural, "The City in 1833," on the wall of the Cleveland Public Library), and nationally famous (as America's greatest animal painter), Henry Keller.

Another famous lithographer was Kalman Kubinyi, who founded and presided over the Cleveland Print Makers Club, which, with the Kokoon Club, the Cleveland Art Students League, and the Cleveland Society of Artists, organized giant promotional fairs in University Circle in the summers of 1932 and 1933. These were highly successful and led to the federal program and to Kubinyi being named head of the WPA Graphics workshop and district supervisor of the entire Cleveland WPA project. Kubinyi too is represented in the WPA Prints in Special Collections of the Kelvin Smith Library.

Before turning specifically to those prints, a few additional comments should be made about the unique nature of the graphic medium: go to [Graphic Arts Processes](#) for explanations and examples of the different processes. As Karal Ann Marling notes, the print, because it was not unique, could be considered a democratic art form. "It is easily distributed and at a low cost per impression, once the plate has been prepared. Its multiplicity and low price lent the print great appeal in the eyes of many New Dealers, particularly Holger Cahill and the leadership of the WPA/FAP." [15]

With regard to the Cleveland Scene, CMA Director William Milliken's local translation (in 1934) of Cahill's American Scene, printmakers pushed the theme in the direction of documentary realism, bringing the grim realities of the Depression home to the viewer. Unlike murals, which tended to be constrained to concentrate on timeless themes and "immediately readable to a scurrying audience," [16] prints could be pondered for a while and their stories of individual lives revealed.

Narrative Depictions in the WPA Prints

There are always certain artists who cannot be satisfied with the credo of art for art's sake. They must tell stories, express opinions, and "take sides." Some of them suffered from inferiority complexes during the late reign of modern art with its too-great subservience to abstract theories and story-telling taboos. But that is past and they are now (1930's) telling hair-raising

stories about a mad world. [17]

One of the more "hair-raising stories" in the WPA prints is *Johnny Get Your Gun* by Charles Campbell. It depicts two figures, one limbless and almost lifeless and the other, leaning over him, a devil-like figure, presumably Satan himself. The print tells the story of the American spiritual folk song by the same name. Written by Monroe H. Rosenfeld in 1886, "Johnny Get Your Gun" warns of Satan's temptation, frighteningly depicted in the print. In 1939, Dalton Trumbo published an anti-war novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*, which recounts the story of a WWI soldier who lost all his limbs (and sight and hearing). Campbell interestingly draws on both sources, using the song for his title and theme and the novel for details of content. There is also the possibility that, besides war, industrialism was Campbell's target, the ruined man the result of the depression in industry, with the artist taking sides against both these perceived evils.



Johnny Get Your Gun by Charles Campbell

A common feature of the WPA Prints is the use of distortion. "If the artist-satirist makes use of distortion and exaggeration in his drawing, it is generally for the purpose of stressing a point or calling attention to a weak or absurd characteristic in an individual." [18] In the *Lonely Road*, Frank Daniel Fousek distorts the fence along the road, the twisted tree limbs, the threatening sky, even the figure of the man hunched over at an odd angle, holding a gnarled cane. Moreover, he could be seen as not even on the road or is in an unexplainable shadow. He seems lost, without clear or logical reference points.



Lonely Road by Frank Daniel Fousek

It is subtle though. "Too much distortion would seem to be an immature resource—a noisy show rather than a subtle suggestion." [19] The picture of loneliness is amply conveyed, and the metaphor of the plight of the individual during the Depression starkly identified. It is a very lonely road. It seems to go nowhere, and no one is on it. The man can see the road, but he can't quite get on it, and it is soon to disappear in darkness. Consider the *Lillies of the Field* by Abraham Jacobs, with their gaunt, drawn-out features.



Lillies of the Field by Abraham Jacobs

The title refers to verses from Matthew 6:28-29: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." The satire is in the fact that the men look like they are toiling or rather are tired after having toiled, perhaps in searching for work. Certainly "Solomon in all his glory" was far better arrayed than one of these!

Star Boarder by Mathew Daniels implies a story. Three people are shown, a woman sitting preparing food, a man in the center entreating her, another man behind him, hands in his pockets, standing, watching, disapproving. The star boarder is the man in the center, in the starring position. Perhaps he has been taken in to provide additional income for the family. He is their privileged, financial star as well.



Star Boarder by Mathew D. Daniels

In the pair of prints that follow, Sheffield Kagy offers a wonderful contrast and a satiric look at the symphony concert. The first shows a rather familiar and benign scene, a "symphonic conductor" conducting an orchestra. The second is frightening. The gates of Hell seem to have opened. You still see the conductor at the top from a different angle, but below a tortured man is looking up from a pit with flames leaping out around him. This may have been a comment on how we hear or react to classical music or perhaps more metaphorically, how the country initially reacted during the depression to a political leadership, oblivious to suffering, which may have just carried on with the "concert."



Symphonic Conductor by Sheffield Kagy



Symphonic Reaction by Sheffield Kagy

However one chooses to interpret the WPA Prints in Special Collections, they clearly contain a wealth of ideas, beautiful and imaginative art, and a cherished resource that we can return to again and again. The prints serve as a

way back to the America of the Great Depression. While history books tell us about what happened, the art of the time allows us to feel what it was really like. To have that feeling is an invaluable experience.

Endnotes

1. William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus, Ohio : Ohio State University Press, 1969), 433.
2. *Ibid.*, 433.
3. *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (June 1919), 79.
4. Karal Ann Marling, *Federal Art in Cleveland, 1933-1943: an Exhibition, September 16 to November 1, 1974, the Cleveland Public Library* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Public Library, 1974), 6.
5. Ellen G. Landau, "Alibeckoff essay." *Social Realism in the 1930's: WPA Prints in Cleveland* (Cleveland, Ohio: 1992).
6. Jane Mathews, "Arts and the People: the New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy." *Journal of American History* 62 (1975), 319-339.
7. Matthew Baigel, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 23.
8. James Shelley, "The Kokoon Arts Club and Cleveland's Golden Age of Art" (Cleveland: 1983), 11.
9. Landau, *op.cit.*, Introduction by Open Weaver.
10. Maguerite D. Bloxom, *Pickaxe and Pencil: References for the Study of the WPA* (Washington: Library of Congress: Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1982), 9.
11. Baigel, *op. cit.*, 38
12. Eugene Neuhaus, *The History and Ideals of American Art*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press; London: H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1931), 7.
13. *Art Digest*, November 15, 1931.
14. Shelly, *op. cit.*, 31
15. Marling, *op. cit.*, 26
16. *Ibid.*, 27.
17. Mabel Dwight, "Satire in Art." In Francis V. O'Connor's *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project.*(Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 151.
18. *Ibid.*, 153.
19. *Ibid.*

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This essay was prepared by Thomas Boyer for Kelvin Smith Library.
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