

Women Artists in the WPA (Work Projects Administration) Print Collection

During the 1930s, there was catastrophic unemployment in the country. A federal project was put in place in 1935, called "Work Projects Administration" which would utilize the skills of out-of-work employees helping them to earn a small wage to survive. In Cuyahoga County alone, 47,000 people were assigned to work on a variety of projects from the Cleveland Zoo, the waterworks, highways, and streets, the airport, to the parks, recreation sites, cultural gardens, and public housing. Previous efforts had begun in 1933, to assist unemployed artists under the Public Works of Art Project established by the Treasury Department. The country was divided into sixteen regions, one of which was the Cleveland region. Two people were instrumental in the success of the Cleveland effort: William M. Milliken, Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art and Linda A. Eastman, Director of the Cleveland Public Library. The significant benefit of their collaboration and leadership was a regional approach to art that exemplified and identified the "Cleveland Scene." In 1935, the Works Progress Administration took over the support of artists on relief and hired hundreds of workers for the Federal Art Project in music, theater, writing, and art. The Federal Art Project alone employed 350 Cleveland artists. The WPA projects were discontinued in the early 1940s due to the consequences and effects of the wartime economy.

The Cleveland artists were creating murals, mural sketches, easel paintings, ceramic sculpture, plaques, sculpture, graphic arts, and photographs as well as furniture and toys. Women played a significant role in the creation and composition of the art that was produced. The exhibit catalog entitled *Federal Art in Cleveland 1933-1943*, for a Cleveland Public Library exhibit in 1974, lists 21 women as active artists in the program. In Kelvin Smith Library's holdings, representative works of seven women are included in the WPA Print Collection: Jolan Gross-Bettelheim, Gladys Carambella, Alice Haber, Florence Korda, Antonina Mancuso, Marguerite Root, and Dorothy Rutka. Three of these artists had works that were highlighted in that exhibit: Jolan Gross-Bettelheim, Gladys Carambella, and Dorothy Rutka.

Jolan Gross-Bettelheim, 1900-1972

Jolan Gross-Bettelheim came to the United States after studying in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. Moving to Cleveland in 1925 she became a student of Henry Keller at the Cleveland School of Art. She was active in art circles, participating in the May Shows at the Cleveland Museum of Art and joined the WPA art project in 1936. In 1938 she moved to New York where she lived until 1959 when she returned to her native Hungary. Her works were very popular and were shown in major exhibits across the United States. Her prints are powerful political statements incorporating industrial subjects of mills, bridges, and factories.

Dorothy Rutka, 1907-1985

Dorothy Rutka moved from Michigan to enroll in the Cleveland School of Art, graduating in 1929. She worked as a portrait painter, a writer, and illustrator before joining the graphic arts project with the WPA in 1936. Her works were included in major exhibits as well as solo exhibitions around the country. The prints in our collection exhibit her sensitive portrayal of cultural aspects of society as well as the poverty and deprivation of those suffering from the effects of the Depression, as obvious from the titles "Poverty," "Eviction," and "Striker's Wife."

She was married to Philip Porter, executive editor of The Plain Dealer. Tragically, they were killed by intruders in their home in Shaker Heights.

Gladys Carambella, 1898-1974

Gladys Carambella was a talented artist interested in illustrating children's stories. She began as a ceramics artist in the WPA project, trained by Edris Eckhardt, a professional ceramicist, and sculptor. Carambella was best known as a designer of murals for schools, nurseries, and hospitals. Her murals could be found in many locations in Cuyahoga County. In the Prospectus of Work for Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority in 1939, her sketches for "Christmas Day," "Thumbelina," and "Snow Queen" were included. Her prints in our WPA collection are colorful and charming scenes of children and depictions of children's stories.