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## **Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents New Deal Paintings from the First Federally Funded Art Program in the United States**

In 1934, Americans grappled with an economic situation that feels all too familiar today. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression, the U.S. government created the Public Works of Art Project—the first federal government program to support the arts nationally. A selection of paintings made with support from this program will be on view Feb. 27 through Jan. 3, 2010, in the exhibition “1934: A New Deal for Artists” at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It will begin a three-year tour of the United States in 2010.

“As the Smithsonian American Art Museum prepares to open ‘1934: A New Deal for Artists,’ the nation is engaged in a great discussion about how to restore confidence during the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. “One contentious issue is whether and how cultural initiatives should play a role in government recovery efforts. This exhibition, which focuses on the first U.S. government program ever to provide direct support for artists, is relevant to that discussion. The legacy of New Deal cultural programs seems indisputable today as we cherish and mine the resources these ‘workers’ left us.”

“1934: A New Deal for Artists” celebrates the 75th anniversary of the Public Works of Art Project by drawing on the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s unparalleled collection of vibrant paintings created for the program. The 56 paintings in the exhibition are a lasting visual record of America at a specific moment in time. George Gurney, deputy chief curator, organized the exhibition with Ann Prentice Wagner, curatorial associate.

Federal officials in the 1930s understood how essential art was to sustaining America’s spirit. During the depths of the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration created the Public Works of Art Project, which lasted only six months from mid-December 1933 to June 1934. The purpose of the program was to alleviate the distress of professional, unemployed American artists by paying them to produce artwork that could be used to embellish public buildings.

The program was administered under the Treasury Department by art professionals in 16 different regions of the country.

Artists from across the United States who participated in the program were encouraged to depict “the American Scene,” but they were allowed to interpret this idea freely. They painted regional, recognizable subjects—ranging from portraits to cityscapes and images of city life to landscapes and depictions of rural life—that reminded the public of quintessential American values such as hard work, community and optimism. These artworks, which were displayed in schools, libraries, post offices, museums and government buildings, vividly capture the realities and ideals of Depression-era America.

“Artists were honored to be paid by the Public Works of Art Project for paintings that would be publicly displayed,” said Gurney. “The program also provided them with a sense of pride in serving their country.”

The exhibition is arranged into eight sections: “American People,” “City Life,” “Labor,” “Industry,” “Leisure,” “The City,” “The Country” and “Nature.” Works from 13 of the 16 regions established by the Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts are represented in the exhibition.

The Public Works of Art Project employed artists from across the country including Ilya Bolotowsky, Lily Furedi and Max Arthur Cohn in New York City; Harry Gottlieb and Douglass Crockwell in upstate New York; Herman Maril in Maryland; Gale Stockwell in Missouri; E. Dewey Albinson in Minnesota; E. Martin Hennings in New Mexico; and Millard Sheets in California.

Ross Dickinson paints the confrontation between man and nature in his painting of southern California, “Valley Farms” (1934). He contrasts the verdant green, irrigated valley with the dry, reddish-brown hills, recalling the appeal of fertile California for many Midwestern farmers escaping the hopelessness of the Dust Bowl.

Several artists chose to depict American ingenuity. Stadium lighting was still rare when Morris Kantor painted “Baseball at Night” (1934), which depicts a game at the Clarkstown Country Club’s Sports Centre in West Nyack, N.Y. Ray Strong’s panoramic “Golden Gate Bridge” (1934) pays homage to the engineering feats required to build the iconic San Francisco structure. “Old Pennsylvania Farm in Winter” (1934) by Arthur E. Cederquist features a prominent row of poles providing telephone service and possibly electricity, a rare modern amenity in rural America.

The program was open to artists who were denied other opportunities, such as African Americans and Asian Americans. African American artists like Earle Richardson, who painted “Employment of Negroes in Agriculture” (1934), were welcomed, but only about 10 such artists were

employed by the project. Richardson, who was a native New Yorker, chose to set his painting of quietly dignified workers in the South to make a broad statement about race. In the Seattle area, where Kenjiro Nomura lived, many Japanese Americans made a living as farmers, but they were subject to laws that prevented foreigners from owning land and other prejudices. Nomura's painting "The Farm" (1934) depicts a darker view of rural life with threatening clouds on the horizon.

### **About the Public Works of Art Project**

The United States was in crisis as 1934 approached. The national economy had fallen into an extended depression after the stock market crash of October 1929. Thousands of banks failed, wiping out the life savings of millions of families. Farmers battled drought, erosion and declining food prices. Businesses struggled or collapsed. A quarter of the work force was unemployed, while an equal number worked reduced hours. More and more people were homeless and hungry. Nearly 10,000 unemployed artists faced destitution.

The nation looked expectantly to President Roosevelt, who was inaugurated in March 1933. The new administration swiftly initiated a wide-ranging series of economic recovery programs called the New Deal. The President realized that Americans needed not only employment but also the inspiration art could provide. The Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts organized the Public Works of Art Project Dec. 8, 1933. Within days, 16 regional committees were recruiting artists who eagerly set to work in all parts of the country. During the project's brief existence, from December 1933 to June 1934, the Public Works of Art Project hired 3,749 artists who created 15,663 paintings, murals, sculptures, prints, drawings and craft objects at a cost of \$1,312,000.

In April 1934, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., exhibited more than 500 works created as part of the Public Works of Art Project. Selected paintings from the Corcoran exhibition later traveled to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and other cities across the country. President Roosevelt, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and government officials who attended the exhibition in Washington acclaimed the art enthusiastically. The Roosevelts selected 32 paintings for display at the White House, including Sheets' "Tenement Flats" (1933-34) and Strong's "Golden Gate Bridge" (1934). The success of the Public Works of Art Project paved the way for later New Deal art programs, including the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project.

Nearly 150 paintings from the Public Works of Art Project were transferred to the Smithsonian American Art Museum during the 1960s, along with a large number of artworks from subsequent programs that extended into the 1940s, especially the well-known Works Progress Administration

program. The museum has one of the largest collections of New Deal art in the world, numbering nearly 3,000 objects.

### **Publication**

A catalog, fully illustrated in color and co-published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and D Giles Ltd. in London, is forthcoming in July 2009. It will feature an essay by Roger Kennedy, historian and director emeritus of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History; individual entries for each artwork by Wagner; and an introduction by the museum's director Broun. The book will be available online and in the museum store for \$49.95 (softcover \$34).

### **Educational Web Site—"Picturing the 1930s"**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is offering an educational Web site, in collaboration with the University of Virginia, which will allow online visitors to explore the 1930s through paintings, artist memorabilia, historical documents, newsreels, period photographs, music and video in a virtual, 3-D movie theater. The site, which was developed for students in the eighth and 11th grades studying American history, will provide opportunities for students to use primary source documents.

The museum has provided images from its collection of artworks from the 1930s with contextual information that will be used as assets in PrimaryAccess, Web-based software that allows teachers and students to create their own documentary videos beginning March 15. Using PrimaryAccess, any user can select images, write text and record narration in the style of a documentary filmmaker. These online videos can be submitted to the virtual theater on the site. The museum also plans to develop introduction and implementation tutorials that suggest ways to integrate the software and assets into the curriculum.

New content will debut for each of the eight theme rooms in "Picturing the 1930s" during the next several months. "The Country," "The Depression," "Industry," and "Labor" will be available Thursday, Feb. 26, followed by "American People," "Leisure," "The City" and "The New Deal." The site will be available at [americanart.si.edu/picturing\\_the\\_1930s](http://americanart.si.edu/picturing_the_1930s).

### **Free Public Programs**

Wagner will conduct a gallery talk Thursday, March 19, at 6 p.m. A family-day program will take place Saturday, May 9, from noon to 4 p.m., featuring dances from the 1930s by Fidgety Feet, oral histories, a scavenger hunt in the exhibition galleries, period board games such as Monopoly and Scrabble and a screening of the movie "Annie" at noon. The museum will present a film series, which runs from April through December, of some of the most well-known films set in the 1930s such as

“Bound for Glory” (Thursday, April 30, at 6 p.m.) and “The Grapes of Wrath” (Thursday, May 21, at 6 p.m.). Kennedy will present a lecture in the museum’s McEvoy Auditorium Tuesday, June 16, at 7 p.m. Details and additional program descriptions are available online at [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

### **Flickr Groups**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is sharing nearly 400 artworks and related objects dated 1934 from its collection with the public by creating image groups on Flickr and Wikimedia Commons. These groups can be found at [flickr.com/groups/1934](http://flickr.com/groups/1934) and [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/1934#Paintings](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/1934#Paintings). The museum is encouraging the public and other Smithsonian collections to contribute to these rich repositories of images.

In addition, a second Flickr group of artworks from the 1930s has been created as part of the museum’s educational Web site “Picturing the 1930s.” These images from the museum’s collection are available for use in documentaries created for the site’s virtual cinema. They are available at [flickr.com/groups/picturing\\_the\\_1930s](http://flickr.com/groups/picturing_the_1930s).

### **Tour**

The exhibition will begin a three-year national tour in 2010. Venue information will be available online at [americanart.si.edu/pr/kits/traveling](http://americanart.si.edu/pr/kits/traveling).

### **Credit**

“1934: A New Deal for Artists” is organized and circulated by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with support from the William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment Fund and the Smithsonian Council for American Art. The C.F. Foundation in Atlanta supports the museum’s traveling exhibition program, “Treasures to Go.”

### **About the Smithsonian American Art Museum**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Web site: [americanart.si.edu](http://americanart.si.edu).

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**Note to editors:** Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 633-8530 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available from the museum’s online press room at [americanart.si.edu/pr](http://americanart.si.edu/pr).