



W O R K ★ P E O P L E ★ A R T

## *Federal Art Projects in Illinois During the Great Depression*

*Jim L. Zimmer, Administrator and Curator, ISM Lockport Gallery*

**T**he federal government's first widespread involvement in the evolution of American art coincided with, ironically, a particularly sober period of America's history. Following the stock market crash in October 1929, the once vital American economy collapsed. Businesses closed, fortunes were lost, and the unemployment rate skyrocketed. By 1933 more than one quarter of America's labor force was unemployed. America's burgeoning interest in art and the thousands of visual artists in the country—no matter how talented—suffered severely from the nation's downward-spiraling economic climate. Fulfilling the basic needs of nourishment, clothing, and shelter overshadowed any desire to buy a painting or develop an appreciation for art. Yet out of the ashes of this troubled time, a cultural Phoenix arose in America.

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### **Walter Paul Robinson**

*Horseshoeing*, 1937. Egg tempera on masonite, 18½ × 23½ in.

Collection of the Illinois State Museum.

<sup>1</sup> The federal government initiated three other projects prior to the 1930s: the National Commission of Fine Arts in the 1850s under President Buchanan; the Council of Fine Arts proposed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1909; and President Taft's National Commission for Fine Arts Act of May 17, 1910, which permitted donations from private sources to be used by the government for art. Although setting the stage for later patronage of the arts, these programs paled in comparison to the scope of programming during the Depression years. See Leonard D. DuBoff, *Art Law* (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Company, 1984), 158–9.



## Depression-Era Visual Art Programs

### Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), 1933–4

Treasury Department work-relief program employing artists to decorate public buildings and parks with murals and sculpture depicting the American Scene.

### The Section of Painting and Sculpture (The Section), 1934–43

Treasury Department non-relief program in which artists were selected through regional and national competitions to design and decorate new federal buildings (primarily post offices) with murals and sculpture; the program maintained an emphasis on high quality and depicting the American Scene.

### The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), 1935–9

Treasury Department work-relief program, funded by a grant from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), in which artists selected through competitions produced murals and sculptures to decorate those new or existing federal buildings without a budget for art.

### Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), 1935–43

Work-relief program employing artists to create works for tax-supported institutions, to educate the public about art, and to conduct research; included were divisions in murals, sculpture, easel paintings, graphics, photography, stained glass, and applied arts; other components of the FAP included programs in music, writing, and theater.

Facing a nation plagued with the hardships of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt offered Americans a plan that came to be known as the New Deal. As part of the New Deal, federally funded work programs, such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), strove to give some relief to the millions of unemployed across the country. The WPA provided approximately eight million jobs at a cost of over eleven billion dollars. But, besides funding the construction of thousands of public buildings and facilities, the WPA sponsored work-relief programs for artists. Coupled with other national public art initiatives, the WPA provided relief and hope to American artists of the 1930s and '40s. In retrospect, the programs also empowered artists to develop a diverse, emergent American aesthetic and bridged the gap between art and the American public by providing numerous tangible exchanges throughout the country. Illinois was one of the states to benefit in incalculable ways.

The first federal art program was initiated in December 1933 under the national direction of Edward Bruce. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), as it was named, was administered under the auspices of the Treasury Department with funds transferred from the Civil Works Administration. Although the program lasted only six months, until its \$1.25 million appropriation was depleted,<sup>2</sup> it provided work for unemployed artists to decorate public buildings and parks. Eligibility was based not only on the artists' employment needs, but also on their level of artistic proficiency.

The PWAP tested the political waters for government art sponsorship and, perhaps more important, established a thematic structure for artistic production that would infiltrate later projects. The "American Scene," with all its possible permutations, became the primary focus for PWAP artists, allowing them to make "a permanent record of the aspirations and achievements of the American people."<sup>3</sup> Placed in very public spaces, the art offered, for the most part, representational depictions of the times that were palatable to com-



### Raymond Breinin

*The Dead Tree, 1937*. Opaque watercolor on illustration board, Harriette Crummer. Breinin worked in both the easel painting and

mon aesthetic tastes. People could identify and embrace what they saw in these works, such as Raymond Breinin's *Farms, Machinery, Industry, and Children*, a large, three-paneled fresco completed in 1934 for Skokie School in Skokie, Illinois.<sup>4</sup>

Today, many people first encounter WPA art through work executed under the second federal art program of the era. The Section of Painting and Sculpture—commonly referred to as The Section—was created in 1934 as a vehicle for adorning new federal buildings, most notably post offices, with murals and sculpture. Also directed by the Treasury Department, this program was conceptualized differently from the PWAP. The Section was not established as a relief program. Instead, the primary goal was to secure work of the highest quality. To this end, the administration introduced regional and national competitions based on design submissions for specific structures. The Section, however, continued to place emphasis on the American Scene as appropriate subject matter, eschewing classical mythology or symbolism and replacing it with an emphasis on the daily lives of the American people. Of all the federal programs, The Section had the best endurance, running from 1934 through 1943.

<sup>4</sup> The Breinin frescoes have since been covered over.

<sup>2</sup> Grace Overmyer, *Government and the Arts* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1939), 97–8.

<sup>3</sup> Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 23.



20 × 30 in. Collection of the Illinois State Museum; gift of mural departments of the FAP.

Whereas many of the other art programs centered their activity around Chicago, evidence of The Section projects is widely distributed throughout Illinois. Between 1936 and 1943 no less than seventy-two post offices across the state were decorated with murals or sculpture. The murals were predominantly horizontal in format, often placed high on the interior walls of public lobbies. Their dimensions varied from Archibald Motley Jr.'s *Stagecoach and Mail* of 1937, at 4'3" × 3', in the Wood River Post Office, to the sweeping *Chicago—Epoch of a Great City* by Henry Sternberg, 1938, at 7'7" × 24'2", in the Lakeview Post Office of Chicago. The types of materials also varied. The majority of murals were painted in oil on canvas, but several were executed as frescoes, by working paint directly into the wet plaster on the walls or by applying tempera paint to dry plaster. In a radically different application, Henry Varnum Poor used glazed ceramic tiles for his depictions of Carl Sandburg and Louis Sullivan in the Chicago Uptown Post Office. Depicted in works from The Section are diverse subjects: pastoral scenes, local events or historic figures, and references to modern technology and the American work ethic. Some of The Section works in Illinois have been removed, relocated, or destroyed over time, but the many that still remain bear

witness to the democratization of American art by its placement in public settings, where it is accessible to all who come into contact with the nontraditional "gallery walls."

About the same time The Section began, another program emerged for decorating federal buildings, new or existing. The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) was also organized under the Treasury Department, but this time as a work-relief program requiring a large percentage of personnel to be drawn from relief rolls. TRAP was shorter-lived than The Section, running from 1935 through 1939, but continued the emphasis on high quality through its organized competitions. TRAP's presence in Illinois was meager compared with the work done under The Section. A single known example is Edgar Miller's six limestone sculptures of animals for the Jane Addams House at 1324 South Loomis Street in Chicago.

In terms of its scope, research, and outreach to Americans, the final Depression-era art project garnered the largest presence. On May 6, 1935, an executive order under the Emergency Relief Act of 1935 created the Works Progress Administration (WPA).<sup>5</sup> That same year the WPA initiated four art programs collectively known as Federal Project Number One, encompassing theater, writing, music, and the visual arts. The Federal Art Project (FAP)—the visual arts division that operated from 1935 to 1943 under the national direction of Holger Cahill—shared characteristics with earlier federal programs but extended beyond the production of murals or sculpture for public buildings. FAP artists were paid a wage to create works that were made available, for the cost of materials, to tax-supported and partially tax-supported institutions such as schools, care facilities, and select nonprofit organizations. New divisions were devoted to easel paintings, graphics, photography, stained glass, and applied arts, in addition to murals and sculpture. Many of the resulting smaller works were not site-specific, as the murals and sculpture were. This permitted work to be created without a

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Mankin, "Government Patronage: An Historical Overview," in *Public Policy and the Arts*, eds. Kevin V. Mulcahy and C. Richard Swaim (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982), 121.

## Illinois Post Offices with WPA Murals and Sculptures

- ★ In the northern region of Illinois, The Section had a presence in post offices at Berwyn, Brookfield, Chicago, Downers Grove, Dwight, East Moline, Elmhurst, Evanston, Forest Park, Geneva, Glen Ellyn, Homewood, Kankakee, Lemont, Marseilles, Melrose Park, Moline, Mt. Carroll, Mt. Morris, Naperville, Oak Park, Oglesby, Oregon, Park Ridge, Plano, Rock Falls, Sandwich, and Wilmette.
- ★ The central part of the state, too, was well represented with work at Abingdon, Bushnell, Carthage, Chillicothe, Clinton, Decatur, Galesburg, Gibson City, Hamilton, Lewistown, Marshall, Mt. Sterling, Normal, Peoria, Petersburg, Pittsfield, Rushville, Shelbyville, Tuscola, Virden, and White Hall.
- ★ Farther south, murals and sculpture were installed at Carlyle, Carmi, Chester, East Alton, Eldorado, Fairfield, Flora, Gillespie, Herrin, Madison, McLeansboro, Nashville, O'Fallon, Salem, Staunton, Vandalia, and Wood River.



specific destination in mind, allowing FAP artists more creative freedom.

Although the primary goal of the FAP was to provide employment to out-of-work artists, there were other objectives held by the program administrators. One was to produce a broader national art consciousness. Education, therefore, was another component of the FAP. The government established art centers in rural and urban communities around the country. These facilities, like the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, were places where children and adults could learn about art and how to make it. The centers were used to house changing exhibits of work by FAP artists throughout the country. Combined, these educational strategies helped bridge the gap between art and the American public.

Research, too, played a role in the FAP. The Index of American Design was organized for the purpose of compiling painstakingly accurate paintings—referred to as plates—of decorative and utilitarian ob-

jects representing America's heritage. More than sixty artists in Illinois participated in this project,<sup>6</sup> and the Illinois pioneer settlements of New Salem, Bishop Hill, and Galena offered valuable source materials.

When the FAP disbanded in 1943, the tally of works produced nationally was staggering. The *Final Report on the WPA Program: 1935–1943* indicated the production of 2,566 murals, 17,744 sculptures, 108,899 easel paintings, 11,285 designs for a quarter million fine art prints, 22,000 Index of American Design plates, and 35,000 designs for two million posters by as many as 5,000 artists at any one time.<sup>7</sup> The estimated program expenditure was \$35 million, culminating in a body of work estimated

to be worth \$50 million twenty years later.<sup>8</sup> In Illinois alone the numbers were substantial: more than 200 murals, over 500 sculptures, and almost 5,000 easel paintings by nearly 800 artists.<sup>9</sup> The ultimate value of work created under the FAP cannot, however, be measured adequately by sheer numbers or dollar amounts. Of greater worth is the substantial artistic legacy left for us to enjoy, analyze, and embrace as an important document in a file of American history.

The Illinois State Museum is fortunate to hold a significant collection of works created under the FAP. Nearly five hundred paintings, prints, sculptures, photographs, and examples of applied art serve as a permanent reminder of the artists, the aesthetics, and the conditions during the 1930s and '40s in America. From the collection we can extract the multifarious translations of the American Scene by the artists who were simultaneously building

<sup>6</sup> George J. Mavigliano and Richard A. Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935–1943* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 186–98.

<sup>7</sup> Francis V. 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), 305.

<sup>8</sup> McKinzie, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Mavigliano and Lawson, 214.

## The Illinois State Museum and the WPA

**B**eginning in 1939, the ISM sponsored the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Museum Extension Project in Illinois and thereby acquired workers to fulfill the Museum's growing human-resource needs. The scope of assistance received during this period included the areas of taxidermy; preparatorial assistance; office work; plant collecting, pressing, mounting, and labeling; assistance to the artists, dioramists, zoologists, and paleontologists; label and poster making; and library services. In May 1940, the ISM opened the Modern Youth Museum with the cooperation of the Central Laboratory of the WPA Museum Extension Project. This museum targeted for children—located in the Edward W. Payne House at Second Street and South Grand Avenue in Springfield—featured rotating educational exhibits of dolls representing various cultures, models of transportation modes throughout history, and other miniature dioramas. In turn, WPA workers from the Central Laboratory crafted duplicate exhibits for loan to rural Illinois schools, to benefit curricula.

The growing art department of the Museum also benefited from WPA programs. At a national level, the Federal Art Project organized traveling exhibitions of work by WPA artists from across the country. Paintings, ceramics, illustrations for children's stories, Pueblo Indian pottery designs, and 125 hand-painted illustrations from the Index of American Design were displayed in the Museum's art gallery between 1940 and 1942.

The WPA's most lasting contribution to the Museum came with an allocation of artwork to the permanent collection. Near the end of the WPA—when government attention turned to World War II—a Central Allocations Unit was set up in Chicago to disburse moveable, undistributed artwork from various state projects. The Illinois State Museum served as one of the Unit's repositories for paintings, prints, sculpture, photographs, ceramics, and textiles by artists from not only Illinois but throughout the country. The Museum's WPA collection was later augmented by a large selec-

tion of sculptures donated by Mr. and Mrs. Louis Cheskin in 1967 and a substantial collection of prints from the Illinois State Library in 1983. The works illustrated here—only a fraction of the nearly five hundred pieces contained in the ISM collection—give testament to the thousands of men and women who, under federal sponsorship, were allowed to maintain their creative freedom during a period of economic hardship.



*Workers making dolls for the Historic Costume Doll Series of Illinois Children for the ISM's Childrens' Museum and School Loan Collection, ca. 1940–1, from the Illinois Museum Extension Project (Statewide) report. ISM archive photograph.*





**Todros Geller**

Chicago Towers, 1937. Woodcut on paper, 12 × 9 in. Collection of the Illinois State Museum.

To see additional works from the ISM's WPA Collection, visit MuseumLink Illinois at [www.museum.state.il.us/muslink](http://www.museum.state.il.us/muslink) (click on Art, then Depression Era Art).



**Joseph Vavak**

Give, 1940. Lithograph on paper, 8 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 12 in. Collection of the Illinois State Museum.



**Bernece Berkman**

South Chicago Series #2, 1937. Opaque watercolor on paper, 20 × 30 in. Collection of the Illinois State Museum.



### Frances Badger

Autumn in Illinois, ca. 1936. Tempera on illustration board, 10¼ × 39¼ in. Mural study for the Audy Juvenile Home, Chicago. The blank area at lower left accommodated a doorway on the mural wall. Collection of the Illinois State Museum; gift of the artist.

a visual expression that was distinctly American.

Several works in the collection celebrate the diverse American landscape. The artists shared glimpses of life in the '30s and '40s, whether depicting a rural scene as found in Raymond Breinin's *The Dead Tree*, or an urbanscape such as Todros Geller's woodcut *Chicago Towers*. These two works demonstrate the lack of conformity among artists in establishing a "WPA style." Breinin's depiction is painterly, surrealistic, and sophisticatedly silent.

By contrast, Geller's blocky, abstract forms glorify the strength of urban architecture and exude the dynamic vibrancy of the city.

Other works glorify the American work ethic. Absent in these pieces are the allegorical or mythological figures that dominated earlier European-inspired public art. We see, instead, the immortalization of the everyday worker—the coal miner, the farmer, and the homemaker are represented with respect and admiration. Everywhere we see muscular torsos and enlarged hands, placing special emphasis

on the merits of manual labor. The American worker becomes heroic, a sign of strength and hope in a difficult time. In some cases, such as Walter Paul Robinson's *Horseshoeing*, the artist confronts us with the attributes of grit and determination so characteristic of rural workers. In Bernece Berkman's *South Chicago Series #2*, however, the convoluted composition urges us to empathize with the responsibilities of an urban mother frantically looking after her family.

More sobering are the images of social realism, which document the economic struggles and psychological strains of the era. These artists held nothing back and used their work as a form of social protest. The tone of these works is dark, almost ominous, yet the works draw us in. The outstretched hands and vacant eyes in Joseph Vavak's lithograph *Give*, for example, compel us to confront the sense of helplessness and humiliation prevalent during the era.

Some of the artists employed by the FAP chose to escape the solemn conditions and depict the American Scene in a lighter fashion than the social realists did. In these works we learn how Americans managed to escape the dark days of the Depression through recreation, play, and a few moments of quiet solitude. Frances Badger's mural study *Autumn in Illinois* presents an idyllic, carefree country scene. Gone are the young girls' troubles as they chat cheerfully by the pasture fence. Felix Ruvolo's *Morning*, though more somber, captures his sitter's brief, private escape before facing the trials of the day.



### William Schwartz

Symphonic Forms #40, 1940. Oil on canvas, 30 × 40 in. Collection of the Illinois State Museum.





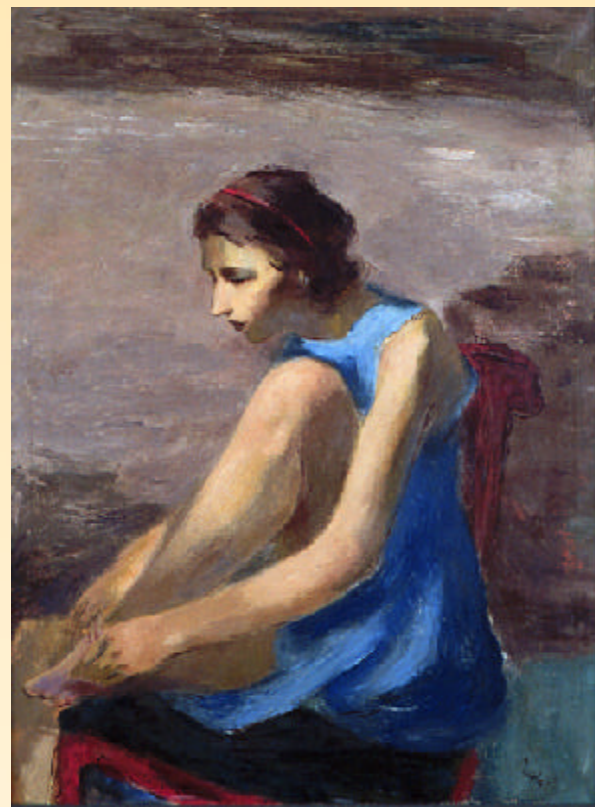
Though much of the work created for the FAP was representational, artists were afforded the freedom to experiment and develop new ways of seeing the world around them. Some of the Illinois artists who had been exposed to Modernism through the 1913 Armory Show in Chicago explored how the new ideas in art might inspire their own work. Laura Slobe's sculpture *Vanity* is a primary example and represents a transitional stage of American art. The title suggests traditional subject matter and the work is rendered in a representational style, yet Picasso's strong influence on early-twentieth-century art is unmistakable. In *Symphonic Forms #40*, William Schwartz liberated his work by daring to seek the intangible through a new level of abstraction.

The works in the ISM collection form only a fraction of the art created in Illinois under federal patronage, yet they provide a fundamental sampling of noteworthy contributions within the state. Fortunately these works have been kept in the public trust for the purposes of research, study, and enjoyment. Conversely, not all Depression-era works survived unscathed. For various reasons, many were covered over, defaced, discarded, or destroyed when popular opinion failed to acknowledge their significance. Renewed interest in this period of American art, however, has recently energized efforts to reclaim WPA works. Many of the murals in Chicago, for instance, have been or are undergoing extensive, thoughtful conservation. The artists of the '30s and '40s gave us an irreplaceable gift: a visual embodiment of their thoughts, their lives, their times. As we strive to honor their artistic legacy, we will preserve a colorful chapter from our cultural heritage. 🐾



#### Laura Slobe

*Vanity*, ca. 1935. Plaster, 27½ × 11½ × 10½ in. Collection of the Illinois State Museum, gift of Mr. And Mrs. Louis Cheskin.



#### Felix Ruvalo

*Morning*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 39¾ × 29¾ in. Collection of the Illinois State Museum.

### Suggested Reading

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