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Art for the People: WPA Prints and Textiles from the Permanent Collection

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Art for the People
WPA Prints and Textiles from the Permanent Collection
Born in Milwaukee, WI in 1908 Agnes Cecelia Jessen Slater grew up to be an artist who could paint, make prints, and work with textiles. She later participated in the Works Project Administration (WPA).

Slater’s *Eskimo* is block printed on cotton with complex repeating patterns. During the time this work was created, Americans were testing the waters with a new style of art. Controversy was in the air about artists taking too much inspiration from Europe, so they started taking inspiration from folklore and indigenous American references. Slater’s piece is a great example of this because of her subject matter. Her patterns going around the tapestry go along with her theme of referencing the nation’s first peoples using the swirl lines and fish because they were such a big part of the culture she was displaying. — Shateanna Stewart
Figure 2: Mildred Emerson Williams (American, 1892-1960), *Washington Square*, 1937, lithograph, 10 x 13in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.30
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks also to our alumni and donors for their support. To make a charitable gift for the Clara M. Eagle Gallery, please contact Tina Bernot in the MSU Office of Development at 270-809-3250 or email cbernot@murraystate.edu.

— T. Michael Martin, Curator and Director of University Galleries, Murray State University

Figure 3: Arthur George Murphy (American, 1906-1991), Steel Riggers — No. 2, 1936, lithograph, 12 x 16in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.44
Figure 4: Harold Knickerbocker Faye (American, 1910-1980), *Locomotive Standing*, 1935, lithograph, 11 x 15in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.46
Figure 5: Beatrice Cuming (American, 1906-1991), *Locomotive*, ca. 1935-43, etching, 8 x 10in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.11

Figure 6: Margaret Lowengrund (American, 1904-1948), *Brick Factory*, 1937, lithograph, 16 x 12in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.34
When the stock market crashed in 1929, the Great Depression made millionaires into paupers overnight. The whole American economy was in ruins. Like many of the nation’s banks, art galleries went bankrupt and closed. At the same time, private patrons of the arts disappeared. The economic collapse put the nation’s arts professionals out of work alongside their blue-collar neighbors. Early on, some relief for unemployed artists came from local, private organizations like New York’s College Art Association. However, widespread support did not come until the political shift that followed the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932. The most important, though not the first, government support for artists came with the establishment of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In the exhibition *Art for the People*, the University Galleries of Murray State University presents works created by the WPA.

Within the WPA, the Federal Arts Project (FAP) supported visual artists and designers. Similar WPA programs supported writers, musicians, and theater performers. In line with the mission of the New Deal, the FAP’s main focus was putting unemployed Americans back to work. FAP support was not direct relief (cash payments). Instead, the FAP supported artists through work projects. For example, FAP-supported artists designed public commissions, produced propaganda posters, taught art classes, and worked in studios throughout the country.

Rather than direct relief checks, the programs of Roosevelt’s New Deal focused on work relief. The tactic of work relief was seen as more “American” than the alternatives. Americans felt that direct relief would be humiliating for the nation’s able-bodied citizens and would ultimately discourage hard work. At the start of the Great Depression, then President Herbert Hoover said “you cannot extend the mastery of government over the daily lives of the people, without at the same time making it the master to their souls and thoughts.”¹ Roosevelt’s programs similarly valued a rhetoric of independence; the importance of providing Americans with support did not merely mean providing them with food and shelter. Therefore, the WPA focused on giving American workers jobs where they could earn an honest wage.

There had been a national program to create visual propaganda during World War One; but for that initiative, artists had largely donated their talents for the war effort in the spirit of volunteerism. Never before the Great Depression had the U.S. Government organized or financially supported artists on a national scale. Preceding the creation of the WPA, government artist-relief projects were limited. Hoover-Era projects mainly included localized, state-administered public art commissions. Largely, this came down to the fact that everyday Americans did not see artists as unemployed workers. However, programs like the 1933-34 Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), changed their...
minds and made the unemployed artist into a figure sympathetic to the American public. As Smithsonian American Art Museum director Elizabeth Broun points out, until the New Deal programs, artists had been “considered marginal ‘extras’ in our society.” These feelings were changed by early stimulus projects like the PWAP. With President Roosevelt’s new programs, artists were reclassified as “workers.” In the eyes of the American public, the artist-worker joined their able-bodied unemployed neighbors in need of employment. This change in perception made it possible for artists to receive public works support.

The projects supported by the FAP, like other WPA programs, were organized to put a large number of unemployed Americans to work in the service of building a stronger nation. For example, FAP artists painted murals for post offices, schools and court buildings; one can still be seen today in nearby Paducah, KY. At the same time, artists were asked to create paintings, sculptures and prints. These artworks were created while working both in community centers and also in their own private studios. Both unknown artists and up-and-coming art superstars received work relief; WPA rosters included important twentieth-century sculptors and painters like Isamu Noguchi, Willem De Kooning, Lee Krasner, Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Thomas Hart Benton and the iconic mid-century American artist Jackson Pollock. In the end, FAP had over 10,000 artists who created over 100,000 easel paintings, 18,000 sculptures, over 13,000 prints, and 4,000 murals, in addition to innumerable posters and photographs.

In addition to putting artist-workers back on the job, the artworks created through the FAP represented a higher cause, too. Their art reflected a contemporary and uniquely American culture. As cultural critic Lewis Mumford described in 1929, “when American taste recognizes that there is more aesthetic promise in a McAn shoe store front, or in a Blue Kitchen sandwich palace than there is in the most sumptuous showroom of antiques...we shall, perhaps, have the opportunity to create from throughout our civilization.” There was an overwhelming feeling in the U.S. that American taste for painting and sculpture reflected European tastes too closely—even artists like Thomas Hart Benton felt this way. Mumford warned that artists had ignored real American aesthetic tastes. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt even commented that “no country comes of age until it appreciates art. No one can really live without it.” Following these ideas, FAP artists were encouraged to build an uniquely American aesthetic.

This new American aesthetic not only tried to look different from European modernism, but it also attempted to picture uniquely American scenes. Aesthetically, artists were guided by the enthusiastic FAP Director Holger Cahill. With his encouragement, artists looked to folk art and American Indian art. This aesthetic was fashionable with the influential Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frieda Kahlo, who were both living and working in the United States at the time. FAP artists used aesthetics derived from the First Nations Peoples to create their new American aesthetic. An excellent example of this can be seen in Agnes Cecelia Jessen’s printed tapestry, *Eskimo* [Figure 1]. Here both the decorative motifs and the subject matter show an interest in
Figure 7: Dori Glosele (American, 20th Century), Viola, ca. 1935-43, etching, 7 x 9in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.7

Figure 8: Otis William Oldfield (American, 1890-1969), Arches of Approach to East, no. 13 from Building the Bay Bridge Series, 1937, lithograph, 14 x 11in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.41
Figure 9: Otis William Oldfield (American, 1890-1969), *Girders Below, no. 5 from Building the Bay Bridge Series #687*, 1937, lithograph, 10 x 14in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.45

Figure 10: William Sanger (American, born Germany, 1873-1961), *Central Park Lake*, ca. 1935-43, etching, 10 x 7in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.9
Figure 11: Harry Shokler (American, 1896-1978), *Gloucester Wharf*, 1937, etching, 7 x 9in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.14

Figure 12: Robert Spray (American, 1910-2000), *Barns*, ca. 1935-43, lithograph, 12 x 18in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.35
indigenous American references. Likewise, the realist aesthetic taken on by many FAP artists allowed for more everyday Americans to understand art. In 1934, American philosopher John Dewey wrote that art did many things but, most importantly, it should serve the real lives of citizens. American art must be functional and educational according to Dewey. The kind of realism displayed in works like Harold Knickerbocker Faye’s lithograph *Locomotive Standing* [Figure 4] showed how FAP artists created easily-readable pictures that were applicable to the real lives of everyday Americans.

Inspiration for new themes for American art came from a number of places. As Mumford had foreshadowed, WPA artists looked to the everyday American market production. An example of this is Margaret Lowengrub’s lithograph titled *Brick Factory* [Figure 6]. Artists also looked to America’s national history to inspire their work. This can be seen in works like Ann Nooney’s *The Poe Cottage* [Figure 15]. Her lithograph depicts the small farmhouse in the Bronx where the American poet and writer Edgar Allan Poe spent the last years of his life. FAP artists also depicted workers laboring, often focusing on public works projects funded by the WPA. As art historian Erika Doss points out, “labor and human productivity” was at the heart of WPA’s mission to create a “nationalist and propagandistic cultural expression” of being American. If the work also represented a WPA building project, so much the better. An exemplar of this theme can be seen in Otis William Oldfield’s *Building Bay Bridge* series [Figures 8 & 9]. Oldfield drew scenes of workers constructing the Oakland Bay Bridge, a joint project between the WPA and the Public Works Administration (PWA). Possibly most important of the new American themes was the depiction of everyday scenes of American life. The land and its people were depicted in order to reflect the triumph of American democracy. Works like Dori Glosele’s *Viola* and William Sanger’s *Central Park Lake* [Figures 7 & 10] show some everyday scenes of American life.

President Roosevelt reportedly said, “one hundred years from now my administration will be known for its art, not for its relief.” As artists created a new American aesthetic, the work of the broader WPA program only grew in importance. There was growing pressure to present a strong and unified American culture to the international public. WPA artwork was at the front lines of this effort as totalitarianism spread across Europe. In 1932, Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany and, soon after, long-time Italian dictator Benito Mussolini signed a non-aggression pact with the Nazis in 1934. At the same time, Joseph Stalin had consolidated control of the Soviet Union and had run out more moderate rivals from the Communist Party.

In the minds of many Europeans, the U.S. was to blame not only for the trans-Atlantic economic collapse but also for the rise of dictators like Hitler. Unlike the Americas’ approach to recovery in the wake of the stock market crash, conservative strategies in Europe, to save rather than spend, brought about political upheaval. The crash represented, for many in Europe, the failure of American culture, not just the stock market in New York. The conspicuous
consumerism of American-style *laissez faire* had been exported to Europe after WWI. Anti-American sentiment was widespread, and Roosevelt was aware of the importance of reversing this image. Therefore, the image of a strong, unified and vibrant American culture created by projects like the FAP was of ultimate importance to international diplomacy.

Both internal and external pressures brought about the American federal government’s insistence that WPA artists represented a strong, unified domestic culture freed from European influence. These values can be clearly seen in the prints and textiles included in the exhibition at the University Galleries at Murray State University. From images of workers to scenes of American small towns, the artworks in *Art for the People* strive to present a new American taste in art. While creating the strong image of an American culture, the programs of the WPA also put thousands of unemployed artists to work. Representing the “Land of the Free,” these scenes of an uniquely-American landscape were both strong and vital to national security both at home and abroad.

8 Saab. 12.
10 Quoted in Broune. 6.
Figure 13: Michael J. Gallagher (American, 1898-1965), *Clifton Heights*, ca. 1935-43, etching, 10 x 14in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.18

Figure 14: David P. Chun (American, 1898-1989), *St. Peter and Paul’s Church*, ca. 1937-42, lithograph, 14 x 10in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.32
Ann Nooney was a New York City artist who actively created prints for the Works Progress Administration program. The Murray State University Galleries are in possession of one of her lithographs, *The Poe Cottage*. Edgar Allan Poe’s cottage, which is depicted in Nooney’s lithograph, was his home during the last years of his life from 1846-1849. The cottage is located in the Bronx. The cottage set the scene for his writing of such great works as “Annabel Lee,” “The Bells,” and “Eureka.” It was during this time in January 1847 that Poe’s wife succumbed to tuberculosis. Poe continued to live at the cottage until his death in Baltimore in 1849. This work of art pays homage to Edgar Allen Poe and his literary work. The print with its dark and light contrasts provides a haunting look into the last years of a brilliant yet tormented American writer and literary critic. The monochromatic feel of the print reinforces the darkness of his writings. — Dawn Attebury
Figure 16: John Worthington Gregory (American, 1903-1992), *The Harbor*, ca. 1935-43, lithograph, 7 x 9in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.39

Figure 17: Albert James Webb (American, b. 1891-?), *June Bugs*, ca. 1935-43, drypoint, 15 3/8 x 11 1/16 in., WPA Loan. 1941.1.4
Figure 18: Oscar Weissbuch (American, 1904-1948), *Cold Spring Harbor in Summer*, ca. 1935-43, etching, 7 x 10in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.15

Figure 19: Joanne Buck (American, 20th century), *The Mailman*, ca. 1935-43, lithograph, 10 x 14in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.48
Figure 20: Marlette Dean (American, 20th century), *Coast Road*, 1935, wood engraving, 5 x 6 in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.25

Figure 21: Ray Bertand (American, 1909-1986), *Women’s College, San Francisco*, ca. 1935-36, lithograph, 9 x 12 in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.49
Figure 22: Max Mongel (American, 20th century), *Bridge Towers*, ca. 1935-43, etching, 12 x 9in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.5

Figure 23: Betty Waldo Parish (American, born Germany, 1910-1986), *Bedford Street*, ca. 1935-43, etching, 10 x 6in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.12
Harry LeRoy Taskey was born in 1892 in the town of Rockford, Indiana. He started his career studying under several known artists at the time such as John Sloan, Robert Henri, and Gustav William Von Schlegell. He studied in the United States and abroad at the Art Students League in New York and in the Grande Chaumiere in Paris. Taskey’s later involvement in the American Veteran Society of Artists in Philadelphia allowed him to be in exhibitions all over the United States and many exhibitions abroad. Taskey was widely known for illustration, block printing, and teaching.

This print is a lithograph; a lithograph is an artwork printed from a stone block onto paper. To create a lithograph, the artist first draws their image onto the stone with a grease pencil or crayon. Then the artist etches the drawing into the stone. Next, water is applied to the surface and the water repels away from the grease drawing. Then ink is applied to the stone and only sticks to where the grease was. Lastly, it is run through a cylinder press to reprint the original image onto paper. — Shanice Ross
Figure 25: David P. Chun (American, 1898-1989), *Landscape*, ca. 1937-42, lithograph, 10 x 14in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.40

Figure 26: Redman Byron (American, 20th century), *Old St. Mary’s — San Francisco*, ca. 1935-43, lithograph, 10 x 8in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.29
Charles E. Pont, a Swiss-American, was born on January 6, 1898 in St. Julien France. Pont grew up in New York where he began his art career in 1932 after having attended Pratt Institute in New York City. Pont was an oil and watercolor painter, as well as a printmaker. He was one of the many artists recruited as a part of the WPA (Works Progress Administration). Pont was also a Baptist Minister and lived all of his life comfortably in New York, up until his death in 1971.

*Europe Bound — The Thomas W. Lawson* was a commissioned woodcut print for the WPA in 1937. The image depicts The Thomas W. Lawson, a large schooner used as a seafaring barge to transport case oil, on her way to London from Philadelphia. This is the schooner's first transatlantic journey. The ship had not been sighted for more than twenty days after their initial departure from Philadelphia and many had thought it to be lost until it appeared in the English channel and was destroyed by storms and raging waters. The only individuals to have survived the wreck were Captain George W. Dow and Edward L. Rowe, an engineer who had been aboard for the trip. The date of the wreck was December 14, 1907, some time after 2 am. A total of 17 of the 19 crew were lost to the sea.

— Jennie Cottrell

**Selected Bibliography**


Figure 28: Bev Pannell (American, 20th century), *Fred’s*, ca. 1935-43, lithograph, 10 x 11in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.61

Figure 29: Barbara K. Warren Weismann (American, 1915-2005), *Dykstra Plaid*, 1941, fiber, 71 x 35in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.75

Figure 30: Dorothy Haagensen Phillips (American, 20th century), *Plant*, 1941, fiber, 72 x 34in, WPA Loan, 1941.1.69