

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

During its years of operation, the government-funded Federal Art Project of the WPA hired hundreds of artists who collectively created more than 100,000 paintings and murals and over 18,000 sculptures. The Project was part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal during the Great Depression (1929-1943). Some of the 20th century's greatest visual artists were employed by the Project under the auspices of the WPA, before going on to create Abstract Expressionist artworks in the post-World War II era. Some of those artists were Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Mark Rothko, Arshile Gorky, Philip Guston, Thomas Hart Benton and Stuart Davis.

Key Ideas

- Under the direction of art critic and curator Holger Cahill, the Federal Art Project operated in all 48 states and instituted divisions for easel painting, murals, sculpture, posters, prints and drawings.
- The Federal Art Project division of the WPA tended to favor figurative art rather than abstract art; a trend that resulted in many of the century's greatest abstract painters (Rothko, Pollock, Krasner, etc.) creating rather uncharacteristic art.
- One of the largest outreach programs of the FAP was constituted by nearly 100 community art centers that provided art classes for children and developing artists.
- Together these programs created a new awareness of and appreciation for the visual arts in America, and contributed heavily to the development of many artists who would go on to define the Abstract Expressionist era following the end of World War II.

DETAILED VIEW:

Origins of the WPA and Federal Art Project

In the mid 1930s, the United States remained at the center of a global economic depression. In an effort to provide economic relief to citizens, particularly artists, who were having trouble finding work, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration (WPA), created under Federal Project One. Several months later, a subdivision of the WPA called the Federal Art Project (FAP) was developed.

Prior to this, Roosevelt had made other attempts to provide relief for artists, including the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), which only lasted a year, from 1933-1934. The Treasury Department Section of Painting and Sculpture was created in 1934 after the PWAP was dissolved, but it was also unsuccessful.

Several U.S. politicians had originally envisioned a fusing of art and patriotic American values. This inspired President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to begin the Works Progress Administration in the spring of 1935, and its subprogram, the Federal Art Project, several months later. The FAP was designed to both supplement artists' incomes and, more importantly, fund patriotic art projects in an effort to rally dispirited American citizens.

For artists to be considered for the Federal Art Project, they first had to apply for Home Relief to confirm they were impoverished, and then submit samples of their work to demonstrate they were actively creating art. Once approved, an artist's stipend was \$24 per week.

Only a few months after the Federal Art Project was announced, more than 1100 artists were working for the WPA, many in the Mural Division, which included artists like Stuart Davis, Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky.

The Early Years

One of the greatest success stories during the early years of the FAP was that of Arshile Gorky. Between 1935 and 1937, Gorky worked for the Mural Division and was paid a little over \$2000, or the equivalent of \$103.40 per month.

In November 1935, head of the Mural Division, Burgoyne Diller, assigned Gorky to draw some sketches for the Administration Building of Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, NY for a mural devoted to aviation. The stipulations for the mural, dictated by the FAP's regional director, stated that it should incorporate "early legends and stories of man's aspiration to fly in a romantic period ... [portraying] the first attempts to build flying machines, through a combination of painted and photo murals." Having never traveled in an airplane, and appalled by the notion of realistically depicting aeronautic history, Gorky wanted to give viewers a *sense* of flying rather than simply depicting people in airplanes.

Originally, Gorky developed a ten-panel piece entitled *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations*, which was to be divided onto four separate walls. The

murals would also include photographs of aeronautical subjects by Wyatt Davis (Stuart Davis' brother), intermixed with Gorky's painting.

A few months after the commission, Gorky had produced well over 50 sketches for possible mural designs. As his ideas for the project developed further, Gorky was able to convince the FAP that it would be better if he and Davis work on separate murals. Gorky had come to believe that incorporating photography wouldn't benefit his own vision. The project's location was soon changed from Bennett Field to Newark Airport, considered at the time to be one of the more advanced centers for aeronautic technology. Several painted murals were selected and unveiled at the airport in June 1937, none of which included any photographs by Davis.

Simultaneously, while Gorky and others were getting back to work, on December 27, 1935, the WPA opened the Federal Art Project Gallery at 225 West 57th Street in New York City. Included in one of its first exhibitions were rare watercolors by Jackson Pollock.

Beginning some time in late 1929-early 1930, Willem de Kooning was hired to design window displays for a chain of New York shoe stores called A.S. Beck. With the development of the FAP, de Kooning quit A.S. Beck (because as an unemployed artist he qualified for FAP assistance). In late 1935, while employed with the FAP, de Kooning was first introduced to Harold Rosenberg, who at the time was working as an assistant to muralist Max Spivak.



By 1936, a little more than 6000 artists were employed by the Works Progress Administration, and Adolph Gottlieb had also joined the Artists' Union and Easel Division of the FAP. In subsequent years, Mark Rothko submitted a series of figurative portraits for the Treasury Relief Art Project (another subdivision of the WPA), including *Untitled (Two Women at the Window)* (1937) and *Untitled (Subway)* (1937).

In the summer of 1937 the U.S. government announced that all WPA workers had to be legal U.S. citizens. This legally excluded Mark Rothko (Latvian), Arshile Gorky (Armenian) and Willem de Kooning (Dutch) from participating further in the FAP, although it would take some time for the federal government to track down all non-citizen WPA workers. Gorky and Rothko continued to work after the late-summer announcement. De Kooning, however, opted to resign from the WPA after only a year and a half of employment.

The Last Years Prior to WWII

In January 1939, the Federal Art Project began laying off some of its artists. Within that same year, Arshile Gorky became an American citizen and once again was eligible to receive WPA grants, but Mark Rothko (still a non-U.S. citizen) was dropped from the FAP on August 17th.

The next year, the WPA instituted a new rule stipulating that artists be rotated, which meant they were to be laid off for at least one month after 18 consecutive months of service with the Federal Art Project. As a result of the new rule, Jackson Pollock was temporarily let go, but was re-hired in October 1940.

The WPA Dissolves

On New Year's Day, 1943, Lee Krasner was dismissed from the WPA, representing one of the first of many FAP artist lay-offs of the year. Jackson Pollock was officially let go less than a month later. On June 30th, the Federal Art Project disbanded and ceased providing funds of any kind to artists.

In December 1943, the government auctioned off thousands of WPA-funded paintings in a warehouse in Queens. Paintings weren't sold individually, but by the pound. Reportedly, a local plumber purchased a large number of paintings in bulk for the purposes of insulating pipes with used canvases, but he discovered that when the pipes got too hot, the melting paints produced an odd smell. Herbert Benevy, the owner of a local frame shop, also purchased a large number of paintings for a total of \$3 a canvas. Among those he bought were paintings by Milton Avery, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock.

Legacy

As the WPA was established in the 1930s, when Social Realism was the preferred artistic style, the Federal Art Project tended to favor figurative rather than abstract art. This trend proved difficult for many artists such as Gorky, Krasner and de Kooning, all of whom tended to resist external pressure to paint in a prescribed manner. Interestingly enough, the work of artists like Rothko and Pollock during the WPA years reflects such outside dictates.

In all, nearly 200,000 artworks were created under the Federal Art Project, yet many of those works have since become lost or were destroyed after the WPA auctioned off thousands of paintings in 1943, when all federally-funded art programs were dissolved.

Quotes

"I had to scheme to get work for abstract artists. I succeeded some of the time, like getting Gorky transferred from the easel project to my mural project and obtaining for him a commission to paint walls at Newark Airport. In negotiating for the work I had to agree that it would not be abstract."

- Burgoyne Diller

"The Project was terribly important. It gave us enough to live on and we could paint what we wanted. It was terrific largely because of its director, Burgoyne Diller. I had to resign after a year because I was an alien, but even in that short time, I changed my attitude toward being an artist. Instead of doing odd jobs and painting on the side, I painted and did odd jobs on the side. My life was the same, but I had a different view of it. I gave up the idea of first making a fortune and then painting in my old age."

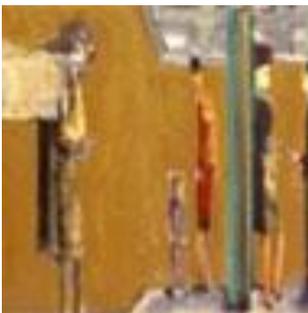
- Willem de Kooning



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Major Works:



Title: *Untitled (Subway)*

Artist: Mark Rothko

Description: This uncharacteristic painting by Rothko is a clear indicator of an artist still searching for his own style. Rothko had lied on his WPA application by claiming he was unemployed (the top prerequisite for consideration), when in fact he was actively teaching art classes and his wife (also a WPA artist) had her own jewelry business. This

untitled work is only one of an estimated three paintings Rothko produced while employed by the WPA, all of which were figurative portraits. *Untitled (Subway)*, however, does offer a glimpse of Rothko's later signature style. If the painting were viewed vertically, the support beams and people on the subway platform starkly contrast against the dull-brown backdrop, and presage the artist's pure and balanced abstractions of muted color and shape.

Year: 1937

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Title: *Landscape with Steer*

Artist: Jackson Pollock

Description: This bleak black-and-white lithograph was sketched in the realist tradition of Pollock's former teacher Thomas Hart Benton, and is also uncharacteristic when considering Pollock's later body of work. In Pollock's paintings, lithographs and watercolors of this era, the unifying factor is that many of his natural forms - whether made of earth, fire, water or air - eventually vanish in the form of winding, slithering trails, hinting at the compositional style of Cézanne. Pollock was employed by the FAP for nearly as long the WPA subdivision existed, and despite rarely meeting his deadlines, he produced a body of work that was indicative of the Social Realism of the era. By the early 1940s, when the WPA began laying off artists, Pollock had committed himself entirely to painting pure abstractions.

Year: 1936-37

Materials: Lithograph, composition

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York