



ALL IMAGES FROM THE EXHIBITION 1934. OIL ON CANVAS, SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

# 1934

A S T I M U L U S P A C K A G E F O R T H E S O U L B Y M E G H A N H O G A N

**In the go-go economy of the Roaring Twenties, a picture like the one on the left may have seemed a paean to the wonders of mass production. Yet, painted as it was just a few years later—in the midst of the Depression—it becomes a scene of stoic resolve, men as hardened as the machine they serve. Economic boomtimes had become factory downtimes, and plants like this one sat silent across the country. So it is also a picture of hope, commissioned by one of FDR’s first programs in response to challenging times, an attempt to restore faith for Americans who had lost everything—stocks, bonds, and savings along with their jobs and confidence in the system.**



**LEFT:** Man melds with machine in Douglass Crockwell’s *Paper Workers*. **ABOVE:** Max Arthur Cohn’s *Coal Tower* dwarfs a trio of diminutive dock hands.

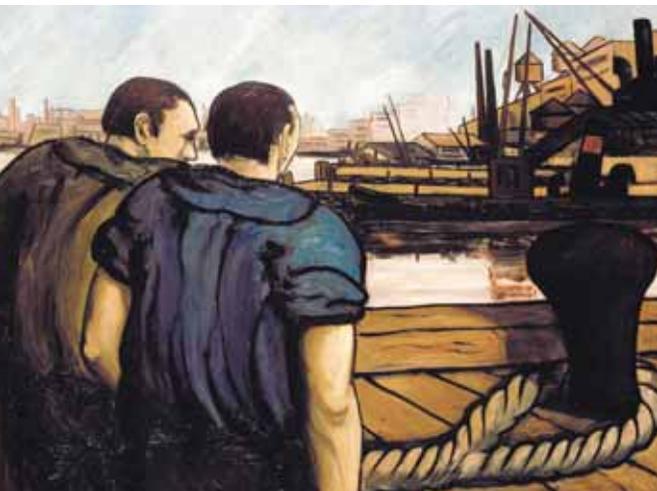
**BUT IF OUR "WORST HARD TIME" WAS ONE OF HUNGER AND STRUGGLE, IT WAS ALSO A TIME OF GREAT ART.**

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is offering a look back at that time in paintings created by the Public Works of Art Project, launched in the first year of FDR's administration. *1934: A New Deal for Artists* features 56 works from the initiative, which started in late 1933 and ended just seven short months later. This year marks its 75th anniversary.

"We'd like visitors to enjoy seeing more than 50 wonderful paintings by artists who are too little known, and perhaps reflect on how these artists were encouraged to paint their world with such verve and intensity," says Elizabeth Broun, director of the museum. She adds that the exhibit itself was a response to economic hard times, relying exclusively on the museum's own collections rather than incurring the expense of borrowing. The show's debut, in the same week that Congress debated President Obama's stimulus package, added a touch of irony. "Although our exhibition was conceived as a historical tribute to the New Deal, it turned out to be a timely review of a 'stimulus for artists' created early in President Franklin Roosevelt's administration," Broun says. "Suddenly, 'history' seemed entirely current!"

Times were hard not just in America, but everywhere. Germans were turning to Hitler and Stalin was conducting a reign of terror in Russia. Violence and suicide rates jumped upwards, along with the ever-increasing unemployment figures. American Communists hoped aloud that their government would fail. The country could have gone the way of Eastern Europe, but instead it

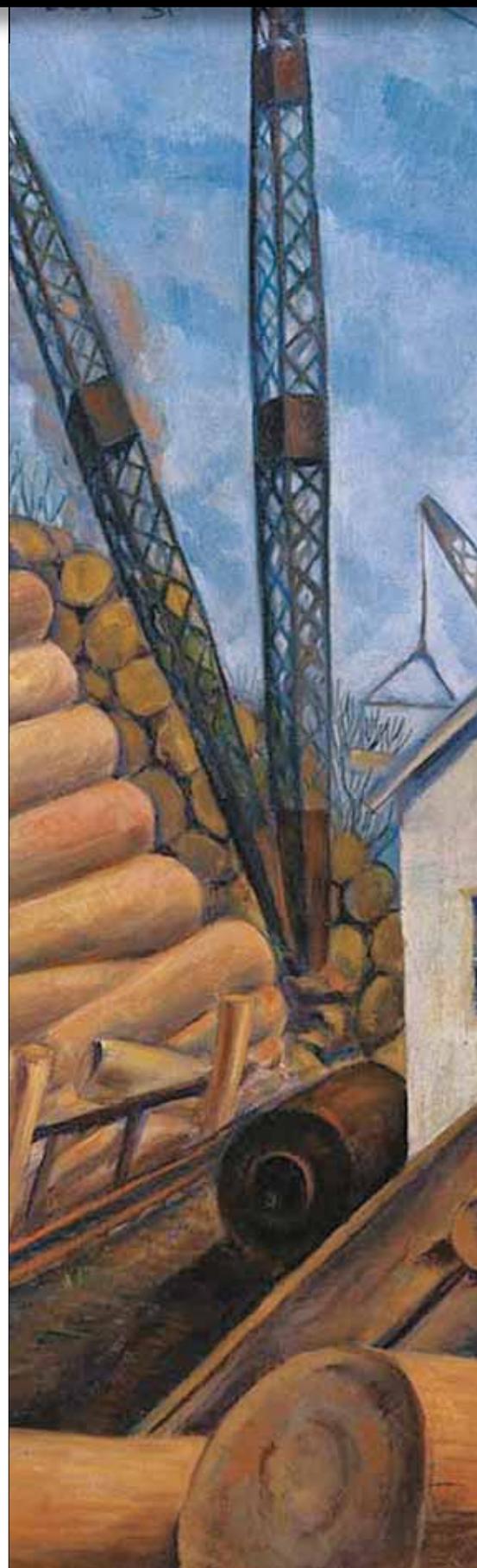
**NOT EVERYONE WAS THRILLED ABOUT FEDERAL FUNDS GOING TOWARDS ART.**



**ABOVE:** Pino Janni's *Waterfront Scene*. As Janni painted, a fight broke out among hundreds of longshoremen hungry for work. **RIGHT:** William Arthur Cooper's *Lumber Industry*. Most southern mills shut down in 1929 and stayed that way for three years. Cooper, an African American minister, captured this scene just as federal construction projects began to revive the industry.

The program's premise was simple: artists would create a work for public display and, in return, get a paycheck, anywhere from \$15.00 to \$42.50 per week. And five years into the Depression already, it wasn't a moment too soon. The economic downfall hadn't just appeared out of nowhere—American farmers had been having problems for years. But by 1933, after the second stock market crash and with the unemployment rate at an all-time high of 25 percent, even the wealthy—who "had danced the Charleston as the riffs of the Jazz Age mocked the miseries of the poor," writes Kennedy—were struggling.

chose optimism. It is said that in every crisis exists opportunity. And who better at providing the opportunity than Franklin Delano Roosevelt? New Deal programs were a "lifesaver," writes Roger Kennedy, director emeritus of the National Museum of American History and former director of the National Park Service, in the exhibit catalogue's essay. "The New Deal was built upon the precept that the pursuit of happiness of each citizen was only possible in freedom from want, fear, hunger, and hopelessness. This exhibition presents art that demonstrates what wonders of creativity may occur, even in the worst of times, once necessity is met and hope renewed."







**THE PROGRAM WAS THE BRANCHCHILD OF EDWARD BRUCE, A BUSINESSMAN AND LAWYER** turned painter turned government administrator, with a passion for everything art and a motto of “You can do anything you want to do.” After excitedly drawing up a blueprint for the project, he got on the phone determined to make it happen. And on the afternoon of December 8, 1933, in the ballroom of his house on F Street in Washington, DC, a host of officials and art museum directors gathered, among them Charles Moore, chairman of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, Forbes Watson, renowned art critic, and meeting chairman Frederic Delano, the president’s uncle. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt knitted in a chair as she listened. Also there were dozens of artists and art collectors. Many had questions, but all had open ears. And though there would be differing views later on federal funds for art, at that meeting everyone more or less agreed to move forward.

The meeting ceremoniously ended with a banquet, and Bruce happily sent out a press release at 3 in the morning. The project was formally announced just four days later. “Painters were getting it, people were on to it,” says George Gurney, the deputy chief curator at the Smithsonian

**1934 WAS A BLEAK YEAR. YET THESE PICTURES ARE NOT BLEAK . . . THEIR AYE-SAYING ASSERTS UNQUENCHABLE CREATIVE LIFE AT A TIME WHEN EVERY EFFORT THE PEOPLE MADE TO GET THINGS RIGHT AGAIN SEEMED TO FAIL. —ROGER KENNEDY**

American Art Museum. “Things happened amazingly quick back then.” Sixteen regional committees, comprised of 600 museum administrators, art instructors, and community residents, were soon formed across the country, tasked with hiring artists and assigning projects. While there weren’t enough jobs to go around in any profession, artists arguably had it as bad as anyone. “Artists suffered because they were pretty much dependent upon private patrons,” says Victoria Grieve, assistant professor of history at Utah State University and author of *The Federal Art Project and Creation of Middlebrow Culture*. And the wealthy weren’t buying art.

Although they needed to earn a living like everyone else, artists were often not seen as “real” workers, partly because average Americans had little exposure to art. Fine art was seen as very European, and millions had never been to museums or concerts and thus had little understanding of how art could impact their lives. But the artists knew. “The soul and heart of human endeavor,” is what Mount Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum called art in a letter to a New Deal administrator urging funding. “To music, the charm of letters, the color and mystery of Innis and Millet—the power of Angelo or the burning words of Tom Paine . . . that’s [what] can coax the soul of America back to interest in life.”

The program wasn’t just about a paycheck; it was a chance for artists to do something new. There were no hard and fast rules. The only guideline was to capture “the American scene.” Even artists like Reginald Marsh—a regular cartoonist for the *New Yorker* who didn’t need the money—lined up for the prized commissions. Some even donated their work. “They were very excited to be thought of as workers along-

**LEFT:** Earle Richardson’s *Employment of Negroes in Agriculture*. Richardson, one of only about ten African-American artists in the program, planned to continue the “Negro theme” in murals for Harlem’s libraries, along with artist Malvin Gray Johnson. Both died before starting. **RIGHT:** Julia Eckel’s *Radio Broadcast*. Radio ownership grew from 12 to almost 30 million, serving escape over the airwaves.

side the other workers and not just idealistic dreamers, but people with families to support and productive work to do,” says Ann Prentice Wagner, the exhibit’s curatorial associate. While only 3,750 were hired, over 15,000 works were produced during the program’s short existence. While this exhibit only features paintings, the artists also created murals, sculptures, prints, posters, and photographs.

The program paved the way for longer lasting federal art programs such as the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project (1935-43), the Treasury Relief Art Project (1935-39), and the Section of Fine Arts (1934-43). Under their wings thrived initiatives such as the Index of American Design (for watercolorists), the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project (producing about 1,000 books and brochures), and the Farm Security Administration (which captured some of the most vivid photographs in the nation’s history, such as Dorothy Lange’s *Migrant Mother*). The breadth of work produced collectively from 1934 to 1942 is truly amazing: 100,000 paintings, 18,000 sculptures, 13,000 prints, and 4,000 murals.



**BUT FUNDING WAS NOT ALWAYS AN EASY AFFAIR, PUBLICLY OR ADMINISTRATIVELY.**

Not everyone was thrilled about federal funds going towards art. Some complained that the programs were “boondoggles.” *Time* magazine described the art programs as “violently controversial.” Harry Hopkins, administrator of the Civil Works Administration, a short-lived subdivision of the Federal Emergency Relief Act established by President Roosevelt in 1933, was in charge of funding and initially obtained half of it through “official U.S. moneylender” Jesse Jones, chairman of the Reconstruction Finance Commission. The rest came from the bespectacled Harold Ickes,

**A LARGE GRAY PLUME OF SMOKE LOOMING OFF IN THE DISTANCE WARNS THAT EVEN THE PROMISED LAND HAS ITS DANGERS.**

Secretary of the Interior and director of the Public Works Administration. Ickes, one of the staunchest advocates for the still-young National Park Service, was very much a supporter of the arts. When the new Interior headquarters building was constructed in 1936, he had its walls covered in murals, bas-relief, panel work, and paintings.

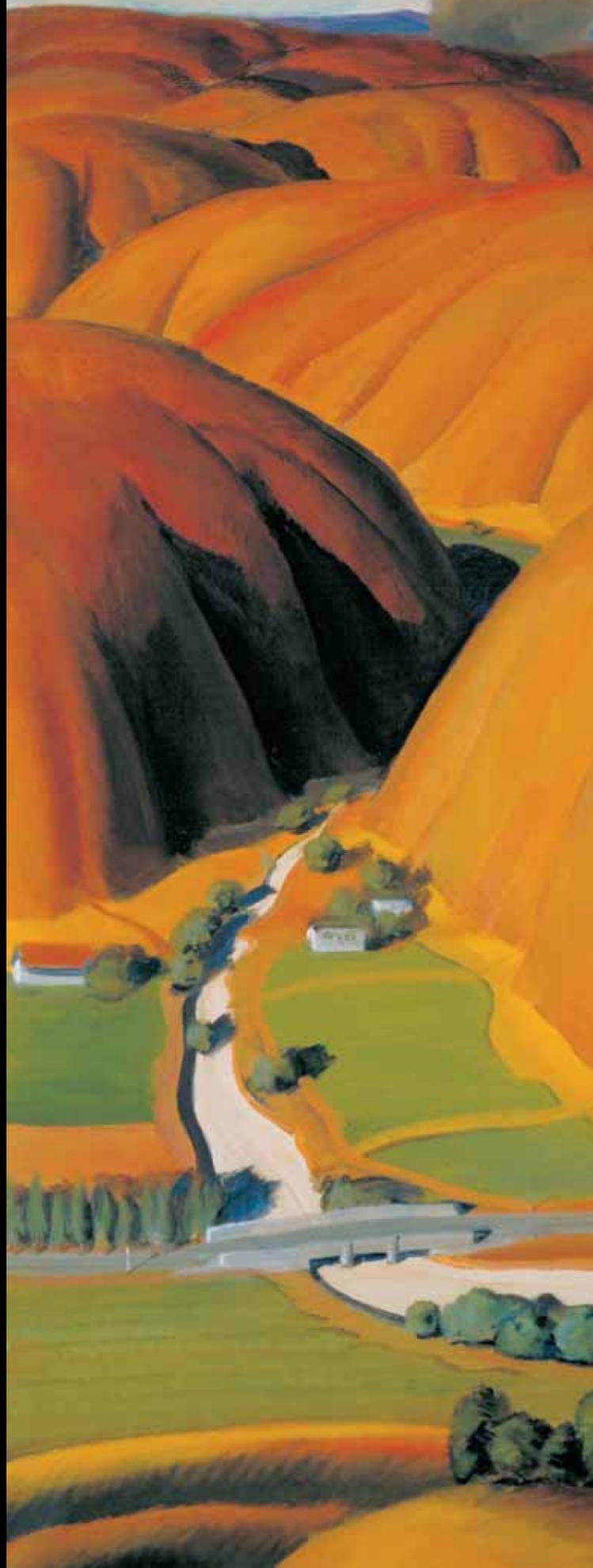
Early on, Hopkins and Ickes let each other do his own thing. But, as time went by—and this first program was followed by others—the two spent a lot of time sparring over projects, and direction. Ickes, whose stance against corruption had earned him the nickname “Honest Harold,” favored a trickle-down approach with money going to multi-million-dollar projects such as water and sewer systems, hospitals, schools, and highways that would, in the long run, benefit lots of people, with art as part of the mix. “In the long run” was one of Ickes’ fond phrases. Hopkins wanted to see immediate results and direct payouts. “People don’t eat in the long run, they eat every day,” was his argument. President Roosevelt brushed the differences aside. His response was “Why not? [Artists] are human beings. They have to live.” He must have known how significant the programs would be, because he once claimed, “One hundred years from now my administration will be known for its art, not for its relief.”

**WITH THE PROGRAM’S START IN MID-DECEMBER, THE ARTISTS SET OUT TO FIND THE American scene in the dead of winter. The cold lent a stillness and sense of isolation to many of the paintings, underscoring their poignance. Several, such as Karl Fortress’ *Island Dock Yard*, show activity, yet no one is around. In *Lumber Industry*, a chute delivers tree trunks to a sawmill, but the painting is also devoid of human life. Still, artist William Arthur**

**RIGHT: Ross Dickinson’s *Valley Farms*, a portrait of his native California. The land is green and fertile—unlike the Dust Bowl plains that many had fled—but the mountains are dry, rife with the risk of fire.**

Cooper shines a ray of hope on a devastated industry. “The fact that the wood is piled up and work is going on was something that would really be celebrated,” says Wagner. “You’re starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel.” Says Roger Kennedy in the exhibit catalogue: “1934 was a bleak year. Yet

these pictures are not bleak. They defy depression. Their aye-saying asserts unquenchable creative life at a time when every effort the people made to get things right again seemed to fail.” The vibrance of America’s melting pot (a good number of the artists were immigrants) comes to life in Daniel Celentano’s *Festival*, a painting that captures a place much like New York City’s Italian Harlem, an area better known as







ALICE DINNEEN  
1934

Spanish Harlem today. As a Catholic procession marches towards them, festival-goers dance joyously in the street while nearby food vendors sell pizza, meat, and fish. In Morris Kantor's *Baseball at Night*, the crowd enjoys an evening game at a country club in West Nyack, New York. The club also sponsored boxing and wrestling matches to provide affordable entertainment for the public.

Perhaps the most popular mode of escape was radio. It was cheap, you didn't have to go anywhere to hear it, and the programming offered news, commentary, live music, variety shows, and of course, Roosevelt's famous fireside chats. Julia Eckel's *Radio Broadcast* omits the visual distractions that would have appeared in a real scene—such as scripts—allowing viewers to focus directly on the performers. Several musicians play their instruments and sing in the background, while a woman in an olive green dress, the lead actress, waits to say her lines.

Many paintings feature scenes from New York City and its surrounding areas, since that's where many artists lived, but the exhibit does show landscapes across America. New Yorker Earle Richardson, one of the program's few African American artists, gives viewers a taste of the Old South in *Employment of Negroes in Agriculture*. Although African Americans are shown barefoot doing the exhausting work of picking cotton, there is a sense of strength and pride. "The fact that they come right up to the foreground, particularly that this woman confronts you, makes you really look

**ALTHOUGH THEY NEEDED TO EARN A LIVING** LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, ARTISTS WERE OFTEN NOT SEEN AS "REAL" WORKERS, PARTLY BECAUSE AVERAGE AMERICANS HAD LITTLE EXPOSURE TO ART.

at them as equals," Wagner says. In *Valley Farms*, Ross Dickinson brings alive his native California, the promised land where many Okies went to escape the Dust Bowl and find better jobs and farmland. "That's where all the *Grapes of Wrath* people were going," Gurney says. A large gray plume of smoke looming off in the distance warns that even the promised land has its dangers. The risk of fire is captured by large orange-hued peaks looming over green patches of land, highlighting the contrast between the stark dryness of the mountains and the fertile irrigated valleys.

**A FEW ARTISTS PAINTED SCENES THAT SEEMED TO HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH AMERICA**, at least on the face of it. Alice Dinneen's *Black Panther* lounges comfortably surrounded by palms, prayer plants, elephant ears, and a bright red caladium. The artist's feline model was likely a captive at the Bronx Zoo, and Dinneen found inspiration for the surroundings through repeated visits to the New York Botanical Garden. The result is an escape to a lush forest of fantasy, just as in Paul Kirtland Mays' *Jungle*, where deer and monkey-like animals frolic in an imaginary world. Mays, a muralist for cinema landmarks such as the Paramount and Grauman's Chinese Theater, saw his career shattered by the stock market crash of 1929. His vision is perhaps straight out of Hollywood. "It's more like an escape from the American scene," Wagner says.

Some works showed a lesser known, seemingly untouched America. In E. Martin Hennings' *Homeward Bound*, two Native Americans at New Mexico's Taos Pueblo—one of the country's oldest continuously inhabited Indian communities, now a world heritage site and national historic landmark—quietly walk in the snow, wrapped in their traditional blankets, just as they might have done for hundreds of years before the Depression.

**MANY OF THE EXHIBIT'S PIECES SIMPLY SHOW PEOPLE BUSY WITH WORK—A LOT OF IT** physical labor. In *Waterfront Scene*, a Pino Janni painting, two hulking long-shoremen eagerly await a cargo ship on a dock along New York City's East River. Jacob Getlar Smith's *Snow Shovelers* is a wintry scene of men out with shovels searching for snow-covered streets and sidewalks to clear. Some are appropriately attired, clearly accustomed to the work; others, smartly dressed in office clothes, are obviously used to sitting behind a desk. The painting is a stark reminder that the Depression affected people from all walks of life, throwing them into unexpected circumstances. The Civil Works Administration hired the shovelers as part of the New Deal, says the exhibit label. The men were probably grateful just to have a paycheck, no matter how unfamiliar or difficult the work.

Tyrone Comfort's *Gold Is Where You Find It*, which was chosen to hang in the White House, sounds a similar theme. Wedged under a low makeshift ceiling, wearing only shorts and boots, a sweaty miner looks suffocatingly cramped as he bores holes in the wall. Mining did not die during the Depression, despite its harsh realities, in part because precious metals held their value, and the price of gold actually increased. Some long-closed mines reopened as the hope of striking it rich spread across the West.

The theme of work as identity is perhaps best portrayed by Paul Kelp's *Machinery (Abstract #2)*. "You have a little man down here and he is kind of dwarfed by the machines above," Gurney notes. The face-



**LEFT:** Alice Dinneen's *Black Panther*. A few artists used the idea of capturing the American scene as merely a jumping-off point. Here, Dinneen transports her feline model—likely a captive in the Bronx Zoo—to a jungle escape. "It's a number of instances where the artists are painting something that they couldn't get support and patronage to do previously," Wagner says. **ABOVE:** Paul Kirtland Mays' *Jungle*. This work is even more fantastical; only the black buck on the far left is real—the rest are imaginary.

less worker, the smokeless smokestacks, the lack of product—the painting raises a lot of questions about what is going on in it, and what is not. “It appears that things are working, but what they’re doing, no one ever knows,” he says.

The scene doesn’t seem real because it isn’t. German-born Kelpé did not visit any factories. As an abstract artist, he wanted to create a painting about the working class and technology. He ran into problems putting across that vision, though, because both Bruce and the regional committees had quality standards and they generally considered abstract art beneath them. In the end, to get his painting accepted, Kelpé introduced elements of realism—hence the wheels, towers, and buildings. Still, like many abstract works, it revels in its contradictions.

**SOME CRITICS OF THE PROGRAM ARGUED THAT ADMINISTRATORS ONLY WANTED TO fund masterpieces.** The program’s primary theme was, arguably, a bit restrictive. “The American Scene excluded radical types of abstract art because the artist, in effect, was required to limit his or her creative activity to matching up some visible element of the environment with a picture that recapitulated the same,” writes Karal Ann Marling in *Wall-to-Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*. To ensure quality, some artists were dropped if they didn’t live up to standards, and others were hired specifically because they were already proven commodities.

Censorship was an issue too, notably in the case of the murals painted for San Francisco’s new Coit Tower, an art deco structure built to honor volunteer firefighters at the top of Telegraph Hill. It was the program’s largest project, involving 25 artists who had all submitted designs to the regional chairman. Just weeks before the tower was to open, however, there was a surprise when the technical advisor, himself one of the muralists, neglected to monitor what his fellow artists were doing. A couple of them had inserted references to communism, a protest against the con-

**ONE HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW MY ADMINISTRATION WILL BE KNOWN FOR ITS ART, NOT FOR ITS —FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT**



**ABOVE:** Jacob Getlar Smith’s *Snow Shovellers*, one of the few downbeat pictures, illustrating the harsh cold and sad reality of people having to take any jobs they could. **RIGHT:** Paul Kelpé, a German immigrant, was compelled to add elements of realism to his *Machinery (Abstract #2)*, one of the program’s few abstracts, reflecting American faith in technological progress.

troversial censoring of Diego Rivera on the other side of the country. Rivera, a famed Mexican artist, was in the middle of painting *Man at the Crossroads*—a 63-foot-long mural showcasing the themes of industry, science, socialism, and capitalism in the lobby of New York City’s Rockefeller Center—when building managers objected to his image of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. Rivera refused to remove it, and the entire work was secretly demolished with axes in the middle of the night, outraging artists across the nation. One Coit Tower muralist argued that what the errant artists had painted—a hammer and sickle and a Karl Marx tract—was part of the American scene: “The paramount issue today is social change—not industrial or agricultural or scientific development.” The communist references were mysteriously painted over before the opening, but the issues of censorship and public input would re-emerge powerfully in similar projects of later decades.

In June 1934, the program was abruptly cut short as its \$1.3 million budget expired. It concluded with an exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art featuring 500 works. The Roosevelts attended, and even though FDR claimed not to have much of an eye for art, he selected 32 paintings to hang in the White House (7 of them are in the 1934 exhibit). Soon, other federal officials wanted works for their buildings. “There was a certain amount of infighting for things,” Gurney says. “The program was a rousing success.” Many of the paintings in this retrospective were ones that wound up in offices occupied by the National Park Service, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Department of Labor, before being sent to the Smithsonian in the 1960s, a better place to take care of them, it was thought. The works also graced the walls of schools and libraries across the country.

**GRIEVE POINTS OUT THAT NOT ONLY DID THE INITIATIVE EXPOSE AVERAGE AMERICANS TO art—enhancing its stature as a profession—but along with fellow Depres-**

sion-era programs also laid the groundwork for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities—both introduced by President Kennedy in the 1960s—as well as GSA’s Art-in-Architecture program, which stipulates that federally owned buildings must include a commissioned work of art. “The legacy is still there in ways that aren’t often recognized, even today,” Grieve says.

So all this makes *1934: A New Deal for Artists* a fitting recognition for the program, long overdue. “As these paintings come to us again three-quarters of a century later, they help us remember—as Franklin Roosevelt thought we would,” writes Roger Kennedy.

**1934: A New Deal for Artists will be on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, until January 3, before commencing a three-year national tour.**

**contact point** **web** Smithsonian American Art Museum *1934: A New Deal for Artists* <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2009/1934>



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