

For the People:
American Mural Drawings of the 1930s and 1940s,
a look inside a public art movement, January 12-March 11, 2007
The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar

Louis Schanker (American 1903-1981)

Federal Art Project, Works Progress Administration

Mural Study for New York World's Fair Medicine and Public Health Building 1938

Oil on canvas, 14 x 28 inches, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

POUGHKEEPSIE, NY — During the 1930s and early 1940s, a flowering of mural painting in the economically depressed United States took place, resulting in thousands of murals decorating the nation's buildings. Many artists, who had often been isolated from public society, sought at that time to become a significant part of it, as in Mexico where artists had established a politically inspired movement in wall painting. Largely spurred during the Great Depression by President Franklin Roosevelt's ambitious New Deal programs, artists took part in competitions to create murals in post offices or other government properties. They were paid through public or private wages, to paint murals across the country for museums, hospitals, high schools, housing projects, colleges, music halls, even ships and night clubs, among numerous other public places.



James Daugherty (1887-1974), Music: Study for "American Rhythm" (detail)

American muralists in this era followed the Renaissance model and made a series of different drawings in their work process, including sketches of individual figures, compositional drawings in both black and white and color, as well as full-scale drawings made for transfer to the wall. The new exhibition *For the People: American Mural Drawings of the 1930s and 1940s*, presents approximately thirty drawings, paintings, and sketchbooks used in preparation for making murals during this period, as well as numerous archival photographs of both completed murals and works in progress. The exhibition features such varied and noted artists as Charles Alston,

Milton Bellin, James Daugherty, Willem de Kooning, Olin Dows, Arshile Gorky, Marion Greenwood, Juanita Rice Marbrook Guccione, Rockwell Kent, Anton Refregier, Lewis Rubenstein, Andrée Ruellan, Louis Schanker, Ben Shahn, and Judson Smith.

For Vassar College, interest in acquiring mural drawings from these decades began over thirty years ago, and now the college's Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center has in its permanent collection over 60 preliminary sketches for murals of the New Deal. While a majority of the works in the exhibition come from the permanent collection of the Lehman Loeb Art Center, there are notable loans from the Archives of American Art, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York, Plattsburgh (NY) State Art Museum, and private collections.

As a theme for the exhibition, "for the people" suggests democratic, open values directed toward every citizen, a social ideal closely aligned with the notions of the New Deal, according to curator Patricia Phagan. "This was an era when national identity played an overriding role in Western culture, and especially so in American art. In the midst of a devastating depression, the identity of the nation became of overwhelming concern, especially for Roosevelt's New Deal administration with its broad work programs to aid the unemployed and re-build faith in the nation's democratic ideals. Artists, writers, photographers, folklorists, and others employed by the federal government or working on their own documented and interpreted American life, paying special attention to distinctive cultures, traditions, and histories," said Phagan, the Philip and Lynn Straus Curator of Prints and Drawings.

These issues of national identity were invariably tied to audiences, observed Phagan, though the original audiences are no longer intact as a viable group. "Who were the original audiences for these murals, why were particular themes chosen, and how did artists go about conceptualizing their designs? Attempting answers to these questions is integral to the exhibition. The one constant is that where a mural was placed provided the audience and the strategy for the work," she said.

The most popular aesthetic approach to the American mural during this period was an accessible, realistic style called the American scene, perhaps most recognizable today in the work of Thomas Hart Benton. This manner of painting was encouraged by government projects such as the Public Works of Art Project and the Section of Painting and Sculpture, which sponsored murals for post offices and several other government properties. A group of drawings in the exhibition are examples of this vital way of interpreting the everyday world. It includes Milton Bellin's large, full-scale charcoal from 1940, *Office Scene*, rooted in an illusionistic realism he learned at the Yale School of Fine Arts. Bellin made the study for a five-panel mural for the main building (Davidson Hall) at Teachers College of Connecticut in New Britain, now known as Central Connecticut State University. As artist-in-residence at the time, he chose models for his murals from the college population, his audience. In *Office Scene*, the final design for his panel on business education, he portrayed women students either busying themselves with duties or lost in reverie.

Andrée Ruellan's sunny entry for the Special 48 State Mural Competition evolved through her love of light and color, and the direct observation of people at the heart of American scene

painting. The Section of Fine Arts had invited artists to submit unsigned designs for forty-eight post offices across the country. In Ruellan's oil sketch, farmers and children engage in activities across an open landscape lively with brushed colors in a narrative meant to connect directly to the Delhi, NY public in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. Ruellan made her sketch expressly for the lobby of the Delhi Post Office in rural New York, though another design was ultimately selected.

These straightforward American scene drawings and paintings are outnumbered in the exhibition by works that, while emphasizing specific locales, draw upon other ways of seeing, including humorous and political cartoons, politics, and European modernism.

Closely related to the American scene approach is the area of cartooning, since both American cartoons of the early twentieth century and the roots of the American scene lie in magazine illustration, where so many American artists received their early training. The highly readable shapes and lines of cartoons became a staple of American magazines and newspapers in the 1920s, a golden age of American cartooning, and they made an early impact on several artists whose works are in the exhibition. For instance, James Daugherty, in his American scene murals for Stamford (CT) High School, made studies that reach back to his days as a cartoonist at the *New Yorker* (where as "Jimmie the Ink" he created drawings dense with scenes, patterns, and caricatures). *Music*, a Stamford sketch by Daugherty in the exhibition, has a jumping rhythm that celebrates differing American musical forms, including spirituals, jazz, opera, and folk. Made for the school's music auditorium, Daugherty expressly chose students and faculty as models to solidify his connection to the local audience.

As with Daugherty's murals for Stamford High School, the vast majority of American murals during this period were made for local audiences with themes tied to regional history, contemporary life, or the land. For the nationwide competition to paint the history of San Francisco in the Rincon Annex of the San Francisco Post Office, Anton Refregier chose to depict a range of historical scenes for his extensive mural series. In his working drawings, he sometimes relied on the cartoon languages of concise images and class symbols to hone his design. In one Refregier sketch on view, a capitalist fights with other San Franciscans in a web of colliding lines, participating in a local riot over the question of the U.S. Civil War – the sketch implies this was an issue that affected people throughout the city.

Other artists in *For the People* also looked to cartoons for inspiration. As one of his sketchbooks in the exhibition shows, the longtime Vassar art professor Lewis Rubenstein (1939, 1946-1974) relied upon his cartooning roots when making quick sketches of a 1932 hunger march to Washington, DC. Rubenstein grew up in Buffalo, NY, began publishing cartoons as a teenager in the 1920s for the *Buffalo Evening News*, and went on to contribute cartoons to such outlets as the *Harvard Lampoon*. Interestingly, his spontaneous sketches of the hunger march to Washington were an eventual source for the fresco Rubenstein and Rico Lebrun devoted to this event, which the two painted in 1933 at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum.

Many artists of the time also became embroiled in political and international issues. With the dire economic straits that so many of them experienced during the Great Depression, these artists saw capitalism as having failed a large part of American society. They also grew alarmed at rising

military forces and war in Europe, and works by a few artists in the exhibition were inspired by these specific concerns. For instance, Refregier executed a section on fascism and war for his San Francisco murals, showing Nazi book burning and the final defeat of Nazism by the Allies (a study for this work is on view).

While most of the exhibition's mural studies were made with American audiences in mind, *For the People* also includes studies conceived for Mexican audiences by Marion Greenwood, an American who became engaged with Mexico's politics and federal art patronage, and who was the first U.S. woman to paint murals for the Mexican government. For her mural at Morelia at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, she resolved to create an original work from her strong affinity for the area's indigenous people – indeed, the national identity of the Mexican Indian was essential for Greenwood in this mural, *Landscape and Economy of Michoacán*. Her final study was drawn to scale and is shown in the exhibition.

Greenwood's original expressionist design for her next mural in Mexico, *Industrialization of the Countryside*, to be painted for the Mercado Abelardo Rodríguez Civic Center in Mexico City, was soon replaced with the more compressed and composed drawing that is exhibited. This second version features stylized figures of revolutionary Mexican farmers, workers, and soldiers. It was the famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera who advised the Mercado mural program, invited Greenwood and her sister Grace to participate in the large, multi-artist project, and approved the second design. An archival photograph in the exhibition also documents the vigorous panel that was the centerpiece of Greenwood's mural.

Greenwood's murals in the Abelardo Rodriguez Market in Mexico City reverberate with both a boldness of line and color, and a deep interest in the social welfare of the Mexican people. Elsewhere in the exhibition, a similar boldness of design and interest in the heritage of one's audience is seen in the Charles Alston drawing *Magic in Medicine*. Here the African-American artist was inspired by the stylized, rhythmic forms of African sculpture. Alston made this study – interpreting traditional African healing rituals – for one of his two murals at Harlem Hospital, commissioned in 1936 by the Federal Art Project of the New Deal's Works Project Administration (WPA).

European modernism also became a filter through which several artists in the exhibition conceptualized their mural drawings. Cubism and Surrealism, for example, were powerful influences on some of these mural studies. Refregier worked with cubist-derived, angular shapes in his competition drawings for the Rincon Annex of the San Francisco Post Office, several of which are in the show. Daugherty used synchromism in a preparatory watercolor, *The Epic of New England*, made for his high school mural series in Stamford, CT. The synchromist theory involved the application of contrasting colors and was derived from the intense colors of the French Fauves and the color-rich cubism of the Delaunays in Paris. With brilliant colors and twisting forms in *The Epic of New England*, Daugherty placed Puritans, abolitionists, and Native Americans into a frenzied modernist collage recounting the region's pioneer past. However, he also bared an ugly episode of history in his sketch. His startling depiction of a slave anchors the left-hand side of the drawing.



Arshile Gorky (b.Armenia 1905-1948), Study for Entry for Unexecuted Mural, Marine Transportation Building

Arshile Gorky used cubist and biomorphic abstraction to present the futuristic, industrial shapes and symbols of an American ship, in his one sketch on view. Made for a large international fair that focused on "the future," his rejected design was created for the dining room of a ship for the Marine Transportation Building at the New York World's Fair of 1939. Vassar's painting on view is a section of an early study for the proposed mural.

Like the sketch by Gorky, the exhibition's early study by the famed abstract expressionist painter Willem de Kooning was a U.S. Maritime Commission competition entry. It pictures a young de Kooning standing on an isolated dock, attended by a seagull and billowing drapery. The abstruse and mysterious work was submitted for a ship mural, and the design carries odd, irrational juxtapositions of elements, inspired by currents of Surrealism prevalent then in New York.

In the end, all of the drawings shown in *For the People* were prepared for the audiences that would ultimately see the mural – whether sailors, students, tourists, or men and women who bought stamps at their local post offices. Products of idealistic thoughts, these murals most often communicated the features or history of a locale with that local audience in mind, though issues on national and world stages were sometimes suggested or confronted. In the process, the artist truly worked outside of herself, researching and studying and making a number of sketches along the way to arrive at the mural on the wall. Though these drawings are complicated in their development and topicality, they remain quite vital.

For the People: American Mural Drawings of the 1930s and 1940s is generously supported by the Smart Family Foundation, Inc. The exhibition will be accompanied by a 16-page publication, authored by curator Patricia Phagan.

Exhibition Lecture and Reception (free and open to the public)

Exhibition reception

Saturday, February 3, 4:00 p.m.

Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

124 Raymond Avenue, Poughkeepsie

(845) 437-5632, <http://fllac.vassar.edu>

Exhibition lecture

"New Deal Art Revisited: The Splendid Muralists of Dutchess and Ulster Counties and What They Told Me", a talk by Karal Ann Marling, professor of art history at the University of Minnesota

Saturday, February 3, at 5:00 p.m.,

Taylor Hall, Vassar College

124 Raymond Avenue, Poughkeepsie

(845) 437-5632, <http://fllac.vassar.edu>

Exhibition and Mural Tours (free and open to the public)

Tour of the exhibition *For the People: American Mural Drawings of the 1930's and 1940's*

Tuesday January 30, 2007

12:00 p.m.

Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

124 Raymond Avenue, Poughkeepsie

Led by Patricia Phagan, curator of *For the People: American Mural Drawings of the 1930s and 1940s*, and the Philip and Lynn Straus Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

Due to space limitations, please call Kelly A. Thompson (845) 437 -7745 or contact her via email at kethompson@vassar.edu to RSVP or for more information.

(845) 437-5632, <http://fllac.vassar.edu>

Tour of murals in the Poughkeepsie Post Office

Saturday, February 24, 2007

3:00 p.m.

55 Mansion Street, Poughkeepsie

William B. Rhoads, professor emeritus of art history at SUNY-New Paltz, will discuss the post office murals, the building's architectural design, as well as FDR'S involvement in their creation.

Space is limited, so please contact Kelly Thompson at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center for more information (845-437-7745, kethompson@vassar.edu). Free transportation to the

Poughkeepsie Post Office from the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center will be available, but reservations are required.

(845) 437-5632, <http://fllac.vassar.edu>

Tour of the Main Street Mural

Saturday, March 3, 2007

2:00 p.m.

Main Street (between Catharine and Market streets), Poughkeepsie

Artist Franc Palaia will discuss his contemporary "Main Street Mural," a historical and colorful

depiction of storefronts that have been well-known staples in Poughkeepsie over the last 100 years. This is one of many outdoor murals that Palaia has painted.

Free transportation to the Main Street Mural from the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center will be available, but space is limited. To make reservations, or for further information, contact Kelly Thompson at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center (845-437-7745, kethompson@vassar.edu). (845) 437-5632, <http://fllac.vassar.edu>

Tour of murals in the Rhinebeck Post Office

Tuesday, March 6, 2007

10:30 a.m.

6383 Mill Street, Rhinebeck

William B. Rhoads, professor emeritus of art history at SUNY-New Paltz, will discuss the post office murals, the building's architectural design, as well as FDR'S involvement in their creation. Space is limited, so please contact Kelly Thompson at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center for more information (845-437-7745, kethompson@vassar.edu). Free transportation to the Rhinebeck Post Office from the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center will be available, but reservations are required.

(845) 437-5632, <http://fllac.vassar.edu>

About the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center was founded in 1864 as the Vassar College Art Gallery. The current 36,400-square-foot facility, designed by Cesar Pelli and named in honor of the new building's primary donor, opened in 1993. The Lehman Loeb Art Center's collections chart the history of art from antiquity to the present and comprise over 16,000 works, including paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, photographs, and glass and ceramic wares. Notable holdings include the Warburg Collection of Old Master prints, an important group of Hudson River School paintings given by Matthew Vassar at the college's inception, and a wide range of works by major European and American twentieth century painters. Vassar was the first U.S. college founded with a permanent art collection and gallery, and at any given time, the Permanent Collection Galleries of the Art Center feature approximately 350 works from Vassar's extensive collections.

Vassar College is a highly selective, coeducational, independent, residential liberal arts college founded in 1861.

Individuals with disabilities requiring accommodations or information on accessibility should contact Campus Activities Office at (845) 437-5370. Without sufficient notice, appropriate space and/or assistance may not be available.

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