

THE AMERICAN GALLERIES

Back to Work



Oregon and the
New Deal Art Projects

Back to Work

The Portland Art Museum's collections include nearly 400 works of art created under the auspices of the U.S. Government during the Depression era of the 1930s. These paintings, prints, photographs, and sculptures are tangible reminders of a unique experiment in government patronage of the arts that sparked discussion about the role of art and artists in American society and over federal support for the arts, issues that are still much debated today.

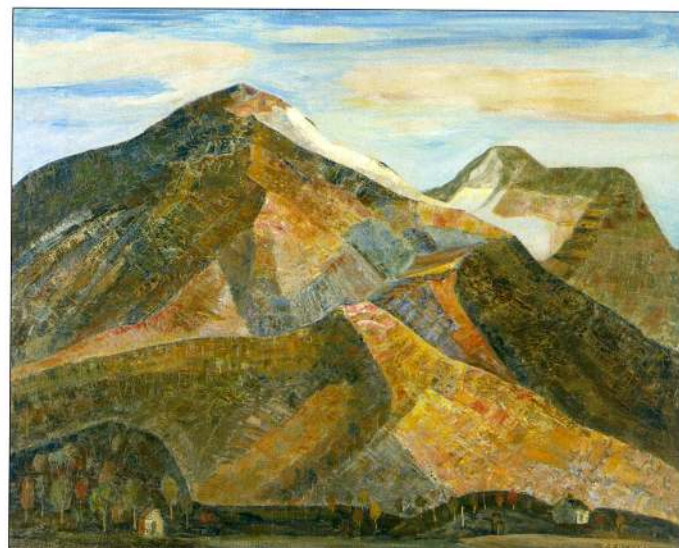
The following essay recounts the story of the Federal Art Projects and, more specifically, the history of the visual arts projects in Oregon. This history is for the most part unwritten, though a flurry of dissertations, articles, and exhibitions over the past two decades has begun the work of unearthing and interpreting the scattered records of this bold experiment in government support of the visual arts.¹

Back to Work is the third in a series of brochures that explores ideas and themes relating to the Portland Art Museum's American collections. Funding for the series is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation.

A New Deal for Artists

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in January 1933 the nation's economy had been devastated by the stock market crash of 1929, subsequent bank closings, and a complex confluence of other factors that put some 13 million people out of work. The Roosevelt administration created a sweeping series of government projects designed to stabilize business and agriculture and to provide assistance for Americans at all levels of society. The resulting network of relief programs, called the New Deal, ranged from farm subsidies to large public works projects, and most importantly, jobs programs.

Among the professions listed as eligible for work relief was the category of "artist," an unusual inclusion for the time as art was generally considered a luxury and the creation of art was not considered "real" work. However, in the atmosphere of social unrest in the 1920s, artists had begun to organize and fight for their rights as workers, and it is primarily through the efforts of groups such as the Artists' Union in New York that art projects were incorporated into the New Deal programs.² Sympathetic government administrators and influential friends of the Roosevelts also provided enthusiastic support.



Charles Heaney
The Mountain, 1938 (WPA)
Oil on canvas

Cover
Carl Morris, *Lumbering*, 1943 (detail) (Section)
Tempera on canvas
U.S. Postal Service, Eugene, Oregon
Photo by Kent Peterson, courtesy of the Oregon Festival of American Music

≡ The Public Works of Art Project ≡

The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), established in December 1933 under the umbrella of the Civil Works Administration, was the first of four projects to employ artists during the Depression. Edward Bruce, an administrator at the Treasury Department and an early proponent of



Dora Erikson
Dakota Hotel, ca. 1934 (PWAP)
Oil on canvas

public art projects, was appointed national director. Bruce appointed sixteen regional directors who, in turn, organized local committees that helped identify worthwhile projects and artists capable of completing them. In the interest of avoiding controversy and of promoting a uniquely American style, Bruce insisted that PWAP artworks should focus on American Scene painting

(that is, scenes from the daily life of America's rural and working classes) and avoid the experimental or unconventional. Though the PWAP ended in April 1934 after only five short months, it employed around 3,700 artists and resulted in more than 15,600 works of art.

≡ The Section of Fine Arts ≡

By the fall of 1934, Edward Bruce had helped organize a second arts project through the Treasury Department. Called the Section of Fine Arts (also the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, or Section), it was funded through a one-percent allotment for the artistic decoration of new public buildings. Section commissions were initially awarded by advisory committees, then later through anonymous national competitions such as the 1939 Forty-eight State Mural Competition for the decoration of state post offices.

The Section closely monitored commissioned works, stressing American Scene painting and demanding changes if there were criticisms. Artists were expected to visit the site where their work would be installed and talk to local people about themes that might be of interest to them. By July 1943, when the Section ceased to function, 1,124 mural contracts and 289 commissions for sculpture had been awarded at a total cost of around \$2.5 million.

≡≡≡ The Federal Art Project ≡≡≡

The third and largest of the art projects fell under the administration of the Works Progress Administration. The WPA was authorized under the Emergency Relief Act of 1935 and was mainly concerned with construction work. However, its director, Harry Hopkins, believed strongly in the WPA's role as a relief organization and worked to extend its programs to as many types of workers as possible. As federal administrator of the WPA, Hopkins created four art projects (collectively known as Federal One) under the Division of Professional and Service Projects: the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Writers' Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Art Project.³

From the outset, the unwieldy bureaucracy within the WPA hampered the Federal One projects. The national, regional, and state-level administrators for the relief aspects of the WPA programs often clashed with the administrators who oversaw the artistic and technical

direction of the art projects over whether the first priority of the art projects should be work relief or a commitment to artistic competence and quality. All agreed, however, that the art



Lucia Wiley
Buffalo Hunt, 1940 (Section)
Egg tempera on board

projects should aim to increase the public's appreciation of the arts and to integrate the arts into daily life in the hope that communities would continue to support the various programs once national funding was withdrawn.

The programs created under the Federal Art Project (FAP) were wide-ranging. The largest of these offered materials and a weekly wage to painters, sculptors, and printmakers in exchange for all the work they created. These works became the property of the government and were dispersed to various public institutions such as schools, community centers, libraries, and museums. Another large national effort was the Index of American Design, begun in 1935 to record American material culture from each of the states. In addition, the FAP supported a number of smaller projects such as stage set production, furniture making, and various educational programs.

Federal Art Centers were also established across the United States, offering free art classes and activities,

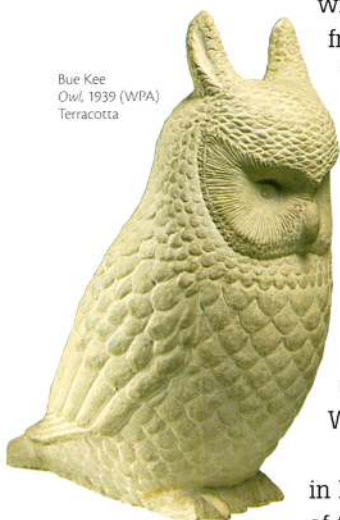
exhibiting works created by FAP artists, and providing space for community resources such as libraries and research facilities. Centers were required to have both popular and financial backing from the community before they were approved. In all, some eighty-four centers were opened across the country between 1935 and 1942.

The FAP was the most controversial of the federal visual arts projects. Hopkins did not believe in restricting artistic content and he allowed artists to experiment with a variety of subjects and styles, exposing the projects to attack from social and political conservatives. Further, a number of FAP artists were members of Socialist, Communist, or worker's rights organizations, and in 1938 writers, actors, and administrators from the Federal Theater and Writers' projects were summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee to discuss their ties to Communist organizations. As a result of these inquiries, in September 1939 Congress voted to end Federal One, permanently closing the Theater project and consolidating the other art projects under direct WPA supervision.

When America entered WWII in December 1941, eighty percent of the Federal Art Project's resources were redirected toward the National Defense Program, and by March 1942 it had become the Graphic Section of the War Services Program. All statewide art projects were closed by February 1, 1943. At its peak, the FAP employed approximately 5,000 artists and by the time it ended had generated more than 108,000 easel paintings, 2,500 murals, 18,000 sculptural works, 200,000 prints, and 2 million silk-screen posters.⁴

≡ The Treasury Relief Art Project ≡

The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) was established in July 1935. Though organized under the aegis of the Treasury Department, it was administered and funded by the WPA. Olin Dows, and later Cecil Jones, of the Treasury Department headed the TRAP, though they ultimately answered to Edward Bruce. The TRAP was a modest program for the embellishment of small federal buildings such as post offices, and differed from the Section in that it required that seventy-five percent of the artists hired be



Bue Kee
Owl, 1939 (WPA)
Terracotta

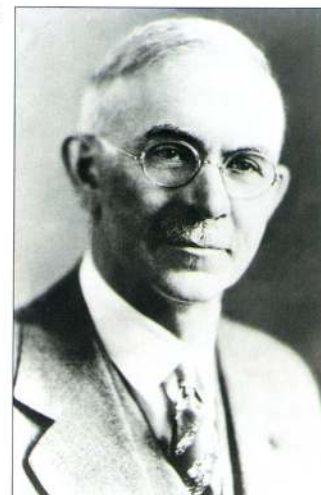


Arthur Runquist
Lunch, 1939 (WPA)
Oil on canvas

registered on the relief rolls.⁵ Like the Section, the TRAP avoided controversial subjects in its commissions. Before it closed in June 1939, the TRAP employed approximately 400 artists at a total cost of around \$735,000 and resulted in 89 murals, 43 sculptures, and approximately 10,000 easel paintings.

Oregon's Federal Art Projects

With the advent of the Great Depression, Oregon's already weakened economy suffered further serious job losses. Demonstrations and labor protests were common, including strikes by the Longshoreman's Association in 1934 and lumber workers in 1935. Oregon artists, who like their contemporaries elsewhere relied heavily on private sales, found little market for their work. The Federal art projects offered many Oregonians their first opportunity to subsist as professional artists.⁶



Burt Brown Barker, Historian and Vice-President of the University of Oregon, 1936
Oregon Historical Society (OrHi CN 000446)



C. S. Price
Riders of the Range, 1934 (PWAP)
Oil on canvas

≡≡≡ The Public Works of Art Project in Oregon ≡≡≡

The regional administrator for Oregon's Public Works of Art Project was Burt Brown Barker, vice president of the University of Oregon as well as a respected lawyer, noted historian, and philanthropist. Barker had settled in Portland in 1928, leaving behind a successful law career in Chicago and New York to devote the remainder of his life to public service. He accepted the appointment as director for Region 16 of the PWAP for the symbolic annual salary of one dollar.

Region 16 included Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana. Barker's first assignment was to organize a regional committee for each state to help identify projects and eligible artists. For Oregon, he chose a committee of four: Robert G. Dieck, an engineer and past chairman of the Portland Art Commission; Ellis Lawrence, dean of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Oregon; Harry Wentz, a Portland artist and teacher at the Museum Art School; and Judge Henry M. Tomlinson, a judge for the City of Portland and past president of the Society of Oregon Artists. Armed with an initial budget of \$32,500, Barker and the committee launched projects to decorate public institutions as well as more specialized projects including wood carvings of wild animals for the School for the Blind, a memorial to Congressman Nicholas J. Sinnott at Crater Lake National Park, and a series of images documenting construction of the Bonneville Dam to name a few.

In all, some 116 artists were employed on the Oregon PWAP during its brief existence, including such well-known

names as Sidney Bell, Eliza Barchus, William Givler, and Percy Manser. Currently, there are no accurate counts of work produced for the Oregon PWAP, but an exhibition of artworks created by Oregon PWAP artists was held at the Portland Art Museum from May 15 to May 30, 1934 and included 108 oil paintings, 72 watercolors, 59 sculptures and woodcarvings, and 39 works in other media.⁷

≡≡≡ The Oregon Section of Fine Arts and Treasury Relief Art Project ≡≡≡

Since Section commissions were awarded by the central office in Washington, D.C., the Oregon Section of Fine Arts consisted only of local committees that were responsible for overseeing the content of community commissions. Nine Oregon Section commissions were awarded, all for the decoration of post offices. The first contract—a single mural in the St. John's Post Office—was awarded in the spring of 1936 to artist John Ballator and the work was installed by June of that year. Ballator later completed a second mural for the building under the Treasury Relief Art Project, the only TRAP commission awarded in Oregon.

The St. John's mural was quickly followed by other commissions: Rockwell Carey's mural for the Newberg Post Office, completed in November 1937, and murals for the Ontario (Edmond Fitzgerald), East Portland Station (Paul Grellert), and Grants Pass post offices, all commissioned in 1938. The Grants Pass project was shared by two artists, Louis Bunce and Erich Lamade, who each painted one wall, harmonizing their subjects and palettes so that the murals would present a unified whole.



Carl Morris
Agriculture, 1943 (Section)
Tempera on canvas
U.S. Postal Service, Eugene, Oregon
Photo by Kent Peterson, courtesy of the Oregon Festival of American Music

No additional Section mural commissions were awarded in Oregon until 1941, when Jack Wilkinson, then living in San Francisco, was hired to paint a mural entitled *Cattle Roundup* for the Burns Post Office. Wilkinson was a city boy with little knowledge of cattle drives or ranching, and his work was subjected to much commentary and revision while it was underway. Letters on file at the National

Archives reveal that Wilkinson responded to criticism both from the Washington office of the Section and from Burns residents by making such changes as shortening branding irons, repositioning ropes and hands, and adjusting other details to make his images more true to life.⁸

The final three Section commissions in Oregon were Andrew Vincent's 1942 mural *Builders of Salem* for the Salem Post Office, a mural by Lucia Wiley for the Tillamook Post Office, and Carl Morris's two murals for the Eugene Post Office, installed in June 1943. All of these murals survive today, though some of the buildings no longer serve their original purpose.

≡ The Federal Art Project in Oregon ≡

In October 1935, Holger Cahill, director of the Federal Art Project, once again enlisted Burt Brown Barker's help,



Minor White
The Patch, ca. 1938 (WPA)
Gelatin silver print

appointing him the FAP's regional director for Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana. Barker quickly found that one of the greatest challenges for FAP administrators was balancing the numbers of artists who were on the relief rolls with those who were not. When the FAP was first authorized, administrators were required to hire ninety percent of the artists

from among those registered for government relief. In Oregon, Barker soon discovered that quite a few artists, including many of his favorites from the PWAP, would not register for relief (some out of pride, some because of other personal considerations) and so were not eligible for the project. Barker began pressuring Cahill to change the relief/nonrelief ratio to fifty percent. Other state directors also complained, and by December 1935 they had convinced the Washington office to allow twenty-five percent of the artists hired to be nonrelief. However, this exemption was short-lived and by November 1936 the FAP had returned to the ninety-percent requirement.

Job quotas for each state also fluctuated regularly, making it hard to keep artists employed at the required relief/nonrelief ratios and still complete projects. Oregon's original quota was twenty-eight artists, a number which climbed steadily through 1938 and early 1939 to reach a

high of sixty-three. By mid-September 1939, however, quotas were once again reduced and continued to decrease throughout the remaining life of the Oregon FAP.

FAP administrators' constant struggles with quotas and relief ratios stemmed from the fact that financing for the WPA was in constant jeopardy of Congressional cuts; many projects were saved only through last-minute allocations. Artist resistance to registering for relief further complicated the situation in Oregon. Oregon's administrators quickly learned how to juggle quotas and ratios in order to hire as many nonrelief artists as possible.



Oregon WPA Administrators, from left: E. J. Griffith; Joseph Danysh (Regional Director, West Coast); (Mrs. E. J. Griffith); Margery Hoffman Smith; Charles Val Clear
Photo courtesy Friends of Timberline

The WPA state administrator for Oregon was E. J. Griffith. He and Barker were generally polite to each other, but clashed periodically over personnel and other internal organizational issues. Gladys Everett, a respected Portland attorney, served as assistant state director of the FAP until it was reorganized in 1939, at which time she became state director of the Women's and Professional Division of the WPA, which included the Art Project.

In the summer of 1936, while Barker was out of the country, Griffith hired Margery Hoffman Smith as assistant state director, a choice that would have a lasting impact on the Oregon FAP. Smith, an interior decorator trained at the Museum Art School in Portland and the Art Students League in New York, was president of the Oregon Art and Crafts

Association, an organization her mother, Julia Hoffman, had founded. She eventually replaced Barker as state director of the Oregon Federal Art Project when the FAP was reorganized in 1939.⁹

Smith is the person most closely identified with the FAP/WPA in Oregon due to her work on Timberline Lodge, the largest and best known of the art projects. When the federal government authorized construction of a ski



Virginia Darcé
Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, 1936 (WPA)
Stained glass mural, Blue Ox Bar, Timberline Lodge
Photo courtesy Friends of Timberline



Virginia Darcé
The Market, 1938 (WPA)
Tempera on board

lodge on Mt. Hood in 1935, the Oregon FAP proposed to decorate the lodge with murals and paintings, woodcarvings, and iron work. Smith organized workshops of weavers, ironworkers, and woodcarvers to create all the interior decorations and furnishings for Timberline. In addition, artists such as Darrel Austin, Charles Heaney, C. S. Price, and Howard Sewall were hired to create paintings and murals for various rooms in the lodge. Other artworks included stained-glass murals by Virginia Darcé, glass mosaics by Thomas Laman, watercolors by Karl Feuerer and Dora Erikson, and linoleum murals by Douglas Lynch. In all, some 200 artists and craftspersons were employed during the Timberline project and it consumed most of the resources of the Oregon FAP during the sixteen months it was under construction.

In the spring of 1938, the Oregon FAP launched another major effort: the creation of community art centers. Salem was chosen for the first center, housed in an old high school that had been remodeled into gallery and office spaces. An artist and art teacher named Charles Val Clear was chosen to run the Salem Art Center and it opened on June 5, 1938. The first two teachers at the center were Louis Bunce (who later became assistant director) and Charles Lemery, though other artists from Oregon and New York later joined them. Eight small branch galleries were eventually established in the Salem public schools as an adjunct to the art center.

The enormous success of the Salem Art Center sparked interest in establishing other art centers in Oregon. The next was located in Gold Beach, then an isolated town of about 400 people and the smallest community in the nation in which a WPA art center was organized. The center was

underway by September 1939, under the direction of Arthur Wasser. In March 1940, a proposal was also submitted for an art center in the Grande Ronde Valley. The La Grande Art Center opened on May 12, 1940; Jane Robinson and, later, photographer Minor White were its managers. Unfortunately, despite widespread local support, the centers folded once government sponsorship ended and WWII began.

The other types of projects pursued by the artists and artisans of the Oregon FAP were wide-ranging and benefited a variety of public institutions. Commissions for the University of Oregon included iron gates for its baseball field, murals by Albert and Arthur Runquist for the library, and a series of prints by Gordon Gilkey that documented construction of the new library. The University of Oregon Museum of Art also later received an allocation of prints and paintings by FAP artists. Schools across the state were decorated with paintings and sculptures, including murals by C. S. Price at Pendleton High, Ed Quigley's recently restored work at Irvington School, George Bendixon's mural for West Linn High, and Thomas Laman's sculpture of Benjamin Franklin for Franklin High School. Oregon State University, Linfield College, and Doernbecher Memorial Hospital also benefited. The easel paintings, sculptures, and prints that were not produced for specific projects were distributed to public institutions in Oregon and nationwide.

When the focus of the art projects turned toward the war effort with the advent of WWII, Oregon's artists worked to provide furnishings and artworks for military facilities, most notably Tongue Point Naval Air Station in Astoria (now decommissioned).

To date, there is no complete inventory of the works produced for the Federal Art Projects either nationally or in Oregon; many of them are now lost or were discarded when the projects ended or institutions closed. Still, a large variety of work was distributed to museums, libraries, schools, and universities when the projects came to a close. The Portland Art Museum's collection includes some 400 works from the Federal Art Projects, by both Northwest artists and those from other states, consisting of 228 works on paper, 88 photographs, 66 paintings, 11 textiles, and 7 sculptures. The first works arrived in 1934, but the majority were allocated



Louis Bunce
Lumber Yard, 1936-1942 (WPA)
Oil on canvas

in 1942 and 1943 through the efforts of the Museum's director, Robert Tyler Davis.¹⁰ Most of these works are painted in a naturalistic American Scene style, though there are also a number that experiment with the vocabularies of modernism and abstraction.

==== The Legacy of the Federal Art Projects ====

The overall impact of the Federal Art Projects was predominantly positive. Most artists remember the projects with gratitude, not only for providing them with jobs but also for treating the creation of art as a legitimate profession. The projects also made art accessible to a broader population rather than a luxury available only to a few. And, of course, the lasting legacy of the projects is the large and varied body of work that now enriches museums and other public institutions nationwide.

Administrators had hoped that the public's support of artists would continue after government sponsorship ended, freeing artists from their reliance on limited private patronage. There were greater opportunities for artists in the booming postwar economy, but financial support from a wide public never materialized. In Oregon, Carolyn Howe has questioned whether the projects really freed artists from the limits of private patronage as was claimed, since many of the artists' former patrons became administrators or advisers to the projects and thus continued to control the commission of artworks.¹¹

The privileging of artistic quality over work relief also appears to have complicated the administration of the art projects in Oregon. It is clear from correspondence among Oregon's project administrators that professional ability was the primary factor in many hiring decisions and the overall direction of the Oregon FAP.¹² It was also at the heart of administrators' struggles with the relief/nonrelief ratios, as they considered only a handful of their employees "master artists" and the majority of that group were not registered on the relief rolls.

Despite these challenges, the records and artworks themselves show that a large and widely talented group of both relief and nonrelief artists was employed on all of Oregon's art projects. Their work represents a lasting gift to be enjoyed, researched, and debated. And there is much still to be discovered about this important moment in Oregon's art history.

Margaret Bullock
Associate Curator of American Art

Endnotes

- ¹ I would like to extend my thanks to Gene Morris, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; Randy Black and Sarah Munro, Friends of Timberline, Portland; Ginny Allen and Jody Klevit; M. C. Cuthill and Susan Seyl, Oregon Historical Society, Portland; and Tiffany Stith for their help in locating materials for this essay. Records from the Oregon art projects can also be found at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the University of Oregon Library, Eugene; the Multnomah County Library, Portland; and the Oregon State Archives, Salem.
- ² There are a wide variety of publications on the history and politics of the Federal Art Projects. A few of the key texts include: Olin Dows, "The New Deal's Treasury Art Program," *Arts in Society* 2 (spring-summer 1963); Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1969); Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Roy Rosenzweig, ed., *Government and the Arts in Thirties America: A Guide to Oral Histories and Other Research Materials* (Fairfax, Va.: George Mason University Press, 1986); Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, in association with the University of Washington Press, 1997).
- ³ The various divisions within the WPA were reorganized and renamed a number of times. As a result many projects are known by a variety of names and acronyms. For example, the Federal One art project is commonly referred to as both the FAP and the WPA. Also, shortly after the WPA was created, the Division of Professional and Service Projects, which oversaw Federal One, was combined with the Women's Division and became the Women's and Professional Division. And in 1939, the WPA was renamed the Works Projects Administration to reflect the changing political view of the New Deal projects.
- ⁴ Exhibitions of FAP work from across the nation were held at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., from June 15 to July 5, 1936; at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from September 15 to October 14, 1936; and at the New York World's Fair in 1939.
- ⁵ For many projects, a nonrelief master artist was hired to oversee the work of a crew of assistants from the relief rolls, ensuring the quality of the work as well as providing employment for less experienced or less proficient artists.
- ⁶ Though scholars have addressed various aspects of the Oregon art projects, the only comprehensive history to date is Carolyn Howe's "The Production of Culture on the Oregon Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration" (master's thesis, Portland State University, 1980), which explores the history, politics, and sociology of the WPA-sponsored art projects in Oregon.
- ⁷ Exhibition catalogue on file, Portland Art Museum library.
- ⁸ Correspondence on file, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C., RG 121, box 89, entry 133. Many Section artists received the same kind of direct community input. Paul Platosh, a graduate student at Reed College, has recently discovered that Newberg residents, for example, insisted that their local mail carrier be inserted into their post office mural even though it illustrated the early days of mail delivery in Oregon.
- ⁹ Margery Hoffman Smith's appointment was apparently a controversial one on several counts. First of all, she was given a salary that was much higher than that of any other state director in the nation, causing complaints from other administrators, including her boss, Burt Brown Barker. Also, both Smith and her husband were well-to-do, which raised questions about her suitability as a director of a work relief project, especially in light of her high salary. Finally, some artists did not feel that her background as an interior decorator qualified her to judge the artistic merit of their work and complained to the FAP offices in Washington. The files at the National Archives contain a variety of letters related to these concerns. Overall, however, Smith's work received widespread public approval and support.
- ¹⁰ Robert Tyler Davis to Mrs. Ronald Ragen, May 9, 1976, on file, Friends of Timberline, Portland.
- ¹¹ Howe, 1980, pp. 73-75.
- ¹² In her final report on the Oregon Art Project, Margery Hoffman Smith stated: "Based on the conviction that a good craftsman is better than a mediocre artist and the talent of the Oregon artists assigned to the projects was mediocre on the whole, the Oregon Art Project was transformed as rapidly as possible and for the greater part to a craft project." Margery Hoffman Smith, "Report on Oregon Art Project," 1943, Margery Hoffman Smith Papers, roll NDA 1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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