Artists on the Left

American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956

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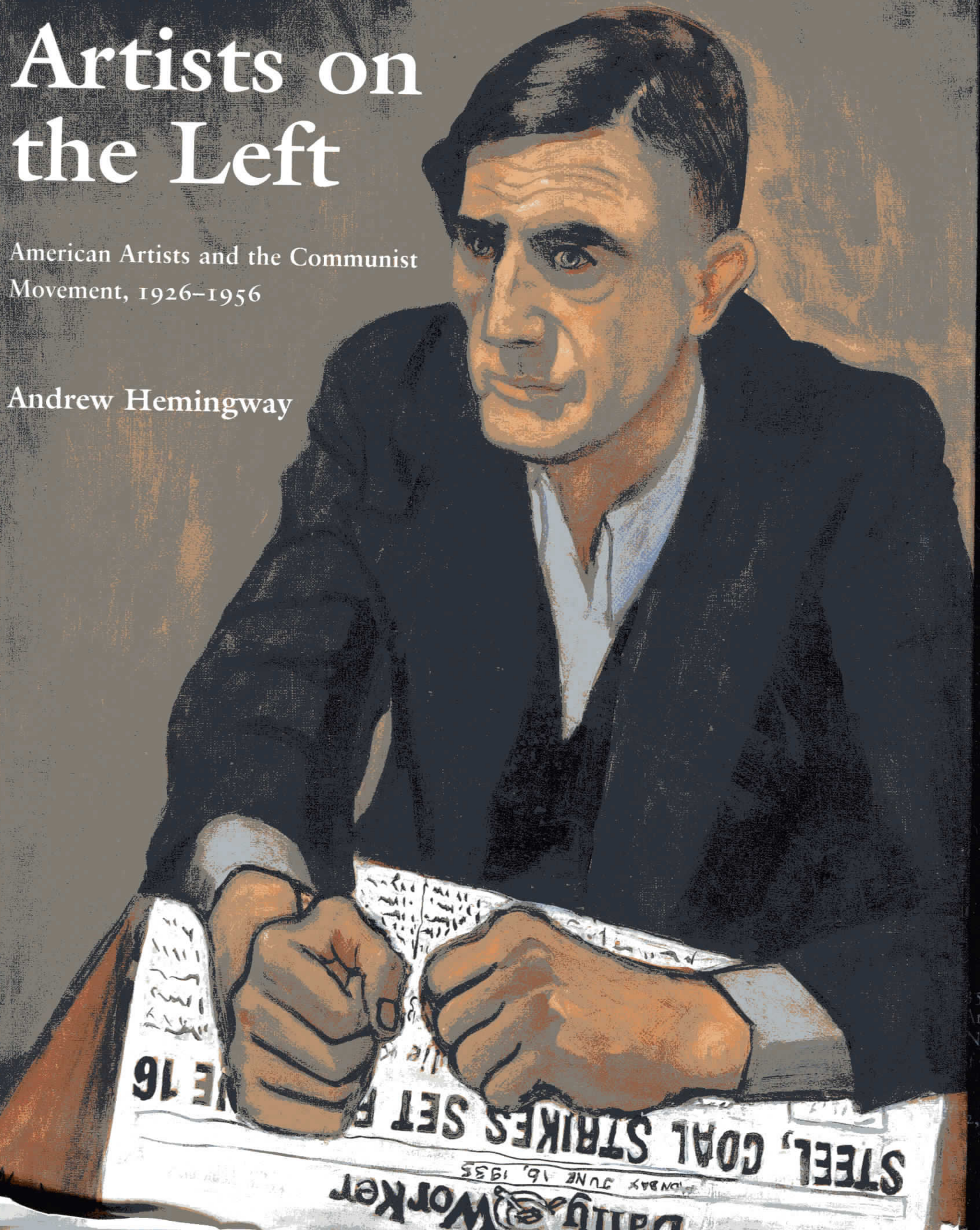


7 Communist Artists and the New Deal (2): From the People's Front to the Democratic Front

The Federal Art Project and the Struggle over WPA

The history of the Federal Art Project is inseparable from that of the vast programme of which it was a part. The drawbacks of the WPA were its drawbacks too – the inadequacy of provision in relation to the total number of unemployed, the humiliation of the means test, continuing uncertainty about layoffs and low wages even during employment. Although Federal One became a particular focus of Congressional hostility, conservatives objected to the principles of the WPA as such, both with regard to work relief and the use of federal funds to redress unemployment. From the other side, the radicalisation and unionisation of project workers was not specific to the arts projects, and the activities of the Artists' Union (and its equivalents in the other arts programmes) need to be seen in relation to those of the Workers Alliance and other organisational initiatives among the WPA workforce. With the administration on the defensive in the face of the powerful conservative coalition of Southern Democrats and rural Republicans that emerged after the mid-term elections of 1938, the WPA as a whole was increasingly vulnerable as a key symbol of New Deal progressivism. Charges of Communist infiltration of the projects particularly targeted the Federal Theatre and Federal Writers' Projects, but they were not restricted to them. It is also important to remember that the principle of relief spending never achieved full popular legitimacy, and indeed according to opinion polls acceptance for it declined in the late 1930s – a phenomenon that probably owed something to the hostility of an overwhelmingly conservative press which accused the WPA, by and large falsely, of inefficiency and waste and, with somewhat more substance, of being a vehicle of political manipulation.[1]

From the beginning, opponents of the New Deal were concerned both that the WPA was a device for securing votes for Roosevelt and that it would somehow become permanent. Of course, permanency was never Roosevelt's intention. He saw the WPA strictly as a temporary relief measure and indeed wished to achieve a balanced budget. From early 1936, when the programme was at its peak, there was a constant threat of layoffs partly as a result of the president's inclination to economise but increasingly due to Congressional pressure. By the spring of that year funds from the 1935 ERA act were beginning to run out and Hopkins was forced to order layoffs. To add to this, anticipating an economic upturn, Roosevelt asked for a much smaller appropriation for the financial year 1936–7, which made further cuts inevitable and in the event contributed to a new recession. One effect of these cutbacks was increasing protests from the relief workers' organisations in the form of pickets and sit-down strikes, particularly in New York where unemployment was especially high. The famous '219' occupation of New York FAP offices on 1 December 1936 was only one instance in a much larger wave of actions against layoffs in all sections of the WPA. As the so-called 'Roosevelt depression' of 1937–8 deepened and the numbers on relief climbed, the president was persuaded to increase relief spending again, with the result that the WPA workforce in New York, which had fallen to 130,000 in September 1937, grew to 175,000 by the autumn of the following year. Audrey McMahon, the director of FAP in New York, recalled that such fluctuations produced 'a horrifying uncertainty as to the duration of . . . employment' which was 'vastly detrimental' for morale. Further, workers had to undergo a fresh means test before each re-hiring which reinforced the idea that WPA was not a proper job but simply a glorified dole. Despite these difficulties, 1937–8 has been viewed as the halcyon days of Federal One, after which the real onslaught began.[2]

Congressional conservatives began to turn their attention to the arts projects in part as a result of two liberal initiatives to establish federal patronage on a permanent basis by setting up a government department for the

arts. The Coffee-Pepper Bill (HR8239), introduced in the House in January 1938, aroused considerable opposition from some art critics and professional groups, and never got beyond the committee stage. Its authors subsequently worked with Representative William I. Sirovich of New York to draw up another bill which was reported by the Committee on Patents, and debated on 15 June. Congressional reception of the Sirovich Bill was bawdy and derisory, and it was defeated by 195 votes to 35. Although the WPA administrators called before the committees maintained a posture of studied neutrality on the proposals, the federal arts projects inevitably received attention in newspaper reporting on the bills which was almost uniformly hostile. Federal One was damaged simply by association with this debacle.[3]

Worse was to follow. In July 1938, J. Parnell Thomas of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) announced that the committee would conduct an investigation of the Federal Writers' and Theatre Projects, which served both as 'a branch of the communist organization' and as 'one more link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine.' The chair of HUAC, Martin Dies, described the WPA in 1940 as 'the greatest financial boon which ever came to the Communists in the United States.'[4] Beginning in August, the Committee began to call as witnesses WPA workers and former workers who claimed that the Workers Alliance virtually ran the projects, and that it in turn was Communist controlled. The Theatre Project in particular was denounced as a nest of Party members that produced blatantly communistic plays, and Edwin Banta, a former Communist employed as a supervisor, made similar claims about the Writers' Project. In December, the directors of the FTP and FWP, Hallie Flanagan and Henry Alsberg, both of whom had been accused of Communist sympathies in previous testimonies, appeared before the Committee to defend their programmes and refute specific charges. This was not what the Committee members wished to hear, and in their report of January 1939 they claimed that a 'rather large number' of employees on these projects were Communists or fellow-travellers, and that workers felt pressured into joining the Workers Alliance.[5]

In fact, the Workers Alliance had begun as a Socialist Party organisation for the unemployed, but in April 1936 it fused with the Communist Unemployed Councils, at the same time taking in many members of the Musteite National Unemployed Leagues. Its president remained David Lasser, a radical Socialist, but its secretary Herbert Benjamin was a Communist as were several other members of the executive board and perhaps the majority. However, while Communists certainly played a major role in the Workers Alliance, its strength lay in its capacity to articulate the very real discontents and anxieties of WPA workers who by 1939 made up 75 per cent of its membership. Rather than directly attacking the administration, the organisation increasingly functioned as a pressure group to protest about assaults on relief provision from the Congressional right. As such it gave assistance to beleaguered WPA administrators, who recognised its position in some degree.[6]

Despite their manifest unfairness, the Dies Committee hearings did enormous harm to Federal One, partly because the frequently groundless charges were given massive publicity in the press. Although neither Cahill nor Nicolai Solokoff were called before HUAC, both the Art and Music Projects suffered from this besmirching of the other two. The conservative group in Congress was considerably strengthened by the November 1938 elections, and in the new session opposition to the WPA was mounted by both reactionary Democrats and Republicans in the House Subcommittee on Appropriations, the former led by Clifton Woodrum of Virginia and the latter by John Taber of New York. In March 1939 the House voted by a massive majority to authorise Woodrum's sub-committee to investigate the WPA. At the hearings that followed, witnesses (many of whom had already appeared before the Dies Committee) rehearsed the now familiar charges about the Workers Alliance's influence in the FTP and FWP. Federal One was also accused of waste and inefficiency, although the FAP and FMP largely escaped on this score.

The WPA was defended before the sub-committee by Colonel Francis Harrington, who had succeeded Harry Hopkins in December. Harrington did not have the same commitment to Federal One as his predecessor, and although he sought to defend the cultural projects he also acknowledged irregularities and promised a wholesale reorganisation. In the event, the ERA bill that Roosevelt signed into law in July clearly reflected conservative power in the House. Not only did it require a mandatory layoff of WPA workers after eighteen months (whether or not they had alternative employment) and put a ceiling on the cost of construction projects, it closed down the Federal Theatre Project and required that all projects, including Federal One, secure at least 25 per cent sponsorship. Moreover the appropriation Roosevelt had asked for was seriously inadequate, to the extent that in New York almost 45 per cent of WPA workers were discharged in the months following the act. The Theatre Project apart, Federal One in New York did survive, but only because Mayor La

Guardia agreed that the city would assume sponsorship costs.[7]

Unwilling to jeopardise the rest of WPA for a relatively small and wayward component, Harrington and Florence Kerr (who headed the Women's and Professional Division) decided to reorganise the arts projects from September 1939 by passing over far more control to WPA state administrators – for the most part construction experts with no competence or interest in artistic matters. This change, together with the new sponsorhsip requirement and the disruptive effects of the eighteen-month layoff rule, curtailed drastically the more creative aspects of the FAP. Colonel Brehon Somervell, the WPA administrator in New York, had run the larger programme in the city with great efficiency, but he was no friend of Federal One and had a personally antagonistic relationship with Audrey McMahon. In the aftermath of the 1939 ERA act he set a limit of 1,000 to the number of artists who could be on WPA rolls – at its height the New York FAP had employed 2,200. He was further empowered by an amendment to the 1940 ERA act that barred Communists and Nazi Bund members from WPA jobs, and required all personnel on the rolls to swear on oath that they belonged to neither organisation. Failure to swear would lead to instant dismissal, and false statements carried a heavy penalty. Somervell ordered an investigation of Board of Election records to identify registered Communists among his workforce, and also sought help from the FBI and the Dies Committee. This campaign proved relatively ineffectual, and of the 365 persons who had been fired by the end of 1940 most were reinstated by May 1941 as a result of protests from the unions and ACLU. Somervell also launched a campaign to purge anything that might be read as propaganda from FAP murals, which led to the destruction of three out of four innocuous canvases on the theme of flight that had been painted for the Administration Building of Floyd Bennett Airfield in Brooklyn by a self-confessed Communist, August Henkel.[8] However, by this time the Federal Art Project was on its last legs and in 1941 it was reorganised as a national defence programme, finally closing down with the remainder of WPA at the end of January 1943.

The CPUSA and the Federal Art Project

The Communist Party's position on the work relief programme was consonant with the positions it took on unemployment insurance, pensions, public housing and health provision. Continuation and expansion of work relief was part of its 1936 election platform, which demanded that the 'government continue and extend the WPA' in conjunction with a massive Federal Works Programme.[9] Protests against WPA cuts in late 1936 were extensively reported in the *Daily Worker*, and this coverage continued for most of 1937, slackening in intensity only towards the end of the year. Several editorials attacked Roosevelt over the cuts, and in November 1936 a substantial article warned workers on the art projects that in the aftermath of the election their future was uncertain, and they should campaign collectively for a permanent Department of Fine Arts.[10] From late 1936 onwards, *New Masses*, which had been so critical of the cultural projects in the past, now found they had 'done wonders to slake the cultural thirst of millions of Americans' and protested against moves to diminish them. The *Daily Worker* reported favourably on a number of Federal Theatre productions in the first half of 1937, and in June published an article affirming the achievements of the FAP.[11]

Although the Artists' Union drew its energies mainly from the grievances and anxieties of art project workers, it was also one arm of a larger Communist strategy in relation to the WPA. As such, it was a loyal exponent of Party policy. The Union backed the Communist-drafted Workers' Unemployment and Social Insurance Bill, introduced into Congress in February 1934. From PWAP onwards it argued that relief provision for artists was inadequate and it was campaigning for a Federal Arts Bill months before WPA was established.[12] In May 1936 the Union followed the CP line in calling on members to support the formation of a Farmer-Labor party,[13] and similarly it greeted the November election results as a victory over reaction. It was immediately forced to confront the threat of layoffs as money from the 1936 ERA act began to run out. *Art Front* denounced these as 'a betrayal of the mandate of the people given to President Roosevelt', and on 12 December artists joined in a picket by 5,000 relief workers of the WPA Central Office at 70 Columbus Avenue.[14]

From the beginning, the Union attacked Bruce's Section of Painting and Sculpture as inferior to the PWAP, both because it did not prioritise helping the destitute and was smaller in scope. By comparison with PWAP, the FAP was also a retrograde step since it paid a 'security wage' rather than the prevailing wage rate and involved a means test. Like the AFL unions, the Artists' Union opposed this undercutting of established pay norms and described the WPA as 'Roosevelt's starvation program for work relief', designed to reduce wages in private industry at a time when the cost of living was

rising. In fact its campaign to secure an AFL charter in mid-1935 occurred at a moment when actions by the New York Central Trades and Labor Council did wring some concessions out of the WPA – although these benefited only skilled workers with union membership. Yet the Union opposed proposals to cut back the WPA in the fiscal year 1936–7, and by 1937 had become a qualified supporter of the projects.[15]

At the same time as it fought cutbacks on a day to day basis and tried (unsuccessfully) to pressure the FAP administration into taking a stand for the permanency of the projects, the Union also emphasised that the 'fight to maintain and expand the Federal Art Project has never been considered by the Union merely as a problem of employment.' The experience of collective organisation had helped artists defeat 'the disease of Bohemianism' and thus the projects stood for a new kind of democratic and socially responsible aesthetic. Through the Public Use of Art committees unions had shown the administration how the scope of the projects could be expanded: 'Art has been brought down from the market places of the dealers and the museums. It is no longer necessary for the worker and the middle class American to take his hat in hand and make a pilgrimage to some shrine to see a work of art.' And this was only a beginning, for 'with the development of democracy in the sphere of wages and hours, with the inevitable political implications of this movement, the possibilities for the establishment of democracy *in the social sphere, including culture* will be realized.'[16]

Whereas *Art Front* had been generally dismissive about the products of PWAP, its reviews of exhibitions at the Federal Art Project Gallery in New York were sympathetic and that of *New Horizons in American Art*, a showcase exhibition of project art at the Museum of Modern Art in September 1936, was cautiously welcoming. McCausland found that 'the murals of the Federal Art Project, though not attaining the highest plastic quality, are vastly superior to the wooden and stereotyped creations of the Treasury Department Art Projects' – a superiority she attributed to the 'somewhat freer though still too restricted hand' allowed FAP workers.[17]

Concern about the influence of the Section (which was after all a source of far more substantial income for artists fortunate enough to secure commissions) prompted an extended critique by one Peter Vane, who argued that Bruce's team was 'a small clique, dominated by reactionary ideas and methods of procedure, which has brought into the workings of the Section a small and malodorous group of Museum Directors and others of their ilk who have attempted to set up in their communities little dictatorships in art'. The Section's premises were essentially exclusive, and Bruce's rationale for the art programme as a kind of safety-valve for social discontents was 'reactionary and anti-democratic'. Moreover the Section had been given existence by the Secretary of the Treasury, an unelected official. By contrast the alternative of the FAP was 'a splendid one', and Cahill's catalogue essay for *New Horizons in American Art* was quoted approvingly. Vane emphasised that the WPA programme depended on funds voted by the elected representatives of the American people: 'the Project must go to the people for support *on the basis of performance*.' In fact, what from an ideal perspective seemed the projects' strength was precisely their undoing.[18] Assuming that the FAP was the basis for 'the complete development and maturation of art' in '*all sections of the nation*', the Union supported the Coffee Bill, the text of which was printed in the October 1937 *Art Front*. In spite of this, the magazine remained fiercely critical of the administration to the end, and the same issue accused even 'so-called liberals', such as Aubrey Williams, of working 'to intensify the effect of every reactionary aspect of the provisions of Congress for WPA on the Arts Projects'.[19]

In March–April 1938 the *Daily Worker* printed a series of six articles on the art projects in music, theatre, radio, literature and the visual arts, and from that point on it effectively subsumed them within the Democratic Front, extensively reporting their achievements.[20] In June the Party openly declared its support for the Sirovich Bill, which was also backed by the Labor Non-Partisan League (formed by the CIO leadership in 1936 to support Roosevelt), by some AFL unions and by the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party. According to *The Communist*, the bill represented 'a program to establish the rights of creative workers to live and to produce their work with the assurance of reasonable remuneration based upon the social use of their work, to establish *people's sponsorship*, *enjoyment*, and *participation in the arts as a principle of our democracy*.' On such a basis the arts could 'flourish as the allies of the people and the enemy of reaction', and thus the bill '*should be made an issue in every election struggle*.'[21]

As the threat to the projects' very existence became evident in the debates around the 1939 ERA bill, *New Masses* published two articles by Joseph Starobin, the first exposing the Dies Committee and the second setting out the achievements of the projects.[22] At the same time, the *Daily Worker* printed articles lauding WPA art at the New York World's Fair, which had itself been turned

into a way station on the road to socialism: 'The World's Fair says – even [if] it does not know it – that poverty, unemployment, back-breaking work, disease and insecurity are needless burdens. The people feel it as they look at the "world of tomorrow".' Moreover, the mural art and public sculpture of the Fair showed America was 'Coming into its Own in the World of Art and Culture'.[23] The WPA building at the Fair was particularly praised, and the paper featured reports on murals by the *Sunday Worker* artist Louis Ferstadt and the leftists Guston and Refregier.[24] *New Masses*'s review of the Fair's massive exhibition of *American Art Today* (which was curated by Holger Cahill), and McCausland's long appraisal in *Parnassus*, were as positive as those of many mainstream art critics, despite the widely remarked dearth of 'social protest' art on show.[25]

In effect, after 1938 cultural criticism in the Party press accepted the project administrators' own evaluation of their achievements – that the 'Federal Art Project [had] made American artists and their work part of the life of the whole people for the first time.' The presence of WPA or former WPA artists in exhibitions was a subject for pointed comment, and by 1940 the *Daily Worker* was applauding new FAP mural commissions. In 1939, the position had shifted so much that even the Treasury Section's Forty-Eight States Post Office Murals Competition was given positive coverage – although the fact that Joe Jones was a prize-winner in this may have played some role in the evaluation.[26] All in all, considering the extent to which the cultural projects had come to stand for the 'most progressive facets' of the New Deal, and the zeal with which they were praised and defended in the Communist press, it is hardly surprising that conservative charges that they were a hotbed of Communist agitation would look credible. Correspondingly, after the Party changed tack with the Nazi–Soviet Pact and the outbreak of war, the diminution of the projects was seen as symptomatic of a conservative turn in the New Deal, for which Roosevelt was held responsible.[27]

The Ideology of the Federal Art Project

In addition to the CP's general stance on the WPA, there were solid reasons for Communists to view the Federal Art Project more favourably than the Treasury Section. These had to do with both the organisation of the project and with its ideological framing. In relation to the former, its orientation to relief rather than quality, the greater freedom of expression it permitted artists, its commitment to art education and the extension of artistic knowledge through community art centres all made it seem preferable to the Section, which rested on a more traditional model of patronage relations and a far narrower notion of aesthetic culture. In relation to the latter, the key voice was that of Holger Cahill (1887–1960), whose background and formation were a world apart from that of Bruce and Watson. The child of impoverished Icelandic immigrants, Cahill was brought to North America around 1889, and spent most of his childhood in rural North Dakota. After a succession of labouring and low-level white collar jobs, he arrived in New York in 1913. There he moved in Greenwich Village circles, got to know members of *The Masses* group, acquired an interest in socialism and took courses on writing and journalism at New York University. One of his early friends was Mike Gold, but although Cahill initially shared Gold's enthusiasm for the Bolshevik Revolution, by 1921 he was a convert to a kind of modernist aestheticism – an outlook that matched his budding career as an art critic, publicist and curator. Cahill later indicated that his political orientation was towards American Populism and the Wobblies, but the fact remains that several of his friends of the early 1920s – Gropper, Stuart Davis, Malcolm Cowley and Orrick Johns – became active participants in the Communist cultural movement. I do not imply by this that Cahill was a closet fellow-traveller, merely that he was far closer to left-wing artistic and literary circles than those who ran the Section.

As Wendy Jeffers has pointed out, it was not by chance that Cahill landed the job of directing the Federal Art Project.[28] His work at the Newark Museum, a stint as acting director at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932–33 and his curating of the First Municipal Art Exhibit in New York (1934) had established his credentials as a propagandist and ideologue for modern American art. By 1935, Cahill had forged an historical rationale for federal patronage that was a fascinating amalgam of ideas culled from John Cotton Dana, John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen and modernist theory which matched perfectly the needs of the radical wing of the New Deal. Some of the guiding principles of his aesthetic were already there in his major essay on Max Weber of 1930, where he argued the familiar modernist point that nineteenth-century academicism had corrupted art by promoting the falsehood that its primary function was imitative and true imitation was necessarily naturalistic. Modern artists such as Weber had revitalised tradition by going back to a 'universal language'

of art, discernible in the Oriental and the primitive: 'The central problem of the painter is that of achieving ordered spatial relations within the rectangle of his canvas. This problem must be solved in terms of the medium. The set of ordered spatial relations achieved in terms of a medium must communicate something to a beholder.' But this 'something' was not like a scientific statement, a symbol referring to an object, for the pictures of 'any artist worthy the name, are intended to be looked at as objects in which the search of the beholder comes to rest.' True art worked by 'evocation'. And yet evocation had to be tied to a 'minimum of statement' for communication to work.[29]

In his brief spell at the Museum of Modern Art, Cahill put on a sequence of path-breaking exhibitions, for all of which he wrote substantive catalogue essays: *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* (1932), *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862–1932* (1932–3) and *American Sources of Modern Art* (1933). The first claimed that folk art grew out of 'the fertile plain of everday competence in the crafts', and was 'the expression of the common people, made by them for their use and enjoyment.' Unfortunately, such art had languished as a result of the spread of 'machine industry' after the Civil War, and by the end of the century the decline of the crafts caused it to die out. It had taken the 'pioneers of modern art' to discover its aesthetic quality. For Cahill, folk art had mirrored 'the sense and sentiment of a community'. In the second of his catalogues, Cahill was still more explicit in lamenting the effects of the rise of industrialism, and the concomitant 'dominance of classes with little interest in art and tradition of art patronage.' The alienation of the artist from community in the Gilded Age was deeply unhealthy, and led to the 'exploitation of personal peculiarities', to 'bohemianism'. Yet there was a dialectical twist here, in that the isolation of the artist also prompted forms of modernist experimentation with a 'powerful and vitalizing influence' on American art, which had produced a 'usable past', technically speaking.[30] Cahill believed that the 'period of experiments' was probably now over, and in a series of radio talks, published as a book in 1934, he argued that after twenty years in which they had been mainly preoccupied with the 'means' of art, American painters were now concerned anew with 'social and collective expression'. The 'world hegemony' of the School of Paris was over: 'American art is declaring a moratorium on its debts to Europe and turning to cultivate its own garden.' This 'contemporary emphasis upon human significance in art' found its 'strongest expression' in a renewed interest in mural painting and art's decorative functions. The most important opportunity for mural painters had been provided by the 'various public art projects' for, whatever the quality of the art they produced, 'They show that the community is assuming a responsibility toward the artist. Through them there may be a possibility of healing the breach between the artist and the public.'[31] This historical schema, which had culminated in the PWAP in 1934, was applied and clarified in Cahill's catalogue essay for *New Horizons in American Art* (1936).

In a speech made at the eightieth birthday celebration for John Dewey in 1939, Cahill presented the WPA FAP as essentially an implementation of Dewey's ideas on art and education.[32] I am not sure how literally we should take this. Dewey's main contribution to aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, had been published in 1934, although he had been expounding its ideas earlier and many of them had a broader currency. (Cahill claimed to have first heard Dewey lecture at Columbia University around 1914.) I have found no reference to Dewey in Cahill's speeches of 1937–8, but many of their key themes certainly had a Deweyan resonance, such as the refusal of any sharp distinction between the fine arts and the arts of use, the insistence on the ordinariness of aesthetic experience, the emphasis on community and democratic participation and the stress on the cultural dimensions of democracy and the organic relationship between culture and social environment. These were coupled with a critique of plutocracy that stopped short of anti-capitalism. But then Communists supported New Deal democracy as a route to developing a socialist consciousness; they did not see it as socialist as such.[33]

References to Dewey were not calculated to appeal to Communist ideologues, to whom Pragmatism generally appeared 'the dominant American bourgeois philosophy', the failings of which were demonstrated by Dewey's involvement with the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky. Moreover, *Art as Experience* would have been made particularly suspect by the author's criticisms of proletarian art, which were linked to an assertion that 'art itself' could not 'be secure under modern conditions' without a revolutionary transformation in social relations of a type ill-defined but implicitly different from that proposed by the Communists.[34] However, such details aside, the rhetoric of cultural democracy and Americanism with which Cahill framed the WPA FAP meshed in well with the discourse of the Democratic Front. Statements such as 'Our experience with the Federal Art Program has inspired all of us with

the belief that art for all the people is possible and that government has a responsibility in making it possible' or that through the WPA artists had been 'given a vision of a genuine people's art functioning freely in relation to society' could be seen as pointing towards a Soviet-style culture, as this appeared in the CP fantasy of the USSR. Cahill's former friend, Mike Gold, claimed in 1940 that the 'WPA was "red" because it was democratic', and that from the perspective of the Congressmen who had destroyed the projects, democracy was 'a dangerous ideology that tried to burst the bonds of capitalism and express itself in the WPA program.' The terms in which Gold read this struggle were excessive, but his characterisation of the WPA's enemies and his perception of what the projects represented were essentially accurate.[35]

The Treasury Section of Fine Arts

After what has been said of the Artists' Union and Treasury Section so far, it might be assumed that relations between left-wing artists and Section administrators were fraught, and that the former found few opportunities for politically significant work within the programme. The first assumption would be unjustified, the latter can at least be argued over.

Ideology aside, the sheer scale and importance of Section patronage meant that artists of the left were obliged to establish some kind of *modus vivendi* with its personnel. Indeed, despite the fierce criticisms of the Section in *Art Front*, collective organisations of the left made several overtures to Bruce – all of which he rejected. From PWAP on, Bruce regarded the Artists' Union as irresponsible and unrealistic, but when the New York organisation asked him to speak at a symposium on 'Art and Government Responsibility' in May 1934, he responded cordially (and doubtless tactfully) enough.[36] In 1936, Biddle invited him to join the Artists' Congress, implicitly at the suggestion of Stuart Davis. While Bruce wisely declined, the superintendant of the Section, Edward Rowan, attended the Congress in 1938, although it is unlikely he was a member.[37]

A significant number of the dramatis personae of our story so far sought or achieved Section commissions, among them the painters Abelman, Arnautoff, Burck,[38] Cikovsky, Evergood, Gropper, Gwathmey, Jones, Refregier, Ribak, Siporin, Moses and Raphael Soyer, Sternberg and Zakheim; and the sculptors Ben-Shmuel, Cronbach, Glickman, Harkavy and Werner. Some of these certainly sought them out of financial exigency, but others may have been prompted to participate in Section competitions in part because they recognised that the programme offered important spaces for public art. Indeed several leftists and Popular Fronters received commissions to decorate federal buildings in Washington itself, notably Cikovsky, Ernest Fiene and Gropper at the Department of Interior; Chaim Gross, Concetta Scaravaglione[39] and Rockwell Kent at the Post Office Department; Ben Shahn at the Department of Social Security; and Gross and Scaravaglione at the Federal Trade Commission. Moreover, the most important Section commission outside the capital, the Saint Louis Post Office, went to the Chicago radicals Edward Millman and Mitchell Siporin.

Of course, being awarded a commission hardly gave politically committed artists a free hand to paint or sculpt as they chose. While the Section claimed that its competition system was democratic and made much of the role of its regional committees and consultation with local communities, the Washington office overruled jury decisions it did not like and the actual production of all works was tightly supervised through a sequence of prescribed stages, tied in with the payment process.[40] Bruce's formalistic preferences partly set the Section's aesthetic agenda. In an early address to artists he observed: 'The artist's business is to help people to see and enjoy seeing and not think. . . . Art is getting too precious and ponderous.' In 1940 the Section's *Bulletin* printed a letter to Bruce from Henry Varnum Poor, in which Poor asserted that 'I think the basis of any great mural, as of all great painting, is a sense of the pictorial necessity, a visual freshness and reality, which speaks more clearly than anything. So a complicated or highly intellectual idea is a great drawback – something to surmount rather than a real help.' Not only did the Section publish this to guide contestants for the Social Security Building commission, but Poor explicitly stated that his ideas were close to Bruce's own. This formalism and insistence on the life-enhancing functions of the aesthetic went hand in hand with the Americanism of the project to justify the beneficent image of the nation that dominated in Section art. In a report to the president in 1939 Bruce observed of a selection of mural sketches that '[t]hey make me feel very comfortable about America', and of the thousands of competition entries the Section had received: 'There has been no sign of defeat or social unrest among any of them.'[41] Certainly the Section's administrators had sought to ensure this was the case. But if the representation of overt conflict was repressed, might not the clash of social interests manifest itself in more subtle forms? I shall consider this question under two heads, labour and history.

111 Joe Jones, mural, 1939, oil on canvas, 49 × 144 in., USPO, Seneca, Kansas.

Labour

The themes of Section art were broadly illustrative of the functions of the institutions they decorated, but in the case of the small post offices which made up the vast bulk of its commissions, subjects concerning the 'history and industries of the place' could substitute for the post.[42] It was in representing the 'industries of the place' and the functions of some departmental buildings in Washington that Section artists produced an extensive iconography of labour, although this also formed part of postal imagery. In his 'Public Use of Art' essay, Schapiro welcomed the art projects as a step in the right direction but warned:

> A regime that must hold the support of the people today, provides conventional images of peace, justice, social harmony, productive labor, the idylls of the farms and factories, while it proposes at the same time an unprecedented military and naval budget, leaves ten million unemployed and winks at the most brutal violations of civil liberties. In their seemingly neutral glorification of work, progress and national history, these public murals are instruments of a class.[43]

This contemporary judgement corresponds closely to that of the most sophisticated recent analysis, Barbara Melosh's *Engendering Culture* (1991), which argues that while the iconic status of male labour in Section art 'gave a new symbolic weight to working-class lives', the way it was used deflected 'the very challenge it raised' because subjects were 'seldom located . . . in any clear social hierarchy and even less frequently suggested class conflict': 'Even as the image of the manly worker denied the authority of the contemporary middle class, it reaffirmed an enduring mythology of classlessness that limited and contained its critique of American society.'[44] The work of left-wing artists was effectively contained and muted by the Section's regime. This is a persuasive interpretation of Section iconography up to a point, but it seems to assume that the art spoke uniformly to different audiences, and arguably gives insufficient weight to the character of American working-class consciousness in the period.

Other scholars have sought to define the audience for Section art from the correspondence of post masters and newspaper clippings in its files, which are taken to manifest the response of 'communities' and 'citizens', or even 'popular taste'. Such materials are a valuable source, but they speak only for those who had a voice, and it should not be assumed that they represent the outlook and attitudes of all the complex groupings in the societies where Section art was sited.[45] Indeed, some left-wing artists specifically denied the representativeness of the post master and such citizens as he or she was likely to consult. It is also worth looking at the practice of specific Communists and fellow-travellers to see if there is room for a multi-accentual interpretation.

Among the Communist artists who worked for the programme, Joe Jones was one of the most successful in terms of the sheer number of commissions received: between 1937 and 1941 he painted five post office

112 William Gropper, *Construction of a Dam*, 1938–9, oil on canvas, centre panel 8 ft 11 in. × 14 ft 6 in., side panels 8 ft 11 in. × 7 ft 9 in., Department of Interior, Washington, D.C.

murals spread over Arkansas, Kansas and Missouri. All bar one of these are images of wheat harvesting. These seem a world apart from his 1935 murals at Commonwealth College, which were described by the *Daily Worker* as 'depicting the outstanding condition and major struggles of the Southern working people.'[46] Yet in fact Jones attributed his success in attracting Rowan's attention in 1935 to the Commonwealth College and Saint Louis Court House murals, together with the intercession of Elizabeth Green on his behalf. At the time Jones hoped the Mena commission would lead to 'other jobs at liberal colleges', and observed that he would 'like nothing better myself than to go around doing these murals'. But although he established friendly relations with Rowan, to begin with he was only offered work with the Treasury Relief Art Project – an offer he turned down both because the pay was less than he could earn from the Resettlement Administration, and because he felt that the WPA (which set the terms of employment under TRAP) was undercutting union wage rates. He was also wary of government patronage, observing in a letter to Green: 'Although Mr Rowan may sincerely want me to do an honest job, I know I will have to fight in order to accomplish anything decent . . . he will have to prove to me the sincerity of our government as a patron of the arts.'[47]

Jones's letters to Rowan (whom he sometimes addressed irreverently as 'Pop' or 'Pappy') suggest that it was mainly financial desperation that made him turn to the Section in 1937, and he may have used Section commissions to fund his production of more politically pointed easel paintings.[48] It seems to have been Rowan who pushed him towards using the wheat theme in his murals, since for his first assignment at Magnolia, Arkansas, Jones suggested other subjects.[49] However, Jones did not see post office decorations just as jobs, and in preparing for the mural at Anthony, Kansas, he enthusiastically researched local conditions, living with wheat farmers and climbing over combine harvesters with a miniature camera. According to the post master, the installed mural was 'regarded very highly by a good many of our people here.'[50] Jones's mural for Seneca, Kansas (fig. 111), was also well received in the long run but, at the post master's request, he was obliged to remove the trade name Massey Harris inscribed on the harvester in the colour sketch and also to alter the vista to indicate smaller farms with mixed crops.

Defending his original conception for Seneca in a letter to Rowan, Jones acutely pointed out the problems raised by the Section's reliance on post masters and local newspapers as measures of public response: 'I hope you will first consider the fact that postmasters are never typical in their community, intellectually or spiritually. This goes for small town newspaper editors as well.' Replying to the criticism that he had not shown local crop culture accurately and that his harvester looked out of date, Jones emphasised that he was not trying to make 'a kind of agricultural survey' of a community but a 'vital work of art' which would have significance 'for the broadest mass of people' in the area. More specifi-

113 (*right*) Edgar Britton, *Work of the Petroleum Division of the Bureau of Mines* (east wall), 1939, fresco, 9 ft 3½ in. × 19 ft 7 in., Department of Interior, Washington, D.C.

114 (*facing page*) Edgar Britton, study for *Work of the Petroleum Division of the Bureau of Mines*, whereabouts unknown.

cally, 'I want the working people, the people producing useful things with their hands to enjoy this painting for the understanding and strength of which part of their lives are reflected.' In the event, the result apparently pleased everyone, including the artist himself. This seems to indicate precisely the multi-accentuality of such images, which could appeal to Rowan and the Section because of their pictorial qualities and progressive symbolism, to the post master and local press because of their presumed accuracy to locale and to the left-wing artist who desired an imagery of labour that would have meaning for a working-class audience. Whether they worked for the latter in the way Jones hoped, cannot be known.[51]

In Section art workers usually labour energetically and productively, and nowhere more so than in Gropper's *Construction of a Dam* for the Interior Department Building (fig. 112). This is a large and imposing painting at the south end of the main corridor, comprising two panels each nearly 9 × 8 feet flanking one of the same height but almost twice as wide. The correspondence between Rowan and Gropper was extremely cordial, and in February 1939 the former reported that E. K. Burlew, the First Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, had expressed 'great satisfaction and delight in your work'. In 1944 the Secretary of the Interior himself remarked on his satisfaction with the mural in a letter of birthday tribute to the artist, and Gropper had, in fact, responded to Ickes's 'instructions' that he 'particularize the building activities' represented in his initial sketches. In summer 1938 he made a research trip to the West, and according to Section publicity the depicted structure was 'inspired by' the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River and the Davis Dam on the Colorado River. (The side panels probably owe something to photographs of workers at the Bonneville Dam published in the *New York Times Magazine* in May 1937.) Section publicity described the artist's intention 'in essence' as 'to portray the drama of labor, the dignity of labor, and the strength of labor.'[52]

Many of the murals in the Department of Interior depict labour (including those of the leftists Edgar Britton,[53] Cikovsky and Fiene), but with its low viewpoint and straining purposive figures, *Construction of a Dam* offers by far the most heroic image. The figures in Britton's frescoes, *Work of the Petroleum Division of the Bureau of Mines* (fig. 113), are productive and self-possessed worker types, but they do not project the same urgency. My point, however, is not that Communist and fellow-travelling artists had some special affinity with energetic labour – Gropper's figures are no more energised than those in Marsh's *Assorting the Mail* for the Post Office Department Building in Washington or Charles Thwaites's *Cheese Making* for the post office at Plymouth, Wisconsin.[54] Rather I want to stress some of the contextual factors that current iconographical readings miss. Firstly, it should be noted that unlike sorting mail or making cheese, building dams was part of a highly controversial intervention in the economy by the federal government. Just as much as the Tennessee Valley Authority, the operation of the Grand Coulee and the Bonneville dams by the Bureau of Reclamation and the Bonneville Power Administration (both agencies of the Department of Interior) stood for public control

of power and state planning against private utilities and the vagaries of the market. At the time, the Columbia River was the largest single source of power in the United States, and the Grand Coulee the largest human-made structure in the world.[55] Thus Gropper's heroic design, however inadequate to the task, was both a tribute to the sheer gigantism of the project and to the way in which government enterprise provided employment, mobilised collective endeavour and worked in the public interest.

The Secretary was certainly not averse to murals that made this point, since when he rejected Britton's first sketches for the Bureau of Mines panels, one of his suggestions, as communicated by the Section was: 'If possible one of your designs might show a ruthless individualist sacrificing the people to his greed and in contrast to that the second panel might depict the Government helping or protecting these people and their rights'. In response Britton conceived two striking Orozcoesque designs, the first depicting the rise of monopoly in the oil industry in the period after the Civil War and the second (fig. 114) showing how international conflict over oil could lead to war: 'The conclusion in this panel deals with the problem of suggesting to the people of the United States that their social duty is to project their efforts and democratic ideology toward the protection of their interests in relation to the natural resources of their country.'[56]

Doubtless these designs went too far, and they were rejected in favour of a blander imagery of productive labour but, none the less, Ickes was concerned to develop an iconographic programme throughout his new building that projected his interventionist view of the federal state. *Construction of a Dam* precisely exemplifies this. At the same time, his commitment to public power overlapped with the Communists' vision of the socialisation of production – for them it was a way station en route to that goal. (Indeed, for Communists, Gropper's generic dam may well have stood as something like an American Dnieperstroi.) Moreover, after the president himself, Ickes was probably the Party's favourite New Dealer because of his outspoken anti-racism and anti-fascism, and his public criticisms of the Dies Committee.[57]

It was entirely consistent that a progressive such as Ickes should find the modern social art of Gropper sympathetic and, in the context of the Democratic Front, equally consistent that a Communist artist such as Gropper should welcome the opportunity to decorate the building of one of the most interventionist branches of the New Deal administration dedicated to 'promoting the domestic welfare', and that the commission should be hailed in the *Daily Worker*.[58] In the huge pink granite building in Washington Gropper's mural belongs to federal authority, but this was not its only location. The full-scale sketch was exhibited at the ACA Gallery, and the initial sketches were reproduced in 1937 in the *Magazine of Art* alongside a range of his more critically charged works.[59] My point is that while the most celebrated Communist artist had contributed to a manifestation of federal authority, federal authority had also conferred a certain status on his work. Gropper's public identity cannot be simply filtered out of contemporary readings of *Construction of a Dam*.

115 Philip Evergood, *Cotton from Field to Mill*, 1938–9, oil on canvas, approx. 4 × 12 ft, USPO, Jackson, Georgia.

116 Detail of fig. 115.

Melosh has argued that 'racial policy' functioned as a fault line dividing Communists from New Deal liberals, and that the limits of Ickes's anti-racism are demonstrated by his concern that the workers represented in the Interior Department Building should look 'truly American'. Yet Ickes was a longstanding supporter of the NAACP and had integrated the first government department in Washington. Further, Gropper did depict black and white workers labouring together, and Fiene's four panels on the Western Lands did represent 'descendants of many races or nationalities'.[60]

The region in which the theme of racialised labour became unavoidable was, of course, the South. In her study of Southern New Deal murals, Sue Bridwell Beckham suggests that while the Section and its artists were not always responsive to the demands of local white communities, the vast majority of murals articulated a model of gender and racial hierarchies acceptable to them through the symbolic typing of certain activities, and the omission of others. Thus, 'White men in the South always work, though often with their brains rather than their brawn; black men sometimes work, are sometimes incompetent; black women always work – and do so with dignity; white women never work and seldom do anything else.' Overwhelmingly, Southern whites wanted the region to be represented as progressive and prosperous.[61]

It was those murals that did not accord with these presumptions in some way that occasionally aroused dissent, and predictably these were the work of left-wingers. The key instance here is Evergood's mural for the post office at Jackson, Georgia: *Cotton from Field to Mill* (figs 115 and 116). Although relations between artist and Section were friendly, throughout the sketch and cartoon stages Rowan worried that Evergood's style would not be understood by 'the people of Jackson', and urged him to normalise his perspective and figure drawing and perhaps even to 'develop a landscape decoration' instead. Responding to the Section's criticisms, Evergood changed the design almost beyond recognition, and even added a colonial mansion in the background at Rowan's request. However, his real problems were with a post master who pronounced that a mural 'anything like' the cartoon would 'not be satisfactory' as it was 'not true to scenes in this section.' When the mural was installed the same official reported that 'Comments have been unfavorable and critical.'

Nothing was said about the iconography but, as Beckham has emphasised, the imagery of black and white men and women all labouring in the same way contradicted the symbolic order of Southern murals at their most sensitive point. Moreover, as a postal worker pointed out when I visited the mural, the range of colour phenotypes in the image indicates that sexual relations occur between black and white. There is, too, a symbol of the class oppressor of both races in the besuited white figure by the cotton scales. Evergood may have compromised on formal matters in some degree, but it was a political achievement to insert a mural of cooperative inter-racial labour into a federal building in the heart of a state where lynching was rife and whose governer, Eugene Talmadge, was an infamous white supremacist and one of the New Deal's fiercest opponents at state level.[62]

There is far more to be said on the representation of racial labour in New Deal murals by left-wing artists than can be included here. For the moment, the example of *Cotton from Field to Mill* must serve to illustrate that intimations of the left's critique of racism are to be found in Southern murals, although they were rarely as blatant as Evergood's.[63]

History

As Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz have observed, the majority of Section murals that dealt with historical themes 'present a view of the past as peaceful, productive, and progressive' – a view that was intended to reassure the audience that the Depression was just a temporary detour from America's normal destiny that the New Deal would remedy. Of the few murals that offer a model of history based on conflict, the most important are those at the post offices in Decatur, Saint Louis and the San Francisco Rincon Annex.[64] All three were prestigious commissions, all were painted by leftists. Here I shall consider only the first two since the third was not executed until 1946–9, although it was commissioned in 1941. The iconography of the Rincon murals and the political struggles over them have to be understood in relation to the position of the Communist Party in the Cold War period, and for this reason they are discussed later.

Both the Decatur and Saint Louis commissions were the work of three Chicago-based artists who were recognised as being among the most distinguished of contemporary muralists by both the Section and WPA FAP, namely Edgar Britton (1901–82), Edward Millman (1907–64) and Mitchell Siporin (1910–76). Of the three, Britton is the least clear-cut in terms of political convictions. He was a member of the Chicago Artists' Union and a lithograph by him on a Spanish Republican theme was illustrated in *New Masses* in 1938,[65] but he was not a signatory of the Call for the American Artists' Congress and, while it is almost inconceivable he was not a member, there are no indications that he played an active role. By contrast, Millman and Siporin signed the first Call to the Congress in 1935. Millman was on the executive board of the Chicago Artists' Union and Siporin had been an active member of the Chicago John Reed Club and was a contributor to *New Masses* as early as 1931.[66]

Indeed, Siporin, whose father was a union organiser, had produced one of the most complex and accom-

117 Mitchell Siporin, *Haymarket Series: The Stool Pigeons, Mr and Mrs William Seliger*, 1993–4, ink on cardboard, 21 3/8 × 14 1/4 in., Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of an anonymous donor, 51.21.

plished instances of proletarian art in his remarkable series of drawings on the theme of the Haymarket Martyrs of 1934–5 (fig. 117), through which he intended to capture 'the condensed essence of the class struggle in America.' He originally conceived a sequence of seventy drawings divided into two parts, the first dealing with the events around the Haymarket bombing, and the second continuing the story of class struggle up to the present. They were intended to form the basis of a book of lithographs, although only twenty-five were produced and the book was never realised. The project had come out of a concern with 'the depiction of American History in mural painting', and was an attempt to go beyond the problems posed by the single moment composition. But the drawings were also informed by a critical understanding of modern art. Describing the relationship between 'young revolutionary artists' like himself and modernism in 1935, Siporin observed: 'We are part of this movement, and still at war with it.' At the same time he characterised his 'principal problem' as that of 'injecting into my work a dynamism which would begin to approach the dynamism of the actuality with which I deal.' This presumably led to the Expressionist element in his style, which, as I have shown, displeased some Communist critics. It also meant that when it came to the mural, the key model was that of the Mexicans.[67] The Mexicans were equally important for Britton and Millman, and the latter had visited Mexico in 1934–5 and studied Rivera at work.[68]

By the time the competition for the Decatur Post Office murals was announced in 1936, both Britton and Millman had gained experience of decorative painting under the PWAP and FAP, and Siporin had been conceiving mural designs for some years.[69] Rather than adopting the theme of the post, the trio took advantage of the localism in Section thinking to develop motifs from the history of Illinois. This came at a time when the folklorist B. A. Botkin was arguing in the People's Front magazine *Midwest* that Marxists could not afford to ignore 'regional "acceptances and resistances" in relation to the class struggle', and must take into account 'the sense of a native tradition growing by folk accretions out of local cultures.' Precisely the same point of view was taken by Siporin (who was an editor of *Midwest*) in his essay 'Mural Art and the Midwestern Myth', written for a WPA anthology in 1936. Here he suggested that Midwestern muralists were seeking to achieve 'a new synthesis of form and content growing out of the artist's own milieu and the new social functions in our society.' Botkin's conception of canalising local traditions of radicalism is nicely matched in his claim that 'Ours is the story of Labor and Progressivism, of Jane Addams and Mary McDowell, of Eugene Debs and Robert La Follette, Sr., of Vachel Lindsay and Theodore Dreiser, of Haymarket and Hull House.' This cultural pantheon is a People's Front in itself, where progressive social workers and La Follette rub shoulders with the Socialist Debs and the fellow-traveller Dreiser! Contrasting his conception with the Regionalism of Benton and Craven, Siporin claimed: 'There is no synthetic regionalism here, no collecting of obvious gadgetry, no jingoistic nationalism; but instead a human democratic art, deeply thoughtful and eloquent, an art of the lives and for the people.'[70] In fact, the fullest realisation of Siporin's vision came under the Section, not under the Federal Art Project.

The Federal Guide to Illinois describes Decatur as a typical prairie town[71] but, despite appearences, this was not the case. Situated at a major railroad junction, it was a small industrial city with a population of around 57,000 in 1938. It was the base for a thriving food processing industry, it had railroad workshops, a coalmine and factories making auto parts, tobacco products and garments. The diverse labour force that worked in these industries and in a host of skilled trades had some history of militancy, but in the 1930s Decatur remained a firmly AFL town. The major employers were still local companies and their proprietors were implacably opposed to industrial unionism. Incursions by the CIO were resisted (apparently with some 'open encouragement' from employers), and in 1937 the Decatur Trades and Labor Assembly suspended the three locals whose parent organisations had affiliated with the AFL's rival.[72]

However, one should not jump to conclusions about working-class consciousness from this. Macon County (where Decatur is situated) adjoins Christian County, the scene of a bloody and protracted struggle between the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the breakaway Progressive Miners of America (PMA) for much of the 1930s.[73] The city policed its unions with a heavy hand. In 1932, when Progressive Miners picketed UMW workers who had refused to strike, a crowd of 150–200 gathered outside the Macon County Coal Company were dispersed with shotguns, tear gas and axe handles.[74] Three years later, workers in Decatur's four garment factories struck in an attempt to achieve recognition for the ILGWU and better work conditions. The police sided more or less openly with the employers, and on several occasions officers and special deputies beat women picketers with clubs and fired tear gas at them at point blank range, before making multiple arrests. The strike lasted for thirteen months and was finally

called off without resolution. In the garment workers' strike, too, there were numerous incidents of intra-class violence.[75]

Decatur did well from the New Deal, and there were extensive public works projects in Macon County. In 1938, when federal relief and work relief spending in Illinois was around its peak, plans were approved for a $2 million sewer project in the town that was to be partly funded by the WPA, and for a new Macon County Building funded by the Public Works Administration.[76] Yet despite the fact that Roosevelt and the Democratic gubernatorial candidate had received landslide votes in the 1936 election, in the mid-term elections of 1938 the GOP won all except one of the Macon County offices, and voters gave majorities to all but two Republican candidates on the state ticket. Although the New Dealer Scott W. Lucas won a large majority in the Senate race in Illinois, he did not carry Macon County. 'Macon County repudiated the New Deal' announced the liberal *Decatur Herald*, which had recommended its readers to vote for the Democratic ticket for all except a few local offices.[77]

Without a detailed analysis of Decatur's social demography and of precinct voting patterns, it is impossible to know the role of Decatur's working class in this shift. But given the AFL's voluntarist tradition, there is no immediate contradiction between union membership and Republicanism, and a number of union members were active in the city's GOP. From the beginning, the AFL unions had problems with the New Deal public works and work relief schemes because programmes such as the Civil Works Administration and WPA usually undercut union wage rates. Moreover, in 1938 the AFL was complaining vociferously that the National Labor Relations Board was prejudiced against the AFL in union recognition battles. So in a strongly AFL town like Decatur there were quite a lot of reasons for unionised workers to vote against the New Deal – however lacking in larger class solidarity such action might appear.

Still, historians can be reasonably confident that one sector of the working class voted for the Democratic ticket in 1938, namely the WPA workforce of around 3,000. A significant number of Decatur's WPA workers were organised by the Workers Alliance, and on several occasions in 1938 they took action to protest against layoffs and to seek improvements in pay. This is one indicator of a Communist presence in the city.[78]

If Decatur's working class was divided by union affiliation and political allegiances, it was also divided by religion, race and ethnicity. There were, at the least, communities of African Americans, German Americans, Greek Americans, Irish Americans and Italian Americans in the city. Some Polish names appear among lists of strikers arrested in 1935, and there was a small Jewish community. In the first thirty years of the century many African Americans had been drawn to Illinois, and the state's black population had increased from 1.8 per cent (85,078) of the whole to 4.3 per cent (328,972). However, Decatur's black population was small, being only about 3,400 at the end of the Second World War. Race relations in Illinois had been turbulent, and the Ku Klux Klan had been particularly successful downstate during its resurgence in the early 1920s. Part of its appeal was to fundamentalist elements among the Protestant working class, disoriented by the postwar crisis in the coal industry and culturally at odds with workers of southern and East European Catholic origins. In this period, Decatur had a mayor friendly to the Klan.[79] In what ways these various differences might help to explain, for instance, who joined the PMA and who the UMW, who joined the 1935–6 ILGWU strike and who scabbed, who voted Democrat and who Republican, at the moment there seems no way of knowing. But somehow, it should be assumed, this divided and complex population was the public to which artists of the Democratic Front (themselves members of a CIO union) wished to direct their work above all others.

The artists arrived in Decatur in mid-August 1938 and the murals were completed on 27 October. All the work was executed in the public eye and, from the outset, the progress of the panels was extensively covered in the Decatur press, which published several photographs of the different stages and reported interviews with the artists.[80] If only through the press, the themes depicted in the murals and the nature of fresco

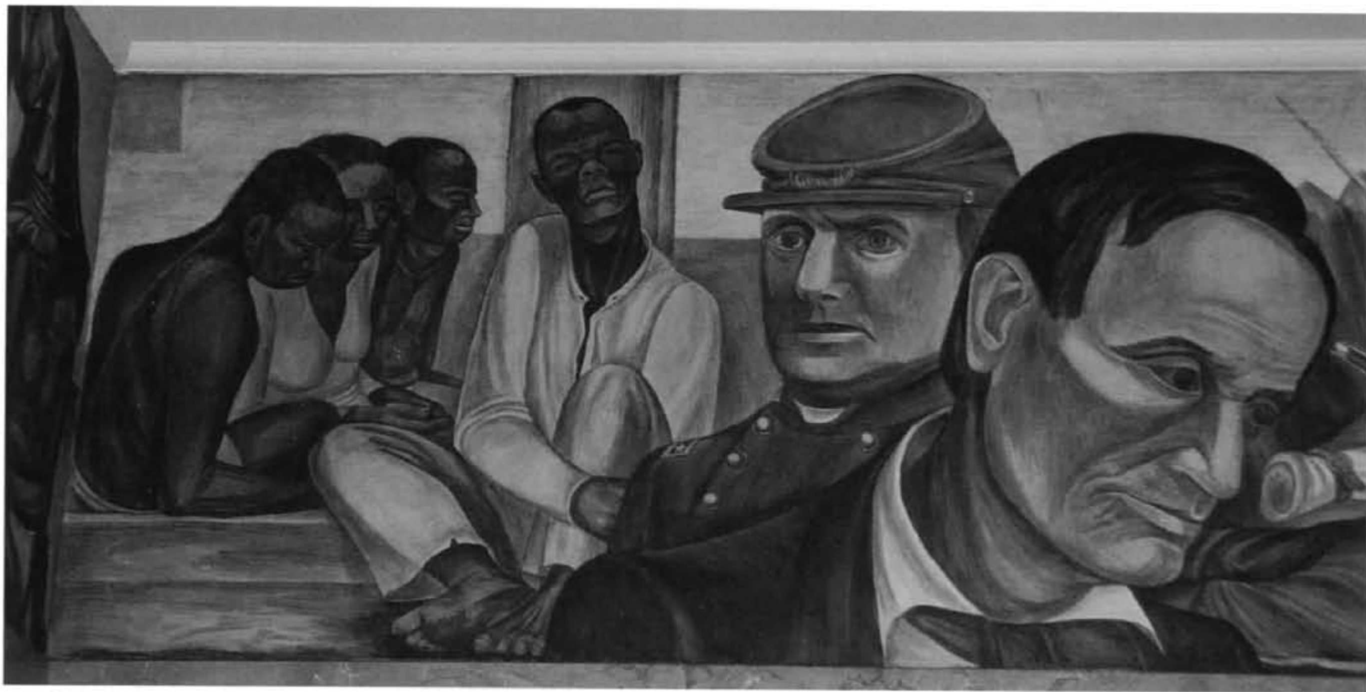
118 Mitchell Siporin, *Pioneer Family*, from *The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry in Illinois*, 1938, fresco, 7 ft × 7 ft 6 in., USPO, Decatur, Illinois.

119 Mitchell Siporin, *Workers of Today*, from *The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry in Illinois*, 1938, fresco, 7 ft × 7 ft 6 in., USPO, Decatur, Illinois.

120 Mitchell Siporin, *The Exchange of the Products of Agriculture for the Products of Industry*, from *The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry in Illinois*, 1938, fresco, 7 ft × 7 ft 6 in., USPO, Decatur, Illinois.

121 Edgar Britton, *Discovery, Use, and Conservation of Natural Resources* (north lobby, detail of south wall), 1938, fresco, 4 × 20 ft, USPO, Decatur, Illinois.

122 Edgar Britton, *Discovery, Use, and Conservation of Natural Resources* (north lobby, detail of south wall), 1938, fresco, 4 × 20 ft, USPO, Decatur, Illinois.

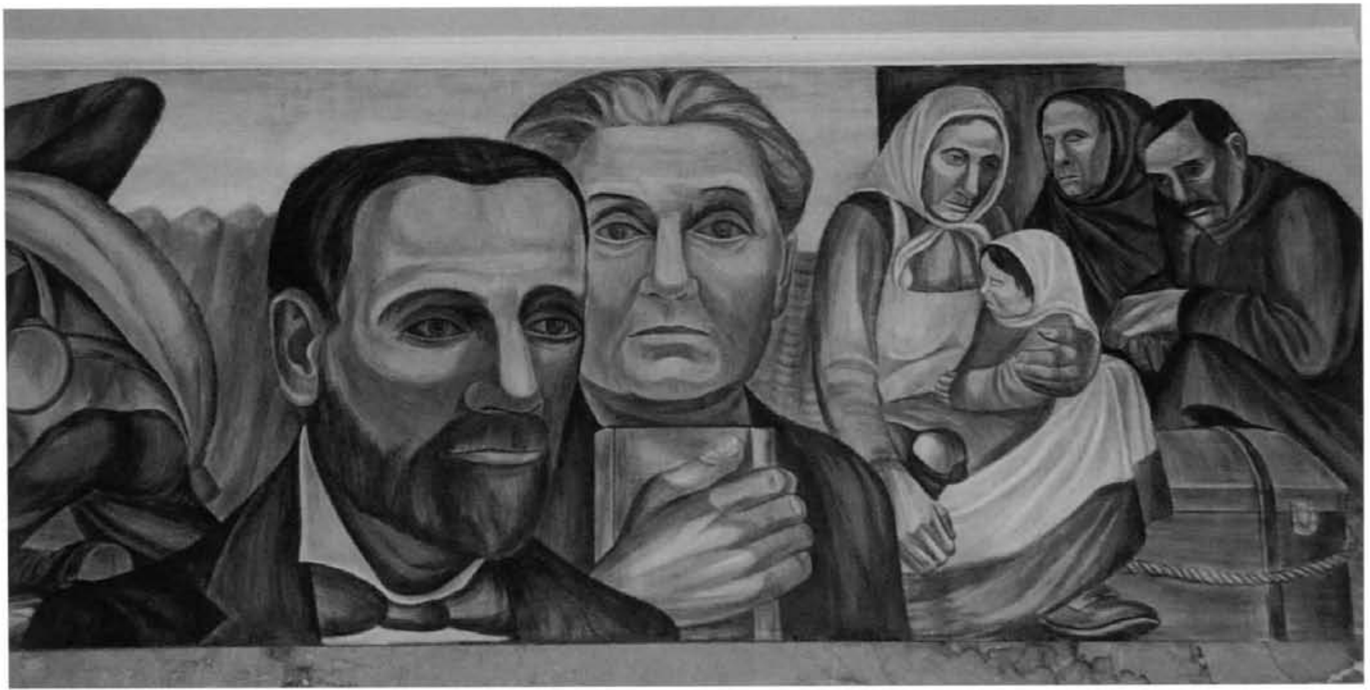


123 Edward Millman, *Growth of Democracy in Illinois* (south lobby, detail of south wall), 1938, fresco, 4 × 20 ft, USPO, Decatur, Illinois.

technique would have been well known. On the day before the murals were completed, the artists estimated that they had answered questions from 'at least 5,000 persons' during the course of their stay, and according to the press 'Hundreds of Decatur persons have paused each day to watch the artists at work.'[81] The artists themselves made much of the public nature of the fresco medium, and willingly stopped to explain things. But who were the people that made up their audience? Certainly it included members of Decatur High School art classes and pupils from grade schools, and on one occasion the artists talked on their work to members of Beta Sigma Phi, a businesswomen's sorority. Most tantalising of all, however, is the *Decatur Review*'s comment that the murals were popular with the 'rank and file of . . . postoffice visitors'.[82] One cannot conclude from this term that the murals had an especial appeal to working-class Decatur, but at least it suggests that their appeal was not limited to the middle class.

The Decatur Post Office was a large commission, comprising decorations to a main lobby nearly 124 feet long by more than 17 feet wide, and two attached north and south lobbies, each approximately 21 by 16 feet. All were painted in *buon fresco*. For the centre lobby – in fact the best spaces – Siporin executed three panels on the theme of 'The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry in Illinois' (figs 118–20), intended to show the 'essential character of the Prairie Midwest' through the representation of its specific economy and forms of labour. As the artist put it in his own explanatory notes, 'The growth and expansion of Illinois farms have given rise to the growth and expansion of factories of Farm Machinery, of steel and flour mills, and of stock yards.' To emphasise historical continuities, Siporin wanted 'the railsplitter emerging from the pioneer family' in the first panel (a self-consciously Lincolnesque figure) to appear to be facing the workers with the contemporary corn-blower in the second: 'The workers in Illinois Industry counterbalance their pioneer ancestors in the first panel.' In the third panel, the 'products of the toil of the farmer are exchanged for the machinery of the city workers.' The Communist Party might have temporarily abandoned its third-party ambitions, but the grounds for the alliance of the farmer and labour are still there. Significantly, farmers and workers exchange products here with no economic intermediary, in an ideal and essentially mutualist relationship.

In the north lobby, where the theme was 'Discovery, Use, and Conservation of Natural Resources', Britton had two panels 4 feet high by 20 feet long, on which he depicted respectively: early settlers and farming; and the building of the railroad, mining, steel works and skyscraper construction (figs 121 and 122) – all activities that could be seen to have a resonance with the occupations of Decatur's workforce. Here too workers labour cooperatively together with no sign of supervision. On four smaller curved panels on the east and west walls Britton painted portrait heads of Midwestern worthies:



124 Edward Millman, *Growth of Democracy in Illinois* (south lobby, detail of south wall), 1938, fresco, 4 × 20 ft, USPO, Decatur, Illinois.

John Deere, Frances Parker, Carl Sandburg and Frank Lloyd Wright. Those of Parker, Sandburg and Wright were accompanied by appropriate quotes, of which that from Parker is the most politically resonant: 'Democracy founded upon the principle that each member of society contributes to the good of all.'[83]

In the south lobby, Millman represented the 'Growth of Democracy in Illinois' on panels of the same dimensions, depicting the history of the state from Indian times, through migration and settlement on the north wall, and from the Civil War through urban social work and contemporary democracy on the south. It was, in the artist's own words: 'an interpretation of those events most important in moulding our democratic destiny'. No one following the sequence could doubt that Illinois's history was one of 'dramatic struggle' (in the words of the *Decatur Herald*),[84] or that the heroes in this narrative were progressives such as the abolitionist martyr Elijah Lovejoy and Governor John P. Altgeld, whose pardons of the surviving Haymarket Martyrs in 1896 cost him his political career. The conflict over slavery in Illinois is central to the iconography of the south wall (figs 123 and 124), in which Lincoln is represented with his friend Governor Richard J. Oglesby, wearing the uniform of the Grand Army of the Republic. Although both had personal connections with Decatur, Lincoln was also a key figure in Communist political discourse under the Popular Front. Correspondingly, he is not represented simply as a son of Illinois but as the instrument of African American Emancipation and thus as a revolutionary.[85] Similarly, Jane Addams, pictured next to Altgeld, represents not just another Chicago worthy but the entrance of immigrants into the workforce and into democracy. The sequence concludes with a panel representing a workman at the ballot box. Considering the nativist currents in Illinois in the 1920s, these figures can hardly stand as simple consensual symbols.

The three sequences are mutually supportive, but they do not really cohere into a single programme. However, it will be evident that labour's role in the building of the state is insisted on throughout. The only businessman represented is the agricultural machinery manufacturer Deere, and there is a marked presence of Democratic Front idols such as Lincoln, Sandburg[86] and Wright. All figures are equally endowed with a kind of symbolic *gravitas*, as if aware of their role in historical destiny. However pallid by comparison, the style was everywhere suggestive of the Mexican Mural Renaissance, more specifically of Orozco in the case of Millman's contributions, and of Rivera in those of Britton and Siporin.[87] The rather flattened bulky forms with clear outlines, and the uninflected facial expressions, spoke the language of revolutionary muralism, as this had been developed by 'Los Tres Grandes' in both Mexico and the United States. This stylistic quality unsettled Edward Rowan, who complained to all three artists of a pervasive 'serious mood', 'an unbroken lugubrious quality' and 'an unbroken somber mood' in their work. All were

125 (*right*) Edward Millman, *Pre-Civil War Missouri* (detail of south wall) 8 ft 10 in. × 29 ft, 1940–42, fresco, USPO, Saint Louis, Missouri.

127 (*facing page*) Mitchell Siporin, *Labor* and *The Land* (east lobby), 1940–42, fresco, each 12 ft 8 in. × 4 ft 4 in., USPO, Saint Louis, Missouri.

126 (*right*) Mitchell Siporin, *The Civil War* (detail of north wall), 1940–42, fresco, 8 ft 10 in. × 29 ft, USPO, Saint Louis, Missouri.

urged to avoid 'unnecessary distortions'. However, their designs were warmly supported by Daniel Catton Rich of the Chicago Art Institute, who chaired the local committee, and although the artists responded to Rowan's criticisms, they do not seem to have altered their overall conceptions much.[88]

It has become commonplace to argue that because such murals do not represent class conflict, their message was essentially affirmative of the status quo. This, I think, underestimates the extent to which working-class gains in the 1930s – especially the Wagner Act of 1935 – were a result of pressure from organised labour on the New Deal administration. Labour was hardly an uncontroversial topic in the early years of the CIO, and the majority of corporate America – as well as Decatur's major employers – was opposed to industrial unionism. In my view, the image of dignified labour at Decatur, like that in Rivera's *Detroit Industry*, offers an image of potential workers' power. Moreover, in their representation of workers as cooperative and unified, the Decatur murals projected an ideal that was very different from the realities outside the building, where, despite the militancy of some of the city's workers, the unity of labour remained only an aspiration.

In their scheme for the St. Louis Post Office, Millman and Siporin deployed a similar approach to the regional history of Missouri. Covering a wall space of 2,913 feet, these frescoes were the largest mural commission awarded by the Section, and brought the pair $29,000 between them. The commission was extensively reported in the press, both nationally and locally, and the artists' opinions were recorded in numerous interviews.[89] As at Decatur, much was made of the artists' willingness to talk with kibitzers.[90]

For once the artists had a fine mural space in a lobby more than 211 feet long and 17 feet high. The competi-

tion announcement had suggested that the 'transportation of the mails from its earliest beginning to the present day' should be 'a subject of great interest involving much of the history of Saint Louis.' Millman and Siporin took up this theme, but reversed its order of significance. In the main lobby, nine panels, all 29 feet wide by nearly 9 feet high, depicted 'major events which shaped the history of Saint Louis', for which the artists conducted extensive researches at the Missouri Historical Society. References to the history of the mail appear only here and there. On the south wall, Millman painted five panels representing purchase of the territory and the arrival of settlers; the struggle for statehood; river traffic; fur traders; and episodes in pre-Civil War history such as the Dred Scott decision (fig. 125). Opposite, on the north wall, Siporin's four panels symbolised discovery and colonisation, the Lewis and Clark expedition and Daniel Boone; the destruction of the Civil War and the achievements of Reconstruction and after (fig. 126). Because Millman took more panels in the main lobby, Siporin executed the four small panels in the east and west lobbies, which symbolise 'Unity', 'Democracy', 'Labor' and 'The Land' (fig. 127), and are linked with quotations from Walt Whitman, probably the key historical figure in American poetry for Communists.[91]

It will be evident that chronologically speaking Millman and Siporin's contributions in the main lobby are interspersed, and the narrative moves back and forth between north and south walls. There is greater unity of conception here than at Decatur, and Millman adopted the same kind of plastic motifs as Siporin, which are more effective than the mixture of portrait heads and smaller figure groupings he used in the earlier commission. The dark blue band of the river binds the panels together into a sombre and sometimes ominous sequence under a red sky. Facial expressions are sober

128 Thomas Hart Benton, *The Social History of the State of Missouri*, 1935–6, oil on canvas, Missouri State Capitol, Jefferson City, Missouri. © T. H. Benton and R. P. Benton Testamentary Trust/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

throughout, and the interlocked figure motifs suggest both collectivity and struggle. No one could doubt from this scheme that the state of Missouri had a bloody and destructive history of racial politics. Yet although the post master, W. Rufus Jackson, initially objected to some historical details such as the depiction of John Brown, he was won over,[92] and the Section seems to have been extremely pleased by the result. It is significant, however, that Rowan should write to the artists in the course of its execution to suggest that 'the over-serious expression of the figures be checked in the further work so that the "social conscious" quality is less insistent.'[93] To judge from the result, they responded only so far as was tactically necessary.

It seems unlikely that Millman and Siporin would not have felt the challenge of Benton's murals *The Social History of the State of Missouri* (fig. 128), given the overlap in theme and the left's continuing criticism of both the style and historical vision of Benton's work.[94] Seen in this light, the shallow spatial composition, simple groupings and sombre colouring in the Saint Louis Post Office frescoes stand in marked contrast to the spatial convolutions, narrative detail and garish colouring of Benton's oil panels in the State Capitol Building in Jefferson City. 'The people' in Millman and Siporin's scheme carry the burden of historical destiny; in Benton's they are actors in diffuse and frequently picayune narratives that blend fact and fiction. For all their seriousness, the former bespeak a certain optimism about the political capacities of their subjects, the latter are pervaded by the same easy cynicism we find in Benton's autobiography.[95] By contrast, the pair openly avowed that their 'hero' was Orozco, 'the greatest mural painter of our time', and they visited Mexico together in 1939 to study his work in preparation for the Saint Louis commission.[96]

The completed murals were reviewed sympathetically in the liberal *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, which referred to their 'richness and meaning for the people of Saint Louis', and described them as being 'painted with a full feeling of destiny'.[97] However, Rowan's intuition that the combination of style and motifs would not please some elements in local society is confirmed by a number

of letters to the paper complaining about public art in the city, many of which focussed more on a singularly banal American Legion monument recently erected. One correspondent described the post office figures as 'agonized, unhappy and grotesque', but even more significant was the accusation that the murals had a 'foreign atmosphere' and were not 'AMERICAN'. There may even have been anti-Semitic undertones in the observation: 'I am sure that most of the founders of the City of St Louis did not come out of the Old Testament.'[98] This response seems to confirm the Section's view that the sectors of local communities with which they had to deal wished for an essentially benign vision of America. However, it also indicates that in the interests of quality Rowan and his colleagues were sometimes prepared to accommodate work by artists of the left that they knew was likely to be controversial at the same time as they sought to temper their style.

The problem with generalising interpretations of New Deal iconography is that they do not sufficiently take into account the specifics of particular works, either in relation to style and motif or in relation to location. (The attention given to the South in existing studies is a partial exception with regard to the latter.) Further, for all its insights, Melosh's study seems to expect too much from left-wing art in relation to its potential audience. It is a commonplace that despite massive unemployment and vast social dislocations, the situation in Depression America was not a revolutionary one. Specific studies of the culture of CIO workers suggest that for all their militancy, the outlook of even the most class-conscious sectors of the working class scarcely achieved the level of the social democratic.[99] In these circumstances, the representation of American workers as the backbone of democracy and the 'Resources of America' in federal buildings was not an insignificant achievement for the left. For all the limitations of Democratic Front analysis, it was acute enough in registering that before American workers could develop any more radical consciousness, they had to be brought to a common sense of their own dignity and potential as citizens. As such, some New Deal murals were arguably more politically valuable than the John Reed Club's collective exhibits at the Society of Independent Artists, or its small shows in a loft on Sixth Avenue. One testimony to this comes from Richard Nixon in 1949, who wrote in a letter to a California postal worker that 'some very objectionable art, of a subversive nature, has been allowed to go into Federal buildings in many parts of the country,' art that he hoped would be removed under a Republican administration.[100]

The WPA Federal Art Project

Relations between Popular Front collective organisations and the Federal Art Project were inevitably far closer than those they achieved with the Section, but also more intense, more turbulent. Cahill was regarded as sufficiently sympathetic to address the Second Artists' Congress in December 1937, and in 1939 the Congress put on a dinner in his honour at the Brevoort Hotel.[101] Reciprocally, the anthology *Art for the Millions*, which Cahill initiated as a report on the project in 1936, would have included a section on 'Artists' Organizations' with statements by representatives of the Artists' Union and Artists' Congress. The editor of this volume, Emanuel Benson, was a critic and prominent AAC activist.[102] In the 1957 interviews that make up his 'Reminiscences', Cahill emphasised the role of the Communist Party in orchestrating pickets and sit-down strikes, but also the anger and desperation of those involved. He and the regional offices were the immediate object of protest because activists assumed if they put pressure on them, they in turn would put pressure on the administration.[103] Regional directors varied in their degree of sympathy with the Union. In Illinois, relations between the Union and the director Increase Robinson were so bad that Cahill was forced to replace her.[104] By contrast, Audrey McMahon, who headed the New York project, declared approvingly in a 1936 article that the government had become 'in some measure, a permanent patron of the arts', and she later recalled that despite 'many bitter encounters' with Union and Congress representatives, 'I always felt that their basic purpose was similar to, if not identical with mine'. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that McMahon was herself a member of the Congress, from which she resigned in April 1940, claiming that she had not hitherto noticed political elements in the Preamble to its Constitution.[105]

Assessing the political import of WPA art works is much harder than assessing that of the Section. Not only was the programme much larger but its products were also far more varied and physically diffused. Moreover, the records of the FAP are both less comprehensive and less easy to use. Iconographical analysis of WPA public art is correspondingly less developed than that of the Section, although its general characteristics have been defined convincingly enough by Park and Markowitz.[106] That the cultural programmes were the subject of heated debates in the press I have already intimated. However, these debates tended to centre around the general principal of federal patronage as representing 'the standards and methods of relief symbolized by WPA'[107] rather than

around specific commissions or works. With WPA murals and public sculptures there are some measures of audience reaction in the form of press criticisms and the responses of sponsors. With the easel paintings, prints and small sculptures distributed to public buildings and offices, or eventually to museums, no such record exists, and the only register of responses lies in reviews of the numerous WPA exhibitions that were shown both at museums and at the FAP's own galleries and community art centres. Nominally, at least, WPA artists on the Easel and Graphic Art divisions in New York had no restriction as to subject beyond a ban on nudes and 'propaganda for a specific political or other kind of group', and the stipulation that 'pictures must be capable of being allocated to public buildings.'[108]

In assessing the politics of WPA art, I focus on New York and Illinois. This is partly for reasons of manageability, but also because of the central importance of the projects in these states and the scale of political activity around them.

Murals

WPA public art was conceived for different types of institution from those in which the Section operated. Most commonly it decorated schools, hospitals, libraries, armouries, parks, public housing, borough halls, courthouses and prisons, but it was also placed in airports and radio stations among other places. Although it was commissioned by a federal agency, WPA art was thus not destined for federal buildings. Having said this, the institutions where it was displayed can be understood as branches of the state, and were characterised as 'authorized governmental agenc[ies]'. WPA projects generally required a 'sponsoring governmental agency', which was expected 'to contribute equipment, materials and services to the maximum amount possible', and after the 1937 ERA act this was a statutory obligation. Until the 1939 act Federal One did not have to meet this requirement, since the offical sponsor of Federal One was the WPA itself. FAP administrators were thus not tied to outside agencies responsible for non-labour costs, although they needed such agencies to reach the communal audience they desired. Project procedures did allow for the role of what were called 'Cooperating Sponsors', who might contribute money or services to its work, but such contributions were kept distinct from the formal transaction of allocation. The route by which WPA art works were installed in 'public agencies or institutions' was through long-term loans from the federal government. Nominally, at least, WPA art remains federal property.[109]

In an article of 1936 passing judgement on the WPA and Treasury projects, E. M. Benson claimed that 'after certain artists of outstanding talent and reputation have passed through the editorial mill of the Procurement Division what remains is something that can hardly be recognized as their work.' By contrast, the FAP was the first 'real attempt . . . to think in terms of a long-range cultural program that would meet the complex requirements of the world we live in.' For 'the most part', the Treasury had not produced a 'people's art'. By implication the WPA FAP would do so. Yet even the partisan Benson acknowledged significant work had been produced under the Section, work that 'has had a salutary and progressive influence in its own sphere.'[110] The FAP has commonly been presented as a model of freedom, in contrast to the Section's tight procedural controls, but supervision of murals and public sculptures was close, and in New York City they had to be approved by the Municipal Art Commission. Cooperating Sponsors could also demand changes, although they were not always acceded to.[111] At a 1939 meeting of the New York mural project, Evergood, then managing supervisor of the Easel Division in the city, gave an address in which he 'lauded the sympathetic understanding of the supervisors of the mural division and of the Subject and Approvals Committee toward the artists submitting work for mural assignment.' He appreciated that an artist might feel 'a resentment toward the committee due to constant recommendation for revision of his design', and he himself had 'formerly felt' it was taking away his '"Freedom of Expression"'. However, after realising 'the tireless efforts' of the supervisors in gaining approval for submissions from the committee, the Sponsor and the Art Commission, he considered any resentment unwarranted.[112] Evergood's statement is a reminder of the constraints under which FAP public art was produced, but it also illustrates the way artists could move between being relief workers for the project and being supervisory personnel. By contrast, while artists were involved in Section procedures as competition jurors, they were deliberately excluded from the running of the programme. In fact, supervisors belonged to a different union from relief workers, although it too was a CIO affiliate.[113] It was the willingness of the FAP to appoint artists working in a wide range of styles as supervisory personnel that partly accounts for the stylistic diversity of the programme.

The leading question regarding public art under WPA is whether it allowed more space for 'Freedom of Expression' than the Section and, if so, whether this meant greater leeway for political radicalism,

manifested either iconographically or formally. To answer this it is useful to compare the murals by Britton, Millman and Siporin produced under both programmes. All three executed murals for high schools in Chicago and its neighbourhood, which, with one exception, matched well with established FAP iconography.

In the dining hall at Lane Technical High School, Britton painted six panels (all roughly 12 × 14 feet) and an overdoor with the title *Epochs in the History of Man*. Such grandiose themes were not uncommon in FAP school decorations, the best-known instance being James Michael Newell's *Evolution of Western Civilization* for Evander Childs High School in the Bronx.[114] The most important model for narratives of this type was Orozco's *The Epic of American Civilization* at Dartmouth College, although none of his American imitators matched its power. Neither Britton nor Newell ironised 'civilization' in the way Orozco did, and their formal motifs and colouring have nothing of his expressionism. Correspondingly, conflict plays no role in Britton's history and little in Newell's. Their history is also essentially Eurocentric. Britton's programme moves from the cave to the New Deal, passing only through the Egyptians, Greeks and Renaissance en route. In a text prepared to accompany the murals, Britton wrote of the last panel in the sequence (fig. 129):

> Our day shows the possibility of the individual standing serene against the product of collective effort of mind and united action. The fruit of his work now exists for the benefaction of Man – his use, his security. . . . Man has brought to this new world a sense of individual freedom through collective effort.

The balancing of individual against collective in this statement finds its counterpart in the image of the worker with wife and child set against a dam. The latter we may take as a synecdoche for 'united action', while worker and family (according to the artist, 'the greatest of human relationships'), isolated in an otherwise unpeopled landscape, are the basic unit of democracy. In this narrative, individual freedom is a product of 'collective effort'. If the familial politics here may count as what Gary Gerstle calls 'moral traditionalism', the progressivist message is not an affirmation of consumer capitalism. Progress here implicitly means, at the least, public control of power, and probably much more.[115]

The image of the worker as the end-product of education was again a common theme. Britton had painted nine panels representing different types of labour for the library at Highland Park High School in 1934 under

129 Edgar Britton, *Our Day*, from *Epochs in the History of Man*, 1936, fresco, 12 ft × 14 ft 4 in., Lane Technical High School, Chicago, Illinois.

the PWAP. Two years later he executed six frescoes on the theme of *Classroom Studies and their Application* in the entrance lobby of Bloom High School, a new Art Deco building in Chicago Heights. Whereas at Highland Park Britton's figures were all male and engaged primarily in manual activity, at Bloom manual workers are balanced by professionals such as architects, doctors and engineers. Women too are represented, but only in supporting roles. All these panels speak of the dignity of labour and cooperation, and the only hint of radicalism here is the red star on the glove of an engineering worker. The Bloom murals are essentially a catalogue of occupations, and the style has none of the dynamism of Britton's Decatur frescoes or their dark Orozcoesque accents.

Siporin's four panels on the Arts for the lobby auditorium at Lane Technical High School are more formally satisfying than these, but their iconography is no more challenging. At Lucy Flower Technical High School, however, Millman decorated a whole room covering 54 feet of wall with frescoes that were so disagreeable to the cooperating sponsor that they were painted over and have only recently been restored. The school is named after a nineteenth-century Chicago reformer who had fought to establish child welfare provision in Cook County and campaigned for vocational schools. Appropriately, Millman took as his theme *Women's Contribution to America's Progress* (fig. 130), illustrating this through images of 'Samaritans in the Field' (female Abolitionists), the 'Suffrage Movement', 'Child Labor and the Schools' and 'Women's Fight for

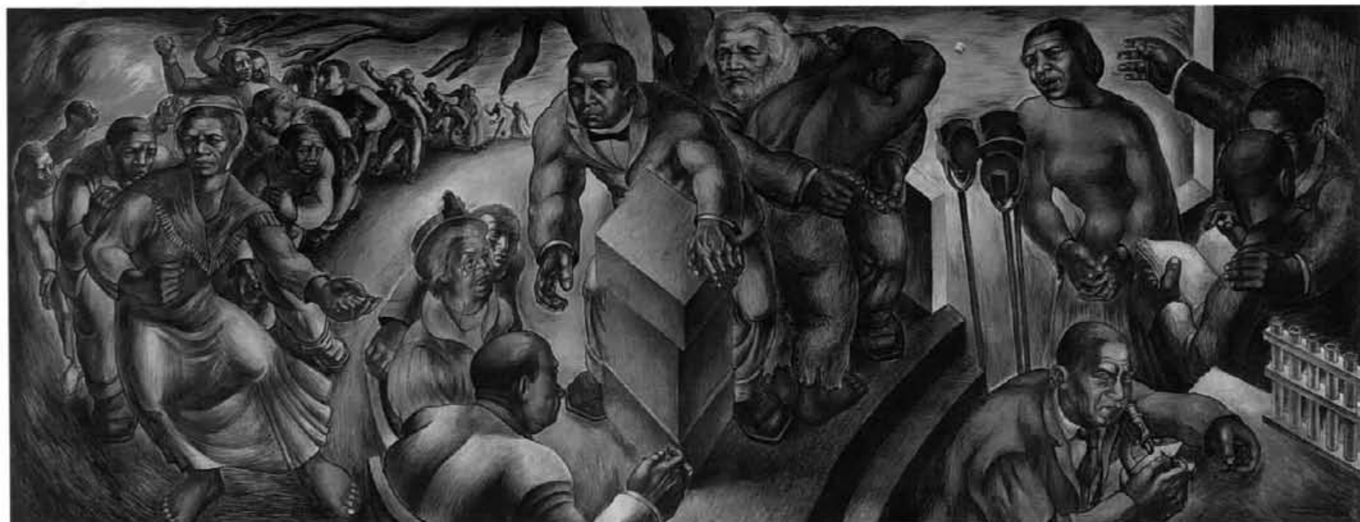
130 Photograph of students in front of Edward Millman's *Women's Contribution to America's Progress*, 1940, fresco, Lucy Flower Technical High School, Chicago, Illinois, Edward Millman Papers, Syracuse University Library.

Peace'. Among the figures represented were Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Clara Barton and – to bring the sequence up to date – Frances Perkins, Roosevelt's Secretary of Labour. Not only was the emphasis on women as political activists, but a recurrent theme was their role in redressing the social ills of racial injustice, poverty and male prejudice. And the style, while restrained by comparison with Orozco, was none the less clearly Mexican in inspiration. Colouring is sombre and facial expressions are uniformly serious. A year after they were finished, the school board had the murals covered up as 'drab and dreary'. This was also the fate of the 42-feet-long panel *The Blessings of Water* that Millman painted in the Bureau of Water in Chicago City Hall in 1937.[116]

The defacement of Millman's murals was the result of an orchestrated campaign against WPA art by the anti-New Deal *Chicago Tribune* in 1940, a campaign that particularly targeted him, Britton and Siporin. While the accusation that their work was 'un-American in theme and design' and displayed 'communistic influence' is the usual stuff of reactionary rhetoric, it does confirm that the tenebrous effects and Mexican style that so worried Rowan at Decatur had a leftish political resonance.[117] It was for this reason they were also adopted by the African American artist Charles White (1918–79), who worked with Millman and Siporin in the FAP mural division, and studied in a fresco painting class they conducted.[118]

White grew up in the poverty-stricken section of Chicago's South Side in a cultural milieu that has been vividly evoked by Bill Mullen.[119] Apart from art classes at the South Side Settlement House, his formal training comprised a scholarship at the Chicago Art Institute in 1937 and a spell with Harry Sternberg at the Art Students League in 1942. Otherwise his artistic education came mainly through a self-help group formed by black Chicago artists, the Art Crafts Guild, and through informal contacts with artists of the Chicago left such as Aaron Bohrod, Todros Geller, Si Gordon and Morris Topchevsky. According to one account, he was a member of the John Reed Club,[120] and he was later active in the Artists' Union and American Artists' Congress. Equally important was his immersion in the circle that met at the studio of the African American choreographer Katherine Dunham and included the writers Nelson Algren, Willard Motley, Margaret Walker and Richard Wright, of whom the last-named impressed him most deeply. White also became a member of the Negro People's Theatre,[121] designing sets and acting in plays, and being coached by the radical playwright Theodore Ward, whose anti-capitalist play *Big White Fog* caused controversy when produced by the Chicago Federal Theatre Project. Given this formation, it is not surprising that White read 'Marx, Engels, and Lenin', and became a committed fellow-traveller, if not a Party member.

As a schoolboy White was outraged by the omission of African Americans from history teaching and mainstream historical writing, something he became aware of through his reading in the public libraries and, particularly, his early discovery of Alain Locke's seminal anthology *The New Negro*. As for so many radical African American artists and intellectuals of his generation, he saw one of the fundamental political tasks as to insert the story of African American oppression and struggles into the American historical narrative. Black Americans needed to be shown to themselves as active players in the nation's history, they needed their own heroes and heroines. As one of the twenty-one black artists taken on by the FAP in Chicago, White found an appropriate space to pursue this strategy in the FAP's South Side Community Art Center,[122] for the library of which he painted the mural *Five Great American Negroes* (fig. 131). Although the mural seems never to have been installed at the Art Center, it was shown at the Artists' and Models' Ball at Chicago's Savoy Ballroom in October 1939, and at the *Exhibition of the Art of the American Negro* held at the Library of Congress from



131 Charles White, *Five Great American Negroes*, 1939–40, oil on canvas, 5 ft × 12 ft 11 in., Howard University Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

December 1940 to January 1941, to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment. For this latter venue it was symptomatically retitled *Five Great Americans*.[123]

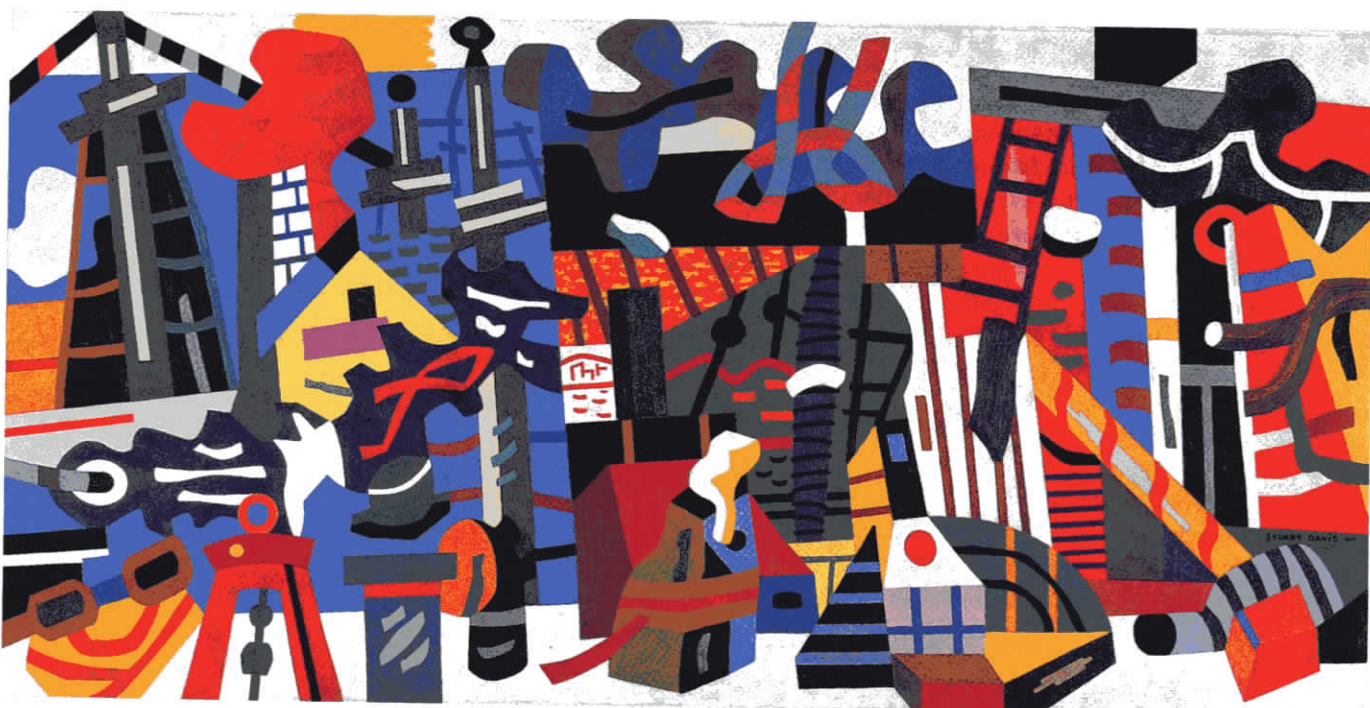
In line with the Democratic Front and FAP ideals of community engagement, White selected the figures on the basis of a survey conducted on his behalf by the *Chicago Defender*. The composition pivots on a podium, from which Booker T. Washington addresses a middle-class group. Just behind him Frederick Douglass (looking remarkably Marx-like) releases a slave from his bonds. This group is flanked by Sojourner Truth leading a line of fleeing slaves on the left[124] and, on the right, by symbols of more recent black achievement – Marian Anderson in concert and the agricultural chemist George Washington Carver at work in a laboratory. From behind Washington and Douglass there spread the ominous branches of a bare tree, overhanging the slave column. Although the picture does not have the formal sophistication of White's later work – he was only twenty-one when he painted it – it is undeniably forceful, and shows the artist already developing those bulky, slightly flattened forms that were intended to signify an authentic folk imagery of the Negro People.

However, if White had learnt the formal language of revolutionary mural painting from Millman and Siporin, he had departed from their example in terms of subject matter. For despite the Party's concern with promoting knowledge of black history and culture, African Americans appear on the walls at Decatur and Saint Louis only in relation to the Civil War and Abolitionist movement, with the exception of a few waterfront workers in one of Millman's Saint Louis panels. There are no indications of African Americans' own role in the emancipation struggle and the war. White's work precisely remedied this lacuna.[125] Thus although his conception of mural iconography grew out of Democratic Front Regionalism, White transformed it in crucial ways, creating an imagery designed not to speak to the people of the Midwest but to a particular constituency within the American polity as a whole. I do not mean to imply that White intended his art only for an African American audience. As the *Chicago Sunday Bee* reported in 1940, he was not to be 'classed as a nationalist painter': 'He sees the problems of Negroes as differing from those of other workers in degree or intensity rather than in kind. He believes that all working class people have a common interest and that there is a common solution for their problems.'[126] In effect, White drew on the Communist conception of the National Question as defined by Stalin in treating African Americans as a subject nationality striving for freedom from national oppression within the United States. From within the Communist culture of the 1930s had come the conception of each 'people' producing an authentic national culture of its own, which was in some cases a weapon in national struggles for liberation from capitalism, as well as from racial and national oppression. White was thus able to produce an art designed to appeal specifically to African Americans, but one that would also, as he and other Communists saw it, contribute to the emancipation of oppressed peoples everywhere.[127]

132 Ben Shahn, *The First Amendment*, 1941, tempera, 8 ft 6 in. × 16 ft, USPO, Wood Haven, Queens, New York City. © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

In relation to my main question, the case histories of the Chicago muralists suggest some kind of answer. From a left political perspective, Millman's achievement at Flower High School was significant, but his murals there are no more conspicuously radical than those in the post offices at Decatur and Saint Louis. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that White's mural, with its overt imagery of racial struggle, could have been commissioned by the Section.[128] This should be compared with Ben Shahn's *First Amendment* (fig. 132) for the Wood Haven post office at Jamaica, New York, which is more experimental in formal terms, but perhaps has enough in the way of unequivocally American symbols (the liberty torch, Supreme Court building and New England church) to escape the charge of un-Americanism. And, of course, Shahn's Americans are all white. We might conclude from this that for the most part the commissioning of public art under the Section was no more restrictive than under the FAP, but that just occasionally the latter permitted greater leeway.

This was certainly the case in relation to style, although only in New York did modernist artists of the left find opportunities to implement their aesthetic on a public scale. One reason for this was that the abstractionist Burgoyne Diller headed the FAP mural division there. Among these opportunities were the commissions for Radio Station WNYC, some buildings in the New York World's Fair, and the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn. I shall concentrate on the last.[129] The Williamsburg Project comprises twenty four-storey apartment buildings, erected under the auspices of the newly established New York City Housing Authority. Its chief architect, William Lescaze, was a member of the FAP Design Studio and an advisor to the programme. Swiss born, Lescaze trained in Europe, and his Philadelphia Saving Fund Society building of 1928–32 was one of the first major International Style buildings in the United States. His design for Williamsburg was also overtly modernist. Although the fenestration is tame by International Style standards, the flat-roofed blocks are arranged in a strikingly dynamic (and, as it turned out, environmentally impractical) way on the site. Even the colouring of the buildings was 'obstreperously striped' by the bands of concrete running through pinkish brick, and the complex layout was also said to have an 'aggressive formality'. One critic complained that the 'system'



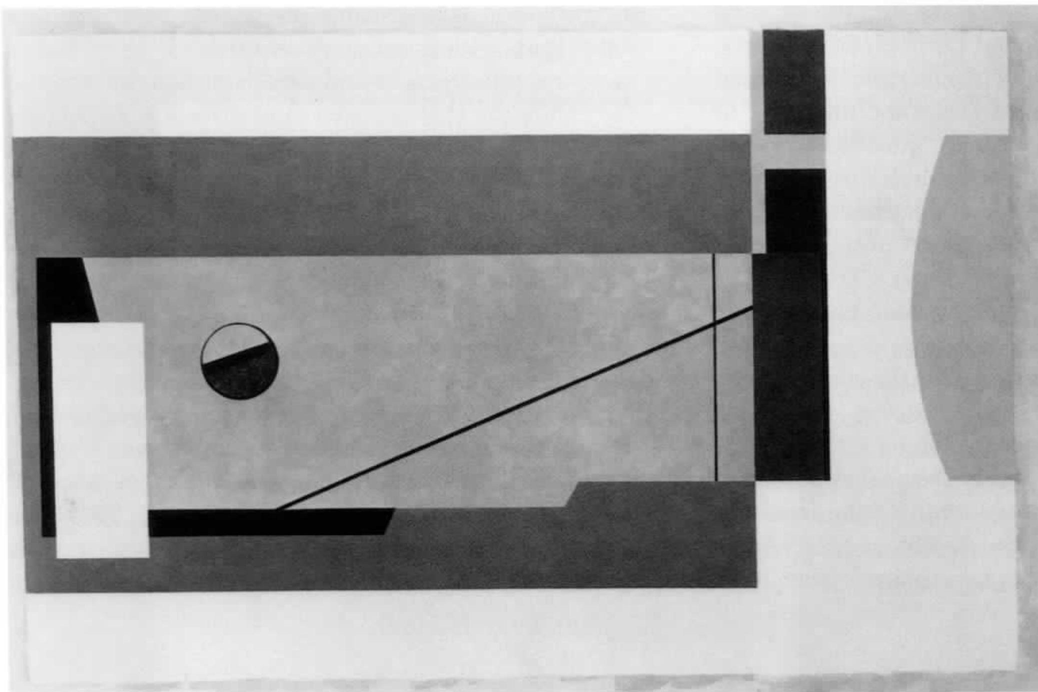
of the plan was hard to follow, and thus calculated only 'to bring pleasure to the esoteric few', making it unsuitable for a 'people's architecture'.[130] The modernist formalism of Lescaze's conception was to be stylistically complemented by the murals that decorated some of the public spaces within it.

In all twelve artists were involved, of whom seven can reasonably be characterised as leftists – Bolotowsky, Browne,[131] Criss, Davis, Greene, Matulka and Morley. The nature and intensity of their commitment to the left varied, of course, as did their individual relationships with the modernist tradition: Bolotowsky and Browne's compositions made no concessions to naturalistic reference, while Criss's *Sixth Avenue El* (National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.) is close to the Precisionist idiom and Davis's *Swing Landscape* (fig. 133) contains the residual outline shapes of a Gloucester harbour scene, which the artist may have thought appropriate in a mural for a port city. In an essay for *Art for the Millions*, written in 1936–7, Diller emphasised that the murals were intended to match the 'functional' character of the architecture, and stressed that their role was to provide 'relaxation and entertainment for the tenants': 'The more arbitrary color, possible when not determined by the description of objects, enables the artist to place an emphasis on its psychological potential to stimulate relaxation.'[132] Some of the artists involved would have claimed a great deal more for their contributions. However, I do not imply by this that they shared a common viewpoint, and the Williamsburg Project can be seen as a site at which different conceptions of pictorial modernism squared off, and particularly those of Davis and Greene (fig. 134).

As shown in Chapter Two, Greene was emphatic that the modern artist was necessarily a specialist, a *déclassé* individual, who could look for support only to 'a fearless intelligentsia'. The new middle class lacked a taste of its own, and did not have the resources to build collections on the traditional scale, while 'the class in power' sought to exploit and degrade 'new intellectual advances'. For Greene, as for Davis, modern art was materialist and realist, and corresponded to the general principle of progress. For him, too, while modernism had a progressive message, it could not be that of the political agitator. However, unlike Davis, Greene argued that modernist evolution had an internal logic that pointed towards abstraction, and correspondingly his model of the artist was significantly more elitist:

> Without denying that his ultimate aim is to touch the crowd, he sees the futility of addressing it in the language commonly used by the crowd. He must employ his own language, in this instance the language of form and color, in order to move, dominate and direct the crowd, which is his special way of being understood.

In his *Art Front* writings of 1936 Greene insistently associated modern art with revolution, but an essay he wrote for *Art for the Millions* specifically rejects 'orthodox Marxist' criticism, and implies that fascism and Communism are both forms of totalitarianism.[133]



134 (*left*) Balcomb Greene, *Untitled*, c. 1936, oil on canvas, 7 ft 7½ in. × 11 ft 7¼ in., Williamsburg Housing Project, Brooklyn, New York. On loan to the Brooklyn Museum of Art from New York City Housing Authority.

133 (*facing page*) Stuart Davis, *Swing Landscape*, 1938, oil on canvas, 7 ft 2¾ in. × 14 ft 4⅛ in., Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington. © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

Davis found the dominant forms of Marxist criticism equally unacceptable, but he was not prepared to separate art from politics as stringently as Greene, and he continued to believe in the Soviet ideal. His essay for *Art for the Millions*, while bearing the title 'Abstract Painting Today', emphasised that the term 'abstract' was misleading, if unavoidable in the context. Like Greene he argued that 'art values are social values, not by reflection of other social values, but by direct social participation.' Modern painting was, of itself, 'a direct progressive social force'. However, Davis's stress on the cognitive force of modernism was greater. Unlike 'domestic naturalism', the dominant trend in American painting of both left and right, which offered only passive reflections of reality, modernism affirmed 'the modern view that the world is real, that it is in constant motion, that it can be manipulated in the interest of man by knowledge of the real character of the objective relations'. Unlike the traditional perspective of naturalistic painting, modernist spatial systems were 'in harmony with, referable, and relative to the contemporary environment'. The progressive 'democratic' aspect of 'modern works' could easily be seen if they were 'contrasted with works of previous centuries, where the formal conception is hierarchically concentric with a center corresponding to monarchical authority and to a science of eternal categories.' Thus for Davis progressive values were directly inscribed in the forms of modernist painting, so that even 'the autonomy of parts' within them corresponded to 'the freedom of the individual under a democratic government.'[134] For Greene, abstract art seems to carry no such messages, and correspondingly his mural lacks both the vestigial naturalistic clues of *Swing Landscape* or its references to popular cultural forms. For Davis, as for other Democratic Fronters, Swing musically epitomised a democratic inter-racial culture, and the extraordinarily vibrant interplay of colours and forms in the work were intended to evoke the rhythms of hot jazz. From Davis's perspective, Greene's elitism and disdain for the Democratic Front would have connected with the position of the reformed *Partisan Review*, and he regarded him as a Trotskyist.[135]

Although the *Daily Worker* illustrated Davis's WNYC mural on two occasions,[136] it cannot be assumed from this that Davis's style had anything like the connotations he claimed for it. And in any case, his mural for Williamsburg was never installed. When it was shown at an exhibition of mural designs at New York's Federal Art Gallery in May 1938, it reportedly dominated the room, 'cancelling everything else within range'.[137] In so far as the surviving murals can be judged from their current condition, *Swing Landscape* would have dominated them too, both colouristically and compositionally. Greene's painting – which was intended to be 'impersonal' and executed with an air-gun – is pallid and formal by comparison.[138] If the murals of Bolotowsky, Browne and Greene were painted over (like Gorky's earlier Newark Airport murals),[139] there is no evidence that this was because some progressive political significance was read into them beyond their association with the WPA. Most commentators would have agreed with Jewell's assertion that '[a]bstract design ... [is] not equipped to prod us into social consciousness, or agitate against war', well suited as it may have been formally to modern architectural environments.[140] With the defacement of Millman's work in Chicago there are certainly surer grounds. This is not to say that the style of FAP abstract murals had no political effects, but it probably stood mainly for WPA 'boondoggling' in the minds of conservative critics and little else. Having said this, there is evidence that some Williamsburg residents valued the art they received: the Tenants' Council sent a letter to Hopkins in May 1938 to protest against a proposed limitation on WPA costs that would mean the effective closing down of the Federal Art Project.[141]

Easel Paintings

While there had been earlier exhibitions of FAP work in New York, *New Horizons in American Art*, shown at the Museum of Modern Art in autumn 1936, was the first major display of the project's achievements. It was curated by Dorothy C. Miller, who had worked as research and editorial assistant to Cahill on earlier projects, and later became his second wife. The catalogue leads with murals, represented mainly by studies, cartoons, photographs and models. It was this aspect of the exhibition that received most critical attention, and pointed up clearly differences between the Federal Art Project and Section on the question of stylistic pluralism. For in addition to the relatively standard fresco forms of Britton's Bloom High School panels and Newell's *Evolution of Western Civilization*, the selection included Evergood's *Story of Richmond Hill*, Gorky's *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations*, and colour studies for all the Williamsburg Housing Project murals. Far more than the Section's public showings, this demonstrated 'the complete eclipse of the old style mural in America' – that is, of generalising allegories in an academic style. Writing in *Parnassus*, Emily Genauer emphasised the predominance of American Scene – 'life and landscape outside the

135 Jolán Gross-Bettelheim, *In the Employment Office*, c. 1936, lithograph, $10^7/_8 \times 8^1/_2$ in., © The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio Art Program, long term loan to the Cleveland Museum of Art, 4021.1942.

painter's door' – in the easel section, while the graphics showed both 'extraordinary versatility' and 'rich social content'.[142] E. M. Benson, in the *Magazine of Art*, stressed even more the latter aspect of the show:

> Here, at last, were no artists having to sit on aesthetic flagpoles to get into the public headlines, but serious craftsmen who had eaten the black bread of poverty and now, with the bulwark of the security the Government was offering them, were prepared to set down their feelings and thoughts in a direct and straightforward manner.[143]

However, to make this claim required a highly selective approach to the display. There were among the easel paintings a few grim genre scenes such as Guglielmi's *New York: Wedding in South Street* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), Vavak's watercolour *The Dispossessed* and two Expressionistic oils by the young Boston artist Jack Levine.[144] In the graphics section the 'social' element was probably stronger, with prints by Jolán Gross-Bettelheim (fig. 135), Julius Bloch, Blanche Grambs (fig. 136), Refregier, Dorothy Rutka and Joseph Vogel.[145] Among the few sculptures there was even an impressive plaster *Homeless* (fig. 138), by Aaron Goodelman. But the catalogue and plates leave no doubt that such works were in a minority. In *Art Front*, McCausland observed the works on show appeared 'gayer and less socially critical than one might have expected in a world where an artist plies his brush and mallet at the price of possible blows from a cop's billy.' It would be a tragedy, she warned, if the work produced under the Project was to be merely '"offical" art'. When Stuart Davis, as secretary of the AAC, wrote in to the *New York Times* to protest about adverse comments on the exhibition, it was on the grounds of the broader social and cultural benefits of the project, not because controversial works needed to be defended.[146]

New Horizons can be taken as showing what the Washington office wanted the FAP to look like, and at regional level artists may well have had more influence on exhibitions because of the close connections between supervisory personnel and project workers. In New York a Federal Art Gallery opened its first exhibition in late December 1935, at 7 East 38th Street in 'the heart of the shopping and garment manufacturing district'. A history of this 'Art Gallery for the People' emphasised that its exhibitions had 'offered a welcome respite from humdrum routine to office workers, business men and women, department store clerks, shoppers and a vast variety of garment workers from the nearby factories.' A sharp contrast is drawn between this audience and the 'roving band of gallery-habitues' (*sic*) that had dominated the gallery scene in the early 1930s:

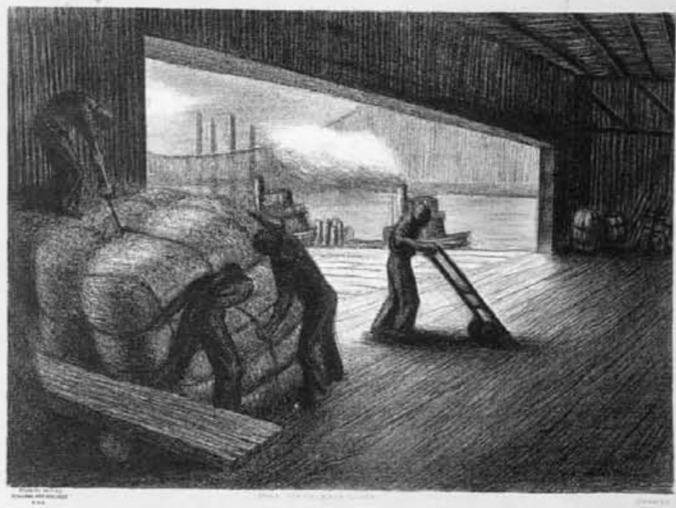
> To many who spent their lunch hour in the Federal Art Gallery, the velvet lined splendor and sense of sanctity in some of the other galleries had been too forbidding; others had been unable to get past the chilling eye of attendants in those hushed high places, while still others had never been able to find time to look at paintings, sculpture or prints, or indeed to consider art in terms of their everyday experiences.

The role of the gallery was thus conceived as an educational one, and its exhibitions would 'offer taxpayers their best opportunity to see and discuss the results of the Federal art program.[147] Whether the gallery's audience was affected by its move to 225 West 57th Street in summer 1937 is not disclosed.

Between December 1935 and June 1939 New York's Federal Art Gallery put on forty exhibitions, many of which were showings of the work of the Art Teaching

Division (in fact the largest component of the FAP) and the Index of American Design. While these activities were not directly political, they were quite extensively reported in the *Daily Worker*, and so too was the Community Art Center in Harlem.[148] As this illustrates, consistent with their own efforts at workers' education, Communists embraced the principle of cultural democracy in the projects as well as the opportunities for producing agitational or politically symbolic work. However, it is on the latter I shall concentrate here, and specifically on the three annual shows of the Easel Division from 1937 to 1939 and on some of the graphics exhibitions.

The broader ambitions of the FAP are evident from the catalogue foreword to the 1937 exhibition, which argued that '[i]n the past the easel painter sat in his atelier and painted his pictures for eternity, as there was no immediate market', but now the project was 'putting easel paintings where they will be seen and enjoyed ... An isolationist attitude is, therefore, no longer possible for the artist. He must paint pictures which people will want to have in their schools, hospitals, courthouses, etc., and which they also will be able to enjoy.' Quite what this meant is not clear, since, as the foreword claimed, the fifty-seven exhibits represented 'the conflicting trends toward realism, surrealism, [and] abstractionism'.[149] No works are titled as abstractions, although some were shown in the 1938 and 1939 shows. The exhibitors included the veteran modernists Ben Benn and Joseph Stella, together with a large number of hitherto unknown artists. Eight of them had shown with the John Reed Club, but it is not evident that their work had a distinctively political character for the most part, and they probably merged in with the

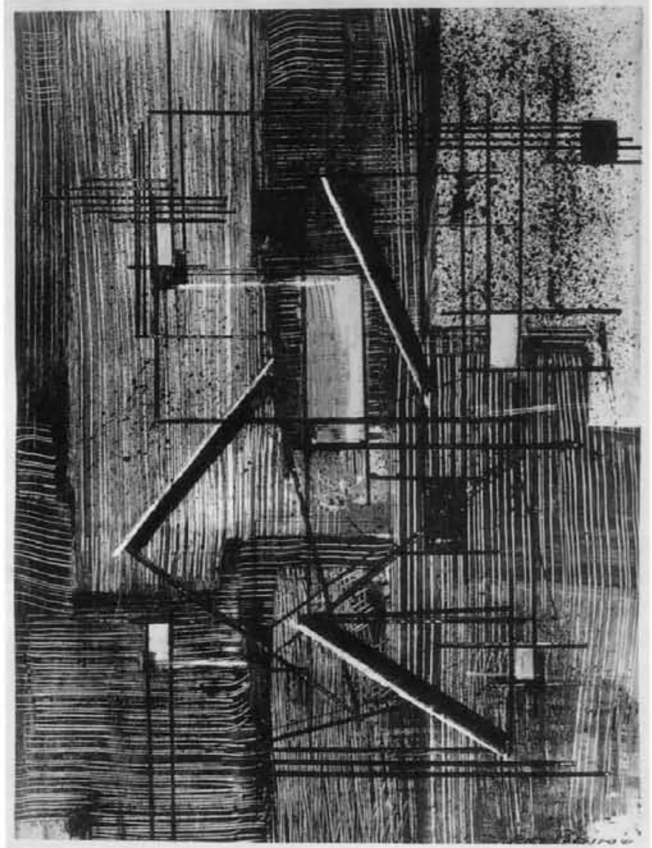


136 Blanche Grambs, *Dock Scene, East River*, c. 1936, lithograph, $15\frac{7}{8} \times 22\frac{7}{8}$ in., Collection of the Newark Museum, Newark, N.J., lent by the WPA, 1945.

138 *(above)* Aaron Goodelman, *Homeless*, plaster, whereabouts unknown.

137 *(left)* Abraham Harriton, *WPA Workers*, c. 1936, whereabouts unknown. This is characteristic of the genre works Harriton produced under WPA auspices.

139 O. Louis Guglielmi, *Sisters of Charity*, c. 1937, whereabouts unknown.



140 Irene Rice Pereira, *Composition*, c. 1938, oil, whereabouts unknown.

general run of sombre urban landscapes and genre scenes (fig. 137).[150] Guglielmi's *Sisters of Charity* (fig. 139) is an exception, however, in representing the Catholic church in a highly unfavourable light. Not only are the sisters juxtaposed with an image of a pig, as John Baker has pointed out, but the woman scrubbing her stoop, whose naked legs appear above her stocking tops, is inadvertently pointing her backside in their direction. The young woman standing to the right seems to regard them in a distinctly unfriendly way, and the Democratic Front magazine *Direction* read the sisters as money collecting. The anti-Catholic implications of the picture were sufficiently telling for a Mrs Sylvia Donnelly to write to the *New York Telegram* to complain. In pictures such as this Guglielmi eschewed Surrealist effects, which for him had associations of social decay, instead seeking to represent the tenement neighbourhoods of the Upper East Side in which he had grown up. In his essay for *Art for the Millions*, Guglielmi describes the private gallery as obsolete, and he seems to have kept more Surrealistic works such as *Persistent Sea* (formerly collection of Nelson A. Rockefeller) and *Mental Geography* (private collection) for exhibition at the Downtown Gallery, where he had his first solo exhibition in 1938.[151]

The Easel Project's 1938 exhibition included oils and watercolours, and was both larger (ninety-six works) and more diverse. In addition to the urban landscapes and genre scenes of artists such as Harriton, Neel and Ribak, it included several works by The Ten,[152] an abstract composition by Irene Rice Pereira (fig. 140) and Quirt's *Obeisance to Poverty* (fig. 141). It may not have been just personal predeliction that caused Kainen to remark on the 'heavy representation by the moderns', who 'simply are doing the best work on the art projects'. Yet as he went on to explain, he put a 'wide interpretation on the term "modern"', meaning by it 'anything that presents a fresh viewpoint in the making of pictures, – something that is contemporary in tradition and feeling, not merely experimentation for its own sake.' Guglielmi's *Relief Blues* (fig. 142) was listed as one of 'the first rate things' on show and attracted the attention of several reviewers. The painting might seem to speak

141 (*right*) Walter Quirt, *Obeisance to Poverty*, c. 1938, oil on canvas, 24 × 32 in., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, WPA Federal Arts Project Allocation to San Francisco Museum of Art.

143 (*facing page top*) Jules Halfant, *Dead End*, c. 1938, oil on canvas, 35 × 24 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Transfer from General Services Administration.

144 (*facing page bottom*) Abram Tromka, *Mining Village*, 1937, oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown.

142 (*below*) O. Louis Guglielmi, *Relief Blues*, c. 1938, tempera on fibreboard, 24 × 29¼ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Transfer from Museum of Modern Art.

to Guglielmi's own experiences as a WPA worker and to that of the popular audience the gallery hoped to reach, for this is an image of a visit by a social worker who wears a pince-nez like a snooper's badge of office, and sits in her outdoor coat and hat itemising the family's paltry resources. The kerosene stove suggests an unheated building, and the carpet is torn through the flower leaf. This is an apartment in which the sleeping area of the young woman to the left is separated from the living room by only a curtain. Indeed, the picture seems partly a comment on generational differences, in the marked contrast between the daughter making up to go out and the stolid desexualised pose of her mother, whose red slippers somehow contribute to the sense of pathos. It is the parents here who seem to feel the humiliation of relief. The painting's intense colours and slightly precipitous spatial effect contribute to its claustrophobic feel.[153]

Otherwise, the works Kainen singled out for praise were mainly oils in an Expressionist vein by Milton Avery, Jules Halfant (fig. 143), Henry Kallem, Kopman, Rothko, Solman, Tromka (fig. 144) and Tschacbasov. This valorisation matches in some degree his affiliation with the so-called New York Group, eight young FAP artists among whom were Halfant, Kruckman, Neel, Louis Nisonoff, Herman Rose, Max Schnitzler and Joseph Vogel. The group showed together at the ACA Gallery at the end of the month, and were reportedly 'united by their identity with "the laboring people whose values are honest and who will last forever."'[154] We might see the works of Halfant and Tromka as seeking to do this not just through their industrial subject matter but also through their forthright style, which stood as an alternative both to the painterly grace of the proletarian naturalists and to the recherché formal effects of the abstractionists. In relation to the prominence of expressionistic art at the Federal Art Gallery, it may be relevant that the head of the exhibition division in New York was the critic and sometime art dealer Robert Ulrich Godsoe, who had helped to launch The Ten in 1935 and was committed to 'the modern expressive tradition'. At the 1938 exhibition he displayed a group of abstractions 'set into the wall so that the surface continuity is unbroken and the ornamental character of the paintings enhanced.'[155]

The 1939 showing of the easel division seems to have been similar in composition, with Social Surrealism represented by Guglielmi and Guy, and a sprinkling of Expressionists among the seventy-six works on show. The association between the gallery and the left was reinforced by a catalogue statement by Weber and a foreword signed by Evergood and his two assistants Murray Hantman and George Picken, both of whom had signed the 1936 Call for the Artists' Congress. The foreword claimed that the artists represented did not 'speak to the public' only as individuals but also 'as a working member of the community to fellow members of that community.' Indeed, the artist was liberated in that she or he was no longer working to please individual tastes: by 'working to please hundreds of thousands of people, the narrowness of individual prejudice is avoided or swept aside', and the artist's own outlook was broadened.[156]

The claims of the FAP to have liberated artists by giving them a collective public are almost impossible to assess, but at the least the numbers who visited the Federal Art Gallery do not seem very large. According to the Weekly Progress Reports from the New York Regional Office, 2,200 persons attended the 1938 Easel

and Watercolour exhibition, and 1,882 that of 1939. In 1938 1,793 attended the Sculpture Division show.'[157] Further, there is no sociological breakdown of who these visitors were. However, the exhibitions at the Federal Art Gallery were by no means all of the Exhibition Division's activities, and in the summer and autumn of 1939, for instance, it scheduled eighteen displays of project work at 'labor unions and federal, state and municipal bureaus dealing with problems of the laboring class.'[158] Moreover, the claims of accountability were not entirely hot air, in that artists were answerable to some kind of audience through the process of allocation (however mediated this was), and the Division did respond to requests for specific subjects.[159]

While many of the paintings shown at the Federal Art Gallery are now lost, a general impression of them can be formed from those that do survive, from photographs in the WPA records and contemporary press reports. Altogether, this evidence suggests a predictable continuum between the FAP exhibitions and those of collective organisations of the period. Many artists of the left showed urban landscapes and genre in both. Within the iconographic framework provided by such motifs, artists sought to endow their work with greater critical force through adopting Expressionist and Surrealist devices. What was left out – at administration insistence – was anything overtly party political. Given the commitment of Communists to the larger cultural vision of the FAP and their substitution of a kind of progressive Americanism for revolutionary politics under the Democratic Front, this may not have seemed much of a sacrifice.

Graphics

When Jacob Kainen reviewed an exhibition of prints and watercolours at the Federal Art Gallery, which had succeeded one of oils in February 1936, he claimed that the graphics were the most interesting.[160] And indeed, relations between formal and technical experimentation and social illustration were, arguably, resolved in more consistently effective ways within the print media.

The FAP Graphics Division in New York opened its first workshop in the WPA building at 6 East 39th Street in the same month, under the supervision of Gustave von Groschwitz. Of the five main FAP Graphic Workshops, that in New York was the largest, and probably the most important. Around 225 artists worked there at one time or another.

The Communist Russell Limbach was appointed as the Division's technical advisor, and many of those on its payroll were leftists active in the Artists' Union, including Will Barnet, Stuart Davis, Harry Gottlieb, Kainen, Chet La More, Lozowick, Olds and Raphael Soyer. Although Kainen, in his retrospective essay on the Division, emphasised that there was no pressure on artists to work in a particular way, the production process certainly had mechanisms of control built in. Artists made an initial drawing for each print, which had to be approved by a supervisor, and first proofs were submitted to a supervisory committee before an edition could be printed. However, since the leftists involved seem to have embraced the Fine Art print ethos of the Graphics Division, this may not have proved too cramping, politically speaking.[161]

One would expect that demands for a 'people's art' could be addressed more convincingly in relation to the inherently multiple processes of printmaking than in relation to painting. Indeed, there was a more collective aspect to labour under the Graphics Division in that although image making was largely done in the artist's studio, printing was done in a workshop environment, and artists learned both from the printers and through lectures on technique. But for all the rhetoric about mass production that surrounded the Division's work, WPA prints remained primarily an individual product directed at a collective audience, with all the customary signs of individuality inscribed in their form. They did not become a collective product for a collective audience, but were still conceived as 'multiple originals', as Rockwell Kent reportedly described them.[162]

A good record of attitudes among left-wing printmakers exists in essays collected for the WPA FAP anthology *Art for the Millions*. The relationship between art and 'the people' is addressed particularly vividly in the essay 'Prints for Mass Production' by Elizabeth Olds (1896–1991), one of that remarkable generation of independent-minded women artists and writers who came to maturity in the 1920s and gravitated to the left. (Josephine Herbst, Agnes Smedley and Alice Neel also exemplify the type.) Born in Minneapolis, Olds studied at the Minneapolis Art Institute and Art Students League before travelling to Europe, where she stayed four years and received the first Guggenheim Fellowship awarded a woman for painting. Like so many others, Olds was radicalised by the Sacco and Vanzetti case. She was a signatory of the 1935 Call for the American Artists' Congress, and was also on the Board of the American Artists School and an active member of the Artists' Union.[163]

Consistent with her involvement with the Public Use of Art Committee, Olds called for the conception of

graphics suitable for printing with power presses. But this was a complex issue because it had to be achieved 'without loss of their basic significance or intent.' However, production was in itself only part of the problem. The other was the audience, in that most Americans were 'culturally illiterate', persons to whom 'the language of art is a closed book'. For Olds, the FAP provided the first mechanisms through which 'cultural literacy' might be extended, fulfilling a comparable function to the school system with regard to verbal literacy. In addition to the exhibition of prints in schools, libraries, hospitals and airports, she suggested they might be lent in the same way books were through libraries and housing projects. Graphic artists in turn had to address themselves to contemporary life, perhaps producing collective histories of technology and labour in print series accompanied by explanatory texts. In effect, the agitational conception of Communist prints of the Third Period was now reconceptualised as part of a state sponsored programme of cultural and social education. In her essay for the same volume, Mabel Dwight (1876–1955), a long-term socialist who specialised in satirical lithographs, advised that 'all the satirical work that has lived was fine art', and criticised 'Some of the young, class-conscious artists' for being 'too arrogantly vehement in their portrayals of vulgarity, ugliness, injustice, etc.' Dwight's view may partly reflect a generational divide, but it also chimes with the culture of the FAP.[164]

Above all else, it was the lithograph that embodied the WPA conception of the print to begin with, although the woodcut and later the silkscreen were seen as having comparable qualities. Correspondingly, etching lost its 'artificial prestige'.[165] By January 1938, Kainen was claiming in the *Daily Worker* that the Graphics Division had brought about a 'veritable renaissance' in American lithography.[166] Particularly significant, both for contemporaries and later commentators, were the Division's achievements in colour lithography, an aspect of the process that Limbach played a key role in developing. Ironically, while for him the Division's main achievement lay in making possible a clear distinction between lithography as a 'fine art' and its various commercial applications, his own prints are too banal as images to be of much interest for the most part.[167] However, other artists who worked for the division produced extraordinarily inventive prints across a range of media.

The two leftists whose work epitomised an experimental approach to technique combined with an essentially realist conception of motif were Olds and Gottlieb. From 1931 to 1935 Olds was living in the Midwest,

145 Elizabeth Olds, *Sheep-Skinners*, from the *Stockyard* Series, 1934, lithograph, $8^5/_8 \times 12$ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Transfer from Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.

146 Elizabeth Olds, *Miner Joe*, c. 1938, lithograph, $17^3/_4 \times 13^9/_{16}$ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Transfer from D.C. Public Library.

147 Harry Gottlieb, *Bootleg Coal Mining*, 1937, lithograph, $12\frac{1}{16} \times 16\frac{9}{16}$ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Transfer from D.C. Public Library.

and under PWAP she produced a number of lithographs representing aspects of unemployment relief in Nebraska. After the project was phased out, she made 'hundreds of drawings' from a platform looking down on the 'killing floor' of Swift and Co.'s Southside Plant in Omaha, drawings that were the basis of an extraordinary series of ten prints of the stockyards.[168] One of these, *Sheep-Skinners* (fig. 145), was selected by the Weyhe Gallery in 1935 for showing in its exhibition *Fifty Best Prints of the Year*. The same documentary conception underlay a trip to the bootleg coal mines of north-eastern Pennsylvania in 1936, and a two-week sketching campaign to the Carnegie-Illinois steel works at Homestead in the following year – both excursions made in company with Gottlieb.[169] Twenty of Olds's drawings formed the basis of her solo exhibition at the ACA Gallery in 1937. Reviewing this, McCausland hailed the selection for its synoptic picture not only of technological processes but also of social relations, at the same time as she read the artist's choice of motif and way of working as marking a new era in which women artists would not need to be restricted to feminine themes as Cassatt and Morisot had been.[170] Olds's views of steel works and the steel-making process are powerful illustrations, but as 'social art' her most compelling prints are her single figures of workers such as *I Make Steel* and *Miner Joe* (fig. 146). The effectiveness of the latter especially lies in the way that with characteristic economy of means Olds suggests both the immiseration of labour and intellectual energy: the averted look, focussed eyes and prominent ear signifying attention to a speaker, who in the context could only be inferred as a CIO organiser.

Gottlieb (1895–1992), who was born in Roumania and emigrated to the United States in 1907, like Olds studied at the Art Institute of Minneapolis and was one of that group of young radicals that also included Adolf Dehn and Wanda Gág. After serving in the navy in the

148 Phil Bard, *Aftermath*, 1938, lithograph, $11^3/_4 \times 16^3/_4$ in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Transfer from D.C. Public Library.

First World War, he moved to New York and became involved with the Provincetown Playhouse, one of the focal institutions of Greenwich Village life. From 1923 to 1935 he lived in the bohemian artist's colony at Woodstock, New York. Radicalised by the Depression, Gottlieb helped set up the Woodstock Artists' Union, before returning to the city in 1935, where he became union president in 1936 and a tireless activist thereafter. Indeed, Gottlieb had become a staunch Communist and remained a stalwart of Party-sponsored organisations until his death.

Primarily a landscape painter, by the time Gottlieb had his first exhibition at the Whitney Studio Galleries in 1929 he had already settled on the kind of painterly naturalism that he practised throughout his career. A trip to Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1932 did not alter his essentially negative view of 'abstract . . . surrealist and non-objective' art. By 1940 he was arguing that 'social realism' was the appropriate art for 'working people', because it correlated with the outlook of those who have 'working knowledge of the structure of things and respect them'. Formalism was for the 'middle and upper classes.'[171]

It seems to have been Gottlieb's political convictions that made him turn to figure subjects and the graphic media in the later 1930s. Although he made his first lithographs in Paris in 1932, the FAP Graphics Division certainly gave a new direction to his printmaking, and a number of lithographs of bootleg mining made on the project were included in his 1937 exhibition at the ACA Gallery (fig. 147).[172] Despite his rather banal conception of realism, in the print media he like Olds adopted a simplified graphic style that would have been unthinkable but for the modern tradition. In both cases, this undoubtedly suggests an engagement with the example of Orozco, whose lithographs had made a considerable impact in the United States. Both artists experimented with colour lithography under the project's auspices,

but the appeal of that medium was supplanted for them by their involvement with the silkscreen process.

In fact, the Graphic Art Division not only provided a milieu that fostered technical experimentation but also, and correspondingly perhaps, was one in which many artists of the left adopted modernist stylistic devices. Thus Phil Bard, whom we encountered as a young Proletarian artist in Chapter Three, produced the extraordinary *Aftermath* (fig. 148), a kind of Surrealist development on Neue Sachlichkeit imagery of mutilated war veterans. At least, two other artists of great technical accomplishment worked in a similar stylistic and iconographic vein on the New York project, Boris Gorelick and Joseph Vogel. Gorelick's lithographs addressed themes such as sweated labour, child poverty, industrial accident and the bombing of civilian populations, all in the same idiom.[173] Joseph Vogel, who had been a regular exhibitor with the John Reed Club, made lithographs in which Picassoid proletarians move against lowering urban backgrounds, as well as a number of images that intimate war and were probably *Guernica*-influenced (fig. 149). The work of Bard and Vogel especially shows an absolute command of Cubist drawing techniques. As with Olds and Gottlieb, the ideal of a people's art did not exclude artistic ambition, in whatever stylistic mode it was formulated.

By around 1940, however, silkscreen had superseded lithography as a symbol for the democratisation of the arts, and in that year McCausland hailed it as: 'the popular graphic art of the twentieth century'.[174] An

149 Joseph Vogel, *Lament*, c. 1938, lithograph, 12 × 15⅞ in., Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of the Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project.

experimental silkscreen unit was set up in the New York Graphic Division in November 1938 at the instigation of the Artists' Union and Public Use of Art Committee. It was directed by Anthony Velonis, who had learned the process in his brother's sign-printing shop and hitherto worked for the Poster Division. Velonis was apparently the first to see the possibilities for turning this commercial medium into the basis for multiple fine art prints, which would be much easier and cheaper to produce than lithographs because they did not involve heavy stones or a press. Moreover silkscreen prints permitted extraordinary varieties of colour and texture, and each print could be individually various. Initially six artists worked in the unit, namely Ruth Chaney, Gottlieb, Morley, Lozowick, Olds and Warsager. In a text of 1940, Olds claimed the silkscreen as a distinctively American and democratic invention: 'Silk screen color prints fill an important need for the American people. Since Currier and Ives, there has been no comparable development of multiple original works of art in color.' However, the mass production of such prints 'for the home, office or public institution' needed 'a new exhibition and distribution program' to reach an appropriately large audience. For this reason, she and others formed the Silk Screen group in 1939, which organised numerous exhibitions over the next few years.[175]

The silkscreen print really came into prominence in 1940 with a trio of exhibitions on view concurrently at the ACA and Weyhe Galleries and the Springfeld Museum. The ACA exhibition was a one-man show of Gottlieb's prints, while that at Springfield was organised by Elizabeth McCausland working with Edward Landon and the Springfield Artists' Union.[176] Yet against inflated claims for the historical importance of silkscreen as the basis for a people's art, Velonis himself warned that the 'medium will not of itself bring about the "democracy of art" and should not be saddled with too heavy a burden at its inception.'[177] In the event, as soon as the FAP folded artists were confronted by the stark economic realities of printmaking. As Gottlieb later recalled:

> The bubble burst when we approached distributors in this field and found that the artist could not exist as an independent artist and craftsman. All they would offer us was workman's wages with the result that we were thrown back upon the limited editions concept regardless of the possibility of the medium.[178]

Of course artists were paid less than some 'workman's wages' on WPA, but it was perhaps one thing to accept this as a state employee in the 1930s, and another to accept it from a commercial print gallery in the postwar period.

150 Harry Gottlieb, *Going to Work*, 1938, screen print, 14 ⁷⁄₈ × 19 ⁷⁄₈ in., Ellen Sragow Gallery, New York.

The 1940 exhibitions also revealed predictable divisions among the silkscreen artists as to what the formal possibilities of the medium actually were. The flat planes of colour it facilitated demanded a different approach to the kinds of image making in which Gottlieb and Olds specialised from that employed in their lithographs. Olds's silkscreens tend to be conceived as pictures, being rather muddy in colour and making no or little use of the white of the paper. Neither were the motifs she addressed in the medium politically significant in the way those she used for lithographs arguably were. In the screenprint she tended to stick to the comic. By contrast, it was not inappropriate that McCausland should single Gottlieb out for his 'substantial contribution to the fine arts use of silk screen', for not only were his prints more formally effective than Olds's, he also managed to adapt the medium more successfully to the kind of documentation of proletarian life and struggle that he pursued in other media. In prints such as *Mine Disaster*, *Going to Work* (fig. 150) and *Rock Drillers* his summary drawing devices and use of texture acknowledge the nature of surface and technique at the same time as they serve as effective graphic notations for the narrative element. Neither was he inhibited by the non-naturalistic approach to colour the medium seemed to encourage. Other left-wing artists in the unit evidently felt that the characteristics of silkscreen lent themselves to a yet more flattened and modernist approach to form. For instance, at Springfield, Eugene Morley showed a suggestive but near abstract composition titled *Execution* (fig. 151). However, the relationship between form and political imperative hardly seems to be as satisfactorily resolved here as it is in some of Gottlieb's better prints.

151 Eugene Morley, *Execution*, screen print, whereabouts unknown. The signature is reversed in the photograph and probably on the original too.

It seems appropriate to end this chapter with the graphic art of WPA because both the art and the discourse around it illustrate so vividly the contradictions in the Communist ideal of popular art as these were played out in the FAP. Put simply, the category of fine art – in any of the forms current in the 1930s – was not demotic. Traditional craft skills and modernist innovations alike, almost any of the aesthetic qualities that artists valued had little meaning to proletarian audiences who were saturated in the more heady visual fare of films, illustrated magazines and billboards. As was widely recognised, even the most naturalistic imagery could not compete with these. Prints could indeed be produced cheaply in large quantities, but this did not solve the basic problem, to which the only solution was to educate the working class to make the kinds of aesthetic discrimination artists themselves cared about – to educate it to new criteria of value. Given that for Communists the proletariat was capable of a special kind of knowledge but needed to have its consciousness raised through Party activity before it would fully comprehend its own truth, this position was not as inconsistent as it might superficially seem. In the early 1930s revolutionary artists had believed that a great proletarian public would emerge almost spontaneously. The people's artists were more realistic about the outlook of their audience: the people needed to be inculcated with new values for their art to work. But they depended on there being a workable agency to conduct that process of inculcation. With the demise of the WPA, they lost the only agency in sight. No wonder many of them looked back on it with such an acute sense of loss. At a personal level, they were also thrown back on the market, no longer collective workers but individual artisans all in competition with one another.

July 1926, and was a contributing editor from 1930 to 1933.

102 For the last work, see Boston Museum & Bread and Roses, *Social Concern and Urban Realism*, 79.

103 Kainen praised the show as reflecting a 'new policy' of including new talents, but the works he singled out were Davis's *Composition* and Tschacbasov's *Clinic*: 'Whitney Museum Opens Doors to Varied Artists', *DW*, 20 November 1937.

104 For Schreiber, see 'Panorama of America', *NM* 33, no. 11 (5 December 1939): 17.

105 E. M. Benson, 'The Whitney Sweepstakes', *MA* 29, no. 3 (March 1936): 188. Both were also praised in 'Whitney Museum Exhibition', *DW*, 8 February 1936.

106 For Davidson and the Spanish Republic, see Jo Davidson, *Between Sittings: An Informal Autobiography of Jo Davidson* (New York: Dial Press, 1951), 307–16. The leftists Gross, Glickman and Ahron Ben-Shmuel also showed in these years, but it is not clear that their exhibits had any clear political references.

107 James Johnson Sweeney, 'Exhibitions in New York', *P* 11, no. 2 (February 1939): 19–22; 'United Sculptors', *NM* 30, no. 3 (10 January 1939): 19.

108 See Boston Museum & Bread and Roses, *Social Concern and Urban Realism*, 54–5; Isidor Schneider, 'A Notable Anti-Fascist Painting', *IL* no. 1 (January 1938): 99–102; Fort, 'American Social Surrealism', 15–16.

109 Elizabeth Noble [McCausland], 'Progressive Sculptors', *NM* 29, no. 8 (15 November 1938): 31.

110 For the critique of museums, see esp. James Swanson, 'J. P. Morgan, Art Racketeer', *NM* 18, no. 6 (4 February 1936): 19–20; Jacob Kainen, 'Mellon Chisels into Art Control', *DW*, 8 March 1937; Clarence Weinstock [Charles Humboldt], 'The Frick Formula', *AF* 2, no. 3 (February 1936): 10–11; and Stuart Davis, in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 122n. However, the Whitney was seen as a liberal institution, and its support of artists on the rental issue earned it respect.

111 William Gropper to Rockwell Kent, 30 April 1942; Rockwell Kent to William Gropper, 2 May 1942 (copy; Kent Papers, AAA, unfilmed, Box 24).

7 Communist Artists and the New Deal (2)

1 Barbara Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed: The View from New York City* (Cranbury, N.J., & London: Associated University Presses, 1979), 221–8, 300.

2 Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 86–94, 101–8; McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 96–102; McMahon in O'Connor (ed.), *New Deal Arts Project*, 57. Jacob Kainen describes the process of re-hiring in his memoir of the Graphic Arts Division, ibid., 164.

3 McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 151–5.

4 Thomas quoted in Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 228; Dies quoted in Eric Bentley (ed.), *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from the Hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938–1968* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 3.

5 Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 228–31; McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 155–8, Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, ch. 8. Flanagan's testimony is reprinted in Bentley (ed.), *Thirty Years of Treason*, 6–47. For earlier accusations of this type, see Ralph M. Easley of the National Civic Federation to President Franklin Roosevelt, 16 July 1937 (AAA DC89:721–6). For a deeply hostile retrospect of the Workers Alliance from the Cleveland FAP director, see Clarence Holbrook Carter, 'I Paint as I Please', *MA* 38, no. 2 (February 1945): 47.

6 Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 297–304; Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 88–95.

7 Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 231–43; McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 158–62.

8 Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 260–64; McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 163–6; Gerald M. Monroe, 'Mural Burning by the New York City WPA', *AAAJ* 16, no. 3 (1976): 8–11. The threat to Henkel's mural made the front page of the *Daily Worker* (9 July 1940), and the UAA's campaign against Somervell's 'Hitler Technique' was reported extensively in the paper between early July and early September. See also 'Vandals on WPA', *NM* 36, no. 5 (23 July 1940): 17. Somervell's obsession with Communists on the projects went back at least to early 1937: see Memorandum from Lawrence Morris to Ellen Woodward, 4 March 1937 (AAA DC89:422–3).

9 'Election Campaign Outline for 1936', *The Communist* 15, no. 9 (September 1936): 822. For the CP campaign for unemployment insurance, see Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 283–9.

10 Charles E. Dexter, 'The Federal Arts Projects Face an Uncertain Future', *DW*, 18 November 1936; 'Roosevelt's WPA Double Cross', *DW*, 27 January 1937; Harrison George, 'No American Shall Starve', *SW*, 2 May 1937.

11 'Not by Bread Alone', *NM* 22, no. 1 (29 December 1936): 20; Theodore Draper, 'Roosevelt and the WPA', *NM* 21, no. 13 (22 December 1936): 14–16; 'The Pink Blight', *NM* 24, no. 2 (6 July 1937): 8; 'Art, The WPA Record', *DW*, 15 June 1937.

12 'Social Insurance and the Artist', *AF* 1, no. 2 (January 1935): 3; 'For a Permanent Art Project', *AF* 1, no. 1 (November 1934): 3; 'Artists' Union Federal Art Bill', *AF* 1, no. 2 (January 1935): 2.

13 'The 40,000 Lay-off Threat', *AF* 2, no. 5 (April 1936): 3–4; 'For a Farmer-Labor Party', *AF* 2, no. 6 (May 1936): 6.

14 Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 101–5; Boris Gorelick, 'The Artist Begins to Fight', *AF* 2, no. 12 (January 1937): 5–6.

15 'The Union Applies for an AFL Charter', *AF* 1, no. 6 (July 1935): 2; 'For a Permanent Art Project', *AF* 2, no. 3 (February 1936): 3; see also 'July 1st 1936', in the same issue (3–4). Blumberg, *New Deal and the Unemployed*, 53–7.

16 'The Artists' Unions: Builders of a Democratic Culture', *AF* 3, nos 3–4 (May 1937): 3.

17 'The Public Use of Art', and JS [Joseph Solman?], 'Exhibitions', *AF* 2, no. 4 (March 1936): 14–15; Elizabeth

Noble [McCausland]: 'New Horizons', *AF* 2, no. 9 (September/October 1936): 7–9; 'Official Art', *AF* 2, no. 10 (November 1936): 8–10.

18 Peter Vane, 'Big Words by Bigwigs', *AF* 3, nos 3–4 (May 1937): 7, 26.

19 'Answer to Washington' and 'The Federal Arts Bill', *AF* 3, no. 7 (October 1937): 3–5, 5–9. For Williams (Hopkins's deputy) and the left, see Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 301–2.

20 The articles appeared in the *Daily Worker* on 18 March 1938 (FMP); 22 March 1938 (FTP); 23 March 1938 (Radio Division of FTP); 24 March 1938 (FWP); 25 March (FAP); 28 March 1938 (Coffee-Pepper Bill). Cf. Adam Lapin, 'WPA: A Record of Achievement', *DW*, 15 May 1938.

21 C. S. Marin, 'The Campaign for the Federal Arts Bill', *The Communist* 18, no. 6 (June 1938): 562–3, 570. Cf. 'Culture for America', *DW*, 13 June 1938.

22 Joseph Starobin, 'Barbarians on Capitol Hill', *NM* 31, no. 7 (9 May 1939): 10–11; 'The United States Arts Projects', *NM* 31, no. 8 (16 May 1939): 12–14. Cf. 'Stop the Wreckers', *NM* 31, no. 11 (6 June 1939): 21.

23 'The World's Fair – It's Really Grand', *DW*, 2 May 1939; 'America Comes into its Own in the World of Art, Culture', *DW*, 30 April 1939.

24 George Morris, 'WPA Exhibit at Fair', *DW*, 4 June 1939; Marcia Minor, 'A Progressive Muralist at the Fair' (Ferstadt), *DW*, 24 November 1938; Lawrence Emery, 'Man in Control' (Ferstadt), *DW* 14 July 1939; 'WPA Art Project Murals Win Prizes at Fair Competition' (Guston and Refregier), *DW*, 13 August 1939.

25 M. R. Linden, 'Art at the Fair', *NM* 31, no. 12 (13 June 1939): 30–31; Elizabeth McCausland, 'Living American Art', *P* 11, no. 5 (May 1939): 16–25. Cf. Donald Baer, 'For the New York World's Fair Contemporary Art Exhibition', *P* 11, no. 3 (March 1939): 14–18. For more critical views, see James Johnson Sweeney, 'Thoughts Before the World's Fair', *P* 11, no. 3 (March 1939): 3, 6–7; Howard Devree, 'Art and Democracy', *MA* 32, no. 5 (May 1939): 262–70.

26 Sam Wiseman, 'Workers Alliance Leader Praises Artist Tromka', *DW*, 4 February 1940; 'Many Project Artists in Whitney Show', *DW*, 22 January 1940. E.g., 'Six Art Project Murals Get Official Approval', *DW*, 15 March 1940; Oliver F. Mason, 'Joe Jones is Winner in Mural Competition', *DW*, 31 October 1939.

27 E.g., Oliver F. Mason, 'The Week's Highlights in the World of Art', *DW*, 1 October 1940.

28 Wendy Jeffers, 'Holger Cahill and American Art', *AAAJ* 31, no. 4 (1991): 2–5; 'Reminiscences of Holger Cahill', 90, 407–8. In 1935 a right-wing publication described Cahill as 'a former adherent of the IWW' and 'a familiar figure in Communist high-brow circles'. See 'Hopkins Selects Communists as WPA Directors', *The Awakener*, 1 September 1935 (AAA 1108: 1128–9).

29 Holger Cahill, *Max Weber* (New York: Downtown Gallery, 1930), 12, 31, 36–7. Cf. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Perigree, 1980), 15–16. Cahill became a defender of Abstract Expressionism in the later 1940s. See Holger Cahill: 'In Our Time', *MA* 39, no. 7 (November 1946): 308; and 'Forty Years After: An Anniversary for the AFA', *MA* 42, no. 5 (May 1949): 178, 189.

30 Museum of Modern Art, New York, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750–1900* (New York, 1932), 6–8, 26–7; *American Painting and Sculpture, 1862–1932* (New York, 1932), 11–12, 22.

31 Holger Cahill and A. H. Barr (ed.), *Art in America in Modern Times* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1934), 43–4, 47–8.

32 Holger Cahill, 'American Resources in the Arts', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 33–44.

33 See esp. 'Federal Art Project, Holger Cahill – Director'; 'Mr. Cahill's Lectures before the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, March 28, 1937' (NARA, RG69:1022); 'Works Progress Administration, The Federal Art Project' [early 1938] (AAA, 1105:994–1006).

34 Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 190, 298–9, 329n, 344. The book would have been made doubly suspect by Dewey's prefatory acknowledgement of the Marxist renegades Sidney Hook and Meyer Schapiro (vii–viii). For the CP view of Dewey, see Frank Meyer, 'Reactionary Philosophy of Dewey and his School', *DW*, 16 October 1939; Philip Carter, 'Pitfalls of Pragmatic Logic', *The Communist* 18, no. 2 (February 1939): 163–9.

35 Holger Cahill, 'July 1937' (AAA, 1105:1218–19); Michael Gold, *The Hollow Men* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 56–7.

36 Jacob Kainen to Edward Bruce, 22 April 1934; Bruce to Kainen, 4 May 1934 (copy; AAA DC6:219–20). Cf. Bruce to the secretary, The Artists' Union, 28 March 1934 (copy; DC7:502); Bruce to Harold Mack, 11 March 1938 (copy; D87:846).

37 George Biddle to Bruce, undated [March] 1936; Bruce to Biddle, 18 March 1936 (copy; AAA D82:950, 949); Philip Evergood to Edward Rowan, 6 January 1938 (NARA RG121:133, under USPO, Jackson, Ga.).

38 Burck joined the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch* on a temporary basis in August 1937, and the following year moved to the *Chicago Sun-Times* – 'Between Ourselves', *NM* 24, no. 8 (17 August 1937): 2. In 1938 he was given a mural commission for the post office at Bradley, Illinois. There is extensive correspondence between Burck and the Section over this stretching from 1938 to 1942 (NARA RG121:133), but Burck never realised the *Industrial Life of Bradley*, in part because of ill-health.

39 For Gross and Scaravaglione, see Jewish Museum, *Painting a Place in America*, 174–5, 189–90. Both signed the 1936 Call for the American Artists' Congress and were sometime faculty at the American Artists School. Gross was also active in YKUF. However, neither were really 'Social' sculptors.

40 See McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 53–6; 'Detailed Report of Section of Painting and Sculpture with Procedure for Competitions', Section of Painting and Sculpture *Bulletin* no. 8 (January/February 1936): 14–18. There is a complete run of the Section *Bulletin* in the Bruce Papers (AAA D91:790–1003). The Section's control of commissions is abundantly documented in 'Case Files Concerning Embellishment of Public Buildings' (NARA RG121:133).

41 'Report of the Section of Painting and Sculpture', January 16 1935 (AAA D89:64); Section of Fine Arts *Bulletin* no. 21 (March 1940): 4; Bruce quoted in *Speech of Hon. Elbert D. Thomas of Utah in the Senate of the United States, May 8, 1939* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 3. Cf. McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 57–8.

42 Section of Fine Arts *Bulletin* no. 2 (April 1935): 10. For analyses of Section iconography, see Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*; Sue Bridwell Beckham, *Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge & London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C., & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). Melosh's book contains the most complete inventory of Section murals and sculptures (233–63).

43 Schapiro, 'Public Use of Art', 6.

44 Melosh, *Engendering Culture*, 97; cf. 230. The sketch for Victor Arnautoff's *Richmond – Industrial City*, for the post office at Richmond, California, depicts 'collective bargaining', but this was changed in the finished version, although workers with union buttons remain. See Victor Arnautoff to Edward Rowan, 4 April 1940 (RG121:133, Richmond, Cal.). For a thorough study of the mural (now lost) and its setting, see Jennifer Golden, 'Victor Arnautoff's *Richmond – Industrial City*: The Negotiation between Radical Politics and Federal Patronage during the New Deal', MA dissertation, University College London, 2001.

45 For an instance where a subaltern group protested about their representation in Section art, see the African American responses to Gustaf Dalstrom's mural for the post office at Saint Joseph, Missouri – discussed in Beckham, *Depression Post Office Murals*, 204–14.

46 Lehman, 'Brilliant Murals by Joe Jones'. The murals were painted on pressed wood board, and were intended to be portable. They are illustrated in *IL* no. 12 (1935): 56–7. Their fate is unknown, but see Marling, 'Workers, Capitalists, and Booze', 45 n. 65.

47 Joe Jones to Elizabeth Green 4 August 1935, 27 August 1935, 28 August 1935, 12 September 1935 (Green Papers, MHS).

48 'the jobs you have already given me have been the only stable thing in my last 5 years of existence.' Jones to Rowan, 'May 26' (RG121:126, 'Correspondence with Artists, 1939–42').

49 Jones to Rowan, 30 July 1937 (RG121:133, Magnolia, Ark.).

50 Jones to Rowan, nd (stamped 15 May 1939), and 23 June 1939; Post Master, Anthony, Kansas, to Federal Works Administration, 15 September 1939 (RG121:133, Anthony, Kan.). 'Joe Jones Completes His Seventh Mural', *SLPD*, 26 July 1939.

51 W. S. Kauffman to Jones, 18 November 1939; W. S. Kauffman to Public Building Administration, 6 February 1940; Jones to Rowan, 4 December 1939; Rowan to Jones, 11 December 1939; 'Postal Mural Here; It's Nice' (unidentified clipping) (RG121:133, Seneca, Kan.). Cf. Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America*, 122–4, 167; Melosh, *Engendering Culture*, 116–17; Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 49, 158.

52 Edward Rowan to William Gropper, 23 February 1939, 23 November 1938, 20 July 1937, 20 September 1938 (copies) (RG121:133, Department of Interior Building); Harold Ickes to Gropper, 28 November 1944, in the album 'To Bill Gropper from his Friends, December 4, 1944' (Gropper Papers, SU). Look and Perrault, *The Interior Building and its Architecture*, 129–30; 'Power Giant of the Far West: Mighty Bonneville Dam', *NYT Magazine*, 16 May 1937 (clipping in Gropper Papers, SU). Three of the sketches are illustrated in *MA* 30, no. 8 (August 1937): cover, 514.

53 My identification of Britton's politics is tentative, as will be apparent later. For his biography, see Look and Perrault, *The Interior Building*, 146–8. His papers are held in the library of the University of Illinois, Chicago. My thanks to Carmen Niekrasz for this information. Unfortunately I was not able to consult these materials before this volume went to press.

54 Illustrated in Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 140; and Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America*, 173.

55 John Gunther, *Inside USA* (New York & London: Harper & Bros, 1947), 118–33. For the Communist view of the Tennessee Valley Authority under the Democratic Front, see Ernest Moorer, 'TVA – Light and Power That Unites the South', *SW*, 5 June 1938.

56 Rowan to Britton, 21 July 1937 (copy); Britton to Rowan, 29 March 1938; Rowan to Britton, 14 April 1938 (RG121:133, Department of Interior Building). As head of the Oil Administration, Ickes had good reason to see corporate interests in this way. See Jeanne Nienaber Clarke, *Roosevelt's Warrior: Harold L. Ickes and the New Deal* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 101–7.

57 E.g., 'America's Duty to the Negro People', *SW*, 23 October 1938; 'Ickes to Assail Dies Committee', *SW*, 1 January 1939; 'Ickes Raps Critics', *DW*, 3 February 1939.

58 'Department of the Interior', Section *Bulletin* no. 12 (February 1937): 6; 'Gropper Gets a Contract from Department of Interior', *DW*, 14 November 1938. Other notable symbols of state interventionism in Washington include Ben Shahn's murals in the Social Security Building, and Simeon Shimin's *Contemporary Justice and the Child* at the Department of Justice. Shahn's must be one of the most successful of all New Deal murals, but his social democratic politics place him outside my purview here.

59 Brace, 'William Gropper', 514 and cover illustration.

60 Melosh, *Engendering Culture*, 89–91; Clark, *Roosevelt's Warrior*, 44–5. Patricia Sullivan has said of Ickes that '[a]mong FDR's major appointments, [he] was exceptional in his willingness to act unequivocally in behalf of racial fairness and inclusion.' See her *Days of Hope*, 54 and, generally, 53–5.

61 Beckham, *Depression Post Office Murals*, 164, 192.

62 Rowan to Evergood, 18 February 1938, 10 August 1939 (copies); Evergood to Rowan, 12 July 1940; Victor H. Carmichael to Evergood, 5 October 1939; Carmichael to Federal Works Administration, 28 October 1940 RG121:133, Jackson, Ga.). Beckham, *Depression Post Office Murals*, 141. For Talmadge, see Gunther, *Inside USA*,767–70, 777–80. My thanks to Walter Widemond for the observation.

63 Instances I have in mind include Victor Arnautoff's mural for the post office at Linden, Texas, and Robert Gwathmey's for that at Eutaw, Alabama. See also Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 85–93; Melosh, *Engendering Culture*, 67–76.

64 Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, ch. 3.

65 *NM* 28, no. 4 (19 July 1938): 16.

66 Siporin was nearly expelled from the Club in 1934 for reasons unknown: see Joseph Freeman to Alexander Trachtenberg, 14 June 1934 and 18 June 1934 (copies); Alexander Trachtenberg to Joseph Freeman, 16 June 1934 (Freeman Papers, HI, 39:1).

67 'Plans for Work'; draft letter from Siporin to Sheldon Cheney [1935]; 'Sketches for Haymarket Series' (Siporin Papers, AAA 2011:17; 2011:88–99; 2012:142–277); Cheney, *Expressionism in Art*, 360; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, *Mitchell Siporin: A Retrospective* (Waltham, Mass., 1976).

68 Typescript obituary notice in Edward Millman Papers, SU, Box 1.

69 Siporin painted three tempera panels, *Jane Addams*, *Lincoln and Altgeld* and the *Prairie Poets*, under the FAP. See Fritzi Weisenborn, 'Siporin Paints Social Scene', *Chicago Sunday Times*, 17 September 1939; and, for photographs, AAA ND/68:499–503. A series of photographs of Orozcoesque mural studies in Siporin's papers can be tentatively dated to 1933 on the basis of the business stamp on one of them (AAA 1328:141, 150–52). Millman established himself as a muralist through restaurant decorations at the Chicago World's Fair of 1933. For photographs of these, see Millman Papers, SU, Box 5.

70 Botkin, 'Regionalism: Cult or Culture?'; Siporin, 'Mural Art and the Midwestern Myth', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 64–7; 'Thoughts Out Loud' (Siporin Papers; AAA 2012:94–5). Cf. Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 277–83; Carl Carmer, 'Stranglers of the Thunder', *NM* 27, no. 3 (12 April 1938): 79–81.

71 Federal Writers Project, *Illinois: A Description and Historical Guide* (Chicago: McClurg, 1939), 303–8; Janet Snow-Godfrey and Milton Derber, 'Decatur', in Milton Derber, *Labor in Illinois: The Affluent Years, 1945–80* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 309–22. Most of the following account is based on the Decatur press. My thanks to Bob Sampson for his advice and encouragement.

72 'CIO Unions Are Ousted by Local Assembly', *DR*, 11 June 1937.

73 Carl D. Oblinger, *Divided Kingdom: Work, Community, and the Mining Wars in the Central Illinois Coal Fields During the Great Depression* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1991).

74 'Two Shot, Nab 40 in Miners' Clash with Police Here', *DH*, 4 November 1932.

75 E.g., 'Officers Raid Strike Picket Lines; Jail 48', *DR*, 22 February 1935; 'Tear Gas Routs Girl Strikers; Eleven Jailed', *DR*, 11 March 1935. For the background to the strike, see James S. Patton, 'Marginal Prices Balk Cotton Dress Unions, Employers', *DSHR*, 24 February 1935.

76 'Five Millions Spent by WPA in County Jobs', *DSHR*, 30 October 1938; 'Decatur Says Yes', *DR*, 3 September 1938; 'Local Firm Gets Courthouse Job', *DR*, 29 October 1938.

77 'Macon Turns Down New Deal Plea', *DH*, 10 November 1938. Cf. 'Republicans Win County Offices', *DH*, 9 November 1938; 'GOP Wins County, Demos Sweep State', *DR*, 9 November 1938.

78 E.g., 'WPA Group Asks Better Conditions', *DH*, 8 August 1938; 'Seeks $175 WPA Wage', *DH*, 12 August 1938; 'Relief Project Aid Demanded by WPA Crew', *DR*, 3 October 1938. In 1932, the CP staged a May Day rally in Decatur, and the Illinois party held its state convention there. Apart from a jobless parade in 1934, no more public May Day events were organised, but an Unemployed Council and Workers Center were established in the city.

79 Donald F. Tingley, *The Structuring of a State: The History of Illinois, 1899 to 1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), ch. 10; David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865–1965* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), ch. 25.

80 E.g., 'Artists Start Murals Monday in Post Office', *DSHR*, 14 August 1938; 'Post Office Murals Here to be Largest in State', *DH*, 17 August 1938.

81 'Finish Murals Tomorrow', *DR*, 26 October 1938; 'Complete Postoffice Murals Soon', *DH*, 24 October 1938.

82 'Murals Take Form on Postoffice Walls, *DR*, 20 September 1938.

83 Typescript descriptions by Siporin, Britton and Millman (RG121:133, Decatur, Ill.).

84 'Murals Take Form', *DH*, 10 September 1938.

85 Cf. Earl Browder, 'Lincoln and the Communists', in *The People's Front*, 187–96. This is the text of an address Browder delivered in nearby Springfield on Lincoln's birthday in February 1936.

86 For a contemporary Communist perspective on Sandburg, see Hicks, *The Great Tradition*, 241–2.

87 See Millman on Orozco in 'Symbolism in Wall Painting' (typescript for *Art for the Millions*, Millman Papers, SU, Box 6); and Siporin on the same, in Siporin to Edith Halpert, 27 May 1941 (draft; AAA 2011:344–5).

88 Rowan to Britton, 14 June 1937, 9 December 1937; Rowan to Millman, 15 July 1938; Rowan to Siporin, 12 June 1937; Daniel Catton Rich to Rowan, 19 June 1937. Rowan visited Decatur to inspect the murals in November. See 'Art Chiefs Laud Murals at Postoffice', *DH*, 14 November 1938.

89 'Art', *Time* 34, no. 14 (2 October 1939): 46; 'Missouri: New Murals Show its History', *Life* 13, no. 15 (12 October 1942): 70–76, 78, 80. The *SLPD* published a picture feature on the murals in its Sunday 'Pictures' magazine of 5

April 1942. The commission was also hailed in the *Daily Worker*: see 'Progressive Artists Win Competition', *DW*, 23 September 1939.

90 E.g., 'Unroll the Scroll of Saint Louis History', *St Louis Star-Times*, 25 February 1942.

91 Four-page typescript description of iconography; Siporin to Rowan, 10 April 1940 (RG121:133, Saint Louis Post Office). For the CP view of Whitman, see Hicks, *The Great Tradition*, 20–31; Sam Roberts, 'On Walt Whitman', *DW*, 25 May 1938; 'Walt Whitman's 119th Anniversary', *DW*, 31 May 1938.

92 W. Rufus Jackson to Bruce, 6 October 1939; Jackson to Rowan, 18 June 1942; Millman and Siporin to Rowan, 13 February 1940. Effectively Millman and Siporin converted the Section to their conception, and used it rather skilfully to mediate with the post master.

93 Rowan to Siporin and Millman, 14 November 1941 (Siporin Papers, AAA 2011:366).

94 In one interview Siporin joked that he was planning a take-off of Benton's infamous *Susannah and the Elders*, which would show 'two old spinsters taking a peek at Benton, naked as a jaybird in the old swimmin' hole', while in another, Millman intimated his low opinion of Grant Wood's work. See 'Start Work Postoffice Murals', unidentified clipping, 22 September 1941 (AAA ND/68:272); Reed Hynds, '2 Talented Artists to Do St. Louis P.O. Murals', *St. Louis Star-Times*, 29 September 1941.

95 For Benton's *Social History of the State of Missouri*, see Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 126–38.

96 Hynds, '2 Talented Artists to Do St Louis P.O. Murals'.

97 Quoted in Downtown Gallery, *Paintings, Cartoons, Photographs of the Saint Louis Post Office Murals by Mitchell Siporin and Edward Millman* (New York, 1942). Cf. the sympathetic and informative article by Otto Fuerbringer, 'Top-Flight Painting Team', *SLPD*, 21 February 1940.

98 Clippings from the *SLPD*, July 1942, in the Siporin Papers (AAA 2012:1132, 1135, 1141). Both artists were Jewish.

99 Cohen, *Making a New Deal*; Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*.

100 Printed in 'Let's Throw Red Art Out of Federal Buildings', *The Argonaut*, 14 November 1952.

101 Cahill's paper was titled 'Cultural Aspects of Government Support of Art'; Circular letter of invitation to Cahill dinner, 16 May 1939 (Lozowick Papers, AAA 1333:1063).

102 O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 13–14 and Part 4.

103 Cahill, 'Reminiscences', 418–22, 457–8.

104 George J. Mavigliano and Richard A. Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935–1943* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 30–45. See also the extensive correspondence in NARA RG69:1023, Box 19.

105 Audrey McMahon, 'A General View of the WPA Federal Art Project in New York City and State', in O'Connor (ed.), *New Deal Art Projects*, 66; Audrey McMahon to American Artits' Congress, 16 April 1940 (copy; NARA RG69:1031, Box 63); Audrey McMahon, 'The Trend of the Government in Art', *P* 8, no. 1 (January 1936): 3–6. Lincoln Rothschild, director of the Index of American Design in New York and an AAC activist, recalled McMahon as being friendly with Union leaders. See his 'Artists' Organizations of the Depression Decade', in O'Connor (ed.), *New Deal Art Projects*, 206.

106 Park and Markowitz, *New Deal for Art*, 44–72. See also Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture*.

107 'Editorials', *The Nation* 148, no. 22 (27 May 1939): 602–3.

108 'Committee Sees Administration on Public Use of Art', *Art Project Reporter* (September 1936): 3 (AAA D343:503–6).

109 McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 264–78.

110 Emanuel M. Benson, 'Art on Parole', *MA* 29, no. 11 (November 1936): 700, 703–5.

111 McMahon, 'A General View of the WPA Federal Art Project', 59. For an instance of interference that backfired, see Greta Berman, 'The Walls of Harlem', *Arts Magazine* 52, no. 2 (October 1977): 122–6.

112 Works Progress Administration, Federal Art Project, *General Bulletin No. 2*, 15 May 1939 (Gellert Papers, AAA, unfilmed).

113 On this, see Rothschild, 'Artists' Organizations of the Depression Decade', 206–7.

114 James Michael Newell, 'The Evolution of Western Civilization', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 60–63. I have found no evidence as to Newell's political outlook.

115 Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project, *Epochs in the History of Man: Frescoes by Edgar Britton in the Lane Technical High School* (nd); Edgar Britton, 'The Cafeteria Murals', *The Lane Tech Prep* (December 1936): 15 (AAA 1107:636); Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*, 12.

116 Gary Wisby, 'Long-hidden Historic Mural Blossoms Forth at Flower High', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 19 May 1997. *The Blessings of Water* murals have also been restored.

117 Seymour Korman, 'Critics Assert WPA Art is Ugly and Subversive', 'Alien Influence, Bad Art Seen in WPA Paintings', '4 WPA Canvases Found Unworthy the Name of Art', in *Chicago Tribune*, 19, 20, 21 December 1940.

118 Autobiographical notes by White made in connection with his application for a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, White Papers, AAA 3191:1190; Benjamin Horowitz, *Images of Dignity: The Drawings of Charles White* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1967), 14–15. For White generally, see also Studio Museum in Harlem, *Images of Dignity: A Retrospective of the Works of Charles White* (New York, 1982); and the special commemorative issue of *Freedomways* 20, no. 2 (1980). White describes his formation in 'Path of a Negro Artist', *M&M* 8, no. 4 (April 1955): 33–44.

119 Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–46* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999).

120 Margaret Burroughs, '"He will always be a Chicago artist to me"', *Freedomways* 20, no. 2 (1980): 153. White was only seventeen when the club was closed in late 1935/early 1936. Topchevsky was secretary to the Chicago American Artists' Congress. See Larry Forhman, 'Portrait of an Artist: Morris Topchevsky (1899–1947)', *NM* 64, no. 4 (22 July 1947): 9–10.

121 Fanny Buford, 'Acting in Anti-War Play Wins Applause', unidentified clipping (AAA 3194:1244); Horowitz, *Images of Dignity*, 14.

122 White autobiographical notes, AAA 3191:1190; 'Chi Negro Artist Immortalizes Own Folk', *Pittsburgh Courier*, nd, AAA 3195:23. On the history of the Center, see Mullen, *Popular Fronts*, ch. 3.

123 Barnwell, 'Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman?: Charles White's Depiction of an American Heroine', in Andrea D. Barnwell *et al.*, *The Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 57, 65 n. 13. See also 'The Barnett-Aden Gallery', *Newspic* (September 1945): 20. It has been suggested that the mural was subsequently installed at the George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library, but the work White associates with the Library in his Autobiographical Notes (AAA 3191:1191) had the theme of 'tactics use[d] to fight for the abolition of slavery', and is presumably that illustrated in Horowitz, *Images of Dignity*, 31. This mural, which seems unfortunately to be lost, looks a stronger and potentially more controversial painting.

124 Andrea Barnwell has pointed out that Truth is shown playing an historical role actually performed by Harriet Tubman, and argues that the figure should be seen as a composite of the two. See her 'Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman?', 54–66.

125 'I do know that I want to paint murals of Negro history. That subject has been sadly neglected.' White, quoted in Willard F. Motley, 'Negro Art in Chicago', *Opportunity* 18, no. 1 (January 1940): 22.

126 Robert A. Davis, 'The Art Notebook', *Chicago Sunday Bee*, 6 October 1940.

127 Joseph Stalin, 'Marxism and the National Question', in *Marxism and the National Question: A Collection of Articles and Speeches* (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1975), 36; Francis Franklin, 'The Cultural Heritage of the Negro People', *The Communist* 18, no. 6 (June 1939): 563–71.

128 However, when realised, such murals were not necessarily safe. Eitaro Ishigaki's two murals for the Harlem courthouse, *Human Rights in the United States* and *Emancipation of Negro Slaves*, were removed in 1938, both because the artist was technically Japanese and because his images of Washington and Lincoln were deemed unacceptable by the Municipal Art Commission. See Louise Mitchell, 'The Fight for Negro Liberation', *DW*, 5 April 1938; Museum of Modern Art, Wakayama, *Japan in America*, 47–9, 108, 117.

129 For a general account, see Greta Berman, 'Abstractions for Public Spaces, 1935–1943', *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 10 (June 1982): 81–6; Brooklyn Museum, *The Williamsburg Murals: A Rediscovery* (nd); Olin Dows, 'Art for Housing Tenants', *MA* 31, no. 11 (November 1938): 616–23, 662.

130 Talbot Faulkner Hamlin, 'New York Housing', *Pencil Points* 19, no. 5 (May 1938): 286–92; Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, Thomas Mellins *et al.*, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 495, 497–8.

131 In 1940 Browne joined the faculty of the American Artists' School – *DW*, 12 January 1940.

132 Burgoyne Diller, 'Abstract Murals', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 69. The artists' belief that their work complemented the 'true modern utilitarian style' of the project is confirmed by Hananiah Harari's report, 'Who Killed the Home Planning Project?', *AF* 3, no. 8 (November 1937): 13–15.

133 Greene, 'The Functions of Léger; Abstract Art at the Modern Museum', *AF* 2, no. 5 (April 1936): 5–8; 'Society and the Modern Artist', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 263–5. Greene's position on the artist and the crowd is strikingly akin to that of Gleizes and Metzinger's 'Du Cubisme'. See Robert L. Herbert (ed.), *Modern Artists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 18.

134 Davis, 'Abstract Painting Today', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 121–7. The Democratic Front positioning of the text is even more evident in the earlier version printed by O'Connor (122n), with its attacks on cultural institutions and reference to 'tory reaction'. For *Swing Landscape*, see Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Stuart Davis*, 235–9. The painting was to have been installed with the panels by Paul Kelpe.

135 In notes dated 9 March 1938, Davis specifically criticises Greene for accepting a narrow audience for his art and refusing to work for a People's Art through a United Front (Davis Papers, HU). It is difficult to tell whether for him the substance of Greene's 'Trotskyism' amounted to more than denying 'the leadership of the Communist Party in the political field'. For the Democratic Front and Swing, see Denning, *Cultural Front*, chs 8–9. Davis had a swing band play at the opening of his 1943 exhibition at the Downtown Gallery, so that 'guests would see how the irregular geometrical shapes and piebald colors of his compositions . . . echo the rhythms and tempo of swing music' – Emily Genauer, 'Two Americans Give Solo Shows', *NYWT*, 6 February 1943.

136 'Symbols of the Radio', *SW*, 17 December 1939; Eric Munx, '"Uncensored" Radio – A Myth', *DW*, 4 January 1940. On the WNYC mural, see Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Stuart Davis*, 239–40.

137 Edward Alden Jewell, 'Commentary on Murals', *NYT*, 29 May 1938.

138 Elaine de Kooning, 'Greene Paints a Picture', *AN* 53, no. 3 (May 1954): 48.

139 Newark Museum, *Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered* (catalogue by Ruth Bowman; Newark, N.J., 1978).

140 Jewell, 'Commentary on Murals'.

141 Tenants' Council of Williamsburg Houses to Harry Hopkins, 20 May 1938 (AAA DC90:1080).

142 Emily Genauer, 'New Horizons in American Art', *P* 8, no. 5 (October 1936): 5–7. Cf. 'Meet Uncle Sam, World's Greatest Collector of a Nation's Art', *AD* 11, no. 1 (1 October 1936): 5.

143 Benson, 'Art on Parole', 770.

144 For the context of the Massachusetts project, see Edith A. Tonelli, 'The Avant-Garde in Boston: The Experiment of the

WPA Federal Art Project', *AAAJ* 20, no. 1 (1980): 18–24. For *New York: Wedding in South Street*, see Louis Guglielmi, 'After the Locusts', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 113–14.

145 For Gross-Bettelheim, see Robinson and Steinberg (eds), *Transformations in Cleveland Art*, 142, 187, 230; for Rutka, see ibid., 140, 190–91, 235. For Grambs, see James Wechsler, 'The Great Depression and the Prints of Blanche Grambs', *Print Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1996): 376–96. Both Grambs and Gross-Bettelheim were CP members.

146 Noble, 'New Horizons'; Davis quoted in 'Opinion Under Postage', *NYT*, 27 September 1936. Davis's letter was in response to Jewell's review, 'Extending Our Horizons', *NYT*, 20 September 1936.

147 'An Art Gallery for the People', in WPA FAP, *40 Exhibitions at New York's Federal Art Gallery: A Preview of the Art of the Future* (1939), 1–3 (Cahill Papers, AAA 1107:585–629). The opening of the new gallery and its decor are described in Jacob Kainen, 'Federal Art Gallery', *DW*, 16 October 1937.

148 E.g., 'Art Holiday Exhibit of Best of Children's Work', *DW*, 20 December 1938; 'WPA Art Exhibit Shows Rare Talents of East Side Kids', *SW*, 28 May 1939; Marcia Minor, 'Harlem's Community Art Center', *DW*, 1 August 1938, 2 August 1938. A listing of FAP exhibits in the city of 1939 is remarkably extensive: 'Variety of Art Shows Offered by Project', *DW*, 5 October 1939. For the Harlem CAC, see Tyler, 'Artists Respond to the Great Depression and the Threat of Fascism', ch. 5.

149 WPA FAP Federal Art Gallery, *Exhibition of Oil Paintings* (New York, 23 February – 23 March 1937) (Harriton Papers, SU, Box 2).

150 Former JRC exhibitors included Mark Baum, Remo Farrugio, Guglielmi, Guy, Harriton, Daniel Koerner, Kopman and Ribak. Harriton's *Astoria Shipbuilding* (19) may be related to the *Astoria Landscape* of which there is a photograph in a 1936 scrapbook in the Harriton Papers (SU).

151 *Direction*, April 1938. The letter is printed in Rutgers University Art Gallery, *O. Louis Guglielmi*, 16; Guglielmi, 'After the Locusts', 114–15. Strangely, the *Daily Worker*'s review did not approve of *Sisters of Charity*, describing it as 'vicious in a crude and unimaginative manner' – [Jacob Kainen?], 'WPA Artists Exhibit Work', *DW*, 9 March 1937.

152 In addition to Gottlieb and Rothko, the future Abstract Expressionists were represented by de Kooning and Pollock. A copy of the catalogue is in the Harriton Papers, SU, Box 1. Photographs of a number of works from the exhibition are in the WPA Photo Archive, AAA 1162–74.

153 Jacob Kainen, 'Art Project Presents Work by WPA Easel and Water Color Painters', *DW*, 5 May 1938; unidentified clippings in Guglielmi's scrapbook (AAA N69-119:239). Cf. 'Uncle Sam's Xmas Gift by a WPA Investigator', *SW*, 20 December 1936.

154 Lydia Paul, '"Eight" Exhibit Stimulating', *DW*, 28 May 1938.

155 Dervaux, 'The Ten', 14; Robert Godsoe, 'A Project for the People', *AF* 3, nos 3–4 (April–May 1937): 10–11; M. D., 'The Easel Division of the WPA in its Last Seasonal Show', *AN* 36, no. 32 (7 May 1938): 17.

156 A copy of the catalogue is in NARA RG69: 1031, Box 65.

157 AAA DC90:188–99; DC91:404–14, 415–27, 429–41; DC89:1241–9, 1350–67, DC90:8–17.

158 Audrey McMahon to Paul Edwards, 31 May 1939 (Weekly Letter), AAA DC91:771.

159 There is some record of institutional allocations in the Weekly Progress Reports. For perceived relations between WPA commissions and receiving institutions, see *The WPA Federal Art Project: A Summary of Activities and Accomplishments* (mimeo, New York, 1938) (AAA DC89:217–41).

160 Jacob Kainen, 'Art Project Exhibits Work', *DW*, 5 March 1936.

161 Seaton, 'Federal Prints and Democratic Culture', 6, 80–100; Jacob Kainen, 'The Graphic Arts Division of the WPA Federal Art Project', in O'Connor (ed.), *New Deal Art Projects*, 155–75.

162 Hyman Warsager, 'Graphic Techniques in Progress', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 139. Cf. American Artists' Congress, *America Today: A Book of 100 Prints*, 5–10.

163 'Chronology' and Biographical Statement (1973), Elizabeth Olds Papers, AAA 2976:5–11, 12–14; Paul Andrews, 'Interviewing Elizabeth Olds: An Artist and Organizer', *DW*, 23 December 1941.

164 Elizabeth Olds, 'Prints for Mass Production', and Mabel Dwight, 'Satire in Art', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 142–4, 151–4. For a longer version of Olds's text, see AAA 2976:200–06. Cf. Harry Gottlieb: 'The taste of the majority of the people, in particular those in the low income groups is on the 5 & 10 store level, where they can buy, at a cost, commensurate with their income, a vulgarized form of upper class culture. This is not their fault. The limited art, available to the people, is an expression of their economic and social condition and not an expression of their cultural aspirations.' (*sic*) From fragment of a handwritten text on the artist and society, c. 1940, Gottlieb Papers, AAA 3889:799–814.

For Dwight, see Susan Barnes Robinson and John Pirog, *Mabel Dwight: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Lithographs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997). Ill-health and deafness meant Dwight was little involved with the workshop.

165 Lynd Ward, 'Printmakers of Tomorrow', *P* 11, no. 3 (March 1939): 8–12.

166 Jacob Kainen, 'Federal Art Project Achieves Renaissance in Lithography', *DW*, 27 January 1938. Cf. Joseph Leboit and Hyman Warsager, 'The Graphic Project: Revival of Print Making', *AF* 3, no. 8 (November 1937): 11.

167 Russell T. Limbach, 'Lithography: Stepchild of the Arts', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 145–7. There is an extensive collection of Limbach's colour prints at the Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn.

168 'Packing Plant Art is Shown', *Omaha World Herald*, nd (1935), AAA 2976:251.

169 Olds and Gottlieb both showed lithographs of bootleg mining in the American Artists' Congress *America Today* exhibition. Gottlieb recalls the mining trip in Stephen Neil

Greengard, 'Ten Crucial Years: A Panel Discussion by Six WPA Artists', *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 1 (spring 1986): 54–6. See also Art Shields, 'He Painted Miners', *People's World Magazine*, 30 March 1974. Contemporaneously, Harry Sternberg used a Guggenheim Fellowship to make a series of prints of coal mining and steel production in Pennsylvania. See Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, *Harry Sternberg*, nos 133–51, 158; and Wechsler, 'The Great Depression and the Prints of Blanche Grambs', 386–8.

170 ACA Gallery, *Steel: Drawings by Elizabeth Olds* (New York: 1937); Elizabeth McCausland, 'Steel Mill Drawings by Elizabeth Olds', *SSUR*, 5 December 1937 (AAA 2976:249).

171 'Autobiographical Sketch', Gottlieb Papers AAA D343: 507–30; Forbes Watson, 'Harry Gottlieb', *The Arts* 15, no. 2 (February 1929): 99–102. For Gottlieb on realism, see AAA 3889:803, 1090–95.

172 ACA Gallery, *Paintings by Harry Gottlieb* (New York: 1937), AAA 3890:210–11.

173 *Sweat Shop, Case No . . . , Mine Disaster, Bombing*. Examples of each are in the Newark Museum WPA print collection.

174 Elizabeth McCausland, 'Silk Screen Color Prints', *P* 12, no. 3 (March 1940): 35.

175 Anthony Velonis, 'A Graphic Medium Grows Up', in O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, 154–6; Elizabeth Olds, 'The Silk Screen Group', typescript in Olds Papers, AAA 2976:193–8. See also Reba and Dave Williams, 'The Early History of the Screenprint', *Print Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (December 1986): 286–321.

176 'WPA Project Developed Silk Screen Art', *DW*, 7 March 1940; Oliver F. Mason, 'Exhibit of Silk Screen Color Prints at ACA', *DW*, 5 March 1940; McCausland, 'Silk Screen Color Prints'; 'Silk Screen Art at Springfield Museum', *SSUR*, 10 March 1940.

177 Velonis, quoted in 'Silk Screen', *NM* 35, no. 1 (26 March 1940): 30.

178 Autobiographical Notes, undated, Gottlieb Papers (AAA 3889:1052).

8 Cultural Organising after 1939

1 Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* For the postwar period generally, see Joseph R. Starobin's acute and moving study *American Communism in Crisis, 1943–1957* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

2 On these issues, see George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Dubofsky, *State and Labor in Modern America*, 137–208; Nelson Lichtenstein, 'From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era', in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (New York & Toronto: Free Press, 1991).

3 Notably in relation to the indictment and prosecution of Minneapolis members of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party under the Smith Act in 1941, on which see Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 123–4.

4 On the ALP, see Kenneth Waltzer, 'The Party and the Polling Place: American Communism and an American Labor Party in the 1930s', *Radical History Review* 23 (spring 1980): 104–29; Gerald Myer, 'American Labor Party', in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 24–5. For the ALP Artists Committee, see Elizabeth McCausland to Marian Rubin, 27 May 1944 (copy), and documents relating to the ALP in Box 35, McCausland Papers, unfilmed.

5 The New York Citizens Emergency Committee to Aid Strikers' Families was transparently a creation of pro-labour elements in the ICCASP. For a listing of the artists' division, see letterhead of Frank Kingdon to Anton Refregier, 11 February 1946 (Refregier Papers, AAA, Box 1a, 'Correspondence c.1950').

6 For American-Soviet Friendship, see Buhle *et al.* (eds), *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 29–32.

7 Copy of Call for the Congress, 'In Defense of Culture' (Gottlieb Papers, AAA D343: 64–6); American Artists' Congress, *In Defense of Culture* (New York, 1941), 11.

8 On the background to this, see Norman Barr to Rockwell Kent, 19 January 1942 (Daniel Koerner Papers, AAA 1337: 801–2). For the disaffiliation, see the correspondence between Lewis Merrill (President of the UOPWA) and Barr and Kent also in this collection (AAA 1337:803–24). For Merrill as a fellow-traveller, see Gary M. Fink (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of American Labor* (Westport, Conn., & London: Greenwood Press, 1984), 403–4.

9 *Joint Bulletin of the American Artists' Congress and the United American Artists'*, May 1942 (Gottlieb Papers, AAA D343: 22–5); draught of letter from Harry Gottlieb to [Richard] Carline (AAA 3889:332); Charles Humboldt, 'What the Artists Want', *NM* 43, no. 11 (16 June 1942): 26–7.

10 Mimeographed flier, 'Your Program for 1944' (Kent Papers, AAA, Box 4).

11 Flier in Charles Keller Papers (AAA).

12 Lynd Ward to Rockwell Kent, 10 December 1944; cf. Kent to Suzanne Noble, 19 December 1944 (copy); Kent to Ward, 7 May 1946 (copy; Kent Papers, AAA, Box 4).

13 It did have friendly relations with similar groups in Cleveland and Chicago. See Rockwell Kent to Leon G. Miller of Artists for Action, Cleveland, 19 November 1946 (copy); correspondence from Harold Hayden to Kent, 1946, on paper of ALA Chicago (Kent Papers, AAA, Box 4).

14 Rockwell Kent to Alvena Seckar, 15 March 1945 (copy). A month earlier, Kent wrote to the ALA executive secretary Suzanne Noble regretting that 'we have so few artists of established reputations in our membership' – Kent to Noble, 10 February 1945 (copy). By contrast, leading figures on the executive such as Lynd Ward and Norman Barr wanted to create a '*mass*, broad, rank & file included, progressive, anti-fascist art organization' – Barr to Kent, 24 January 1947 (Kent Papers, AAA, Box 4).

15 Rockwell Kent to Harold Hayden, 30 November 1946 (copy); Kent to Leon G. Miller, 19 November 1946 (copy; Kent Papers, AAA, Box 4).