

## WPA Art at RAM

When the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts first opened in 1941, it did not have a permanent collection. Any of the work on display in the galleries was borrowed from artists, collectors, and other museums as short term loans. This changed, and Wustum became an institution with an art collection, when **Sylvester Jerry**, the museum's first director, was able to obtain over 260 works produced through the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Working with state and local governments, the WPA was a national program that provided jobs and income for many unemployed during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The impact of this dramatic economic episode was felt for decades on multiple levels—socially, culturally, financially, and psychologically. An estimated 10,000 artists and craftspeople with a wide variety of experience and at various skill levels were offered employment under the FAP. They were put to use both as a part of the relief measures being undertaken to improve the welfare of U.S. citizens overall and to support cultural activity. Working from community art centers around the country, these artists created murals, paintings, sculpture, posters, textiles, theatre



**Elizabeth Olds**  
*Miner Joe*, ca. 1935, Lithograph, edition of 24  
17 5/8 x 13 1/4 inches  
Racine Art Museum, Works Progress Administration  
(WPA), New York Federal Art Project (FAP)

(below)  
**Berenice Abbott**  
*Henry Street Looking West from Market Street from the  
Changing New York Series*, 1935, Silver gelatin print  
7 3/8 x 9 7/16 inches  
Racine Art Museum, Works Progress Administration  
(WPA), New York Federal Art Project (FAP)



**R | A | M**

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Racine, Wisconsin  
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ramart.org



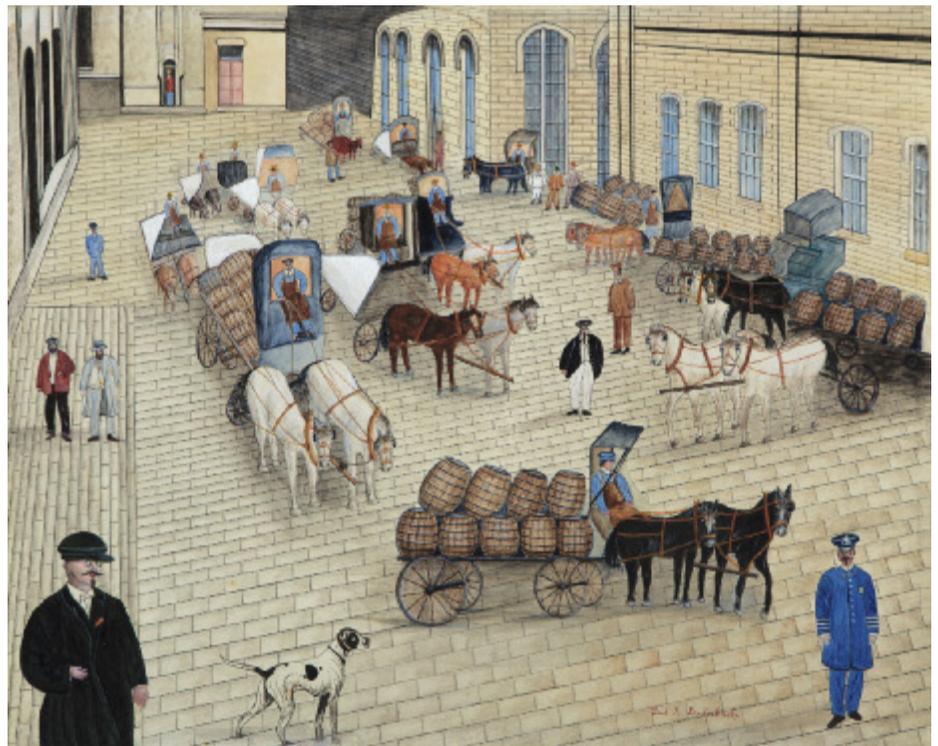
design, and more. Each state administered the program independently—RAM has examples of artwork produced through California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C.

In addition to employing a notably broad range of people—without gender and race operating as barriers—the value of the FAP seemed to be its ability to boost morale and contribute to the greater cultural good. As pointed out in a Wustum exhibition catalog from 1998, “Roosevelt [President Franklin D.] and WPA administrators also realized the important role the arts could have in bolstering the country’s sagging spirit. At a time when the arts were not considered part of popular education, the idea that the creation of artworks and the presentation of plays and concerts was work worthy of Government funding was revolutionary. In addressing why artists should be paid to make art instead of working on roads and public work improvements, WPA administrator Aubrey Williams said, “We don’t think a good musician should be asked to turn a second-rate laborer in order that a sewer may be laid for relative permanency rather than a concert given for the momentary pleasure of our people.”

While there were artists from a wide variety of backgrounds supported by the FAP/WPA, the subject matter of much of the work produced emphasized landscapes, social circumstances, architecture, and people. By and large, and following trends of the day, the artists favored realistic—rather than abstracted—

styles. There were some making pointed statements about cultural circumstances or documenting the effect of economic disparity, yet there were also those creating designs—as seen in the textiles produced through the Milwaukee Handicraft Project (MHP)—that were based on nature, the landscape, and folk traditions.

The MHP, running from 1935 to 1942, employed over 5,000 women and people of color to make mostly household-related articles of wood, paper, yarn, and cloth, that could be sold to schools, libraries, and other public institutions. Operating with one of the most progressive mindsets of the WPA initiatives, the MHP utilized an integrated workforce with designer foremen and laborers sharing the same workspace. What began as an initiative to employ those classified as unemployable due to age, disability, race, or the



(above left)  
**Anonymous Artists, Milwaukee Handicraft Project**  
*Applied Design Block Printed Textile*, ca. 1940  
 Color wood block on cotton  
 20 x 10 inches  
 Racine Art Museum,  
 Gift of Hannah Gollin

(right)  
**Paul Lauterbach**  
*Old Schlitz Beer Delivery Depot*, 1939  
 Watercolor  
 19 3/8 x 22 1/2 inches  
 Works Progress Administration (WPA),  
 Wisconsin Federal Art Project (FAP)

circumstance of being a woman who had not worked outside the home previously, became a successful program with a high rate of production. After learning block printing, design, and bookbinding, workers created art instructional and children's books, such as *Come and Sing*. A collaboration between the Milwaukee State Teacher's College and the MHP, this piece included illustrations and songs that had been written by children at the Teacher's College training school. RAM has a copy of this as well as multiple portfolios of block-printed textile samples. A partial list of works produced by the MHP includes printed paper and textile pieces, woven draperies, table runners, placemats, upholstery fabric, bed covers, toys, dolls, costumes, quilts, furnishings, and wall hangings. This initiative attracted attention nationwide, with high profile figures such as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and **Frank Lloyd Wright**, visiting the project.

RAM's holdings of work from the WPA encompass a selection of prints, watercolors, drawings, photographs, textiles, paintings, and small-scale sculptures. Subject matter includes landscapes, barns, the architecture and/or people of cities and towns, social commentary, and people at everyday activities. Considering the social climate at the time, it is no surprise that a number of the works emphasize the plight of the laborer or worker. This is matched by a desire to explore stylistic modes of the day, including those of the American Regionalists, such as **Thomas Hart Benton**; German Expressionists; Russian post-revolutionary art; and Mexican Muralists such as **Diego Rivera**. Broadly, art of the period was rooted in representation yet distortions of the figure were often used to convey emotion and expression or as a metaphor for physical and bodily existence.

RAM has work from artists that were, or became, well-regarded nationally and internationally, such as the photographer **Berenice Abbott** and the painter **Stuart Davis**. They were a part of the New York WPA along with **Arshile Gorky**, **Louise Nevelson**,



(above right)  
**Raphael Soyer**  
*Working Girls Going Home, 1937*  
 Lithograph, uneditioned  
 11 1/4 x 9 3/8 inches  
 Racine Art Museum,  
 Works Progress Administration (WPA),  
 New York Federal Art Project (FAP)



(left)  
**Paul Clemens**  
*Artist at Easel, 1936*  
 Watercolor  
 15 3/8 x 20 3/4 inches  
 Racine Art Museum,  
 Works Progress Administration (WPA),  
 Wisconsin Federal Art Project (FAP)

**Jackson Pollock**, **Mark Rothko**, and **David Smith**. Thirty Wisconsin artists are represented in RAM's holdings, including **Edmund Lewandowski**, **Schomer Lichtner**, **Robert Schellin**, **Alfred Sessler**, **Robert von Neumann**, and **Santos Zingale**, who became well-known artists and highly influential teachers and mentors in the region.



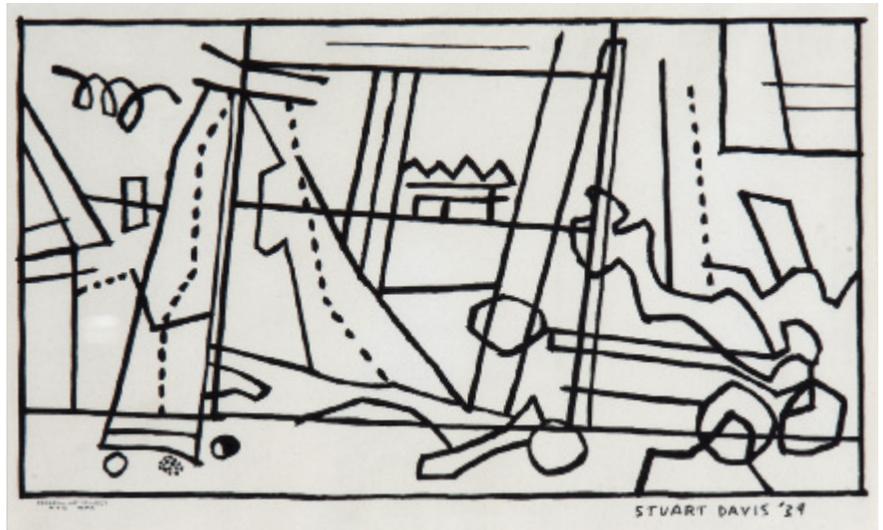
**More about the WPA works in RAM's collection:**

- The large number of works on paper from Wisconsin artists—such as the lithographs of **Mabel Dwight** and **Schomer Lichtner** and the woodcuts of **Santos Zingale**—reflects the state's prominent role in commercial printing and artistic interest in graphic media in the first half of the twentieth century.
- The significance of watercolor as an artistic medium in Wisconsin is also represented with notable examples from **Paul Lauterbach**, **Edmund Lewandowski**, and **Robert Schellin**.
- A hearty gathering of photography is present with multiple works by well-known photographers, including **Berenice Abbott** and **Brett Weston**.

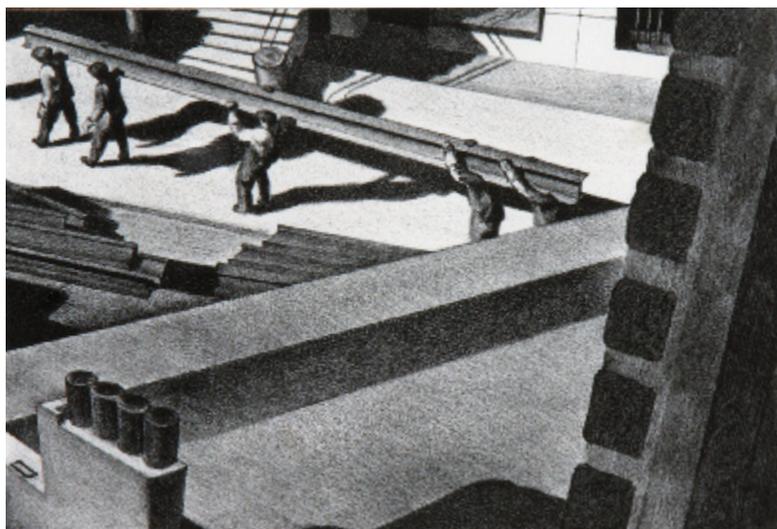
• There are two large-scale formal, printed textile works including a version of **Barbara Warren Weismann's** *Ruby*—a piece related to one of the textiles presented to Eleanor Roosevelt upon her visit to the Milwaukee Handicraft Project in 1936.

• There are examples of artists addressing subject matter in series such as the *Along the Waterfront* photos of **David Robbins** and as stages of a creative process such as the different media of **Louis Powell's** *Rooftop Series* with photos, drawings, gouache, watercolor, and oil painting.

• Works from the WPA were gifted to Wustum Museum while the institution was under the direction of its first director, **Sylvester Jerry**. Jerry headed the Michigan State WPA art program and his wife, **Cherry Barr Jerry**, was the western regional supervisor for the *Index of American Design*—a pictorial survey of American material culture from the early Colonial period to 1900.



While the works produced through the WPA are now historical, they first entered the collection as contemporary art, made by artists who were alive and still making work. This is significant for two reasons. It reflects an ongoing commitment on the part of Wustum and RAM to support



contemporary artists by exhibiting and collecting their work. This gift was also visionary in that it foreshadowed the collecting foci of Wustum and RAM—contemporary craft and works on paper.

**Lena Vigna**  
Curator of Exhibitions

(above left)  
**Edmund D. Lewandowski**  
*Gas Company*, 1937  
Watercolor  
16 1/2 x 23 1/2 inches  
Works Progress Administration (WPA),  
Wisconsin Federal Art Project (FAP)

(above right)  
**Stuart Davis**  
*Seine Cart*, 1939  
Lithograph, uneditioned  
8 5/8 x 13 15/16 inches  
Works Progress Administration (WPA),  
New York Federal Art Project (FAP)

(left)  
**Louis Lozowick**  
*Roof and Street*, 1938  
Lithograph, edition of 25  
7 1/2 x 11 inches  
Racine Art Museum,  
Works Progress Administration (WPA),  
New York Federal Art Project (FAP)

Photography throughout by  
Jon Bolton, Racine