

# Racine exhibit recalls when America put artists to work

Diane M. Bacha, Special to the Journal Sentinel 10:11 a.m. CT March 20, 2017



(Photo: Jon Bolton)

There was a time when the U.S. government decided that one way to tackle the nation's problems was to put more artists to work. That this sounds so startling today is a good reason to visit the [Racine Art Museum](http://www.ramart.org/). (<http://www.ramart.org/>)

“WPA Art from RAM's Collection,” (<http://www.ramart.org/content/wpa-art-rams-collection>) on view through June 4, is a reminder that art as an essential element of community prosperity was once a less debatable idea. The watercolors, photographs, textiles, handcrafts, and prints in this exhibition were produced during the Great Depression in a deliberate effort to lift the economy and lift public spirits. Artists were paid with government funds to teach art, research art, and make art.

In a curious byproduct of history, the exhibit also tells the story of how RAM got its start.

Between 1935 and 1943, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) put millions of unemployed people to work as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Some WPA workers built roads, bridges, parks and schools. Others wrote music, painted watercolors, and designed murals under a program called the Federal Art Project (FAP). Holding hammers or brushes, they were all part of Roosevelt's vision for relief, recovery and reform.

As it happens, the first director of the Wustum Museum of Art – RAM's predecessor museum – had administered one of the WPA arts programs in Michigan. He came into possession of many works produced for the FAP and these became, in 1943, the Wustum's first permanent collection. It was a prescient move. The museum would go on to focus on contemporary crafts and works on paper and, 60 years later, spin off RAM, which today has the largest contemporary craft collection in the country.

The 70 works now on view represent only a portion of that collection, and have been brought out of storage in part to mark Wustum/RAM's upcoming 75th anniversary. They invite us to reflect on what has and has not changed in those 75 years.



This color wood block on cotton (circa 1940) from the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project is part of a Racine Art Museum exhibit. (Photo: Jon Bolton)

There is a good deal of everyday life in these images, and much of it involves the working life: scrub ladies and circus workers, miners and shoe-shiners, typists and air-hammer operators. A cynical eye might think the artists were encouraged to glorify American values, but these artists were actually given a great deal of leeway in choosing and interpreting their subject matter. Social commentary often seeps through.

We see optimism in a city street scene titled “Working Girls Going Home” (Raphael Soyer, 1937) and confidence in a rooftop view of brawny workers shouldering an I-beam in “Roof and Street” (Louis Lozowick, 1938). But we also see bleakness. Jacob Kainen's “Aftermath” (1937) is a colorless jumble of shabby buildings and leafless trees. In the foreground, almost overwhelmed by an indistinct heap of rubbish, are two small figures, an adult and a child holding hands. They look at the ruins just as we do, but without the benefit of distance. It's one of several reminders that the country was still reeling from poverty, joblessness, and displacement.

An even grimmer truth is depicted in “Lynch Law” (1934), a woodcut gifted to the museum directly by Wisconsin artist Santos Zingale. In it, a lynching victim, noose still around his neck, is circled by mourners expressing grief in ways ranging from sorrow to outrage.



Berenice Abbott's "Henry Street Looking West From Market Street" (1935) is included in Racine Art Museum's exhibit of WPA artwork. (Photo: Jon Bolton)

The estimated 10,000 artists and craftspeople employed by the FAP were a varied lot, and that's true for RAM's exhibit. A number of the artists shown here were foreign born – Russian, Belgian, German and Ukrainian, among others. A handful are women. Levels of training and experience also vary: The delightful watercolor “Old Schlitz Beer Delivery Depot” (1939) was painted by Paul Lauterbach, a self-taught artist working in Milwaukee.

Lena Vigna, who curated the show, made a point to highlight one of the WPA's more groundbreaking programs, the Milwaukee Handicraft Project (MHP). Launched as an initiative to train the “unemployable,” the MHP became known for breaking color and gender barriers. Its integrated workforce produced household items for families in need as well as books, wall hangings, and other crafts sold at reasonable prices to schools and libraries.

Among the MHP products here are prints created for children's books and block-printed textile designs intended for draperies, table runners, or other household items. Most are anonymous. They are decorative but not fussy. Entrepreneurial mission aside, the MHP crafts say much about the home-design aesthetic of the times.

Three Berenice Abbott photographs depicting New York scenes are breathtakingly evocative. Stuart Davis – a famous painter by this time, but impoverished enough to earn a WPA spot – introduces the single abstract note in a chorus of realism with his lithograph “Seine Cart” (1939). Wisconsin's Schomer Lichtner is here, pre-cows-and-ballerinas, along with other Wisconsin artists who would go on to influence the regional scene.



This color wood block on cotton (circa 1940) from the Milwaukee WPA Handicraft Project is part of an exhibit at the Racine Art Museum. (Photo: Jon Bolton)

The legacy of Roosevelt's New Deal principles is not without its controversies, especially as America grapples with tectonic shifts in economic and social dynamics. That doesn't interfere with the pleasure of viewing this melting pot of images. Each, in its own way, reflects back to us an America under duress, and carrying on.

The Racine Art Museum is at 441 Main St., Racine. It's open daily. Admission is \$5 for adults. For more information visit [www.ramart.org](http://www.ramart.org). (<http://www.ramart.org/>)

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