



When Art was for Every American

JEWISH MUSEUM MILWAUKEE'S "BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A DIME" EXPLORES FEDERALLY FUNDED CREATIVITY IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

BY DAVID LUHRSEN

During the Great Depression, heroic images of everyday folk, the laborers and farmers in the country's factories and fields, were spread across the bare interior walls of post offices and other public buildings. The muralists working from their scaffolds were employed by several federal agencies, including the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Ostensibly, the New Deal programs supporting visual and other artists had a pragmatic objective: living wages for destitute artists during the worst economic crisis in American history. But those projects also served the more idealistic goal of ennobling the American experience.

The current exhibition at the Jewish Museum Milwaukee focuses on federally funded art from the Great Depression. "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime: Jewish Artists of the WPA" assembles some 70 works by 41 artists and includes oil and watercolor paintings, lithographs, serigraphs, woodblock prints and sculpture. Wisconsin's Aaron Bohrod and Alfred Sessler are among the artists represented in the show. "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime" brings together for the first time pieces from several museums and collections, including the Racine Art Museum and UW-Milwaukee.

Most WPA art reflected the prominent visual movement of the day, social realism, whose proponents sought to accurately depict immediate reality through compositions in simplified lines suggesting motion and strength. Avoiding genteel subjects (no still lifes here), social realists delivered messages on the value of everyday life in emotionally vivid form. Social realism was also the preferred visual genre of other nations, including the Soviet Union, where representations of workers in factories and farms circulated widely. However, American artists labored under fewer restrictions and were encouraged to incorporate recognizable aspects of the regions where they lived in their depictions of everyday life.

According to the Jewish Museum's curator, Molly Dubin, the artists were "tapping into Franklin D. Roosevelt's idea, his focus on creating the 'American scene,'—the truly American identity and all it encompassed."

RAISING THE CULTURAL LEVEL

The museum programming associated with “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime” puts WPA art into the larger context of the New Deal’s cultural agenda. As painters rendered images of American life, the Library of Congress’ John and Alan Lomax roamed the South recording blues and folk musicians. Other researchers took down the narratives of former slaves and other marginalized citizens. Writers were employed to produce guidebooks to cities and states, plays were mounted and art centers established to raise the country’s cultural level and make the arts accessible to everyone.

The plight of working men (and occasionally women) at a time of massive unemployment, when brutal battles for organized labor raged outside factory gates, can be discerned in some images. “Many of the artists were immigrants who came in search of the American Dream and found themselves in one of the darkest times in American history,” Dubin says.

While some foreign governments had long spent lavishly on the arts they favored, large scale federal funding of culture in the U.S. was among Roosevelt’s many innovations. The content was sometimes controversial, spurring Congressional hearings by the same sort of know-nothings who block progress today.

“The Trump administration tried to squash the National Endowment for the Arts. Biden has promised increases to the federal arts budget—one of the largest ever in dollars to be spent,” Dubin says. “I’m hoping people coming to the exhibition will see the parallels between then and now and be encouraged to think about the role of government spending for the arts and the role of artists in our society.”

“BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A DIME: JEWISH ARTISTS OF THE WPA” RUNS THROUGH SEPTEMBER 5 AT JEWISH MUSEUM MILWAUKEE, 1360 N. PROSPECT AVE. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT JEWISHMUSEUMMILWAUKEE.ORG.

David Lührssen has written several books on 20th century popular culture including the forthcoming Great Depression on Film.



Top Left: *The Miner*, photo credit: Illinois State Museum.

Top Right: *Hooverville Depression Scene*, photo credit: UWM Art Collection.

Bottom: *Sweat Shop*, photo credit: Illinois State Museum.

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