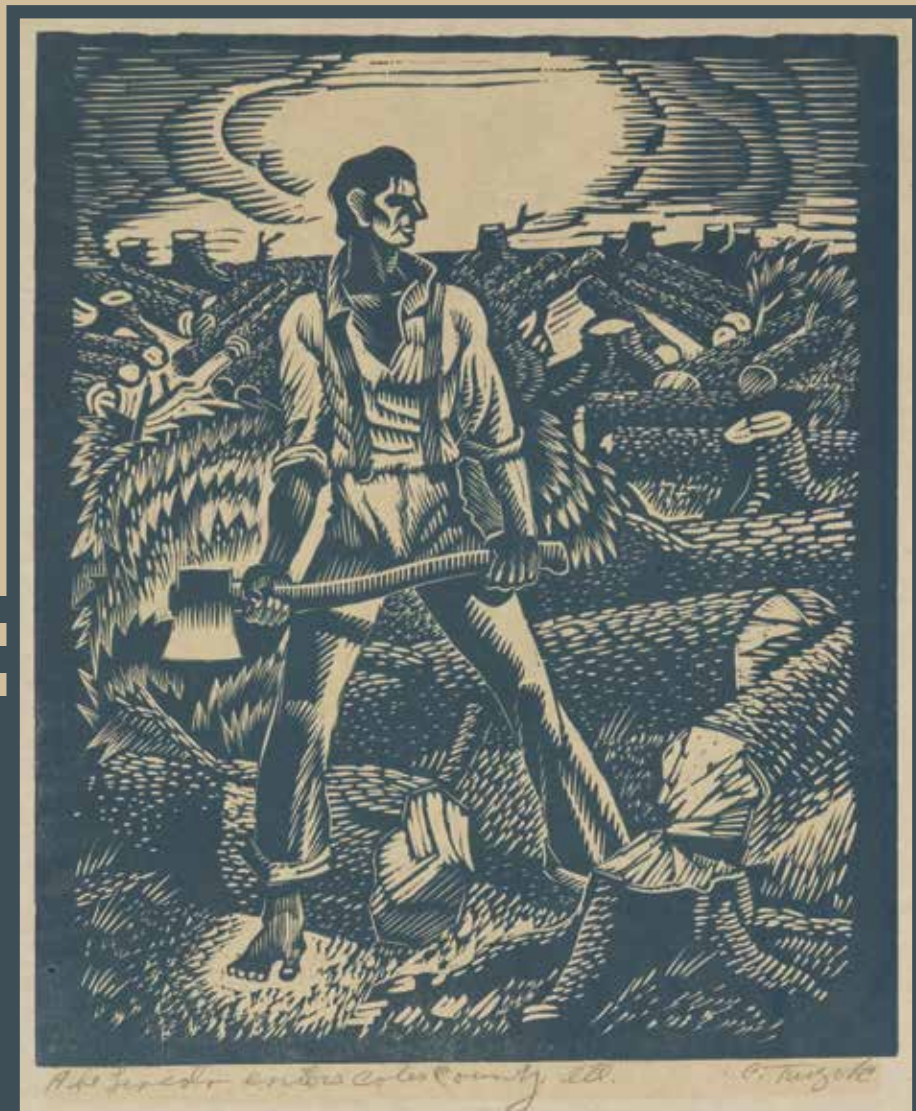


# A New Deal for Illinois

The Federal Art Project Collection  
of Western Illinois University



Gregory Gilbert

# A New Deal for Illinois

## The Federal Art Project Collection of Western Illinois University

---

Gregory Gilbert, Ph.D.



WESTERN  
ILLINOIS  
UNIVERSITY

© 2013 Western Illinois University

Reproductions of works of art © 2013 Western Illinois University  
unless otherwise noted. All rights reserved.

Western Illinois University  
1 University Circle  
Macomb, IL 61455  
www.wiu.edu

ISBN 978-0-615-82928-9

This catalog was published in conjunction with the exhibition *A New Deal for Illinois: The Federal Art Project Collection of Western Illinois University* organized by the Western Illinois University Art Gallery.

Figge Art Museum  
Davenport, Iowa  
September 14, 2013-January 5, 2014

University Art Gallery  
Western Illinois University  
Macomb, Illinois  
January 18-March 1, 2014

*Project director*  
Ann Marie Hayes-Hawkinson  
Director, Western Illinois University Art Gallery

*Essay and catalog of works author*  
Gregory Gilbert, PhD  
Associate Professor, Art History, Knox College

*Catalog design*  
Pederson Paetz

Cover:  
Charles Turzak  
American, 1899-1986  
*Abe Lincoln Enters Coles County, Illinois, 1933-34*  
Block print  
Courtesy of the Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service, U.S. General Services Administration  
Commissioned through the New Deal art projects

# Contents

---

- 5    **Acknowledgments**
- 7    **Art Conservation Initiative**
- 11   **A New Deal for Illinois**  
Gregory Gilbert

## Catalog of Works

- 21    **Section I**  
Allocated by the U.S. Government  
Commissioned through the WPA, Federal Art Project
- 24    **Section II**  
Courtesy of the Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service,  
U.S. General Services Administration  
Commissioned through the New Deal art projects
- 42    **Section III**
- 44    **Section IV**



Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Jazz Singers*, 1934

# Acknowledgments

My colleagues and I are delighted to present the exhibition *A New Deal for Illinois: The Federal Art Project Collection of Western Illinois University*. The exhibition features 40 of the 72 works of art that were acquired by the university in the 1930s and 1940s, when the university was operating as Western Illinois State Teachers College. Collection highlights include paintings by Gertrude Abercrombie, Archibald J. Motley Jr. and Romolo Roberti. The collection is truly a pleasure to experience for its range of subject matter and variety of art mediums.

Although these paintings and prints may be appreciated for their aesthetic value alone, Western Illinois University also treasures the Federal Art Project Collection because of its historical importance. Like many institutions across the country, the university and the Macomb community benefited from the federal government's desire to bring art to large and small communities across the country. These works, which were hung in campus offices, classrooms and public spaces, speak to the power of art to educate and inspire during challenging times. Now, more than 70 years later, we believe the story behind the formation of this collection and the artists' stories will intrigue viewers.

---

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people who made the exhibition and accompanying catalog possible. As early as 2010, Brad Bainter, vice president of Advancement and Public Services at Western Illinois University (WIU), proposed the idea of exhibiting the Federal Art Project Collection at the Figge Art Museum in Davenport, Iowa. The WIU Graduate Museum Studies Program is taught at the Figge Art Museum, and the WIU-Quad Cities Riverfront Campus was scheduled to open in 2011. Tim Schiffer, the new executive director at the Figge Art Museum, graciously extended the invitation in 2012. On behalf of my WIU colleagues, I would like to thank Tim and the Figge Board of Trustees for the opportunity to share our collection with the Quad Cities.

This exhibition simply would not have been realized without the Western Illinois University Foundation's support. I wish to thank the Foundation for sponsoring the exhibition and catalog. Foundation resources also were offered to support the art conservation initiative (described on page 7); Brad Bainter and Julie Murphy, director of Donor Relations, secured many sponsors.

I would like to acknowledge Macomb residents Bill and Jo Sanders for their major gift to support the exhibition and catalog. The Sanders have given generously to WIU during the years, and this recent gift demonstrates their continued commitment to supporting the visual arts at WIU.

I am grateful to Dr. Gregory Gilbert, associate professor of art history at Knox College, who accepted my invitation to serve as guest curator and author of this catalog. Greg's superb scholarship emphasizes, among other things, the historical significance of these works of art to the university. His insights about this collection are a pleasure to read and are sure to encourage new interest in the collection. I also wish to thank Pederson Paetz for complementing Greg's research with this beautifully designed catalog and exhibition graphics.

I thank Kathy Nichols at University Archives for her expert research assistance and for identifying photographic materials to enhance the exhibition. I also thank Julie Redwine, Fine Arts Program, Art in Architecture and Fine Arts (PCAC), U.S. General Services Administration, for providing important information about WIU's New Deal works.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge John Graham, curator of the Western Illinois University Art Gallery from 1992-2011, for his fine stewardship of the Federal Art Project Collection.

*Ann Marie Hayes-Hawkinson*

Director, Western Illinois University Art Gallery

# Art Conservation Initiative

Shortly after being offered the opportunity to exhibit the collection at the Figge Art Museum, the Western Illinois University (WIU) Foundation and University Art Gallery brought conservators from The Conservation Center in Chicago to campus to assess the condition of the works that would travel to Davenport. Although a few works had been conserved, it was clear the majority of the works would benefit from treatment and archival framing. To cover expenses, the WIU Foundation, the College of Fine Arts and Communication (CoFAC), and the University Art Gallery worked together to secure sponsors for the works identified for conservation treatment. These generous patrons, who are listed on the next page, have ensured WIU's collection may be enjoyed for years to come.

In addition to Brad Bainter and Julie Murphy mentioned earlier, I wish to thank William T. (Billy) Clow, dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication, and Charles Wright, chair of the Department of Art, for supporting this initiative. Under their leadership, and with assistance from Mick Cumbie, CoFAC director of development, and Cathy Null, assistant to the Dean, the College of Fine Arts and Communication organized a successful fundraising event to secure sponsors. On behalf of these colleagues, I also want to acknowledge our Art Conservation Initiative sponsors for helping the University Art Gallery care for this important collection.

I want to thank the conservators and staff at The Conservation Center in Chicago for their excellent work. In particular, I wish to acknowledge April Hann-Lanford, vice president of Client Services, for her expert advice, professionalism and patience during this eight-month process. Finally, I also thank the staff at University Television for documenting this initiative. The program will be aired on University Television and WQPT, and will be shown in both exhibition venues.

*Ann Marie Hayes-Hawkinson*



## Art Conservation Sponsors

- Gil Belles** *A Terribly Strange Tree* by Gertrude Abercrombie
- Bill and Jacquie Brattain** *General Grant's Home, Galena, Illinois* by Charles Turzak
- Tom and Maria Dunstan** *Marquette and Joliet Welcomed by the Illinois* by Charles Turzak
- Al and Elaine Goldfarb** *Portrait of President Morgan* by J. Theodore Johnson
- Ken Hawkinson** *The Pump* by Gertrude Abercrombie
- Thomas C. Jackson and Joanne Stevens** *A Tank Worker* by Charles Turzak
- Tom and Kate Joswick** *Lincoln's Springfield Home* by Charles Turzak
- Sterling Kernek** *Vandalia 1824* by Charles Turzak
- Tate and Sharon Lindahl** *Woman Sewing* by Macena Barton
- Sue Martinelli-Fernandez** *Lincoln Park* by Charles Turzak
- George and Renee Mavigliano** *Drug Store* by Charles L. Schucker
- Julie Murphy** *Peaceful Valley* by Anne Michalov (Johnson)
- Cathy and Ned Null** *The Bride* by Gertrude Abercrombie
- Phillip and Jacqlin Richmond** *Crow Squaw and Warrior* by Cornelius C. Sampson
- Joe Rives and Scott Brouette** *Factory Buildings, #255* by Aaron Bohrod
- Ned and Sandy Shearer** *Abe Lincoln Enters Coles County, Illinois* by Charles Turzak
- Amy Spelman and Brad Bainter** *Lumber Schooner* by Charles Biesel
- Norm and Carmelita Teeter** *Roofs (Tree Studios)* by Romolo Roberti
- Jack and Linda Thomas** *Cradling Wheat* by Margrette Oatway (Dornbusch)
- Dave and Jackie Thompson** *Portrait of S.B. Hursh* by J. Theodore Johnson
- Charles Wright and Jo-Ann Morgan** *The Little Waterspout* by Francis Robert White
- Western Illinois University Alumni Council** *The Lagoon* by Paul Stoddard
- Western Illinois University College of Fine Arts and Communication** *River and Canal Boats* by Charles Turzak
- Western Illinois University Foundation** *Over-Mantel Decoration in Student Lounge* by Ellsworth Young and *Apple Harvest* by Gregory Orloff
- Western Illinois University Performing Arts Society** *Dunes Near Fremont* by Fred Biesel and *Metropolis* by Helen Noel (Shagam)

Finally, many individuals contributed to the overall project, providing necessary support for the exhibition and catalog. Your support and donations are greatly appreciated.

Herb and Rhoda Butler

William T. (Billy) Clow and Michelle Floersch-Clow

Don Dexter

Bill and Sondra Epperly

Sharon and Halle Evans

Joanne Findley

Jo Flack

Fred and Nancy Jones

Patricia I. Jones

Te-Hsiu and Peggy Ma

Samuel and Rebecca Parker

Al and Evie Reusch

Bill and Jo Sanders


Phillip and Margene Weiss



Ellsworth Young, *LaSalle Street Bridge*, 1933-34

# A New Deal for Illinois

## The Federal Art Project Collection of Western Illinois University

n October 29, 1929, the faltering stock market crashed, ushering in the Great Depression of the 1930s. The seismic effects of the crash quickly reached the Midwest, resulting in factory closings, massive unemployment and plummeting farm prices. As a major industrial and agricultural state, Illinois was especially hard-hit by the economic crisis. These financial problems were compounded in the Midwest by the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl, which brought drought conditions and crop failure to regions of Illinois.

In response to the nation's devastating economic hardship, President Franklin Roosevelt's administration created a series of federal work relief programs, beginning in 1933 with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Civil Works Administration (CWA). In January 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established, the largest and most comprehensive New Deal agency, employing more than eight million people until its dissolution in 1943.

The majority of federal work relief jobs involved unskilled manual labor for public works projects. However, in 1933, as part of the federal aid to white-collar workers through the CWA, the government enacted the radical decision to extend federal relief to artists, creating the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). The PWAP was the first government program in the United States to support art on a national scale, providing unemployed artists with wages and creative opportunities. Like earlier federal agencies, it was replaced in 1935 by the larger Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA/FAP).

During robust economic times, it often is difficult for creative individuals to support themselves, but the Depression left an unprecedented number of artists jobless and unable to pursue their vocations. George Biddle, an artist partly responsible for convincing Roosevelt to enact the federal art programs, commented, "For the first time in our history, the Federal Government has recognized that it has the same obligation to keep an artist alive...as to keep a farmer or carpenter alive."<sup>1</sup> Through this kind of egalitarian rhetoric, which stressed ideals

of shared hardship and a commonality of social identity, the federal art projects managed to promote the citizen-artist as a productive worker within New Deal society.

Based on these liberal policies of social inclusion, the projects rejected the view of fine art as the exclusive possession of a privileged elite. Art would be accessible to a mass public for edification and enjoyment and be capable of enhancing democratic values by constructing communal visions of the American experience. Under Holger Cahill, director of the FAP, this belief formally became codified as federal art policy. Influenced by John Dewey's Pragmatist art philosophy, most importantly his 1934 book *Art as Experience*, Cahill advocated support of public arts that reflected the daily existence and commonplace experience of American citizens. This emphasis on quotidian localized subjects led many project directors to express preference for the Regionalist themes associated with the trend of the American Scene, whose most famous practitioners were Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry. Moreover, the integration of aesthetic expression into the life of the community served to remind Americans struggling with the material hardships of the Depression that survival also required emotional and creative sustenance.

In addition to providing economic relief for artists, the philanthropic goal of the PWAP and the FAP was to produce art to embellish federal, state and municipal buildings. Besides these programs, the Treasury Relief Art Project and the Section of Fine Arts were formed for the purpose of creating large-scale murals and sculptural installations for federal buildings. In contrast, the majority of artworks commissioned under the auspices of the PWAP and the FAP were portable easel paintings, prints and sculptures, which were distributed regionally for public display.

Although the PWAP and the FAP were national programs, their activities were concentrated disproportionately in the state of New York, which received the largest amount of federal arts funding and employed the greatest percentage of artists in the country. As a result, most early scholarship on the topic in the 1970s, in particular the pioneering research of Francis V. O'Connor, concentrated on the federal arts projects in New York as representative of the history of New Deal art.<sup>2</sup> However, beginning in the 1980s, such art historians as Karal Ann Marling, Marlene Park and Jonathan Harris adopted a broader national perspective, examining the thematic policies and aesthetics of New Deal art in relation to differing cultural regions and localized art traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Following this significant scholarly trend towards regional, statewide studies on New Deal art, George J. Mavigliano and Richard A. Lawson documented the history of Illinois art projects in their 1990 book *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935-1943*.<sup>4</sup> With its administrative center in Chicago, Illinois had one of the largest and most distinguished art projects in the 1930s. Mavigliano's and Lawson's study, as well as more current research such as Heather Becker's *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive-and-WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943* and *Chicago Modern 1893-1945*, has enhanced historical knowledge on the important cultural achievements of the federal art projects in the state.<sup>5</sup>

---

In keeping with scholarly efforts to more fully investigate the singular character of the Illinois federal art projects, the exhibition *A New Deal for Illinois* examines the Western Illinois University FAP art collection in the regional context of Chicago in the 1930s and in relation to the institutional history of the university.

The short-lived PWAP operated in Illinois from 1933 to 1934 as part of Region Ten, a division of Midwestern art programs that also included Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Dakotas. After the PWAP ended, some artists were re-employed on projects through the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission (IERC). However, with the creation of the FAP in 1935, the Illinois Art Project (IAP) became one of the largest and most active state-run federal art units, employing 775 artists between 1935 and 1943. The IAP greatly benefited from having its administrative base in Chicago, as the city boasted a sophisticated and vital arts scene, as well as prominent arts organizations, galleries and museums. The project was composed of separate media divisions for the production of murals, easel paintings, graphic arts, sculpture, photography and posters and maintained art studios, a print workshop and a gallery showcasing federal art. The Graphics Division, directed by the printmaker Carl Hoeckner, was particularly productive and operated its workshops at the Jane Adams Hull House. Art on display at the IAP gallery was available for allocation, and representatives from state and public agencies could visit and make selections for their institution.

Throughout most of the 1930s, the federal art projects in Illinois were directed by Increase Robinson (1890-1981), who first served as regional director of the state's PWAP program in 1934. She eventually advanced to Illinois director of the FAP in October 1935, administrating the programs of the Illinois Art Project until her dismissal in 1938. A painter and lecturer on the arts, Robinson came from a prosperous artistic family in Hyde Park and pursued artistic training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and later transferred to the University of California, where she studied with the renowned art teacher and abstract painter Hans Hoffman. In 1929, she opened the Increase Robinson Gallery in Chicago, which represented preeminent Midwestern modernists like Grant Wood and gained a reputation for fostering innovative art. It was Robinson's reputation as an influential art dealer with discriminating standards and her close alliance with notable Chicago artists that led to her administrative appointment with the Illinois art projects.<sup>6</sup>

As director of the art programs in Illinois, Robinson was the primary administrative liaison who oversaw the allocation of federal art to state institutions like Western Illinois University (WIU). While the Depression was especially challenging for educational institutions in the state, Western Illinois University (then operating as Western Illinois State Teachers College) received substantial funding from a host of New Deal agencies during the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> These funds, nearly one million dollars, had been attained through the skilled administrative efforts of the college's influential president, Walter P. Morgan. Morgan was successful in advancing the college's building program and maintenance of its infrastructure by relying on the resources of early New Deal programs like the Civil Works Administration and its successors, the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the WPA.

The major building initiative during this period was the designing and construction of the Training School, which finally was completed in 1939 through a federal grant. In addition to funding for physical facilities, the government also provided direct aid for student work-study programs first through FERA and later the National Youth Administration. As a means to overcome the Depression, professional training and education of young people was viewed as a progressive force to ensure future growth and prosperity for the nation.

From 1934 to 1937, the PWAP and the FAP also provided funding for the college to commission murals and institutional portraits and to acquire New Deal art to adorn public spaces on campus.<sup>8</sup> The federal art allocations had been planned by Increase Robinson and



Theodora (Polly) Pottle instructing art students.  
Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections,  
Western Illinois University Libraries.

Theodora (Polly) Pottle (1898-1975), who served as head of the WIU art department from 1928 to 1958. Like Robinson, Pottle came from a privileged creative family in Chicago (her father was a mechanical inventor and her mother directed a theater company), and she received an extensive arts education, attending the University of Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Ransom Studios in Paris, France.

During the 1930s, Pottle acted as the primary advisor to the college on its federal art collection and campaigned throughout her career as a strong advocate for public art. In her series of instructional textbooks titled *My Own Picture Book*, she emphasized art as a primary mode of expression and edification for children, an educational ideal that took root in the pedagogical reforms of the New Deal.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Pottle's textbooks promoted the creative capacity of art to inform and inspire educational

discoveries in a range of academic subjects, a pedagogical belief that is directly reflected in her efforts to display federal works beyond the specialized confines of the art department, incorporating art into the wider educational environment of the college.

In many respects, Pottle's pioneering commitment to the broader academic value of art within public education also followed the populist mission of the New Deal to bring appreciation of art to a mass audience. Although the federal art collection added an aesthetic significance to the college as a whole, its presence was no doubt used for instructional purposes to strengthen and energize the studio art program, which offered a four-year degree. As chair of the art department, Pottle had developed a comprehensive curriculum consisting of courses in fine art foundations, primary and secondary art education, specialized offerings in the instruction of perspective and color theory, as well as introductory courses in art history and art appreciation. The art department also sponsored

---

a fine arts club at the college named the “Palette and Brush,” which hosted a dinner in 1934 with J. Theodore Johnson, an artist in the Illinois Federal Art Project. He visited the college to paint institutional portraits of President Morgan and Professor S.B. Hursh, which are in the exhibition.<sup>10</sup> While in residence at the college, Johnson also painted a mural devoted to the theme of student and campus life, which was commissioned for the institution’s Student Lounge and is no longer extant.<sup>11</sup>

Many of the artists represented in the WIU FAP art collection, such as Archibald Motley, Gertrude Abercrombie, Aaron Bohrod and Romolo Roberti, were based in Chicago in the 1930s and actively involved in the city’s cosmopolitan and progressive urban arts community. While federal art in Chicago lacked the more radical abstract styling of works produced in the New York City projects, the WIU collection serves to counter the prevalent view that New Deal art in Illinois was entirely conservative and provincial. It has been noted that in running the IAP, Robinson, like other project directors, endorsed an artistic policy of democratic accessibility and favored the quotidian Regionalist themes and naturalistic approach associated with American Scene painting.<sup>12</sup> However, works by Motley, Abercrombie, Roberti, Charles Schucker and Anton Rogalski indicate that Robinson’s administrative policies also supported certain modernist trends like Surrealism, Precisionism and Expressionism, which allowed for stylized, semi-abstract forms of representation and fanciful narrative. Their experimentation with these styles actually reflects a concern to reconcile modernist values with federal artistic mandates, particularly the project’s preference for the American Scene.

In her theoretical study on the aesthetics of the New Deal, Victoria Grieve has argued that this aspect of federal art can be seen to represent the ascendance of a laudable “middlebrow” taste within early 20th-century American visual culture, in which the innovations of high art are aesthetically modified and rendered accessible for mass cultural consumption.<sup>13</sup> It also is important to consider how the artistic policies of the New Deal corresponded to longstanding



J. Theodore Johnson, *Portrait of President Morgan*, 1933-34



Gertrude Abercrombie, *The Pump*, 1938



aesthetic attitudes and traditions within the Chicago art scene of the 1930s, which perhaps made Illinois an ideal region for a flourishing New Deal artistic culture.

Beginning in the 1910s through the 1920s, the Ashcan School realism of John Sloan and George Bellows remained a strong and influential modernist artistic current in Chicago. The Ashcan School's emphasis on representational observation of everyday life coincided with the aesthetic goals of the New Deal art programs and may have predisposed artists in the IAP to align themselves with the American Scene. Moreover, during the 1920s and 1930s, artists and art critics in Chicago did not strictly equate modernism with vanguard abstraction, but tended to define it in more liberal terms as an intensified personal response to modern reality, in particular localized experience. This view could accommodate a broad, eclectic range of artistic modes, including the individualized representational styles associated with federal art in Chicago.

In addition to the artistic context of Chicago, *A New Deal for Illinois* also represents the first effort to examine the formation of the WIU FAP art collection in relation to the history of Western Illinois State Teachers College in the 1930s; this includes the historical context of the town of Macomb and the area of McDonough County. For example, the prominent display of federal art at the college historically followed the institution's support of the visual arts and campus aesthetics. In



Gregory Orloff, *In the Field*, #264, 1933-34

the late 1910s, the School of Arts Building and College Art Museum were constructed, and a series of campus beautification programs were initiated that continued through the 1930s.

Art historical studies on the New Deal have sought to analyze the ideological intentions of the federal art programs and have attempted to determine the complex range of social and cultural meanings that would have been perceived by the art's intended communities and institutional audiences. As a result, it is important to consider how the presence of

federal art at the college may have been able to represent institutional and local concerns while also expressing the broader artistic and socio-political policies of the New Deal.

Did New Deal artistic imagery have particular meanings and signifying purposes for the college as it grappled with the social and economic challenges of the Depression? Moreover, as an institution located in a rural town and community, was this federal art meant to speak to students, faculty and administrators about a collective experience of the Depression from a specific regional perspective?

For instance, American Scene images of rural communities and farms would have had an urgent topical relevance to the surrounding vicinity of McDonough County, which struggled with difficult economic and environmental problems during the 1930s, receiving sizable sums

---

of agricultural aid from federal programs.<sup>14</sup> Works in the collection by artists like J. Theodore Johnson and Gregory Orloff depict idyllic scenes of verdant rural farms that not only reflected pride in America's abundant agricultural resources, but also instilled confidence in the nation's economic recovery through federal support of farming.

The collection also includes works by Howard W. Brown, Helen Noel and Ellsworth Young, which represent urban variations on the American Scene with images of industrial manufacturing along Illinois' river ways and bustling metropolitan commercial centers in Chicago. It is interesting to note that by the 1930s Macomb was identified as an important manufacturing town in Illinois with industries producing porcelain insulation, pottery, sheet metal and vending machines. During the Depression, these businesses financially benefited from New Deal programs like the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), but throughout the 1930s Macomb experienced major unemployment caused by financial instability and layoffs in the town's manufacturing companies.<sup>15</sup> Macomb's economic problems in the 1930s and its involvement with federal subsidy programs in Washington, D.C., made the region more aware of issues associated with modern urban environments, increasing the town's identification with an array of national concerns beyond rural farming life.



Howard W. Brown, *Along the Calumet*, 1933-34

Federal art depicting thriving industry in Illinois would have had important relevance to Macomb's industrial economy in the 1930s, and like themes of prosperous farming would have served as a hopeful emblem of the nation regaining economic strength through its manufacturing and agricultural power. The college's own building program, subsidized by federal agencies, relied on and supported a local workforce and industries. Interrelated themes of farming and industry in federal art also served some of the ideological motives of the New Deal to encourage a sense of social unity through a joining of urban and rural cultures. In addition, these themes represented the interdependence of industry and agriculture, stressing that the interconnection of differing regional economies and collective forms of labor were crucial to national progress and survival in the Depression.

The WIU FAP art collection also is distinctive for the inclusion of a large number of women artists and a minority artist like Archibald Motley, reflecting the acceptance in Illinois of the New Deal's liberal democratic policies to promote social and economic equality during a period of profound adversity. In general, the New Deal offered greatly expanded social, political and professional roles for women in public life, which is reflected in the considerable number of women artists employed in the federal art projects, including the IAP.<sup>16</sup> The active participation

of women artists in the IAP was due in large part to the prominence women enjoyed within Chicago's vital and diverse arts community during the 1920s and 1930s. Beginning in the early 20th century, a large number of women artists increasingly were being admitted for training in such premier institutions as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Academy of Design. In addition, gallery owners like Robinson and Katharine Kuh vigorously promoted women artists in Chicago, and the city's art scene was reviewed by such influential women newspaper critics as Inez Cunningham Stark and Eleanor Jewett.

Helen Langa, professor of art at American University, has argued that despite the cooperative inclusion of women in the federal art projects, they tended to relinquish a female identity and conformed to the gendered dictates of the programs, working in the masculinist themes of New Deal art, in particular themes of heroic male industrial or agricultural labor. In light of this observation, it is interesting to note that many of the works by women artists in the WIU FAP art collection do not follow this pattern, but reflect such traditional thematic preferences as still life or American Scene landscapes. More importantly, in the case of works like Macena Barton's



Macena Barton, *Woman Sewing*, 1935-42

*Woman Sewing* or Gertrude Abercrombie's *The Pump*, these paintings actually depict images that reflect either a distinctly female domestic experience or gendered psychic vision, which arguably have a proto-feminist character. Abercrombie's works in particular can be seen as rejecting the male-dominated public discourse of federal art, as her Surrealist paintings signify private emotional reveries and are replete with female archetypal symbols.<sup>17</sup>

The egalitarian spirit of collective need and relief in the Depression also resulted in greater equal opportunities for minority Americans, including African Americans, who were granted employment in the government's various work programs. The federal art projects also initiated the liberal policy of hiring African-American artists, which partly served the idealist ethos of the early New Deal to emphasize national solidarity and cooperative citizenship while promoting

racial difference. Moreover, the inclusion of African-American artists like Motley in the federal art programs fostered an interest in black history and artistic culture and increased acceptance of African-American social experience as a legitimate genre within the American Scene. The IAP was particularly notable for employing African-American artists like Motley, Charles White, Charles Dawson and others. Their acceptance in the Illinois art program was no doubt facilitated by the enhanced cultural stature and public visibility of African-American artists in Chicago during the 1920s and 1930s, which stemmed from the "New Negro" movement of the 1920s.

---

Related to Alain Locke's radical philosophy of black racial pride, which promoted black cultural history and achievements, the "New Negro" movement sparked a burgeoning trend of black creativity in Chicago and resulted in the founding of active organizations supporting African-American artists, such as the Chicago Art League.<sup>18</sup> The liberalism of the New Deal era can be related to enlightened efforts at Western Illinois State Teachers College during this period to advance forms of social equality within the educational sphere.

Beginning in the late 1910s, the college endorsed the women's suffrage movement, reflected in the election of the college's first female senior class president in 1917. In the 1920s, groups like the all-female Sociology Club were established to inform female students about social and political issues pertinent to women. During the 1930s, the largest student organization on campus was the Women's Athletic Association, which not only promoted recreational sporting programs for female students, but also sponsored events to advance and raise money for women's educational activities.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the college's progressive support of women's education, it began admitting African-American students during the late 1910s and through the 1920s. One of the most notable was Ernie Page, a physical education major and an exceptional student-athlete, who graduated in 1929 and was the first African American to receive a bachelor's degree from Western.<sup>20</sup> Efforts to enroll and provide financial assistance to African-American students continued into the Depression years of the 1930s through aid from the National Youth Administration.<sup>21</sup> In considering institutional meanings for the WIU FAP art collection, works by women artists and an African-American artist may have been intended to signify a certain degree of liberal support for women and minority students pursuing educational and professional opportunities at the college. One of the primary ideological messages of New Deal art was to promote a progressive democratic vision of social equality and cooperative citizenship through the inclusion of women and minority artists in the federal art programs.

The WIU FAP art collection lent an expressive human face to the governmental programs of the New Deal to advance American education and represented the institution's faith in the liberal policies of the era to contend with the Depression. In keeping with the artistic dominance of the American Scene in the 1930s and its cultural relevance to the rural locale of the college, Regionalist farming subjects are prevalent in the collection. Yet, modern industrial and urban social themes indicate that the college's institutional values and perspectives were being increasingly shaped by national social and economic forces extending beyond the traditional farming community of McDonough County.

These socio-economic and political concerns were referenced through a range of reportorial and metaphorical images in a variety of stylistic idioms, reflecting the diverse scope of federal artistic culture in Illinois in the 1930s. The multi-contextual approach of this exhibition hopefully will not only contribute new insights on the social and cultural role of New Deal art in the history of Illinois, but also enhance understanding of Western Illinois University's institutional history during the Depression, in particular its largely unexamined federal artistic legacy.

## Notes

1. George Biddle quoted in Bruce Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1997), 17.

2. For Francis V. O'Connor's major early scholarship on New Deal art, see: *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1969); *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972); (ed.) *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administration of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

3. Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

4. For important scholarship on the Illinois Federal Art Project, see: Maureen A. McKenna, *After the Great Crash: New Deal Art in Illinois* (Springfield, Illinois: Illinois State Museum, 1983); George J. Mavigliano and Richard A. Lawson, *The Federal Art Project in Illinois, 1935-1943* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

5. See the following recent important sources covering issues on New Deal art in Illinois: Heather Becker, *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive-and-WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002); Wendy Greenhouse and Susan Weininger, *Chicago Painting: 1895 to 1945* (Springfield, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Elizabeth Kennedy, *Chicago Modern 1893-1945: Pursuit of the New Chicago* (Chicago: Terra Museum of American Art, 2004).

6. Information on Increase Robinson derived from these sources: Mavigliano and Lawson, *Federal Art Project in Illinois*, 14-15; Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast, eds., *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990: A Biographical Dictionary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 760-762.

7. For historical information on Western Illinois State Teachers College during the Depression, see: John E. Hallwas, *First Century: A Pictorial History of Western Illinois University* (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1999), 91; David M. Atkinson, "Relief and Recovery without Strings: The New Deal in McDonough County, Illinois, 1933-1940" (M.A. thesis, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, 1999), 131-156.

8. Extensive correspondence dating from 1934 to 1937 exists between Increase Robinson and Water P. Morgan

on the allocation of federal art to Western Illinois State Teachers College. For detailed information regarding the interest of the college in commissioning a series of murals by artists in the Illinois Federal Art Project, see Walter P. Morgan, Macomb, to Increase Robinson, Chicago, 18 December 1935, Typewritten letter, University Archives and Special Collections, Leslie F. Malpass Library, Western Illinois University, Macomb. In this letter, Morgan outlines a plan for an extensive series of murals to be executed for the Administration Building, Arts Building and Main Building. The most elaborate murals were to be scenes painted in the east and west corridors of the Administration Building depicting the themes "The Development of the Amusements of the American Youth" and "The Development of the Education of the American Youth." For the Arts Building, a series of murals devoted to the subject "American Print Shops" was planned with separate images representing Indian picture writing, the carving of Mayan glyphs and Benjamin Franklin's print shop.

9. Theodora Pottle, *My Own Picture Book* (Champaign: The Johnson-Randolph Company, 1937).

10. For information on *The Sequel* (Macomb: Western Illinois State Teachers College, 1935), 65.

11. This mural was created for the Western Illinois State Teachers College Student Lounge, which is presently the WIU Western Courier office in the Heating Plant Annex.

12. Mavigliano and Lawson, *Federal Art Project in Illinois*, 24.

13. Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

14. Atkinson, "Relief and Recovery without Strings," 107-109.

15. *Ibid.*, 63.

16. For information on the professional roles of women in New Deal politics and participation in the federal art projects, see: Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981); Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 221; Helen Langa, "Egalitarian Vision, Gendered Experience: Women Printmakers and the WPA/FAP Graphic Arts Project," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Icon Editions, 1992).

17. Langa, "Egalitarian Vision, Gendered Experience," 415.

18. Daniel Schulman, "'White City' and 'Black Metropolis': African American Painters in Chicago, 1893-1945," in Kennedy, *Chicago Modern*, 44.

19. Hallwas, *First Century*, 77.

20. *Ibid.*, 61.

21. Atkinson, "Relief and Recovery without Strings," 151.

# Catalog of Works

## Section I

Allocated by the U.S. Government

Commissioned through the WPA, Federal Art Project

### Gertrude Abercrombie

American, 1909-1977

*The Pump*, 1938 (see page 15)

Oil on canvas, 29 x 34 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.

Abercrombie was born in Austin, Texas, but as a child lived in Germany and the rural town of Aledo, Illinois, before her family moved permanently to Chicago in 1916. After graduating from the University of Illinois in 1925 with a degree in Romance languages, she began studying art part-time at the American Academy of Art and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and was hired as a commercial illustrator for department stores in Chicago. In 1933, Abercrombie was appointed to the PWAP and established an independent career as a fine artist in the 1930s through the financial support and professional validation of the federal art projects. She was a prominent member of a bohemian artistic subculture in Chicago and held fashionable salons in her Hyde Park home, which included avant-garde artists, eminent writers like Thornton Wilder and such renowned jazz musicians as Dizzy Gillespie. During the 1930s, Abercrombie's works were shown at Increase Robinson's Studio Gallery and the Chicago No-Jury Society of Artists, leading to a major solo exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1944.

Although Abercrombie promoted herself as a self-taught visionary painter, she was a key figure in the development of Surrealism in the Midwest and had a sophisticated knowledge of the radical aesthetic, literary and psychological theories that were central to the movement.

Rendered in the artist's meticulous naïve manner, *The Pump* contains many of the stylistic and symbolic elements typical of her signature Surrealist vocabulary. The work depicts a stark barren landscape with a lone figure and rural pump reminiscent of the Midwest, which may signify the social and economic desolation associated with the Depression. Given the evocative multivalent meaning of Surrealist imagery, it is tempting to further read the narrative elements of the painting in the context of the Depression years, in particular the work's title, which may allude to New Deal programs being referred to as "pumps" for the nation's economic recovery.



### Macena Barton

American, 1901-1986 (*see page 18*)

*Woman Sewing*, 1935-42

Oil on canvas, 45 x 35 in.

A native of Union City, Michigan, Barton studied in Chicago at the School of the Art Institute, where she received her primary instruction from Leon Kroll, a prominent realist figure painter associated with the Ashcan School. She graduated in 1924. Although Barton was best known for her hyper-realistic academic portraiture, she also gained notoriety for her daring and sexually frank paintings of the female nude. During the 1930s, she exhibited her work in annual group exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Century of Progress Exhibition and was employed as part of the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project.

*Woman Sewing* depicts a female figure seated in a domestic interior with an expansive view of an idealized landscape framed by a curtained window. Engaged in the act of sewing, she pursues her domestic chore with a gaze of skilled concentration.

As can be seen from this work, Barton's paintings are distinguished by firmly contoured images, precise detailed modeling and bright, unmodulated colors. Although her figurative painting is rendered in a highly naturalistic manner, Barton creates a complex abstract patterning through the layered folds in the woman's piles of sewing, as well as in the interplay of decorative designs on her floral chair fabric and striped skirt. While the painting depicts a nostalgic Victorian setting, the image may refer to the fact that during the Depression the primary form of female labor in the federal relief programs was sewing projects. As a woman artist receiving federal aid, the theme of sewing may have expressed Barton's feelings of sympathy and kinship towards the struggles of unskilled women, whose sewing work assisted families with economic survival in the 1930s, especially if their husbands were unemployed. Barton is known for advocating early feminist beliefs, and it also is intriguing to consider her theme of sewing as a possible polemical statement on the aesthetic value of women's craft, which anticipates the radical feminist craft movement of the 1970s.



### Kalman Edward Himmel

American, 1903-1997

*Merry-Go-Round*, 1939

Oil on canvas, 42 x 31 ¾ in.

Born and raised in Chicago, Himmel attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and was a graduate of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. Himmel frequently exhibited his works in the 1930s at group exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Milwaukee Art Institute and was appointed to the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project. *Merry-Go-Round* is reminiscent of Reginald Marsh's urban realist scenes of carnival ride amusements in the 1930s. Yet, Himmel eschews

---

an American Scene reportorial realism for a more stylized expressionist approach with boldly simplified elongated figures painted in muted, powdery tones. The dynamic expressive curvature of the pictorial shapes and the broadly painted strokes also suggest the whirling motion of the glittering carousel. During the 1930s, as a means of escapist diversion from the hardships of the Depression, there was an increase in the popularity of cheap, novel forms of mechanized entertainment, in particular carnival rides and motion pictures.



**Anton Harry Rogalski**

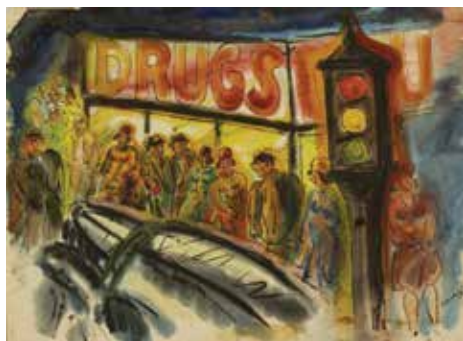
(dates unknown)

*Shepherd Song*, 1935-42

Oil on canvas, 40  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 34  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

Virtually nothing is known of Rogalski's biography and artistic career. He participated in annual group exhibits at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1930s and was employed in the Easel Division of the Federal Illinois Art Project. His religious painting *Shepherd Song* is equally enigmatic and is a stylistic and thematic anomaly within New Deal art, which tended to emphasize American Scene or nationalistic historical subjects. Rogalski's painting represents the biblical

theme of the Annunciation to the shepherds, in which angels proclaim Christ's birth to a group of shepherds. In keeping with the mystical narrative, the work is rendered in an expressionistic visionary manner reminiscent of the style of the French Symbolist Odilon Redon. Loosely painted in vivid colors, it depicts floating ethereal figures surrounded by tendrils of light. While the painting's idiosyncratic style and theme reflects the artistic diversity of early federal art in the PWAP, there was a fantastic, spiritual strain in early 20th-century art in Chicago, which can be related to Rogalski's work.



**Charles L. Schucker**

American, 1908-1998

*Drug Store*, 1942

Watercolor on paper, 22  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 30  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.

Most well known as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, Schucker was born in Gap, Pennsylvania, and attended the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, graduating in 1933. After a scholarship to study art collections in Europe from 1933 to 1934, Schucker returned

to the United States, settling in Chicago, where he gained employment in both the Easel and



Graphics divisions of the Illinois Federal Art Project. Schucker is known for his boldly executed and vibrantly colored watercolors, and this work depicts an expressively sketched scene of a city street at night, bustling with pedestrians and illuminated by the neon glare of a drugstore sign. The vigorous graphic strokes and transparent washes of color anticipate Schucker's later abstract style, which was based on a fusion of Abstract Expressionist and Color Field painting. He was fascinated by urban themes and industrial cityscapes throughout his career, and his *Drug Store* reflects the ongoing vitality of urban life during the Depression. The vibrancy of the scene indicates the expressive appeal of urban commercial culture, cheap consumer goods and the spectacle of street life as a means to offset the deprivations of the period. Although there was an active form of urban Social Realism in the 1930s, which chronicled the severe economic and social plight of the nation's cities, it was not encouraged by the federal art projects, which endorsed more optimistic images of productive survival and socio-economic recovery.

## Section II

Courtesy of the Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service, U.S. General Services Administration  
Commissioned through the New Deal art projects



**Charles Biesel**

American, 1865-1945

*Lumber Schooner*, 1933-34

Oil on panel, 31 ¼ x 38 ¼ in.

Although Biesel's major artistic career is associated with Chicago, he was born in New York City and spent his childhood and young adult years in Newport, Rhode Island, where he developed a strong attachment to the sea and sailing. Biesel was not academically trained in art, but developed his abilities through a position as a commercial artist with the

American Lithograph Company in New York. In 1918, Biesel was assigned as first lieutenant in the ordinance reserve corps at Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois and was later headquartered in Chicago. During these years, he began to pursue an interest in fine art and became devoted to painting marine and boating scenes, which were influenced by the realist seascapes of Winslow Homer. Biesel became a pivotal figure in the Chicago arts community and was actively involved in many of the city's major arts organizations, including the Arts Club of Chicago and the Chicago Society of Artists. In 1922, he helped found the influential Chicago No-Jury Society of Artists. In the 1930s, he was appointed to the PWAP and to the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project, specializing in Midwestern landscapes and nautical subjects like *Lumber Schooner*.



**Fred Biesel**

American, 1893-1954

*Dunes Near Fremont*, 1933-34

Watercolor and ink on paper, 19 7/8 x 25 in.

Biesel, whose father was the artist Charles Biesel, was born in Philadelphia and raised in Newport, Rhode Island. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design, graduating in 1915, and studied the following year with Robert Henri, one of the leading members of the Ashcan School. In 1919, Biesel moved to

Chicago and pursued additional art studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he trained with George Bellows. In 1920, he resided in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and New York City to work with John Sloan, who also was a prominent figure in the Ashcan School. Following his father's active involvement in the Chicago arts scene, Biesel was part of a growing community of avant-gardists that included the artist Emil Armin and the writer Sherwood Anderson. In the 1920s and 1930s, he participated in exhibits at many of the city's major art venues, such as the Art Institute of Chicago and the Society of Independent Artists. Initially employed in the PWAP and in the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project, Biesel advanced within the IAP and eventually served as the final director of the project from 1941 to 1943.

Although he initially was indebted to the urban realism of Henri and Sloan, in the 1920s and 1930s Biesel began to experiment with a more modernist vocabulary influenced by post-impressionism, which is apparent in *Dunes Near Fremont*. Depicting a regional scene of vacationing figures along the Indiana shore of Lake Michigan, this watercolor contains landscape details executed in a fine wiry line overlaid with translucent washes of color. Biesel's work represents the efforts of certain artists in the IAP to integrate the Regionalist subject matter of the American Scene with a more progressive modernist syntax. While the figures and buildings in the foreground are rendered in a representational manner, the rising hills in the distance have a more flattened schematic appearance with an indeterminate, shifting sense of space.



**Aaron Bohrod**

American, 1907-1992

*Factory Buildings*, #255, 1933-34

Gouache on paper, 24 ½ x 18 ⅛ in.

Bohrod was born to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents on the West Side of Chicago, which gave him a lifelong sympathy for the social concerns of working-class ethnic communities in the city. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago beginning in 1926, followed by two years at the

Art Students League in New York City, where he trained with the eminent Ashcan School realist John Sloan. Bohrod returned to Chicago in 1930, encouraged by Sloan's mentoring to pursue urban Regionalist subjects that would reflect the distinctive social realities of the city. Bohrod began showing in important juried exhibitions, such as the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh and the Art Institute of Chicago, which led to numerous prestigious awards, most notably two Guggenheim fellowships in 1936 and 1937. During the 1930s, Bohrod also was employed within the PWAP and the Illinois Federal Art Project, working in both the Easel and Mural divisions and receiving major assignments through the Treasury Section of Fine Arts for post office murals in Galesburg, Clinton and Vandalia.

As part of the politicized artistic environment of the Depression era, Bohrod was affiliated with an influential circle of Social Realist artists in Chicago, which included a number of radical Jewish artists, such as Mitchell Siporin and Edward Millman. While Social Realists used their art as an ideological weapon to indict the failures of industrial capitalism or to protest social and economic injustices against proletarian workers, the federal art projects rejected this more militant brand of socially conscious imagery. Bohrod negotiated these restrictions by offering a more subtle commentary on the harsh socio-economic conditions brought about by the Depression in Chicago.

*Factory Buildings* depicts a deserted industrial sector in the city with a ramshackle building and a factory complex sitting idle, which conveys a somber atmosphere of economic stagnation. Bohrod's simple, unadorned treatment of these pictorial details lends a sense of reportorial accuracy and resignation towards the desolate scene and contrasts with more idealized and glorified images of American industry that were typical in New Deal art.

**Howard W. Brown**

American, 1905-1975

*Along the Calumet*, 1933-34 (see page 17)

Etching, 9 ½ x 6 ¾ in.

Brown trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1930s and later in the decade he was affiliated with the PWAP and the Illinois Federal Art Project, serving as a member of the Graphics Division. In producing prints, Brown had experience in multiple processes like lithography and various intaglio methods, but his primary medium was drypoint etching.

---

Spending most of his professional life as an officer in the U.S. Army, Brown maintained an active artistic practice, transporting a printing press wherever he was stationed. His artistic interests were oriented towards specific regional locales, mainly landscapes, city views and industrial scenes that were associated with his military travels.

*Along the Calumet* depicts an industrial factory site located on the Calumet River, a system of heavily industrialized rivers and canals in the region between South Chicago and Gary, Indiana. Industry began to develop along the Calumet waterways in the late 19th century with heavy shipping traffic and a dense concentration of steel mills, factories and manufacturing plants. In the print, precise hatching is used to render a variety of surface qualities ranging from the shimmering water to the rough knotted texture of the wooden docks. These intricate organic details contrast with the massive mechanical shapes of the darkened factory in the background. During the Depression, this subject would have reflected regional pride in Illinois' industrial vitality, but as New Deal art it also highlights the skills of American industrial workers and manufacturing power as a valuable resource to assist with the larger economic recovery of the nation.



**Howard W. Brown**  
American, 1905-1975  
*Outbound*, 1933-34  
Etching, 9 ½ x 6 ¾ in.



**Howard W. Brown**  
American, 1905-1975  
*River Traffic*, 1933-34  
Etching, 9 ½ x 6 ¾ in.



**Elizabeth Colwell**

American, 1881-1954

*Bowl of Fruit*, 1933-34

Tempera on board, 18 x 24 in.

Born and raised in Bronson, Michigan, Colwell attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she trained with the American Expressionist B.J.O. Nordfeldt. A painter and printmaker, Colwell also was a skilled typographic designer and is credited with inventing a typeface known

as “Colwell Hand Letter.” In the 1930s, Colwell worked in the PWAP and in the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project and exhibited her work in annual shows at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Society of Independent Artists. Colwell did numerous etchings of still life subjects in the 1930s, which is reflected in the clear linear delineation of forms in *Bowl of Fruit*, as well as the graphic hatched modeling over planar areas of color.



**Emile Jacques Grumieaux**

American, b. Belgium, 1897-1954

*The Road*, 1933-34

Watercolor on paper, 15 x 18 in.

Grumieaux was born in Gosselies, Belgium, and received artistic training in Europe before immigrating to the United States, where he settled in the Chicago area. In the 1930s, he was employed in the PWAP and in the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project and was a member of the Chicago Society of Artists

and the Chicago No-Jury Society of Artists. He exhibited frequently in the annual exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Grumieaux’s watercolor depicts a cluster of farm buildings with a curving roadway encircling an undulant rural landscape. The soft rounded contours of the painted shapes and fluid washes of color reinforce the sense of organic richness to the farming scene. The subject of a country road may refer to the fact that a major area of federal work relief during the Depression was the construction and maintenance of roadways, particularly in rural sectors of the United States. The Civil Works Administration (CWA) funded numerous projects to build and repair country roads in order to connect and improve transportation between farms and neighboring towns. This subject had relevance to Western Illinois State Teachers College and the surrounding area; in the early 1930s, the CWA approved funding for ambitious road construction projects for paving streets in Macomb and applying gravel surfaces to dirt byways in McDonough County.



**J. Theodore Johnson**

American, 1902-1963

*Barnyard*, 1933-34

Watercolor on paper, 17 x 22 in.

Originally from Oregon, Johnson studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1921 to 1925 and later traveled to Paris in 1930 to train for a year with the Cubist artist André Lhote, who was noted for his talents as a modern master of mural painting. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Johnson

won numerous prizes showing his works in national juried exhibitions at such major museums as the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Carnegie Institute and the Art Institute of Chicago, which led to Johnson receiving a coveted Guggenheim fellowship in 1929. In 1934, he received federal commissions for a mural project and institutional portraits at Western Illinois State Teachers College, which were funded by the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission. Later in the decade, he was appointed to the Mural Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project and received major commissions in 1937 and 1939 from the Treasury Section of Fine Arts to paint historical murals in the Morgan Park and Oak Park post offices.

However, the inclusion of *Barnyard* in the WIU FAP art collection indicates that Johnson also produced earlier works for the PWAP in Chicago. Offering a typical American Scene view, the watercolor depicts a rural farm with a weathered barn, milling livestock and laboring figures in the foreground. Rolling hills, agricultural fields and groves of trees are discernible in the landscape distance, and Johnson's direct, economical style imparts a sense of rustic simplicity to the agrarian scene.

The popularity of the American Scene within the federal art programs was strongly related to the social and economic turmoil of the Depression, as nostalgic depictions of rural farming life offered a hopeful sense of stability and the continuity of tradition in the face of adversity and uncertain modern change. Idyllic images of prosperous farms also served to promote to the nation's citizens the contributions of the New Deal government to the ongoing livelihood of American agriculture during the Depression. Such federal programs as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA) provided economic relief to American farmers through financial subsidies and loans, and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) assisted with improving farmland through extensive soil conservation projects. The artistic subject of a thriving farm would have been highly relevant to agricultural concerns in McDonough County in the 1930s, as local farming around Macomb was in a depressed condition, and numerous farmers received FSA loans and drought relief assistance from the Department of Agriculture. In 1933 and 1934, the CCC also carried out important soil conservation work for 6,000 acres of eroded farmland in the county.

### **J. Theodore Johnson**

American, 1902-1963

*Portrait of President Morgan*, 1933-34 (see page 15)

Oil on canvas, 53 x 42 ½ in.

Walter P. Morgan (1871-1958) served as president of Western Illinois University from 1912 to 1942, the longest standing chief executive in the history of the institution. Born and raised in Indiana, he graduated from Indiana University in 1900 and was superintendent of schools in Terre Haute, Indiana, from 1906 to 1908. In 1909, he earned a master's degree from the University of Chicago. Initially hired in 1912 as the director of the Training School at the Western Illinois State Normal School, Morgan was appointed that same year as the school's third president. With the growth of the school under Morgan's leadership, its name was changed in 1921 to Western Illinois State Teachers College. Since his appointment as president, Morgan had developed the institution from a small normal school to a thriving four-year teachers college with a sizable credentialed faculty and a growing student body that numbered 751 by 1930. Despite the onset of the Depression, Morgan successfully advanced the college's building program through the 1930s and maintained the academic vitality of the institution through his dedicated efforts to understand and negotiate the intricacies of New Deal funding agencies. As college leader, Morgan projected an imposing, dignified presence, and Johnson's portrait depicts him seated in a square-shouldered relaxed pose, conveying a professional demeanor both forceful and congenial.



### **J. Theodore Johnson**

American, 1902-1963

*Portrait of S. B. Hursh*, 1933-34

Oil on canvas, 35 ½ x 30 in.

A prominent and well-loved faculty member, Samuel B. Hursh was hired as the first English literature and grammar teacher at Western Illinois State Normal School. During his career at the institution, he served in a variety of positions, primarily as head of the English department since 1902, as well as acting president and vice president, and in 1921, he was elected dean of the faculty. Known for his inspirational teaching and dedication to the college, Hursh retired in 1925 but remained an active

presence on campus. This portrait, which was executed two years before his death in 1937, captures his reputation for exuding a kindly, professorial intelligence. An advocate for campus beautification, it was fitting Hursh's portrait be included in a federal art initiative in the 1930s to enhance the college's aesthetic environment.





**Anne Michalov (Johnson)**

American, 1904-2001

*Peaceful Valley*, 1933-34

Lithograph, 11 ½ x 17 ½ in.

Michalov was born and raised in a small mining town in Grundy County, Illinois, and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1920s. A versatile artist, she was employed during the 1930s in the PWAP and later served

in the Easel, Mural and Graphics divisions of the Illinois Federal Art Project. She exhibited her works in annual exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago and in the 1939 New York World's Fair. The swelling topographic forms of the fertile landscape are drawn with fluid deft strokes in Michalov's print, which contains contrasting textures of dense and softly muted tones. American Scene themes of idyllic rural retreats served as artistic antidotes to the turbulent economic and urban social realities of the Depression era, offering a sense of reassuring tranquility and stability.

**Archibald J. Motley Jr.**

American, 1891-1981

*Jazz Singers*, 1934 (*see page 4*)

Oil on canvas, 32 x 42 in.

Motley was born in New Orleans, moving as a child with his family to St. Louis and Buffalo, New York, before finally settling in the community of Englewood on Chicago's South Side. Summers spent visiting relatives in the South exposed him to Creole and African traditions and stimulated his interest in exploring an African-American cultural heritage in his later art. Demonstrating advanced artistic ability as a child, Motley was encouraged by his family, and he began studying painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1914, graduating in 1918. He was schooled in the conventions of academic genre painting by his mentors John W. Norton and Karl A. Buehr, and in 1919, he returned to take influential classes with the urban realist George Bellows. Motley came of age as a young black artist during the period of the "New Negro" movement, a progressive trend in the 1920s that was inspired by Alain Locke's radical philosophy of black racial pride and his efforts to promote the distinctive cultural and creative achievements of African Americans. As a result, a vital black arts community formed in Chicago through the founding of organizations supporting African-American artists such as the Chicago Art League.

Motley enjoyed notable success early in his career, holding an exhibition of his work in 1928 at the New Gallery in New York City. That same year he received a Harmon Foundation award. In 1929, he was granted a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship to study art for a full year in Paris, where he was exposed more fully to modernist artistic developments and to the progressive and tolerant racial attitudes of European society. Upon returning to the United States at the onset



of the Depression, Motley benefited from the liberal social policies of the New Deal and was employed in the PWAP and later assigned to the Easel and Mural divisions of the Illinois Federal Art Project. Created for the federal art program, *Jazz Singers* reflects a variety of aesthetic and thematic issues that were significant for Motley's art, as well as the reformist social and racial ideals of New Deal artistic culture.

Basing many of his subjects on the vibrant social life in Bronzeville, a historically black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, Motley was committed to expanding definitions of American Scene painting to encompass the experience of African Americans, an artistic goal that followed the emphasis on racial and social solidarity promoted by the New Deal. The theme of jazz in his work is strongly aligned with these concerns, as jazz was seen as a socially unifying musical genre that appealed to both black and white culture, encouraging racial interaction and tolerance.

Jazz also was closely associated with the musical culture of Chicago, giving this federal artwork a distinctly Regionalist character. Presenting a crowded, casual arrangement of five musicians set against a shallow space, the painting's bold colors and rhythmic contrasts of form evoke the syncopation of jazz. The broadly rendered and expressively simplified figures suggest a modified stylized modernism similar to the works of Guy Pene du Bois and George Bellows. Yet, the humorous anatomical distortions of Motley's work also were inspired by the stylish caricatures of Miguel Covarrubias and may have reflected his belief that amusing racial stereotypes, such as black minstrel characters, served to make his scenes of African-American life more recognizable and accessible to white viewers.



**Helen Noel (Shagam)**

American, 1912-1989

*Metropolis*, 1933-34

Lithograph, 10 x 7 ¾ in.

Born in Chicago, Noel attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, graduating in 1934. She held positions in the PWAP and the Illinois Federal Art Project in the 1930s, producing lithographic prints like *Metropolis* that were devoted to anecdotal scenes of urban social life. Creating a gridded design of vertical skyscrapers intersected by the horizontal track of the elevated train and surrounded by a teeming flow of traffic, Noel represents the modern city as massive geometry offset by dynamic flux.

Unlike intaglio or silkscreen methods, lithography is a highly technical and complex process involving printing from inked limestone plates and requires the skilled assistance of master printers. Complex lithographs like Noel's would have been created in the IAP's highly productive Graphics Division, which was directed by the printmaker Carl Hoeckner and operated out of a workshop at the Jane Adams Hull House. Due to the multiple, portable nature

---

of the print medium and its relatively low cost of production, printmaking was an ideal art form for fulfilling the New Deal's artistic goals to democratize and disseminate American art to a mass public.

### Gregory Orloff

American, b. Russia, 1890-1981

*In the Field*, #264, 1933-34 (see page 16)

Watercolor on paper, 17 ¾ x 23 ½ in.

Born in Kiev, Russia, Orloff studied in a local art academy, but after immigrating to the United States, he trained at the National Academy of Design in New York. Orloff later pursued art studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, taking classes with Karl A. Buehr. During the 1930s, he worked for the PWAP and was appointed to the Mural Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project. He became established in the Chicago arts community, serving as a member of the Chicago Society of Artists and the South Side Art Association.

Orloff was particularly prolific as a graphic artist and book illustrator during the Depression, and many of his prints depict both rural and urban landscapes, as well as Social Realist themes typical of the era. *In the Field* depicts the bucolic Regionalist theme of farmers tilling the land with horse-drawn plows and contains artistic elements associated with Orloff's distinctive illustrative style. The rhythmic interlocking contours of the landscape and bulbous trees create a stylized abstract patterning in the scene. Moreover, the forms of the farmers, horses and expansive pastoral fields are rendered as supple rounded shapes, expressing a sense of fertile abundance and the unity of laboring figures with nature. As a possible elegiac response to the crisis of the Depression, *In the Field* reflects a rejection of modern mechanized farming and a nostalgic longing to return to an earlier agrarian age.



### Gregory Orloff

American, b. Russia, 1890-1981

*Apple Harvest*, 1933-34

Oil on canvas, 38 x 26 in.

Orloff's painting represents a rural ideal of close-knit, dedicated workers and displays the artist's elegant decorative style of melding the organic shapes of nature with laboring figures. With the selection of *Apple Harvest* for Western Illinois State Teachers College's federal art collection in the 1930s, it is interesting to note that historically McDonough County had been known for its abundant apple crop. Although Orloff's works in the WIU

FAP art collection are more traditional American Scene images, he is sometimes grouped with the Chicago Magic Realists of the 1930s due to his placing of figures in enigmatic poses and strangely lit evocative environments.



### Romolo Roberti

American, b. Italy, 1896-1988

*Roofs (Tree Studios)*, 1933-34

Oil on canvas, 38 x 33 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.

Roberti was born in Montelanico, Italy, and had studied drawing as a teenager. While traveling with his father on a business trip to the United States in 1911, he decided to remain to pursue an artistic career. Supporting himself as a maintenance worker at Cornell University in 1913, he was tutored in art by Professor Christian Midjo, who allowed Roberti to attend his life drawing course at the university. In 1922, Roberti relocated to Chicago to pursue formal art training, attending the School of the

Art Institute of Chicago for less than a year, studying with Albert Krehbiel.

In his early works, Roberti favored observational views of Chicago's urban landscape, focusing on the city's modern architectural sites and industrial waterways. Reflecting the conservatism of the artistic training at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Roberti's urban views of the 1920s were executed in a late Impressionist empirical mode and colored in hazy pastel-tinted hues. Throughout the 1930s, Roberti struggled financially and worked an assortment of menial jobs in Chicago until he qualified for work relief in the PWAP and later in the Illinois Federal Art Project.

While maintaining his interest in urban vistas, the style of Roberti's paintings in the 1930s became increasingly responsive to modernist artistic developments, in particular the streamlined stylizations of architectural form associated with Precisionism. Practiced by such artists as Charles Sheeler, Precisionism was influenced by European Cubist abstraction, but tended to retain a degree of representational form that reflected the modernist stylistic traits of precisely delineated geometrized shapes and flat, unmodulated color. Roberti's adherence to this American modernist idiom (sometimes referred to as Cubo-Realism) can be seen in his painting *Roofs (Tree Studios)*, yet his brand of Precisionism has a decorative handling that closely resembles the works of Louis Lozowick.

The subject of this work is a panoramic view of rooftops of the Tree Studios in Chicago, and Roberti depicts the rising cluster of urban buildings as pristine cubic shapes painted with precise contours and vibrant tones. Despite being painted at the height of the Depression, *Roofs (Tree Studios)* continues to express a brash urbanism and an optimistic romanticized faith in the majestic power of American industry. The Tree Studios complex originally was constructed by the philanthropist Judge Lambert Tree in 1894 to provide artists in Chicago with affordable low-rent studios, which were funded by commercial retail spaces in the building. Discernible in Roberti's painting, the Tree Studios complex was designed with distinctive decorative elements like sculpted chimneys and ornamental friezes, and the building boasted expansive windows and slanted skylights for optimal light. Famous artist residents of the Tree Studios included Karl A. Buehr and the renowned modernist sculptor John Storrs. One of Roberti's neighbors was Macena Barton, whose work is included in the WIU FAP art collection.



**Cornelius C. Sampson**

American, 1907-1978

*Crow Squaw and Warrior*, 1933-34

Aquatint, 10 x 13 in.

Originally from Billings, Montana, Sampson was raised on a ranch near a Crow reservation, which sparked his lifelong interest in Native American culture. He attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1929 to 1934 and earned his tuition working as a caricaturist on tourist excursion boats on Lake Michigan. Although Sampson

officially was appointed to the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project in the 1930s, he also produced prints in the earlier PWAP unit in Chicago. Given Sampson's interest in depicting a Native American tribal scene in this work, it is important to note that various New Deal policies in the 1930s sought to re-establish Native American culture and traditions. Most significant was the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, which restored tribal self-government to Native American groups and assisted them with regaining reservation lands lost through allotment and homesteading. Sampson's print dates from this same year and may have been created to recognize this important reformist New Deal legislation. The PWAP and FAP also created special art programs employing Native American artists, who produced murals and other federal artworks depicting Native American cultural and religious themes that were executed in indigenous styles.



**Paul Stoddard**

(dates unknown)

*The Lagoon*, 1933-34

Lithograph, 15 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 21 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.



### Charles Turzak

American, 1899-1986

*Marquette and Joliet Welcomed by the Illinois*,  
1933-34

Block print, 10 ½ x 13 ½ in.

Born in Streator, Illinois, Turzak was the child of Czech immigrant parents. His father labored as a coal miner and strongly discouraged his son's artistic talents in woodworking and carving. In 1920, Turzak won a cartoon drawing contest sponsored by the Purina Company in St. Louis, which helped

him pay tuition fees to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. At the school, Turzak especially excelled in drawing and relief printmaking, in particular wood engraving and woodcut techniques. Turzak graduated in 1924 and later completed an artistic sojourn to Europe in 1929, where he traveled to receive additional exposure to major museum collections and to study modernist artistic trends firsthand in England, France and Germany. He returned to the United States at the onset of the Depression and was employed in the PWAP in Chicago and was later appointed to both the Graphics and Mural divisions of the Illinois Federal Art Project.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Turzak enjoyed considerable artistic recognition and commercial success from his work, producing a popular series of prints featuring major Chicago landmarks such as the Tribune Tower, Buckingham Fountain and the Lincoln Park Zoo. Beginning in the 1930s, he embarked on his most important and ambitious artistic projects, executing a series of historical woodcuts illustrating the biographies of famous American political figures, most notably Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin. This led to his most celebrated series, *A History of Illinois in Woodcuts*, created in 1934, in which Turzak illustrated in epic fashion the pivotal dramatic events in the history of the state. This includes the expedition of Louis Joliet and the Jesuit Father Jacques Marquette in 1673, who were the first Europeans to explore and map much of the Mississippi River. Several of the woodcuts chronicle historical episodes leading to the Civil War and its aftermath, such as the 1824 voting in the town of Vandalia to determine if Illinois would remain a free state and permit slavery.

In New Deal art, patriotic historical images of both national and regional events served as inspirational cultural symbols, reminding Americans of past historical struggles and providing a hopeful message that the country would prevail and surmount the hardships of the Depression. Themes dealing with the nation's frontier history of exploration and discovery had particular appeal and ideological significance during this period, reflecting an optimistic vision of pioneering fortitude and progress towards future prosperity and growth.



**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*La Salle Fortifying Illinois, 1933-34*

Block print, 13 ½ x 10 ½ in.

This print further chronicles the important expeditionary history associated with Illinois, in this case the travels of the explorers Robert Cavelier de La Salle and Henri de Tonti on the Great Lakes and the establishment of Fort Crevecoeur near what is today Peoria, Illinois.

During the 1920s, there had been a significant woodcut movement in the United States, largely through the technical and aesthetic innovations associated with the radical trend of the Provincetown woodcut. Technical and formal advances

in the art of woodcut printing and other graphic processes continued to occur in the 1930s through the federal art programs' enthusiastic support of printmaking. The style of Turzak's woodcuts strongly reflect the influence of Art Deco in the 1930s, an artistic movement primarily in architecture and the decorative arts, which was based on bold ornamental geometric forms inspired by Cubism and the industrial aesthetics of the Machine Age. The Art Deco style was extremely prevalent in the modern architecture constructed in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s and was extensively promoted in the designing of the Century of Progress International Exposition that was held in the city from 1933 to 1934.

This pairing of a modern Art Deco styling with patriotic historical themes may have served to promote to audiences of New Deal art the continuing significance of the values and lessons of the historical past and their relevance to the socio-political challenges experienced in the Depression.



**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*Captain George Rogers Clark Takes Kaskia, 1933-34*

Block print, 13 ½ x 10 ½ in.





**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*Fort Dearborn Massacre, 1933-34*

Linocut, 13 ½ x 10 ½ in.

**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*Abe Lincoln Enters Coles County, Illinois, 1933-34 (see cover)*

Block print, 13 ½ x 10 ½ in.

Several of the images in this series commemorate the dramatic narratives and sites linked to the mythic significance of Abraham Lincoln within the history of Illinois, such as his Springfield home, where he rose from a humble country lawyer to be elected president of the United States.

This print depicts a youthful Lincoln assisting his father, Thomas Lincoln, with building a log cabin in Coles County, the first home of Lincoln in the state. The image promotes an iconic representation of Lincoln as a heroic figure wielding an axe and felling trees, demonstrating a pioneering strength that had ideological resonance for the Depression era. The historical figure of the young Lincoln was particularly inspirational and relevant to the historical period of the Depression and was dramatically portrayed throughout the 1930s in art, theater and literature, as well as popular culture and film. Lincoln's myth appealed to both radical and conservative factions in the 1930s, in particular his democratic efforts during the Civil War to maintain national unity in a period of turbulent political crisis and social change. Lincoln's legacy had tremendous inspirational significance for the nation, as his struggles offered a dramatic narrative of fortitude and triumphant faith over similar forms of doubt and disruption in the 1930s.



**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*River and Canal Boats*, 1933-34

Block print, 10 ½ x 13 ½ in.

Like a young Abraham Lincoln, many men in 1830 transported barrels of pork on flatboats down commercial waterways to New Orleans. In 1938, Turzak recreated this image on a large public scale for a federal mural titled *Canal Boats* for a post office in Lemont, Illinois, which had been commissioned by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts.



**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*Vandalia 1824*, 1933-34

Block print, 13 ½ x 10 ½ in.



**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*Lincoln's Springfield Home*, 1933-34

Block print, 10 ½ x 13 ½ in.





**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*General Grant's Home, Galena, Illinois*, 1933-34

Woodcut, 10 ½ x 13 ½ in.



**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*A Tank Worker*, 1933-34

Linocut, 13 ½ x 10 ½ in.

During the Depression, images of productive industrial labor were hopeful signs that manufacturing production and construction could contribute to America's economic recovery and its return to material prosperity and industrial strength. Similar to the glorified image of the farmer, the iconography of the heroic industrial worker also served as a reassuring emblem of the nation's future socio-economic vitality. This theme also served as a benign form of propaganda for the New Deal government's financial support of weakened industries.

With its dramatic elevated view of the tank worker, Turzak's print aggrandizes the figure of the male laborer, presenting him as a muscled industrial Hercules. This imagery also reflects a crisis of masculinity in the Depression, serving to address anxieties over eroded male strength, offering a recuperative symbol of industrial mastery and power over economic adversity.



**Charles Turzak**

American, 1899-1986

*Lincoln Park*, 1933-34

Linocut, 10 ½ x 13 ½ in.

**Ellsworth Young**

American, 1866-1952

*LaSalle Street Bridge*, 1933-34 (see page 10)

Watercolor on paper, 18 ¼ x 24 in.

Born in Albia, Iowa, Young was a successful magazine and book illustrator throughout the early 20th century and a noted painter of landscapes. During World War I, he also was a prominent illustrator of posters for the war effort, his most famous being *Remember Belgium*, which was used by the Allied Nations to protest German military atrocities. In the 1930s, he worked for the PWAP in Chicago, later earning a position in the Easel Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project. A prime example of the Regionalist emphasis in much of the federal art produced in Chicago, Young's painting depicts the iconic LaSalle Street Bridge and the Merchandise Mart, which fronts the Chicago River, the city's major commercial and industrial waterway. Constructed in 1931 in the Art Deco style, the Merchandise Mart has been referred to as a "city within a city" due to its massive retail and office space and continues to serve as an architectural emblem of Chicago's mercantile strength.



**Ellsworth Young**

American, 1866-1952

*Over-Mantel Decoration for Girls Dormitory (Autumn Landscape with River)*, 1934

Oil on canvas, 24 x 80 in.

In 1934, Young was appointed through the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission to execute a large painted decorative panel of an idealized autumn landscape for Morgan Hall (later Old Grote Hall), the women's dormitory building at Western Illinois State Teachers College. The painting was removed when the building was demolished in 1991, and after being in storage for many years, was restored in 2011 at The Conservation Center in Chicago.

### Section III

The Federal Art Project (FAP) employed the following artists, but further research is required to confirm whether these works were produced under the auspices of the FAP.



**Margrette Oatway (Dornbusch)**

American, 1905-1988

*Cradling Wheat*, c. 1934

Lithograph, 23 ¼ x 19 ¼ in.

Acquisition source unknown

Little is known about Oatway's artistic training and career, but records exist of her employment in the Graphics Division of the Illinois Federal Art Project during the 1930s. In the same decade, she produced illustrations for children's picture books. *Cradling Wheat* follows the thematic conventions of the American Scene to idealize and even heroicize the figure of the American farmer.

A cradle scythe is being used to reap the wheat, which allowed wheat to be cut and then laid down for bundling without disturbing the grain.

Utilizing a stylized geometric mode derived from Art Deco, Oatway transforms the farmer into a cultural icon of masculine fortitude and productive efficient labor, reflecting the nation's rationalist faith in the policies of the New Deal to regulate and remedy the economic and political chaos generated by the Depression. This optimistic view of agricultural plenty and efficiency also is signified through the decorative orderly patterns of wheat, indicated through a precise layering of stippled marks. During the Depression, artists felt a kinship with farmers, who also were skilled craftspeople laboring independently by hand to produce useful goods for a struggling nation.



**John Stenvall**

American, 1907-1990

*Flowers on a Table*, 1934

Tempera on board, 26 ½ x 28 ¼ in.

Acquisition source unknown

Stenvall was born in Rawlins, Wyoming, and in 1931 earned a degree in art from the University of Nebraska, which awarded him a scholarship for one year of advanced study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. During the 1930s, he was appointed to the Easel Division of the Illinois

Federal Art Project. Throughout the decade, Stenvall participated in the annual exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, winning a prize for his work in 1936. That same year, the influential

---

New York art dealer Edith Halpern invited Stenvall to show his work in her Downtown Gallery with such prominent American modernists as John Marin and Charles Sheeler, which led to a solo exhibition of Stenvall's paintings at the gallery in 1937.

Presenting a causally arranged tabletop still life, *Flowers on a Table* is painted with a precise linear outlining of forms and a schematic detailing of intricate surface textures. The skewed elevated perspective compresses the space of the room, flattening and collapsing the visual distance between the tabletop and floor into a patterned layering of planar shapes. The planar geometric clarity of the work is reminiscent of Precisionist art in the 1930s, which represented a synthesis of modernism's reductive purity and a traditionalist preference for visual naturalism in American art.



**Francis Robert White**

American, 1907-1986

*The Little Waterspout*, c. 1934

Lithograph, 20 ¼ x 15 in.

Acquisition source unknown

White was born in Oskaloosa, Iowa, and in the 1920s pursued art studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and also trained in Europe during the final years of the decade. In 1932, he was a student at Stone City Art Colony, following the artistic style and themes associated with Grant Wood's brand of American Scene painting. From 1932 to 1934, White took classes at the Art Students League in New York City with the Ashcan School painter John Sloan and John Steuart Curry, the prominent Kansas Regionalist. In

1934, he relocated to Chicago and took night classes for a year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. During the 1930s, White also was employed in the Easel and Design divisions of the Illinois Federal Art Project, which led to his hire as district supervisor in Chicago and as state director of the FAP in Iowa in 1938. In 1942, he returned to Chicago to work as supervisor of the exhibition unit of the IAP. During the 1930s and 1940s, White exhibited his work widely at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the New York City World's Fair.

Although *The Little Waterspout* is a regional landscape, White is most well known as a radical committed Social Realist artist in the 1930s, who was an active member of the American Artists Congress.



## Section IV

The Federal Art Project (FAP) employed Gertrude Abercrombie, but these paintings were produced after the FAP ended.



**Gertrude Abercrombie**

American, 1909-1977

*A Terribly Strange Tree*, 1949

Oil on panel, 17 ¼ x 19 in.

Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie estate



**Gertrude Abercrombie**

American, 1909-1977

*The Bride*, 1946

Oil on panel, 18 ¾ x 20 ¾ in.

Gift of the Gertrude Abercrombie estate



*Dr. Gregory Gilbert is associate professor of art history at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, and director of the art history program. He also has taught at Western Illinois University, Purdue University and Rutgers University. He has served as senior curator at the Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa, and has authored exhibition catalogs at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas and the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University. He has published widely in the area of 20th-century American art and is the co-author of Harry Gottlieb: The Silkscreen and Social Concern in the WPA Era.*



**WESTERN  
ILLINOIS  
UNIVERSITY**

1 University Circle  
Macomb, IL 61455  
[www.wiu.edu](http://www.wiu.edu)

