Of Screens and Stones: 
Technological Innovations in Lithography and Screenprinting developed in the 
New York City Graphic Art Workshop Under the Works Progress Administration 

by 

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“In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience.”

-John Dewey, Art as Experience (1934)
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This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents
Introduction

In June 1935, Audrey McMahon, the Regional Administrator for the New York City Federal Art Project (FAP) under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), received a letter from a coalition of New York artists proposing that the FAP open a graphic arts workshop for unemployed artists. McMahon reported that a number of artists desired to initiate an:

American school of colored lithography to compete with the German and French lithographs [to] be built up, and [that] a very talented and eager group of young people is anxiously waiting to have this opportunity. They are so eager that they offered to buy lithographers presses from their own salaries.¹

From the very beginning of the Project there was a clearly expressed interest in color lithography, a printing technique that had been infrequently utilized as a fine art medium in the United States. Several months later, in the fall of 1935, McMahon received permission from the national headquarters of the WPA to organize the Graphic Arts Division of the Federal Art Project in New York City. As Hyman Warsager, a WPA printmaker observed, the establishment of this organization “injected new hope in the artist and new life in the print. It gave the artist an income, though meager; it placed him in direct contact with an audience, and, more importantly, enabled him to experiment fully in his search for a more adequate technique.”² With the help of the federal government, a small number of American printmakers had the unprecedented opportunity to create original prints while remaining largely free from the economic factors that had limited their production in

² Hyman Warsager, “Graphic Techniques in Progress, Art for the Millions; Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project, Holger V. Cahill ed. (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973) 139.
the past. In the process, these artists helped to develop a broad and strong school of American printmaking.

The Works Progress Administration was implemented in 1935 under Roosevelt’s New Deal and was the Federal Government’s most ambitious attempt to provide employment for jobless Americans during the Great Depression. The Federal Art Project (FAP), which came under the heading of the WPA, was a fine art work-relief project that employed jobless artists to create murals, easel paintings, sculptures and graphic arts from 1935 to 1943. While the FAP was a national program, New York City was often seen as the heart of the Project because of the large number of artists who lived in the city as well as the fact that the majority of the FAP budget was used to support artists in New York City. The Graphic Arts Division, which is the focus of this thesis, was one of several fine art units established within the FAP, and while there were dozens of Graphic Arts Divisions throughout the country, the Division in New York City was the largest and most prolific.

This thesis posits that the FAP led to the revitalization of American printmaking by fostering technical and aesthetic innovation. The FAP was established as the result of two distinct but intertwined movements, each of which was critical to the foundation of this creative arts job-creation project. The first of these was Roosevelt’s New Deal and his acknowledgment that the United States’ capitalist-industrial economic system was so weakened by the Great Depression that federal aid was required to repair it. The second was a growing labor movement among artists. For the first time artists self-identified as laborers and wished to establish a union to push for labor rights. The establishment of the Artists’ Union (AU), the largest
chapter of which was located in New York City, was in many ways responsible for the breadth of the Federal program. It is critical that these top-down and grassroots efforts merged because it is unlikely that the FAP would have been as successful without the efforts of the Artists’ Union and equally unlikely that the AU would have been as effective without government support. Without each of these elements, the majority of American artists would have been unable to find work during the Depression.

Unlike other countries that had state-sponsored art programs, the Roosevelt Administration was not interested in changing the existing political or economic system. Rather, Roosevelt sought to buttress the weakened capitalist-industrial system until it could fix itself and become strong enough to once again support jobs in the private sector. The WPA, like each of the New Deal programs, was an investment strategy calculated to stabilize the fragile economy. It is significant that Roosevelt included the fine arts in the work-creation project in any capacity. This inclusion shows the Roosevelt Administration’s investment in the preservation of the cultural fabric of the United States and proves that they acknowledged the legitimacy of the artist in society. At the urging of the Artists’ Union, the Roosevelt Administration reframed the identity of the artist as a laborer and participant within a national program whose scope was to rehabilitate the capitalistic conditions for artistic production.

This investment in the American artist had long-lasting and widespread consequences. This thesis focuses on one of these: the technological innovations and developments that occurred in the graphic arts as a result of the implementation of the
WPA. By changing the conditions for production, the federal government allowed for an ideological realignment to develop among printmakers and their audience and fostered a series of important technical and aesthetic innovations.

Through a close analysis of first and second-hand accounts of people involved in the Project, as well as a visual analysis of several prints, this thesis explores the mechanisms through which the New York City Graphic Arts Division catalyzed a series of technological and stylistic shifts in American printmaking during the 1930s. It discusses how, through continued governmental support, graphic artists in New York received a new level of emotional and economical assistance that enabled them to challenge well-established conservative paradigms of graphic art, subsequently enabling them to develop a “high level of confidence and maturity.”³ To this end, this thesis shall explore how graphic artists hired by the WPA found the newly formed workshops to be a source of inspiration and creative exchange.

The Graphic Arts Division in New York City was a critical addition to the WPA’s fine art programs. The opportunity to work in a fully stocked graphic arts workshop with technical supervision from other artists and master-printers allowed for the constant exchange of ideas and information and gave artists the opportunity to mature in their personal styles and technical abilities. This thesis posits that while artists could work in a variety of printmaking mediums, particularly large strides were made in lithography and serigraphy, today more frequently known as screenprinting, and that these developments would have been impossible without the WPA.

Throughout the course of the government-funded Program, artists were given the opportunity to move away from the conservative reputation that clung so tightly to American printmaking. These artists revitalized the industry by reintroducing the fine print to the American public as a worthy and affordable art object. For American printmakers, prints had both an ideological and a functional role. Because contemporary artists and politicians put a premium on the creation of “democratic art” for the people, WPA printmakers sought to actively promote prints as the most “democratic” art objects produced during the Depression-era because of their inherent reproducibility and low production costs. The idea of prints as having a “democratic nature” of the prints was cultivated by emphasizing that each impression was a unique fine art object that could simultaneously be on view at a museum, at a children’s hospital or at a community art center. Their status as “multiple originals” put these prints within the reach of millions of Americans, many of who had never encountered a fine art object before. As WPA artist Russell Limbach stated:

No amount of duplication can rob any impression of its originality. The power of the artist is just as sure in a scattered million impressions on paper as a single statement in oil in a dark room of a European Museum. Limbach’s comment highlights that artists conceived of their prints as original works of art rather than as reproductions of works in other mediums. Their value as art objects does not diminish as the edition size increases because each print is, in and of itself, an original work of art.

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4 The WPA allocated works to tax-supported institutions such as hospitals, penitentiaries, schools and community art centers.
5 Russell T. Limbach Papers, Wesleyan University Special Collection and Archives, Middletown, Connecticut.
This sentiment was echoed in 1947 by Jean Charlot, who wrote “the essence of the graphic arts is its ability to multiply, and thus pull down the barriers of rarity and expensiveness that stand between the everyday man and the art originals” and I 1976 by Francis O’Connor, who wrote:

Prints in any technique —relief, intaglio, planographic or stencil—are products of immediate risk and implied social commitment. The artist who crafts them must command an often difficult medium while possessing a sense of democracy alien to the creators of unique objects.

WPA artists and administrators praised prints as being democratic in their wide-reaching accessibility, in their affordability and in the fact that prints could be produced in multiples but that each impression retained value as an original work of art. Thus, American artists transformed printmaking into one of the “decade's most exciting forms of art. As a cheap, vital, and egalitarian means of artistic expression, prints came close to realizing the ideal of creating ‘art for the millions.’”

Although prints are unique in their status as multiple originals, they do not exhaust the definition of democratic art. Discussions of art as democratic defined all WPA discourse and it is useful to acknowledge that murals were simultaneously promoted as constituting a democratic “art for the people.” However, O’Connor

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9 "Radical Art: Helen Langa," *University of California Press.* “Art for the Millions” is the title of the anthology that O’Connor published during the 1960s. This is an example of the propagandistic rhetoric that Cahill and others employed in order to justify the use of federal funds to create art.
correctly notes that American mural art never reached “a peak of human and artistic intensity comparable to that of the Mexican creations that inspired it.” The Mexican creations that O’Connor refers to are the murals produced during the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and continued until 1920. O’Connor attributes this weakness of American mural art to the relative inexperience of the young muralists, the scarcity of appropriate walls to paint on and, most importantly, due to the “lack of a useable past. Our European roots are not sufficient to celebrate our national experience; our indigenous roots are neither recognized or assimilated.” Because American mural art ignored and excluded the “rich, ancient, archetypal lore” of this country’s collective past, the art form never realized its potential as a democratic medium.

Despite a number of administrative shortcomings, the WPA was the mechanism through which many American printmakers were able to truly challenge the extant paradigms and customs in favor of a variety of styles such as abstraction, social realism, precisionism or regionalism. These aesthetic styles, as diverse as they might seem today, all represented a rejection of the status quo in favor of styles that the artist felt most suitably addressed contemporary political, social, cultural and economical issues. Many artists rejected the idea of art for art’s sake in favor of an art for society’s sake, a mentality that expressed what the WPA artists saw as a renewal of vitality in art. Through an analysis of prints produced under the WPA, this thesis will explore this mentality as the basis for understanding the unprecedented union between the United States government and the American artist.

10 Lynn Davies, "History of the Mexican Revolution."
In the years following the dissolution of the WPA, the prints produced by artists on the relief rolls came to be seen as second rate and were greatly devalued as the art market shifted back to the private sector. In subsequent decades, the WPA’s focus on the American Scene was eclipsed by the rise of abstract expressionism and other modernist movements. It was not until Francis O’Connor’s watershed study in the late 1960s that people began to focus on the significant role that the WPA/FAP played in the trajectory of American graphic art.11 O’Connor’s work, along with works by Helen Langa, Russell T. Limbach, David Acton, and others, play a critical role in the development of this thesis as they provide much of the primary and secondary materials upon which my arguments are based.

Francis O’Connor spent a year researching the New Deal visual art programs and WPA-era projects through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.12 During his studies, he uncovered an unpublished anthology of essays that Holger Cahill, the National Director of the FAP, had put together during the late 1930s as part of a national report on the successes of the WPA. The anthology, entitled *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, remained in Cahill’s possession until his death. His widow then gave it to O’Connor, who edited and published it as part of his NEA research. O’Connor also sent a questionnaire to artists he knew had worked under the WPA and asked them to describe their experience.13 He found that among the artists who

13 The questionnaire states: “The questions asked are based on knowledge of the
responded, most felt positively about their experience and attested to the fundamental role that the Project had played in their technical and stylistic development. In 1972, he collected these testimonials and published them in a second anthology, entitled *The New Deal Art Projects: an Anthology of Memoirs*. These two documents are unparalleled in terms of their importance to WPA-scholars. Together, they embody a renewed interest in the significant role that the New Deal visual arts projects played in the history of American art.

Other recent scholarship has specifically focused on the graphic arts and the methods through which printmaking in America evolved from a tradition limited to an interest in etching to a multifaceted, stylistically diverse art form. David Acton’s catalogue for an exhibition at the Worcester Museum, entitled *A Spectrum of Innovation: Color in American Printmaking, 1890-1960*, is a survey of color printing by one hundred artists. While the catalogue only briefly touches on the Works Progress Administration, it does discuss how the WPA fostered technical innovations structures and aims of the New Deal art projects and on awareness of the many historical and aesthetic pressures that were brought to bear on them between 1933 and 1943. This is not another senior thesis in the making or another half-baked institutional interview where you have to supply the questions as well as the answers. We know the outline of what happened on the projects from government documents and contemporary writings, in most cases we have your employment records—above all we know what we want to know. That is: how you, as an artist, profited, or didn’t profit artistically and economically by being employed on a government art project and how that experience has affected your career, then and now. If your relationship with the projects was rich and fulfilling or if it was wasteful and traumatic, or if it was both, we want to hear about it—in detail. We could have simplified and generalized in order to be brief and easy but we feel, and we think you feel, that the New Deal projects were important for you and important for the creative life of this country.” See Louis Lozowick Papers.
in color printing. \(^{14}\) Helen Langa’s *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* discusses how, during the era of the Depression and the New Deal, American artists transformed printmaking into one of the “decade's most exciting forms of art.” \(^{15}\) Langa deals with the ways that artists worked to reach a more widespread audience and also with the changing nature of printmaking in New York during the 1930s. She notes that the Graphic Arts Division was significant because “new opportunities for cooperative art production, gender equality, and freedom from competition inspired feelings of professional camaraderie as well as aesthetic liberation,” all of which were crucial for the development of a new paradigm in printmaking. \(^{16}\)

Another useful source is Jonathan Harris’ book, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America,* which examines and analyzes the ways through which a federal intervention in the visual arts can be seen as a method of cultural hegemony. \(^{17}\) This thesis also draws upon various exhibition catalogues and archival and collection sources. This thesis draws upon the Russell T. Limbach Archives, which are located at Wesleyan University’s Special Collections and Archives, WPA print collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The New

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\(^{14}\) “Spectrum of Innovation: Color in American Printmaking, 1890-1960 by David Acton,” *Library Thing.*

\(^{15}\) “Radical Art: Helen Langa,” *University of California Press.*

“Art for the Millions” is the title of the anthology that O’Connor published during the 1960s. Langa draws upon the propagandistic rhetoric that Cahill and others employed in order to justify the use of federal funds to create art.

\(^{16}\) Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in the 1930s,* 3.

York Public Library, the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum and a series of Works Progress Administration archives at the Archives of American Art.

The following chapters explore many research questions, each of which plays an enormous role in our cumulative understanding of the WPA Graphic Arts Division as a catalyst for a variety of technical and stylistic developments in American printmaking. The first chapter provides an overview of the social, economical and political conditions that led to the government intervening directly in the arts. This chapter aims to answer why the government stepped in to provide economic assistance for its artist-citizens. It is important to understand how and why it became the government’s responsibility to support artists and how the government saw these artists as participating in and contributing to national culture. It is also important to examine how the federal government and WPA administrators employed the use of rhetoric and propaganda to justify their support of, and involvement in, the arts. This chapter examines and analyzes the ways through which the federal intervention in the visual arts should be seen as a method of cultural hegemony and interpreted, methodologically, also as an “Ideological State Apparatus” (ISA). Louis Althusser proposed in the 1970s that there are institutions that are formally outside of state control that serve to transmit the values of the state. This thesis argues that while the WPA was not formally outside of state control, it functioned as a cultural Ideological State Apparatus that worked within the extant economic and political strictures to
buttress and support the weakened capital-industrialist system.\textsuperscript{18} Finally, this chapter also examines the hierarchy of the Federal Art Project.

The second chapter focuses specifically on the Graphic Arts Division and aims to contextualize the program both within the WPA and within the trajectory of printmaking in twentieth-century America. This chapter provides an overview of the workshop, examines who was eligible to work in the Division, and discusses selected works that these artists produced during their WPA tenure. Through a close analysis of artists’ personal reflections and administrative testimonials, this chapter seeks to answer how these artist-printmakers interpreted their responsibilities to the government and to the American people. The artist-printmakers employed by the WPA saw themselves as cultural laborers working to create art that would be accessible to everyone. They believed themselves to be especially equipped for this mandate due to the supposed inherent democracy and vitality of prints. In addition, this chapter explores how the artists’ interpretation of their roles, abilities and responsibilities coincided or clashed with the Administration’s understanding of these and how these ideological successes and failures affected production in the Graphic Arts Division.

The final two chapters focus on lithography and screenprinting, respectively, as these two methods were impacted the most by the foundation of the Graphic Arts Division. Chapter Three discusses the lithography unit within the context of the New York City graphic arts workshop. Through a close reading of Russell T. Limbach’s

papers, an examination of other first and second-hand accounts, and visual analyses of a series of prints, this chapter examines the ways in which the WPA allowed for and promoted technical advancements to develop in lithography. Access to instructors and professional printers encouraged an increasing number of artists to experiment with and produce lithographs, thus facilitating technical and stylistic growth within the medium. More importantly, artists began to create works in color lithography. The technique had been largely ignored as a fine arts medium in the United States. However, Russell Limbach instigated a revival in the use of this process as a creative medium. This chapter focuses on this technical growth as well as the implementation and development of a color lithography unit in the New York City workshop under Limbach’s guidance.

The fourth chapter focuses on the implementation of a screenprinting unit in the workshop. In 1938, Anthony Velonis received permission from Audrey McMahon to experiment with screenprinting as a fine art medium. Before this, the technique had been used exclusively as a commercial printing method. Velonis believed, however, that it could be a cheap and easy method that artists could use to create prints in color. Because screenprinting was developed as a fine art in the United States, Velonis and others called screenprinting the first true American fine art printing process, a feature that was celebrated by the Administration as concrete evidence of the WPA’s successes. This chapter, like the previous one, addresses how federal support encouraged technological and stylistic developments and specifically addresses the ways that the WPA marketed this new technique as being uniquely democratic and vital.
Cumulatively, this thesis aims to contextualize and then examine how the controversial Federal Art Project influenced the progression of American printmaking in the twentieth century. It also aims to deconstruct the mechanisms that caused this paradigm shift. These printmakers and the works they produced all played an important role in advancing printmaking as an economical and democratic art form, one that captured the vitality of a nation and a people in flux.
Chapter One: *New Horizons in American Art*

The Development and Implementation of New Deal Work-Creation Projects in the Fine Arts Sector During the Great Depression

The Graphic Arts Division was one of several art work-creation programs established by Roosevelt under the New Deal. This chapter situates the Division within the larger schema of these New Deal programs. The political, socio-cultural and economic conditions of the Great Depression and mounting pressure from groups such as the Artists’ Union forced the government to step in and stabilize a weak economy. For the first time in American art history, the government began to explicitly support its artist-citizens. Holger Cahill, the national Director of the Federal Art Program, and Audrey McMahon, the New York City Regional Administrator of the FAP, created a program that challenged the myth of the artist as an isolated figure removed from society and, instead, reframed the artist-citizen as playing a critical cultural role in American society. Drawing on ideas articulated by aesthetic philosopher, John Dewey, Cahill organized a program that supported the creative endeavors of American artists, and, along the way, marketed their products as being “truly American.” The support that the federal government provided allowed the American artist to reclaim a role in society as a fellow laborer contributing to the cultural fabric of the United States.

This chapter serves as the foundation and framework for the development of the rest of this thesis as the content presented here will make further analyses of the Graphic Arts Division possible. It first discusses the staggering economic conditions that led Roosevelt and his Administration to implement the Works Progress

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19 Chapter titles are named after WPA/FAP exhibitions.
Administration and inspired artists to organize themselves into proactive labor groups such as the Artists’ Union. Then, this chapter discusses the status and role of the artist in American society during the Depression. Next, this chapter discusses how the Federal Government initially responded to the economic crisis, and why the first programs they established ultimately proved to be unsuccessful. This chapter then situates the FAP within the wider WPA program and analyses how, by using propagandistic rhetoric, the government promoted the art created by Project artists as contributing to American society. As a result, this thesis explores why the WPA, particularly the FAP, should be interpreted as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Finally, the chapter establishes the framework within which we can critically examine the works created by the WPA graphic artists to fully understand their significance as products of a government patronage system.

Artists, who can be identified as both a social group and a unique branch of the workforce, had historically maintained a marginalized position in the American economy due to an under-supported market for contemporary American art and an attendant “inadequacy of means to widely distribute contemporary art to a sufficiently large part of the population.”20 The graphic art market during the first decades of the twentieth century in the United States was more or less limited to upper-class interests in artists such as James Abbott McNeill Whistler and Francis Seymour

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20 Chet LaMore quoted in Harris, 15. In a 1937 New York Times article, Holger Cahill was quoted as saying that artists were marginalized due to “the rise of increasingly complex patterns of society, the necessary reorientation of social aims and the reworking of social patters due to the extraordinary development of industrialism and technology; certain special developments in technology, such as the rise of photography; the growth of the museum system with its emphasis on archeology and the depression.” See "Federal Aid Held Vital to Spur Art." The New York Times (New York City) 19 Dec. 1937: 50.
Haden, a preference that New York art dealers acknowledged and fostered by mounting exhibitions either by European artists or by American artists who had “done Europe.”

It seemed as though the prerequisite for a successful career was a trip to the “Old World” where one might produce what James Watrous refers to as a series of “views of Italy, France, England, Germany or London, Paris and Venice.”

Besides some support from the Whitney Museum, the Newark Museum and the Duncan Phillips Collection in Washington D.C, there was little interest and even less institutional support for the creation, purchase and consumption of contemporary American prints. The cautious tastes of the galleries and museums impeded technical and stylistic developments in printmaking because artists were unable to find patrons for their modernist works.

When the stock market crashed on October 29th 1929, America entered a downward economic spiral. The following decade was one of economic chaos, political extremism and social upheaval. America’s capitalist-industrial system collapsed and the credit banking system could not support the crushing weight of a failing economy. Thirteen million Americans were unable to find or keep jobs. The desperate and extreme conditions of the Great Depression created a volatile socio-political climate, rife with anxieties.

The emotional and economic effects of the Great Depression particularly immobilized artists and effectively eliminated any presence of a contemporary

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21 Watrous, 31.
23 Harris, 16.
25 Harris, 14.
American art market. Even the American artists who had reached some measure of success in earlier decades, such as John Stuart Curry and Edward Hopper, were deeply affected by the Depression. Curry bemoaned the state of the art world when he complained to a friend that, despite the widespread publicity he had received during the 1920s, he could not sell any of his work.\textsuperscript{26}

With the effects of the Depression limiting an already slow print market, artists were desperate to find new and innovative ways to survive. Some, such as Harry Wickey and Adolf Dehn, formed print clubs, and for $5.00 would send prints to anyone who subscribed in advance.\textsuperscript{27} For Dehn, this plan proved successful enough to allow him to continue to create and sell prints for several years; for Wickey, the venture proved less successful, and the works he sold were primarily to “sympathetic friends, fellow artists and former students.”\textsuperscript{28} The Society of Independent Artists established a barter system for their 1932 exhibition, allowing “clothiers, dentists, lawyers and landlords [to offer] their services or goods in exchange for art.”\textsuperscript{29} However, the plan did little to facilitate an exchange between artists and consumers.\textsuperscript{30} Other artists formed groups in an effort to market themselves. In 1932, ten artists formed the Contemporary Print Group, whose members included Jose Clemente Orozco, John Stuart Curry, Reginald Marsh, and Thomas Hart Benton.\textsuperscript{31} Their socially critical prints did not sell well and the group was forced to disband after two

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Watrous, 95.
\item[27] Ibid, 95 and Langa, \textit{Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York}, 15.
\item[28] Watrous, 95.
\item[29] Ibid, 95.
\item[30] Ibid, 95.
\item[31] Langa, \textit{Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York}, 16.
\end{footnotes}
years. Other print groups formed and attempted to sell their works in bulk, but none were able to survive in a market where private patronage was so weakened.

This economic paralysis would certainly have continued without the intercession of the Federal Government and the concurrent unionization of artists. Artists saw capitalism as the primary culprit and many were eager to denounce a system that had left them on the margins of contemporary society for so long. Social historian, Gerald Monroe, wrote:

> After a period of stunned inaction, artists gradually realized that their economic and professional needs could only be obtained through massive government patronage...artists organized themselves as ‘cultural workers’ and turned to militant trade union tactics to effect their goals.33

For a short time, a group of artists, including printmakers such as Boris Gorelick and Bernarda Bryson, met informally to discuss the possibility of obtaining federal patronage. Some even issued a manifesto demanding that the “state sponsor art projects as an economic aid to the artist and as a cultural and artistic resource for the community.”34 More and more artists became interested in the idea of ending artistic dependence on “the caprice of private patronage,” and turning to a state sponsored art program instead.35 The group eventually began to refer to themselves as the Unemployed Artists Group (UAG), and in 1934, decided to call themselves the Artists’ Union [Image 1.1]. They took as their emblem the image of a closed fist clenching a painter’s brush, an icon that calls to mind other symbols of workers’

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32 Watrous, 95.
35 Monroe, “Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression,” 7.
solidarity but one that clearly indicates their unique position as artists. The group also published a monthly journal, *Art Front* [Image 1.2]. The AU pressed for worker’s rights for artists through petitions, manifestos, mass protests [Image 1.3], sit-ins and even kidnappings. Of particular note was an event in 1937, when AU members held Harold Stein (a New Deal administrator for New York) in his office overnight.36 Through their constant agitation, they were effective in securing city, state and federal aid.

The Artists’ Union self-identified as a craft union dedicated to obtaining and preserving the tenuous hold that AU members had on federal jobs. They were willing to use aggressive and radical techniques in order to press for federal funding to become a permanent part of the social and artistic fabric of society.37 The Artists’ Union joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations as a local branch of the United Office and Professional Workers of America. They continued to agitate on behalf of artist-laborers until the early 1940s and the dissolution of the Works Progress

36Ibid, 8-9. Monroe writes, “On Tuesday, June 27 [1937], the pink slips were issued and the Joint Strategy Committee responded with the precision of a military campaign: Wednesday, sixty workers barricaded themselves in the payroll offices of the New York City Arts Projects; Friday, LaMore and a delegation of fifty journeyed to Washington, sat in at the WPA headquarters, and asked to see [Harry] Hopkins. That same day in New York City, 600 artists, writers and musicians invaded the newly consolidated offices of the Federal Arts Projects, now located on East 42nd Street, while another 100 remained outside to demonstrate. Harold Stein, a sensitive New Dealer who had recently been appointed administrator of the Arts Projects in New York, was ordered by his captors to call Washington WPA officials to transmit the strikers’ demands. Artist’s Union leader Moe Neuwirth announced that Stein would be held captive until those demands were met–by President Roosevelt, if necessary…every inch of the floor was covered by demonstrators; the air was stifling. The police were warned that if they took action and a riot ensued the floor might collapse. During the night, Stein negotiated an agreement with the strikers; he was released Saturday morning, fifteen hours after the invasion of his office.”

37 Ibid, 8.
Administration, proving that artists, like other laborers, could hold significant power in numbers.38

The presidential election of 1932 took place as the full effects of the economic crash and the Great Depression were starting to be felt across the country. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the governor of New York, secured the Democratic nomination and committed to battling the Great Depression in the United States with a ‘New Deal,’ stating: “I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people.”39 He won the presidential election in a landslide victory by gaining 88.9 percent of the Electoral College votes, a statistic that emphasizes how desperate the country was for a change.40

By 1933, unemployment numbers had risen to an all-time high and Roosevelt and his Administration were hard-pressed to find feasible short-term economic solutions to ameliorate the dire situation. The New Deal, which he implemented during his first term, was a complex series of economic programs that focused on relief, recovery and reform. The New Deal aimed to create jobs in the public sector in order to stimulate the circulation of funds and restore confidence to the American people through both fiscal and cultural initiatives.

38 Ibid, 8-9.
In 1933, Roosevelt received a letter from a former classmate, George Biddle, who commented on the current state of the artist. In his letter, Biddle wrote:

There is a matter, which I have long considered and which some day might interest your administration. The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregón allowed Mexican artists to work for plumbers’ wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideas of the Mexican revolution... The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution our country and civilization are going through; and they would be eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government’s cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling for. And I am convinced that our mural art with a little impetus can soon result for the first time in our history in a vital national expression. Biddle was referring to the Mexican Revolution, during which the Mexican government sponsored the wide-scale production of murals. Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose work came to define the essence of what the movement stood for, championed the creation of murals, which expressed a communality of national experience and offered a synthesis between “fine” and “popular” art. This allowed for an ideological realignment of the common people towards a common cause, as well as the subsequent overthrow of Mexican autocrat Porfirio Diaz, with these murals serving as figurative banners and rallying points.

By stressing the potential of wide reaching federal art-creation initiatives, Biddle is credited with encouraging the Roosevelt administration to implement a

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series of art projects under the New Deal.\textsuperscript{43} Due to pressure from organizations such as the Artists’ Union and from administrators such as Biddle, art moved to the front line of Roosevelt’s disciplined attack against the devastating effects of the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{44} Many of Roosevelt’s programs targeted unemployed artists and aimed to assimilate the artist into society as a laborer who, like others, could serve the needs of their country. Olin Dows, the Director of the Treasury Relief Art Project\textsuperscript{45}, stated:

\begin{quote}
Human economic relief was the motive behind all the New Deal’s art programs. That is why they were so easily accepted by both the public and politicians. If it had not been for the Great Depression, it is unlikely that our government would have sponsored more art than it had in the past.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Dows’ comment reiterates that the projects established by the government were primarily focused on creating jobs for unemployed Americans. By becoming actively involved, the government sent a clear and strong message that it had a vested interest in supporting the arts and in its artist-citizens as well as preserving the cultural fabric of the United States.

\textsuperscript{43} Biddle is frequently cited as the catalyst for Roosevelt’s intervention in the arts. However, during a 1960 interview, Holger Cahill said the following: “Who actually started this? Now, when people write about this thing and when George Biddle writes about it, he claims that he did it because he knew Roosevelt at Groton and at Harvard. Well, I’m not so sure of that, and really I don't believe it because there were so many people -- the terrible excitement about the unemployment and the possibility of our program, which nobody had ever envisaged in this country... I think that the original impetus for an art program came more through Harry Hopkins when he was here in New York. He had some friends in the art world and the photography world. For instance, Walker Evans was a great friend of his. And if you look up, you'll find that the ERA, Emergency Relief Administration in New York City, had an art project.” It is possible that identifying Hopkins as the catalyst for federal action served a purpose that helped identify Roosevelt as being in touch with realities of the plight of the artist. See Oral history interview with Holger Cahill, 12 Apr. and 15 Apr. 1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

\textsuperscript{44} Kennedy, 22.

\textsuperscript{45} Olin Dows served as the Director of TRAP. "Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP),” Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica.

\textsuperscript{46} O’Connor, The New Deal Art Projects; an Anthology of Memoirs, 12.
The New Deal included a number of work-creation programs, a small portion of which had creative art components. Generally, the programs were so limited that they did not effectively provide economic relief to artists. They are significant, however, in representing a concerted effort on the part of the Federal government to offer support to artists. The first of these programs was the Civil Works Administration (CWA), which was established in November 1933, but disbanded the following spring.\footnote{Harris, 23 and "Civil Works Administration (CWA)."} Established under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the CWA provided millions of public work jobs such as infrastructure construction and maintenance, the construction of public buildings, and surveys of coastlines and harbors. The CWA also “employed artists, musicians, and actors on projects.”\footnote{Harris, 23.} This particular program “greatly increased support for public employment,”\footnote{Ibid, 23.} and created pressure from politicians and from the public for the Administration to launch the WPA in 1935. However, given that the program did not specifically target the issue of artist unemployment, it was not significantly effective in providing wide scale aid to unemployed artists.

In December 1933, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was established within the Department of the Treasury through funding from the CWA. The PWAP, which was designed as a crash relief program, was in operation from December 1933 until June 1934. Costing $1,312,000, PWAP employed about 3,700 artists.\footnote{O’Connor, The New Deal Art Projects, 12.} The program’s goals were to, first, furnish work for unemployed artists through the decoration and general embellishment of public buildings. Second, to choose high
quality artworks that depicted popular and didactic images of America, and, third, to increase the public's interest in art by placing art in public buildings, and to open up a two-way dialogue between art producers and art consumers. Qualification for employment was extremely difficult as chief administrators were more interested in receiving high-quality works for federal buildings than in removing artists from the relief rolls. Their policy was to “select needy artists whose artistic ability was worthy of employment,” thus making a distinction between worthy artists/good art and unworthy artists/bad art. The administration openly preferred realist representations and often censored abstractionist art; they responded positively to the depiction of the “American Scene” and were openly hostile to and suspicious of anything experimental, unconventional or “possibly titillating.” These policy restrictions angered the Artists’ Union and they protested vehemently against what they deemed was a shortsighted program that handpicked successful artists with established reputations over the truly needy artists. PWAP was dissolved in the spring of 1934 when funding for the program ended.

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52 Harris, 24-25.
53 Ibid, 24-25.
54 “A term used to describe scenes of typical American life. It was first applied to the paintings of Charles Burchfield (American, 1893-1967) in the mid-1920s. Born in the aftermath of World War I, American Scene painting developed partly as an outgrowth of the Ashcan school, and partly as a reaction to French modernism. This art movement came from an interest in celebrating the democratic ideals of America by promoting accessible subject matters. A related trend was the growth of interest in creating prints for mass distribution.” "ArtLex on American Scene Painting."
55 ArtLex Art Dictionary.
The Section of Painting and Sculpture (the Section), later called the Section of Fine Arts, was established in October 1934 and ran until June 1943. This program, like PWAP, was financed by the Treasury Department. It obtained paintings and sculptures to “decorate new federal buildings, largely post office and court houses.”

By definition, the Section was not a relief program as artists had to apply to regional and national competitions in order to contribute works to the Section. Artists from the relief rosters could submit their works to anonymous competitions for inclusion. An advisory committee consisting of Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, Rockwell Kent, Reginald Marsh, Henry Varnum Poor, Boardman Robinson and Grant Wood was established to ensure that the program “acquired masterpieces for the government.” Because of the stringent hiring policies, the program was exceptionally limited and only employed 1,440 artists over its nine-year tenure.

The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) ran from July 1935 until June 1939 and employed 446 artists, the majority of whom were on relief, at a cost of $833,784. The program was established through an allocation of funds from the WPA to the Treasury for the decoration of federal buildings and was administered by the Section. The program followed the work-creation regulations of the Works Progress Administration, implying that the program was more concerned with hiring jobless artists than with the aesthetics of the works produced. However, considering

57 “New Deal/WPA History.” *New Deal/WPA Art Project*.
58 Harris, 26-27.
60 Harris, 26 and O’Connor, *The New Deal Art Projects*, 12.
the number of nationally registered unemployed artists, this project was extremely limited in its function as a relief program.62

Each of the above programs had the same goal of putting artists to work. However, their stringent policies and limited budgets ultimately restricted their successes. It was not until the Roosevelt Administration implemented the Works Progress Administration in August 1935, with the intention of employing jobless Americans across the country, that artists finally received the economic support they required.63 The WPA employed thousands of artists across the country and had a much larger budget than previous New Deal art-creation projects, which accounts for why the WPA was ultimately more successful than programs such as PWAP.

The national headquarters of the WPA were located in Washington D.C. where Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt’s closest advisors, acted as its National Director.64 Hopkins oversaw a five-pronged hierarchical work-creation program entitled Federal Project Number One, including the Federal Art Project, which sought to conserve and foster native artistic talent. In less than a decade, the FAP employed more than 5,000 people, cost more than $35,000,000 and produced 2,250 murals, 13,000 sculptures, 85,000 paintings, 239,727 prints and 500,000 photographs.65 It was

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62 Harris, 26-27.
63 Ibid, 29.
64 “A social worker, Hopkins was appointed Director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in 1933. With bold plans and unfailing energy, he quickly took over the massive Federal relief efforts, culminating in the creation of the WPA in 1935. In December 1938, he was named Secretary of Commerce and held the post for two years. A close friend of FDR, Hopkins helped manage his 1940 campaign and tapped to lead the Lend-Lease program with the United Kingdom in 1941. Throughout the war, Hopkins remained FDR’s closest advisor.” See "Who's Who in the New Deal," New Deal/WPA Art Project.
65 O’Connor, The New Deal Art Projects, 12, 43.
seen as a “creative” project that “sponsored on a nationwide basis separate divisions dealing with all major… art forms and activities.” The other Federal Project Number One programs were the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), the Historical Records Survey (HRS), the Federal Theater Project (FTP) and the Federal Music Project (FMP).

Administrators filled national, regional or local positions [see Figure 1.1]. This pyramidal structure was put into practice to alleviate possible tension between federal policy and the implementation of these strategies at the local level. Though there was a “plurality of local opinions within the decision making process,” this did not prevent the Federal government from attempting to implement nationalized policies and guidelines. WPA administrators were paid between $150 and $200 per month, almost twice the amount that artists were paid on the Project. Artists were paid from $80 to $115 per month depending on their position. The rate for each employee was determined by evaluating comparable private sector jobs and their salaries. Ultimately, however, salaries were slightly deflated to avoid competition with jobs in the open market, as the primary aim of the Project was to return workers to the private sector.

In response to the creation of the WPA, Holger Cahill, the National Director of the WPA, stated in 1936 that, “Art is a normal social growth deeply rooted in the life of mankind and extremely sensitive to the environments created by human

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66 Ibid, 3.
67 Harris, 30.
68 Oral history interview with Holger Cahill.
society.” That same year Cahill stated, “For the first time in American art history, a
direct and sound relationship has been established between the American public and
artist.” He and others have argued that because of the WPA, the Great Depression
marked the moment in American history when art was most closely and profoundly
related to contemporary society and when the American artist was able to break free
from the myth of the solitary genius and rejoin society as a productive and
contributing member. Cahill’s strongly rhetorical comments echo the sentiments
expressed by the Roosevelt Administration.

Roosevelt and his advisors walked a fine line with the Works Progress
Administration. Conservative critics had condemned previous work creation
programs, which they saw as creating an entire class of “unemployable” Americans.
The FERA programs were unpopular among politicians who viewed them as
temporary solutions that did not provide long-term viable options in the private sector
for American workers. Roosevelt and his administration developed the WPA art
programs in response to these criticisms. While Harris and others saw the program as
an immediate response to a deeply entrenched economic problem, the Administration
carefully and definitively avoided characterizing the project as a federal dispensation

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70 Holger Cahill, “Introduction,” *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum
of Modern Art, 1936) 9.
71 Cahill, 29.
72 This was an idea championed by many of the top-level administrators of the FAP
such as Cahill. See, for example, Cahill, 13.
73 Republican Alf Landon, Governor of Kansan from 1933 to 1937 and Republican
Presidential candidate in 1936, argued that what New Dealers had decided that “if
$400 Million a month of useful projects would be good medicine, $600 million a
month thrown around at random would be even better.” Jason Scott Smith, *Building
New Deal Liberalism: the Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (New
Rather they stressed the sentiment that Harry Hopkins expressed when he said, “Give a man a dole and you save his body and destroy his spirit. Give a man a job and you save both his body and his soul.” By utilizing a deliberately pro-labor vocabulary to promote a discourse of patriotism, citizenship, nationalism and social identity, they sought to implement a program that would attract wide support from disparate groups across the nation.

This propagandistic rhetoric is the reason that the Works Progress Administration should be interpreted as an Ideological State Apparatus. In the 1970s, Marxist theorist Louis Althusser posited that the superstructure of the state was supported by a number of “ideological state apparatus,” which are formally outside of state control but serve to transmit the values of the state, in order to maintain order in a society and to reproduce the conditions for the continuation of the extant politico-economic system. Althusser identifies, “Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions.” He identifies a number of institutions as ISAs: churches, education systems, the family, political systems, trade unions, communication systems and cultural institutions. Although the WPA was under Federal control, it utilized functions of the education system, trade unions and cultural institutions to support a common ideology, one that promoted a capitalist system of  

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74 Harris, 13-27.
76 Harris, 8.
77 Althusser.
78 Ibid, 96.
79 Ibid, 96.
production and consumption. The Federal Art Project primarily drew upon cultural and communications apparatuses to give each “citizen daily doses of nationalism…liberalism, moralism, etc.”\textsuperscript{80} By promoting the FAP as being a program that transmitted these values, and by identifying the WPA artists as key participants in this transmission, the Works Progress Administration, exhibits elements that identify it as an ISA. This is significant because it reiterates that the Roosevelt Administration was not aiming to appropriate cultural production in an attempt to overthrow the status quo; rather, they wished to regenerate a weakened economy by stimulating a cycle of production and consumption.

Through outreach programs, the United States government and the Works Progress Administration marketed American artists as worthy and patriotic investments. Such a nationalist understanding of the production and consumption of art went hand in hand with what Harris called an emergent movement of modern nationalism that combined an appeal to patriotic fervor with an appeal to the popular classes: the American people. The national-popular discourse, therefore, conflated patriotic loyalty (and therefore a loyalty to the New Deal State) with a belief in citizenship.\textsuperscript{81} This type of language reaffirms the role of the WPA as an ISA. By using a rhetoric that linked themes of nation, state and people, the WPA, and by extension, the Roosevelt Administration, encouraged “the American people” to see artists as helping to cultivate a modern American culture.

The Federal Art Project was initiated under the supposition that it was important to conserve and foster native artistic talent among Americans. The project

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid, 96.
\textsuperscript{81} Harris, 20.
“proceeded on the principle that it is not the solitary genius but a sound general
collection which maintains art as a vital, functioning part of any cultural scheme.”\textsuperscript{82} In order to reestablish a sense of pride and self-sufficiency among artists, Program administrators used rhetoric that legitimized artistic production as being as valid, authentic and contributive as the work of “plumbers, electricians, salesmen or teachers.”\textsuperscript{83} On both a national and local level, the program used a propagandistic vocabulary to support its thesis that art creation is “real work.”

Administrators were “antagonistic towards modernist notions of art that placed art and artists outside of society (as defined by the government) and represented them as being unconcerned with society (i.e. only concerned with art for art’s sake) or in opposition to it (i.e. the radical avant-garde).”\textsuperscript{84} Rather, they spoke of artists as laborers and their artistic creations as important patriotic products, aiming to construct a social identity that equated “artists” to a social force with ideas of citizenship and nationhood.\textsuperscript{85} In 1940, Helen Gahagan from the National Community Service Advisory Committee, stated:

\begin{quote}
You, patriotic and enlightened citizens in communities all over the country…have helped to make it possible for millions of people to go on working, to continue to be citizens useful to their communities…the women who cook and serve lunches, the nurses, the technicians, the clerical workers, the skilled craftsmen who work in museums and universities, the teachers, the librarians, the legal, the economic, engineering and social students who make our surveys, the household service workers, the helpers in medical clinics, the artists who paint pictures and murals, the musicians in our orchestras, the writers and all our other workers.”\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{82} Cahill, 13.  
\textsuperscript{83} Harris, 31.  
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 10.  
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 9.  
\textsuperscript{86} Gahagan quoted in Harris, 42-43.
Gahagan’s comment is an example of this nationalist discourse because she stated that the Project was the result of an active involvement on the part of a patriotic and enlightened populace and also that artists merited a role within the framework the program. This discourse on nationality encouraged citizens to subscribe to a common ideology that reaffirmed the actions that the government took in order to stabilize the economy.

The American audience proved highly receptive to the newly altered relationship between them and the artists. They flocked to the regularly planned WPA exhibitions and participated extensively in hundreds of Community Art Centers that had opened across the country. Because of this exposure to the widely circulated art objects, Americans were introduced to a whole corpus of original, contemporary American art and to a series of techniques that they may have been unfamiliar with up till then. Latent artistic ability within the general public was fostered and young children and adults alike were encouraged to participate in art classes taught by FAP artists and to create their own art objects. This exchange brought the American artist “closer to the interests of a public which need[ed] him, and which [was] now learning to understand him.”  

For the first time, American receptivity went beyond merely tolerating artists and Americans subsequently took up the cause of supporting contemporary American art quite whole-heartedly as evidenced by exhibition attendance numbers and community art center participation.

87 O’Connor, Art for the Millions, 41
88 See Daniel Defenbacher, “Art in Action,” Art for the Millions; Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project, Francis O’Connor, ed. (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973) 223-224 and Mary Morsell, “The Exhibition Program of the WPA/FAP,” Art for the Millions; Essays
Holger Cahill, known to friends as Eddie, was named Director of the Federal Art Division in August of 1935 [Image 1.4]. According to Lee Sorensen’s biography, Cahill joined the staff of the Newark Museum in 1921, where John Cotton Dana encouraged him to organize shows on folk art, the American primitives, and American folk sculpture. Cahill was greatly influenced by Dana’s “strong populist impulses” and his attention to the art museums’ potential for “broad public appeal.”

After Dana's death in 1929, Cahill left the Newark Museum. Subsequently he served as acting Director of the Museum of Modern Art, where he curated several exhibitions that focused on American folk art and contemporary contributions to American sculpture and painting. One of his most significant contributions to the field of art history was his 1933 exhibition entitled "American Sources of Modern Art." The exhibition examined the “ancient art of Mexico, Peru, and Central America and its influence on Gauguin, the Fauvists and Cubists, and contemporary Latin American muralists.” The next year Cahill and Alfred Barr directed the first Municipal Art Exhibition of New York and co-edited the Art in America in Modern Times catalog for the Museum. Sorensen writes that the text for this exhibition was then transcribed and broadcast as a radio series, thereafter increasing public access to the exhibition.

Like John Cotton Dana, John Dewey had a significant influence on Cahill’s philosophy about art. Cahill drew specifically upon the tenets proposed by Dewey in

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90 Sorensen.
91 Sorensen.
his 1934 book, *Art as Experience*, an aesthetics treatise based on the author’s lecture series at Harvard in 1932. Dewey’s argument is predicated on the idea that aesthetic experience should be a commonplace experience, one that is available to everyone and not limited to a select few. Dewey rejected the idea of the artist as the active creator and the audience as the passive recipient of art. “This distinction artificially truncates the artistic process by in effect suggesting that the process ends with the final artifact of the artist’s creativity.” Dewey argues that, on the contrary, the process of creation would lose its effectiveness without the participation of an audience, whose “active assimilation of the artist’s work requires a recapitulation of many of the same processes of discrimination, comparison, and integration that are present in the artist’s initial work, but now guided by the artist’s perception and skill.” The idea of an active exchange between the artist and his audience was attractive to Cahill, who saw in art the potential for a commonality of experience between the artist and audience. For him, as for Dewey, art lost much of its value if it was separated from the common experience. He believed that Federal investment in the arts could ameliorate this dislocation by facilitating a two-way dialogue between art producers and art consumers, and that “without government patronage, art in this country has virtually no place to go.”

Cahill and others believed that the WPA increased the citizen’s understanding of the significance of art in the community. Cahill stated:

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94 “Dewey, John.”
95 Sorensen.
96 Cahill quoted in "Federal Aid Held Vital to Spur Art."
This creative drive has been stimulated and maintained because the Project has held to the idea of the unity of art with the common experience, the continuity between ‘the refined and intensified forms of experience that are everyday works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.’

One can readily identify the strong influence of John Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy on Cahill’s commentary in his use of terms such as “common experience,” “continuity,” and “everyday.” Like Dewey, Cahill aimed to resituate artists within daily life and stressed that art was quotidian rather than exotic. Cahill’s rhetoric is not always perfectly matched to the realities of the FAP, which will be discussed at length in the following chapter. His discourse, however, does indicate the strength of the ideological basis for the program.

The artists hired by the government utilized similar rhetoric. Charles E. Edholm, a painter employed on PWAP, wrote to Roosevelt:

You have given us this opportunity to do the best we are capable of in the service of this nation. For many of us it is the chance of a lifetime to put our souls in the work by which we gain a living...we hope that the crisis through which the nation is passing may well be remembered as the period in which American art grew to full stature and took on a vitality and a beauty never dreamed of before.

For artists such as Edholm, art filled an ideological and functional role in service of the nation. Art was to be a vital and democratic national resource cultivated by artist-laborers with the support of the people and the United States government. The same rhetoric was used to characterize the Roosevelt Administration as “benevolent and

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97 O’Connor, Art for the Millions, 39-40
98 Dewey writes that, “Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living,” and that, “In the qualitative background of experience and of the special meaning through which distinct meanings and values are projected upon it, we are in the presence of something common in the substance of the arts.” Dewey, 36, 209.
99 Edholm quoted in Harris, 21.
rationalizing” and the artist as a loyal citizen using the only tools at his disposal to aid his country in its time of need. Together, artists were creating what artist Anton Refregier called an “art for the people” built out of a “close comradeship among the artists, [and] a respect for each other regardless of the direction each of us chose -- the Realist painter along with the Abstract and Surrealists felt a common bond…we were not manipulated by art entrepreneurs, critics, nor museums.”

The concept of an art for the people generated much debate among artists and in the public sphere. Did the artist in a democratic society have a certain responsibility to the people for which they were ostensibly creating works of art? Should artists be limited to only creating objects whose content would please the general public? Could art be educational or should people be educated to understand art? Should art serve exclusively as a didactic tool or should the public be taught to have greater visual literacy? How was art to be democratic and vital? Individual artists responded to these questions in their own ways. However, the general consensus was that art had the power to educate, entertain, critique and satirize. Art objects could be revolutionary declarations of discontent, relaxing nature vistas, literal records of a moment in time or abstracted interpretations of one’s feelings. The FAP did not overtly favor one particular aesthetic over others and was careful to not openly censor their artists. They promoted an agenda of freedom of expression and creative license. However, they were wary of any art objects that appeared too radical in content. Among the upper levels of the FAP, there was a constant fear of the

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100 Harris, 20-22.
“communist association” and those artists suspected of being too left leaning were viewed as directly in opposition to the tenets upon which the FAP was built.\(^{103}\) Artists were mindful of this and often toned down their radical works in order to avoid losing their jobs. They were very conscious that without a job, they would be unable to survive, let alone to produce art. Elizabeth Olds and Harry Gottlieb, two artists employed by the Graphic Arts Division, chose to have their most radical works printed in George Miller’s private lithography shop rather than in the FAP workshop in order to avoid problems with the program’s supervisors.\(^{104}\) When, in 1939, the program was accused of supporting an overtly Communist agenda, they and others decided, “only themes appropriate for a popular audience could safely be produced at the workshop; those that displayed leftist or overtly pro-union views could not.”\(^{105}\) The idea of a theme appropriate for a popular audience was much discussed among the artists themselves and shall be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

How, then, was this Federal Art Project organized? In order to standardize employment and to ensure that at least 90 percent of the FAP artists were hired from

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\(^{103}\) Artists who openly supported the Communist Party were feared because the political, economic and social ideologies of Communism were in direct conflict with those supported by a capitalist, democratic system. The WPA and US Government wished to avoid a popular uprising against the economical and political status quo. In Roosevelt’s New Deal, “the people were figured as citizens (i.e. juridical-political subjects of the state), not as a popular force for revolutionary social change.” Harris, 21. This is significant because Althusser defines an ISA as being in support of the superstructure and infrastructure of the state. The state must seek to reproduce the conditions for production by utilizing ideological state apparatuses. ISAs support and reaffirm the societal values promoted by the political and economic systems in place. They do not seek to challenge them, but rather to support them. Roosevelt saw the people as “citizens,” with an active interest in perpetuating the status quo and not as a popular force for social change. Althusser, 95.


\(^{105}\) Ibid, 27.
the relief register, Cahill and his advisors implemented a set of eligibility classifications. They wished to insure that the scope of the program was broad enough to encompass “every degree of skill and large enough to accommodate as many people as possible.” However, Cahill understood that the government could not assist every artist in need. Therefore, in order to qualify for employment under the Federal Art Project the artist had to prove that he or she had no means of supporting themselves or their family. Printmaker Anthony Refregier recalled his experience:

You had to be on relief. In other words, you had to be in a position not to be able to pay your rent, not to be able to buy a loaf of bread, and of course that already takes for granted that you don't have 15 cents to go to a movie, I was called in by Audrey McMahon, who was a wonderful girl, a New York WPA administrator, I was already certified for relief, you see. Then the procedure was to take you off relief and put you on the WPA rolls, which paid $23.86 a week. I came in… The headquarters at that time was at College Art Association because Audrey McMahon was with the College Art Association until she was asked by the Federal government to assume responsibility for the N. Y. project. I waited there with two or three other guys.

This program, unlike the previous art work-creation programs, hired based on economic need rather than artistic merit. Artists applied directly to one of several divisions and had to meet with a government inspector to prove that they were in need of relief. After receiving approval, artists were eligible to “matriculate into the WPA.” At first, artists could remain on the program until they found jobs in the

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106 WPA policy required that 90 percent of the artists hired by the Project be on relief.
109 Oral history interview with Anton Refregier, 5 Nov. 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
private sector or were fired. However, after Roosevelt’s Reorganization Plan was enacted in 1939, the WPA implemented the policy of firing Project members every eighteen months, ostensibly to allow them to look for private work.\footnote{111}{"New Deal/WPA History."} Artists who wished to rejoin the Project had to repeat the qualification process and once again prove that they needed relief. This restriction came just two years after Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act (1937), which forbid non-nationals (such as Willem de Kooning) to be hired by the WPA, a law that reflected an underlying xenophobia present in American culture at the time. Any non-national artists employed by the WPA at the time were fired with little notice.\footnote{112}{"The WPA was henceforth not to employ any alien who was not at least a declarant and, moreover, a system of preferential employment was introduced: 1st preference given to veterans of the Spanish-American War and WWI; 2nd preference to other citizens; 3rd to aliens who had obtained first papers prior to the enactment of the law; 4th to aliens who obtained first papers after that date.” See "Lower East Side Tenement Museum," \textit{New York City Tenement Museum}.} 

The artists who were hired by the WPA/FAP were assigned to one of four possible classifications: professional/technical, skilled, intermediate and unskilled. For an artist to attain professional status, he or she had to be “experienced in their skill and capable of producing creative work of a high standard of excellence.”\footnote{113}{Harris, 32.} These artists were assigned to one of the four fine arts divisions: the Mural Project, the Easel Division, the Sculpture Project or the Graphic Arts Division [see Figure 1.2]. Frequently, skilled artists that were able to produce works of “recognizable merit” joined these professional artists.\footnote{114}{Ibid, 32.} Administrators hoped that the more technically capable and experienced artists would “share their knowledge and new
ideas with less experienced peers” so that they might learn from one another and “set high standards for workshop production.”\textsuperscript{115}

These skilled workers could also be employed on a series of utilitarian art programs such as the WPA Poster Division [figure 4.2], which used commercial printing methods to produce posters that “promoted health, safety, and tourism; advertised community events; and warned of crime, fire and other dangers.”\textsuperscript{116} Another utilitarian program was the scenic design division that “provided models of historic stage sets and architectural models for planning and educational use.”\textsuperscript{117} The Federal Art Project also compiled a 22,000-plate Index of American Design, which was designed to record the history of “authentic American material culture” with an emphasis on “personal anecdotes and the real lives of the people” regarding their “utility in the development of the nation.”\textsuperscript{118} Their work was championed as a full-fledged encyclopedic effort to define what was “truly American.” Artists who failed to attain “professional” were assigned to the above programs, and while they were employed as artisans rather than as artists, they received the same administrative support for their labor as those employed on the fine art units.

The third classification was that of the “Intermediate-grade workers who were less skilled and experienced and required constant supervision and guidance.” They were primarily eligible for jobs on the utilitarian projects where they could work closely with their supervisors. The final classification was that of the “unskilled

\textsuperscript{115} Helen Langa, \textit{Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York}, 25.
\textsuperscript{116} O’Connor, \textit{The New Deal Art Projects}, 101.
\textsuperscript{117} "New Deal Cultural Programs." \textit{Webster's World of Cultural Democracy}.
\textsuperscript{118} Harris, 85.
worker who was not to be employed at all in any production of art.” These workers were employed as administrators, teachers and as community liaisons.

Artists were assigned to a program where they regularly submitted pieces that were deemed “suitable for viewing by the public.” Because each fine art program worked with different artistic media, their deadlines varied widely; for the Graphic Arts Division, this meant producing at least one print a month. The works were then allocated to tax-supported, or semi-tax supported institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, low-cost housing projects, libraries and public colleges.

According to Cahill:

“If a school wanted to get a painting allocated to itself, it came to the project, saw the paintings in the racks and bins in the exhibition gallery, and would pay for the cost of the paint, canvas and frame. The basic costs of these three items, which amounted to, let us say $6 for an 18 inch by 24 canvas, or $12 for a 30 inch by 40 inch. That's all they paid for. The cost of everything else was met by the United States government, whether it be earlier in the day during the Federal Art Project by the federal government, and later through the states.”

However, before allocation, the works were frequently exhibited at the various Municipal Art Galleries, where the public could view them at no cost. Cahill’s comments illustrate how much the Federal Government was willing to do in order to foster production in the arts sector. By requiring that tax-supported institutions pay a minimum fee for the art, the FAP was able to marginally offset costs. However, they

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119 Ibid, 85.
120 Langa, Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York, 22.
121 Oral history interview with Holger Cahill and O’Connor, The New Deal Art Projects, 62.
122 Oral history interview with Holger Cahill.
were covering much of the financial burden themselves, indicating, once again, that they viewed the production and preservation of art as important.

FAP administrators viewed New York as a unique urban center that was a “microcosm of the entire country.” As a result of the heavy concentration of artists in New York City, the city was administered as an individual unit. 124 Audrey McMahon was placed in charge of the New York City program, which included divisions of each fine art and different utilitarian programs [Figure 1.3]. McMahon’s responsibilities included acting as a liaison between the Federal Government and the various artists on the program [Image 1.5]. Gustave von Groschwitz, first Supervisor of the Graphic Arts Division, likened McMahon’s job to “walking a tight rope over a raging fire, but she did it with great success” as she got along well with government officials in Washington and in New York. 125 She also readily established strong relationships with artists and worked closely with them during her time as Director.

The democratization of both the production and the experience of American art during the 1930s led to an immediate and interactive art experience where the value of the art went beyond the content of each individual work. This point is illustrated by Cahill’s comment in the introduction to the 1936 New Horizons in American Art exhibition catalogue. Cahill wrote, “The works shown in this exhibition indicate important phases of a year’s accomplishment. From the point of view of the artists and the public they have a significance far beyond that of the record, beyond

even their value as individual works of art.”  

126 The true value lay instead in the mentality of the movement and the ability of the art to “effect and engage our essential humanity.”  

127 Under the patronage of the United States, “the creative forces of our country” were released.  

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In conclusion, this chapter has shown that in response to the severity of the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his Administration felt that it was necessary to set the Works Progress Administration in place. This chapter has also provided a methodological framework through which the Works Progress Administration should be interpreted. By positing that the WPA was an Ideological State Apparatus, this thesis reiterates that the steps the Federal government took in order to stabilize the economy represented a concerted effort to preserve rather than to alter the capitalist economic system in America. Through federal subsidization, artists had consistent access to equipment and guidance, both of which allowed them to develop and mature in their technical understanding of the materials and in their own personal styles. The Federal Art Project, in all of its facets, allowed for a new chapter in American art history, one that challenged the myth of the artist as an isolated figure, removed from society. Instead, the artist was called upon to contribute to society through a reestablished relationship between the artist and their audience based on the concept of a communicable and shared common experience. This interest in direct and communal experiences gave American artists the opportunity to have a definable role in post-Depression America.

126 Cahill, 40.
128 Ibid, 38
Chapter Two: Art for the Millions
The Implementation and Development of the New York City WPA Graphic Arts Division

In 1939, Lynd Ward, Supervisor of the New York City Graphic Arts Division, wrote:

Printmaking in modern America has reached what historians of some later time are sure to refer to as a ‘new stage’…The graphic processes, as arenas of original expression are no longer the strange and unknown lands they were during the first years of the century…Development of graphic artists is possible only through long practice and experience and, in providing the materials of work for artists, the Federal Art Project has not only enriched the immediate present but has laid the ground work for a future flowering of graphic art.¹²⁹

Ward was far from the only person to recognize and acknowledge that the establishment of the Graphic Arts Division within the schema of the Federal Art Project’s fine art programs had caused a significant shift in American printmaking. His comments reveal that the FAP did more than just give printmakers a job. It gave these artists a space to work, to experiment and to learn by a sense of mutual inspiration. This chapter posits that by relieving printmakers of the economic pressures of the open market and providing access to materials and other artists, the FAP affected a series of technical and aesthetic innovations that forever altered the direction of printmaking in America.

While the Project was far from a perfect solution and suffered from a number of bureaucratic and administrative inefficiencies, it was successful in many significant ways and the general consensus among artists was that the benefits of

¹²⁹Ward, a wood engraver, illustrator and children’s book author, was hired as the Gustave von Groschwitz’s replacement as Supervisor of the FAP Graphic Arts Division in New York City. He was followed by Werner Drewes and Oscar Weissbuch. See Lynd Ward, “Printmakers of Tomorrow,” Parnassus, vol. 11, no. 3 (March 1939): 8, 12.
being employed on the Program outweighed the negatives. This chapter seeks to answer how, through consistent financial support and the tireless efforts of Administrators such as Cahill and McMahon, the Federal Art Project “enriched the immediate present” and catalyzed the development of a series of new technical and aesthetic styles. This chapter examines how the Federal Art Project gave artists the support they needed to reach new levels of creative success which ultimately caused a paradigm shift to occur within American printmaking.

This chapter, first, contextualizes the Graphic Arts Division both within the trajectory of printmaking in twentieth century America and within the schema of the WPA Federal Art Project, then, provides an overview of the workshop and examines who was eligible to work in this division. Finally, this chapter examines prominent themes that emerge from a close analysis of the prints produced. Among these themes, one can readily identify a preoccupation with the laborer, industry, vignettes of rural and urban life, and a strong modernist movement, particularly evident in prints by Stuart Davis. Through a close analysis of testimonials from printmakers such as Jacob Kainen, Anton Refregier, Elizabeth Olds and Russell Limbach, this chapter examines how these artists understood their responsibilities as federal employees and analyzes how the artists’ interpretation of their roles, abilities and responsibilities coincided or clashed with the administrative policies of the WPA. In conclusion, this chapter examines how these artists worked to create a vital “art for the millions.”

This chapter expands upon key points made by Jacob Kainen in his essay, entitled The Graphic Arts Division of the WPA Federal Art Project, published in
O’Connor’s *The New Deal Art Projects*. The essay is of particular interest and importance as Kainen describes in great detail how the New York City workshop was organized, which artists were eligible for employment, as well as documenting his personal employment history on the Project. Kainen, who went on to become curator of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Smithsonian, wrote the essay three decades after the end of the WPA in response to Francis O’Connor’s 1972 NEA questionnaire. Because it was written several decades later, Kainen’s essay offers a strong analysis of how the Project affected a real change in American printmaking during the twentieth century. Kainen’s essay currently constitutes the most complete account of daily life on the Graphic Arts Division. For this reason the essay remains a critical source for those interested in the New York City Graphic Arts Division of the FAP.

Francis O’Connor’s *Art for the Millions* serves as another important source for this chapter. *Art for the Millions* was the name given to the national report that the Washington Office of the WPA/FAP intended to publish in the late 1930s in an attempt to garner a favorable public image. The report was to be heavily illustrated in order to highlight the importance and quality of the WPA activities.130 In describing the project, Holger Cahill wrote:

> It is our intention to publish the kind of Report that will not only document our accomplishment but do this in a unique and persuasive manner. We came to the conclusion that the most forceful and dramatic way of getting our story across would be to have it come from the lips of those Project workers…who have made our accomplishments possible.131

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130 O’Connor, *Art for the Millions; Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, 13.
131 Ibid, 13.
To this end, the WPA solicited essays from Project artists and administrators, to be written on project time.132 Numerous artists, such as Russell Limbach, Mabel Dwight, Stuart Davis, Elizabeth Olds and Anthony Velonis, and administrators, such as Holger Cahill, shared their perspectives of life on the Project. As Cahill stated, “artists, contrary to prevailing opinion, have something vital to say about themselves, their crafts, about the world they live in, and about the relation of all of these things to the Federal Art Project.”133 The essays that the WPA artists contributed are significant because they reveal major trends in art during the Depression years. Artists reflected on and responded to contemporary aesthetic questions, political controversies and social critique. For this reason, *Art for the Millions* is a unique primary source document from which this thesis draws heavily. *Art for the Millions* remained unpublished until Francis O’Connor traced the manuscript to Cahill’s widow, Dorothy Miller. Miller gave the original material to the Smithsonian Institute. In the early 1970s, O’Connor published an edition that followed the basic organization of the illustrated “dummy” that WPA administrators had produced in 1938. He made minimal adjustments in the final version and added as the introduction a speech that Cahill had given in 1939 in honor of John Dewey’s birthday.134

In order to understand the paradigm shift that occurred during the 1930s, it is necessary to have a general understanding of what came before and what actually changed as a result of the initiation of the Graphic Arts Division. During the middle of the nineteenth century there was a revival in etching as an original form of creative

133 Ibid, 13.
During the proceeding century and a half, etching had fallen out of favor as a fine art medium and was regarded predominantly as a method for reproducing works of art in other media. The etching revival began in France with the Barbizon school, a group that, according to Lang and Lang, felt “completely out of sympathy with the then current academic style and sought inspiration from the work of [their] Dutch predecessors.” They turned to etching as a free, expressive medium that eloquently captured naturalistic scenes of rural life. Artists such as Charles Jacque, Jean-Francois Millet and Charles Daubigny found that they could translate their ideas directly from nature onto their matrices and into their prints. When these artists began to etch there was not a strong market for their prints. They etched because to them the process represented a vital and expressive medium. The etching revivalists “rejected the hard line, tight handling, and high finish of engraving in favor of a freer, sketchier style and more personally expressive and spontaneous mood.” As their work became better known, the number of etchers increased, which according to the Langs’, indicated that etching had, once again, become a fashionable and marketable medium.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler was greatly influenced by the etchings that he encountered during his time in Paris. The American expatriate and his brother-in-law, Francis Seymour Haden, are largely responsible for the etching revival movement in

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136 Ibid, 25.
139 Lang and Lang, 25-26.
England and later helped to spark a similar craze in America.\textsuperscript{140} Haden and others promoted etching as a painter’s art and aimed to elevate the medium from its reputation as a commercial or reproductive medium to that of an artistic or creative one.

The etching craze came to America in the late nineteenth century, when a group of artists organized themselves into the New York Etching Club.\textsuperscript{141} Joseph Pennell, a conservative artist and arguably one of the most important American artists associated with the etching revival, worked for many years in Europe before returning to New York in 1917 to teach etching at the Art Students League. Two years later he published the first edition of his text on printmaking. Of particular note is his volume, \textit{Etchers and Etching} (1919). The text elucidates a number of significant elements that came to define works created during the etching revival. Pennell saw etching as a specific and particular art that was only accessible to a select few. By this he meant that good technique was not enough. He believed that for an artist to make a great etching he had to have an emotional connection with the medium and feel that the subject could only be rendered in etching.\textsuperscript{142} He saw etching as a vital art that was the product of an artist’s passion:

expressed with the fewest, vital, indispensable lines, of the most personal character: an impression, a true impression of something seen, something felt by the etcher, something that means a great deal to him, which can be expressed only by etching, something he hopes someone may understand and care for, as he the artist does, for it is all his own work.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{James McNeill Whistler: The Etchings, A Catalogue Raisonné.}”
\textsuperscript{141} Lang, 53.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid, 15.
In Pennell’s comments we can see the same dedication to capturing a moment in time that the Barbizon school advocated. Pennell emphasized integrity of process and supreme beauty as being more important than technical skill. In his eyes, Whistler was the only modern artist who had successfully created etchings of this nature. Everyone else, including Haden and Charles Meryon, were merely contributing to what Pennell referred to as the “etching bubble.”¹⁴⁴ Pennell believed that the majority of artists who made etchings during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century were merely doing so to achieve commercial success and that they were more interested in fulfilling collectors’ orders than in creating quality art. Pennell argued that contemporary collectors purchased etchings as an investment rather than as a piece of art, a tendency that is evidenced by Henry Clay Frick’s print collection. Many collectors considered etchings to be the art of the cognoscenti and an exclusive method by which to invest in art. They purchased portfolios of signed, limited edition prints, thus cementing etching as an art for the aristocracy. The continued rise in the popularity of etching and the attendant inflation of print prices continued until World War I, at which time, as Pennell noted, “contemporary art suffered a serious blow.”¹⁴⁵

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the American print market remained limited to prints produced by etching revivalists or old masters and, as

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¹⁴⁴ Lang, 25.
¹⁴⁵ Pennell, xi.
Kainen noted, “in 1935 printmaking was an unrewarding field for nonconformist artists.”\textsuperscript{146} Kainen wrote:

Until the early 1930s, the United States was not so different from other countries in its largely conservative attitude towards prints. The greatest modern masters from Delacroix to Picasso, although acclaimed as painters, did not fit the standard backward-looking style of the print societies and therefore were not highly regarded as printmakers. The field was dominated by conservative artists who were concerned mainly with conspicuous technical competence, in the illustrative sense.\textsuperscript{147}

Kainen clearly demonstrates that some artists were frustrated with what he called “the conservative tradition,” focused on illustration and technique, and the uninspired works by second-generation etchers who continued to work in the styles of Haden, Whistler and other revivalists.\textsuperscript{148} James Watrous echoed Kainen when he wrote:

Many of the second-generation etchers continued for years to emulate the prints of the French and Whistler and Haden. Although their conservative etchings revealed modestly individualized conceptions and personalized styles, they became latter-day heirs and, in some degree, victims of a dominating heritage handed down by the European artist-etchers who had nurtured the revival of the art in the nineteenth century. A comparable preference for, and a veneration of, the works of foreign masters persisted among collectors and dealers as their interest in prints by current American etchers subsided into routine acquisition and sale of skillfully wrought pictorials.\textsuperscript{149}

Because the second generation of etching revivalists continued to emulate the works of Haden, Whistler and other etching revivalists, their works became static and routine. This focus on etching left lithography and woodblock prints on the periphery of American printmaking. Kainen described woodcutters and lithographers as fighting

\textsuperscript{146} Jacob Kainen, "The Graphic Arts Division of the WPA Federal Art Project," \textit{The New Deal Art Projects; an Anthology of Memoirs}, Francis V. O'Connor, ed. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution) 156.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid, 156.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, 155-156.
\textsuperscript{149} Watrous, 44.
an uphill battle in their efforts to secure recognition from print societies, art dealers and collectors due to the entrenched preference for artists “who worked in the copper plate media.” \(^{150}\) He noted, however, that galleries were often less conservative than the societies, and made some effort to promote work in a variety of media and aesthetic styles. These galleries and a small selection of print publications served as the main agencies for the exhibition of “advanced tendencies in printmaking.” \(^{151}\)

In his masterful study of twentieth century printmaking, Watrous refers to the first three decades of the Twentieth Century as the years of diversity and progress, during which a small number of artistic “mavericks” were impelled to seek “different artistic goals” as the status quo could no longer meet their creative needs. \(^{152}\) The 1913 New York Armory Show, served as a critical vehicle that brought about changes in aesthetic consciousness. \(^{153}\) The show, officially called The International Exhibition of Modern Art, was the first large exhibition of modernist European art in America. The exhibition, held in the 69th Regiment Armory building in New York City, showcased examples of Symbolism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Cubism and introduced many American artists to the modern stylistic movements that were developing in Europe. John Quinn, a successful New York lawyer and art collector, opened the exhibition with the words:

\(^{150}\) Kainen, 155, 156.
\(^{151}\) Kainen names the print publications as being the *Contemporary American Prints*, which was the publication of the Art Dealers Association, *Prints*, a bi-monthly magazine that ran from 1930-1938, and the American Institute of Graphic Arts’ *Fifty Prints of the Year*. Ibid, 156.
\(^{152}\) Watrous, 44.
\(^{153}\) Charlot, 45 and "As Avant Garde as the Rest of Them: An Introduction to the Armory Show." *The University of Virginia*. 
The members of this association have shown you that American artists—young American artists, that is—do not dread, and have no need to dread, the ideas or the culture of Europe. They believe that in the domain of art only the best should rule. This exhibition will be epoch making in the history of American art. Tonight will be the red-letter night in the history of not only American but of all modern art...[we] felt it was time the American people had an opportunity to see and judge for themselves concerning the work of the Europeans who are creating a new art.\footnote{Richard H. Love, and Carl William Peters, \textit{Carl W. Peters: American Scene Painter from Rochester to Rockport} (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 1999) 208.}

Quinn refers specifically to the younger generation of American artists, revealing that he and others believed the potential for the creation of a new art lay with them.

Artist and curator Jean Charlot called the Armory Show “the aesthetic thunderbolt...which shattered the only accepted artistic faith and replaced it with other creeds, sapling-like, bud-hard and dynamic.”\footnote{Charlot, 45.} Following the Armory Show, a small number of printmakers, many of whom embraced liberal social and political attitudes, began creating prints in a diverse spectrum of aesthetic styles. As Watrous stated, some such as John Sloan, Edward Hopper and George Bellows chose to create prints that portrayed facets of contemporary urban life. Artists such as Max Weber, John Marin and Arthur Davies used features of European modernism in their work and others such as Louis Lozowick, Jan Matulka and Charles Sheeler chose to focus on the effects of urban industrialization. Each of these artists created works that reflected the multifaceted features of American art, which emerged and developed after the Armory Show.\footnote{Watrous, 32.} While many American critics condemned these new styles
as vulgar and unworthy of admiration or acclaim, Charlot commended the artists for “unlacing the stays of the academic tradition.”\textsuperscript{157}

Despite their dedication to a revitalization of American printmaking, many of these artists were unable to find consistent patrons and found it difficult to sell their works. Hopper sold his first print in 1913 but could not sell another until 1923.\textsuperscript{158} John Sloan was similarly unsuccessful in his sales and was forced to turn to commercial art to support himself.\textsuperscript{159} Due to a lack of support from dealers and galleries, the already precarious economic situation of the American artist became dire during the Great Depression and many were compelled to direct their time and energy towards magazine illustration, commercial art or teaching.\textsuperscript{160} As was stated in Chapter One, it was not until the artists organized themselves into a union and demanded that the government take action that the Roosevelt Administration stepped in and offered widespread economic support, thus giving printmakers the opportunity to really explore the technical and visual potential of the graphic arts.

In the fall of 1935, Audrey McMahon received permission from Washington to establish a graphic arts workshop in New York City.\textsuperscript{161} She assembled an administrative staff to oversee the division and hired technical supervisors to outfit the workshop. She took the suggestion of Bernarda Bryson, a leading member of the Artists’ Union and the wife of Ben Shahn, and hired Russell T. Limbach, a skilled

\textsuperscript{157} Charlot, 45.  
\textsuperscript{158} Watrous, 57.  
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid, 57.  
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 95.  
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 97.
artist and printer, to outfit the graphic arts workshop.\textsuperscript{162} According to Kainen, Limbach’s job was to “plan the workshop for maximum working efficiency, to procure equipment and supplies, and to find skilled printers.”\textsuperscript{163} Workshop supplies included various presses for printing in lithography, woodblock media and etching. It also included a special tank and a wooden grill for graining lithograph stones as well as various kinds of tables for workshop operations. Woodcutting tables were designed at a thirty-degree angle so that the matrices would not slip as artists worked on the blocks.\textsuperscript{164}

Supplies included lithograph stones of various grades and sizes, paper suitable for the different processes, plank and end-grain wood for the woodcut and wood-engraving media, copper plates for the intaglio processes, and tools and materials needed in all the techniques of printmaking. In addition, storage racks had to be designed for storing stones, plates and woodblocks.\textsuperscript{165}

Assembling the workshop proved to be a serious challenge for McMahon and Limbach. Funds had been allocated for artist salaries and to obtain supplies, however no money had been set aside to purchase printing presses. Eventually, “sympathetic individuals” donated these presses.\textsuperscript{166}

On February 6, 1936, the graphic division’s studio workshop was officially opened on the twelfth floor of the WPA/FAP headquarters at 6 East 39\textsuperscript{th} Street. Kainen recounts that demonstrations in all the major printing processes were carried out by artists hired during the early months of the program and that Harry Leroy

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 97. See also Russell T. Limbach, Letter to Samuel Golden, January 6, 1940, Russell T. Limbach Papers, Wesleyan University Special Collection and Archives, Middletown, Connecticut.
\textsuperscript{163} Kainen, 157.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid, 162.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid, 157.
\textsuperscript{166} Kainen does not specify who these “sympathetic individuals” were. Ibid, 157.
Taskey, one of the first artists hired by the WPA Graphic Arts Division, created a limited edition lithograph, entitled *City Hall* (1936) to commemorate the opening of the Division.\(^{167}\)

Gustave von Groschwitz, who later became Curator of Prints at the Cincinnati Art Museum, was hired as Supervisor of the Graphic Arts Division. Months after the opening, he wrote:

> A workshop equipped with work-tables, and the presses necessary for printing, has been established at 6 East 39\(^{th}\) Street in New York. To date, sixty-one men and women have been assigned to work here, with materials provided by the Federal Government, to make lithographs, etchings, wood engravings, linoleum cuts and drawings. Their work, when finished, will be allocated to museums, schools, hospitals, and other tax-supported institutions at a nominal price. This price covers only the cost of the materials used. Thus the project will be in part self-liquidating.\(^{168}\)

Gustave von Groschwitz’s comment gives us a sense of the workshop’s scope. He states that within the first several months, sixty-one artists were hired to make fine art prints. No more than ninety artists worked in the graphic art workshop at any given period, thus by February 1936, the workshop was already operating on a large scale. He also gives us information regarding how the FAP subsidized the costs of each art project. Through nominal charges for the prints the workshop was expected to generate a small income in order to offset federal spending. This policy, which was discussed in Chapter One, reveals that the WPA was wary of being accused of

\(^{167}\) A year later, the graphic arts workshop, along with the rest of the fine art programs, was relocated to 235 East 42\(^{nd}\) Street, and in September 1938, the workshop moved to its final quarters at 110 King Street. Kainen cites an administrative report from September 29, 1938, that lists Augustus Peck as shop chairman of etching and Ted Wahl as assistant supervisor of lithography; Frank Nankivell printed etchings; Isaac Sanger printed woodblocks on a Hoe hand press and Louis Schanker acted as a supervisor in color block printing. Ibid, 157.

\(^{168}\) Von Groschwitz quoted in Kainen, 158.
spending money unwisely and had wished to publicly advertise their prudent
economic strategies.

Production requirements varied between the fine art programs. Graphic artists
were expected to complete at least one print per month. The Administration
required that each printmaker submit a preparatory sketch in order to insure that the
content was acceptable and that the finished product would have “artistic value.”

McMahon wrote:

Graphic artists were a little more tightly held [then the other fine art projects],
as they were obliged to submit a sketch of their planned work before obtaining
a go-ahead signal. Whether this arose from the fact that the medium made it
possible, or whether it was motivated by the greater propensity of the graphic
artist to be a commentator, and that this was feared, I don’t recall.

During her original proposal, McMahon had predicted that prints would yield the
bulk of allocations. It is possible, then, that the Administration had more strict
policies for the graphic art because prints were circulated more widely than other
media. From McMahon’s comments we can deduce that the Administration
maintained a set of standards for the works produced under their patronage.

Acceptable content and artistic value were stressed, although neither was explicitly
defined by the Administration. However, despite this lack of explicit guidelines most
artists received approval to complete their intended design, which suggests that they
understood what the Administration was looking for and did their best to abide by
those standards.

169 Kainen, 158.
170 See Cahill.
171 Audrey McMahon, "A General View of the WPA Federal Art Project in New
York City and State," The New Deal Art Projects: an Anthology of Memoirs, Francis
V. O'Connor, ed. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution) 58.
172 Kainen, 157.
Kainen writes that after receiving approval artists received the appropriate matrix for their medium: a stone for lithographers, a block for woodcuts or a plate for etching.\textsuperscript{173} Lithographers were allowed to select the stone that they wished to use, a liberty that Kainen believed was important, as “certain kinds of stones were best for fine or broad treatment.”\textsuperscript{174} The artist would grind off the design left on the stone from previous printings and would grain the stone to their liking.

The workshop space was limited as the presses occupied most of it.\textsuperscript{175} As a result, artists had the option of working either at the workshop or at home [image 2.1]. Lithographers working outside of the workshop were notified when their stone would be delivered by truck to their home or studio. Kainen noted that many lithographers worked from home while woodcutters found it more convenient to work in the workshop:

At the shop the artist was without the comforts of home and moreover he had to work in a public situation with people watching as he mulled over his compositions. He had the additional expense of going out to eat, to say nothing of the extra carfare. Also he had to work at stated hours, while at home he could work evenings if he wished. At both places the necessary materials were provided for the lithographer – crayons and heavy lithographic ink (tusche) and a barrel stave or another form of wooden bridge set over the stone to permit him to draw without the danger of getting his greasy fingers on the surface. Doing woodcuts was more convenient at the shop because of the special tables available. Etching was rarely done in the shop because of the acid fumes which would create an unpleasant and even toxic atmosphere for some workers. At home the etcher could bite his plate near an open window.\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, 157-158.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid, 157-158.
\textsuperscript{175} Langa, \textit{Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York}, 25.
\textsuperscript{176} Kainen, 162.
When they had completed the design on the stone, artists working from home notified the managing clerks, who would arrange for the stone to be picked up and transported back to the FAP workshop for printing.

Artist collaborated closely with professional printers to produce a limited number of proofs, which were submitted to a committee of project supervisors. This collaboration was important because many of the professional artists lacked the technical training and the patience to independently print editions of their own work. Kainen wrote “since we watched and took part in all the printing processes, we became familiar with the operation of a print workshop. This experience proved to be valuable later on when we had to qualify for jobs in the print field.”177 By working closely with professional printers, artists absorbed the practical and technical skills they needed to print their own work in the future.

Prints were published in editions of twenty-five to seventy-five impressions, depending on artistic value and the expected popularity of the print. Most, however, did not exceed twenty-five. These editions were kept small so the prints would not quantitatively compete with those produced in the private sector. Each print was rubber-stamped with the official Project stamp, which read, “Federal Art Project/WPA NYC.” Fred Becker, who was employed on the Project as a wood engraver, wrote that the WPA followed no specific system in the process. The stamp was occasionally applied “a number of times on the back of the print, sometimes on the front, and occasionally next to the signature,” reflecting a lack of bureaucratic

177 Ibid, 158.
standardization. Artists could request three proofs for themselves, but were not allowed to sell them while working for the project. In addition to reaffirming that the prints were the property of the WPA, the stamp served to block any potentially illicit sales. Artists found this policy restrictive and frustrating because it limited the number of impressions that each artist retained after the dissolution of the WPA.

Regardless of whether the artist decided to work at home or in the workshop, he was required to check in at a central location by 9 a.m. each morning. Most artists, including Kainen, saw this process as an incredible waste of time, as well as an administrative attempt to standardize labor among artists. The policy failed to take into consideration the fact that many artists did not work on a 9:00 to 5:00 schedule and that they might prefer to work in the evenings or at night. This heavy-handed regulation frustrated many artists who resisted revolting out of concern for their jobs. In an effort to make the best of a frustrating situation, artists took advantage of these moments and socialized with the other artists around them.

After checking in, artists who were not working at the workshop were required to remain in their homes at all times. Periodically, timekeepers would check in on them. These visits were unscheduled and if the artist did not answer the door, he was registered as absent without leave. During an interview for the Archives of American Art, Holger Cahill recalled that Mabel Dwight, an elderly printmaker who lived on Staten Island, was deaf and unable to hear her alarm clock. She would sit up all night in order to arrive at the morning check-in time punctually and was so

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178 Becker, 79.
179 Kainen, 163.
180 Ibid, 163.
worried that she would not hear the timekeeper’s knocks that she perpetually lost sleep.\textsuperscript{181} Other artists recalled that they were hesitant to go to the bathroom for fear that the timekeeper might come during their absence. Fred Becker wrote that if he stepped out to have a meal, to shop, or purchase art materials, he would often return to find threatening notes pinned to his door.\textsuperscript{182}

If they wanted to go out to sketch, artists were required to inform the Administration that they would be away from home and had to give a precise time for when they could be found at a specified location. Timekeepers were frequently dispatched in order to check that the artist was where they said they would be. Kainen complained:

\begin{quote}
This procedure wasted the artist’s time and kept him from wandering about – the only way he could find unexpected subject matter. These timekeeping abuses, characteristic of the first few years, were later relaxed when it became evident to government officials, who dictated to the Project administration, that treating artists like factory hands was an unrealistic way to sponsor the production of works of art. Timekeeping methods were a nuisance and a bore but they were not the worst abuse the artist had to bear.\textsuperscript{183}
\end{quote}

Rather, the “worst abuse” came in the form of the WPA’s 1939 policy, which required that the FAP dismiss Project members every eighteen months. The policy, as was discussed in Chapter One, was ostensibly enacted to allow artists to find jobs in the private sector. It is more probable that the impetus stemmed from increased Congressional pressure and a constantly decreasing budget.\textsuperscript{184} Kainen saw the policy as unfair and excessive because there were no jobs in the private sector for these artists and recalled that while the policy did not officially go into effect until 1939,

\textsuperscript{181} Oral history interview with Holger Cahill.
\textsuperscript{182} Becker, 79.
\textsuperscript{183} Kainen, 163.
\textsuperscript{184} Helen Langa, \textit{Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York}, 205.
the mass firings actually began as early as the fall of 1936. In July of 1937, over seventy artists were fired without notice. Among those fired were Joseph Stella, Julian Levi and Fritz Eichenberg. Kainen remarked that the Administration did not seem to follow any apparent standards in selecting artists for dismissal, but that many were non-citizens, including a number of Chinese and Japanese artists. As was stated in Chapter One, the exclusion of foreigners was legalized in 1937, when Congress passed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, a law that forbid the employment of non-citizen foreigners on the WPA.\(^{185}\)

Kainen, himself, was fired from the project three times and each time reapplied for employment. He recalls that the procedures for reapplication were strenuous and demeaning. The artist had to:

> declare himself a pauper and qualify for home relief. Then he had to wait in a home relief center every day of every week, sitting on a hard bench in a dreary waiting room together with other unemployed persons and homeless derelicts. He kept his eye on a blackboard, on which a clerk would occasionally list a job opening in white chalk. The artist remained there, if he was determined to get back on the Project, while such jobs as ‘dishwasher,’ ‘laborer,’ ‘porter,’ and the like were inscribed. When, finally, there appeared the words ‘graphic artist, WPA, 110 King Street,’ he made a mad dash for the exit and took the first street-car to his destination. The artist who got there first got the job.\(^{186}\)

Fred Becker recalled that when he applied for matriculation into the WPA he was a “full-fledged Federal pauper” living in a decrepit apartment complex known as Slaughterhouse Alley.\(^{187}\) His desperation mirrors Kainen’s. Both were without alternatives and depended upon the Project to survive. Life was not easy in the WPA

\(^{185}\) "Lower East Side Tenement Museum."
\(^{186}\) Kainen, 164.
\(^{187}\) Becker, 76.
and Kainen recorded his personal employment history in an effort to demonstrate the “typical vicissitudes” of WPA firing and re-hiring:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment/Reassignment</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Pay Rate</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignment 8-26-35</td>
<td></td>
<td>$103.40 per month</td>
<td>Termination 7-15-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment 9-2-37</td>
<td></td>
<td>$95.44 per month</td>
<td>Termination 8-31-39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assignment 12-13-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>$87.60 per month</td>
<td>Termination 4-23-41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assignment 5-22-41</td>
<td></td>
<td>$87.60 per month</td>
<td>Termination 5-6-42 (Left to take job in the graphic arts field)</td>
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</tbody>
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Louis Lozowick, a lithographer, muralist and easel painter employed on the FAP between 1935 and 1940, also documented his employment history. As with Kainen, he was hired, reassigned, terminated and then rehired.188

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<tr>
<th>Assignment/Reassignment</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Pay Rate</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignment 11-23-35</td>
<td></td>
<td>$103.40 per month</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassignment 12-16-36</td>
<td></td>
<td>$115.00 per month</td>
<td>Supervising Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay Adjustment 4-16-38</td>
<td></td>
<td>$91.10 per month</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassignment 9-1-39</td>
<td></td>
<td>$87.60 per month</td>
<td>Supervising Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination 10-4-39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assignment 10-13-39</td>
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<td>$87.60 per month</td>
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<tr>
<td>Termination 10-25-40</td>
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Lozowick had no other income while on the project and he and Kainen shared similar feelings regarding the hiring and firing policies of the FAP.190

Kainen recalled that the fear of being fired was frightening, “infected our thinking, consciously and unconsciously, and gave us the feeling of leading a transient existence…This situation, in large measure, kept us from fully concentrating on our art and prevented us from expanding our possibilities naturally.” The fear of termination permeated the workshop and put pressure on the Project artists to produce works of art that had artistic value and were pleasing to the public. Becker recalled

188 Kainen, 164.
189 Louis Lozowick Papers.
190 Kainen, 164 and Louis Lozowick Papers.
191 Kainen, 164.
that it rapidly became apparent that the upper level government officials were worried about the apparent radicalism of the WPA artists, many of whom were “left of center politically.”192 Elizabeth Olds, like many other artists employed by the WPA, toed the line regarding the political content of her prints. As was stated in the previous chapter, in 1939, when Congress accused the WPA of promoting a communist agenda, Olds decided to edition her more extreme political prints in George Miller’s private lithography shop rather than at the Project workshop for fear of being fired.193

The above recollections reveal that the Project was plagued by a number of bureaucratic inefficiencies. Nevertheless, many of the graphic artists enjoyed their tenure on the Federal Art Project. Kainen recalled the enthusiasm and goodwill felt by many of the participating artists, feelings he attributed to the fact that each had been given the opportunity to “function full time as artists and work in a spirit of camaraderie with other artists.”194 Boris Gorelick, a muralist and graphic artist, remembered the whole period with fondness, stating:

I think it was one of the most stimulating periods I’ve personally lived through. And, I think it was also one of the most stimulating periods of any time in American history… it was tremendously interesting; it was culturally exciting; and it was an intellectual climate that I wish could be duplicated again. There was ferment; there was curiosity; there was agitation; there was activity; there was interest; and there was freedom of thought… it brought about great friendships, a feeling of oneness, camaraderie.195

Gorelick’s comment gives us a sense of how fascinating and educational life was at the workshop. The comings and goings of each artist contributed to a melting pot
atmosphere where artists exchanged ideas, reminiscences and suggestions. Anthony Velonis, who joined the workshop in the late 1930s, stated:

[The Project] saved my life, put it that way, literally. I mean, literally, you know, it gave it some meaning, and it was the best university I've ever gone to. I couldn't have asked for anything better. The contact and the dialogue with all those artists and the work that took place was just invaluable. You couldn't have gotten it in any other way.  

Kainen, Velonis and Gorelick each indicate that the combined experiences of producing prints, having them professionally printed, and working in such a technically and emotionally stimulating environment more than made up for the indignities that the artists suffered.

At the workshop, artists were given the opportunity to work side by side with some of the greatest contemporary printmakers, such as Stuart Davis, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Adolf Dehn and Louis Lozowick. The atmosphere was not seen as hierarchical, and as Kainen stated, “there was no ‘star system’ – we were all in the same boat.”

Refregier reiterated this sentiment when he stated, “For the record, while on WPA we had complete democracy, no name stood out, every man had an equal chance.” The collaborative, democratic structure of the workshop gave the artists a common experience to draw upon in their art. Dehn, Kuniyoshi, Lozowick and Davis, like each of the other artists, had come to the WPA due to economic need, and it was this common element brought the united the artists on the Project.

One of the major benefits of working on the Project was that the workshop did more than give artists a job. It also gave them a space to interact. Kainen writes that

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197 Kainen, 166.
198 Oral history interview with Anton Refregier.
they were stimulated by each other’s presence and recalls a particularly rewarding moment when he was drawing on a stone and Stuart Davis came by. He writes:

 Inspired by his presence I made some bold decisions, almost reckless ones, that gave some verve and sparkle to the composition. It was probably the best print I made on the Project. I still remember with pleasure his kind words: ‘That’s damn good.’\(^{199}\)

From Kainen’s comments we can see that a sense of mutual learning and mutual inspiration encouraged artists to take risks in their work. Artists reached for new levels in their artistic creation. This experimentation slowly increased the aesthetic standards of the workshop and allowed artists to develop their own style. In 1942, Carl Zigrosser, celebrated print scholar and curator, wrote:

 Time and time again I have watched the progress of a particular artist as evidenced by the sequence of his prints over a period of time. His early prints would be halting and derivative; after six months’ or a years’ time he would find his own distinctive style, and from then on continue as a full-fledged master. If he had not had the opportunity for trial and experiment [while on the Project]… he would never have found himself as an artist and might have been driven into some other profession.\(^{200}\)

In both Kainen and Zigrosser’s comments we easily see that the workshop was more than a place of employment for many of these artists. It was a place of learning, a place of experimentation and a place of mutual inspiration.

 By April 1936, enough prints had been produced to mount an exhibition at the newly opened Federal Art Project Gallery, located at 225 West 57\(^{th}\) Street.\(^{201}\) The exhibition, which opened on April 30 and ran through May 13\(^{th}\), was a celebrated success. New York Times critic Edward Alden Jewell reported that “An onlooker

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\(^{199}\) Kainen does not record the name of this particular print. Kainen was born in 1909 and turned 26 in 1935. Kainen, 162.


\(^{201}\) Kainen, 158.
may hazard the opinion that in a general way the show just opened seems ahead of any previous WPA offering he has seen since the gallery began its career…and along with quite a bit that proves sound or reasonably so in craftsmanship, rather than inspired by sentiment and execution, one finds the occasional print of outstanding quality.” Overall, he determined that the quality of the works was “pretty good.”

A larger selection of prints was exhibited at the International Art Center in January 1937. The exhibition was appropriately entitled *Prints for the People*, a name that reflected the role that WPA administrators anticipated graphic art would play as a democratic and affordable art form within the schema of the fine art programs. *Prints for the People* included works by artists employed on the New York project, as well as project artists from workshops in Philadelphia, Cleveland, San Francisco, Massachusetts, and New Mexico. John Taylor Arms, a highly celebrated American printmaker, was invited to speak at the opening ceremony “because of his reputation as a fine etcher and in appreciation of his many efforts in the cause of American printmaking. His presence there lent an aura of commendation for federal support of the arts compounded by his declaration that ‘the works shown are deeply and sincerely felt and honestly and, in many cases, beautifully executed.’” The positive responses that the exhibition received from the *New York Times* and from artists such as John Taylor Arms buttressed the reputation of the Graphic Arts Division within the New York art scene as a legitimate enterprise dedicated to the creation of quality artwork.

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203 Jewell, "Federal Project Opens Art Exhibit."
204 Watrous, 97.
Three months later, in March 1937, another exhibition, this time limited to works created by artists on the New York Project, was mounted at the FAP gallery. Once again, John Taylor Arms was asked to give the opening address and was asked to contribute to the exhibition catalogue. In his address, he stated that the works produced by the FAP artists constituted a serious and worthwhile body of work. He stated “this exhibition reflects serious study, technical skill and, above all, artistic power.” His words, once again, were targeted to garner public approval. Holger Cahill traveled from Washington for the opening of the exhibition and both Cahill and Arms’ remarks were broadcast by a New York radio station, WHN, “for the express purpose of assuring the public that there was value in employing printmakers and to counter the criticisms of ‘boondoggling artists’ supported by federal taxes.” This public relations method proved successful, as evidenced by the high attendance by the public for each FAP exhibition.

The majority of the prints produced on the project were unimaginative, due, in part, to the fact that artists were required to produce a minimum of one print per month and also because not every artist on the project had the ability to produce quality artwork. Cahill recognized that trend and in a speech written in 1939 for John Dewey’s birthday, he stated:

One of the most important lessons of art history is that great art only arises in situations where there is a great deal of art activity and where the general level of art activity is high. When one goes through European art museums which preserve, in spite of all the destructive forces of time, an extraordinary quantity of works form the past, one is struck by the amount of work produced in the great periods. During the early part of the twentieth century it is said

205 Arms quoted in Watrous, 97.
206 Ibid, 97.
207 Morsell, “The Exhibition Program of the WPA/FAP,” 231.
that there were some forty thousand artists at work in Paris. Probably history
will not remember many of these artists. Probably, too, if these great numbers
had not been working, very few of those who will be remembered would have
been stimulated to creative endeavor. And even those who will be forgotten
were doing useful work in their own generation.208

Cahill understood that the majority of the artists employed on the project were not
capable of creating highly aesthetic or technically complicated works. However, he
recognized the importance of sponsoring art on a large-enough scale so that those
who were capable of doing so had the opportunity to mature. As John Walley, a WPA
artist from Illinois stated, “If you can create a number of plateaus, then you eventually
get the peaks.”209

As was stated previously, while the Administration was strict regarding
production rates and timekeeping, there were no explicit limitations or prescriptions
established regarding the content of the prints other than the fact that the prints had to
be appropriate for a mass audience and contain “aesthetic value.” Outside of these
stipulations, there was no pressure placed upon the artist to work in a specific
direction and they were welcome to draw from a variety of styles. In 1939, Elizabeth
McCausland, an important contemporary art critic, wrote:

We have, then, an art in America today of an eclectic cosmopolitan character.
No one style has made itself master, no one kind of subject matter
predominates. Yet from the flux of ideas and tendencies emerges a
recognizable idiom. From the melting pot, the American artist comes forth. To
be sure there are categories of Realism, Romanticism, Abstractionism,
Surrealism, Cubism and Classicism. But the lines of demarcation are not
rigid… generally the dominant style seems… [to be] a socially conscious
realism.210

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208 Cahill’s widow gave a written draft of the speech to O’Connor, who reproduced it
as the foreword in *Art for the Millions*, 18, 35.
209 John Walley, quoted in Mavigliano, 28.
The idea of an aesthetic melting pot is an appropriate metaphor. However, McCausland correctly points out that many artists, perhaps without meaning to, became social commentators who reacted to their immediate environment. In a world overtly affected by protracted economic and political crises, many artists turned away from an “art for art’s sake” paradigm in favor of an art that took the American people as its main subject.

This tendency towards American realism became apparent in 1936 when FAP administrators worked with the Museum of Modern Art to mount an exhibition entitled *New Horizons in American Art*. The exhibition, which was organized and directed by Cahill’s wife, Dorothy Miller, was the first major exposition of work created under the WPA. It included easel paintings, sketches for murals, sculptures, graphic art and works created by children in the Community Art Centers. Cahill and Miller assembled an exhibition catalogue that reproduced a number of the works, and also included both an introduction by Cahill and a foreword by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., then the Director of the Museum. Barr wrote:

> The material, assembled from every section of the United States, has been selected by the Director of the exhibition for its artistic value alone, no effort being made to consider it from a regional aspect. Taken as a whole, apart from its interest as an index of individual talents, it reveals certain major trends in contemporary American art.

Barr’s need to justify the selection of works comes off as defensive, as though he wished to repudiate the multiple accusations of “boondoggling.” In his description of

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the material, he aimed to justify the WPA by celebrating the artistic value of the works created under the Project and to reassure the audience that the works were the products of a successful national endeavor. Despite the defensive overtone, Barr’s quote is significant because he acknowledges the existence of several simultaneous trends in American art, each of which had artistic merit.

Cahill expanded upon this idea in his introduction:

From the opening of the World War up to the 1920’s the dominant tendency in art was in the direction of the segregated, the precious, the difficult. An amazing technical equipment was developed, with a polyglot of stylistic language often devoted to abstruse statement and consciously cultivated incomprehensibility. Art had become its own subject, and an understanding of its self-communicated mysteries was to be limited to a few initiatives…In the opening years of the twentieth century, seventy years after the incursion of frontier democracy into American art, a clear return to the interests of the average man was evident in the work of the group of Philadelphia artists, including such men as John Sloan and George Luks, and, later, George Bellows. These artists rediscovered the American scene and brought the gusty vitality of city streets into the staid salons of the genteel tradition…Strong currents toward an art of native social meaning were flowing in this country.213

Like Barr, Cahill argued that American artists wished to reclaim American art from the ivory tower of academia and “consciously cultivated incomprehensibility” and desired, instead, to create an “art for the millions.” Cahill’s comments confirm that the Administration used careful wording to support the Federal job-creation Project. By cultivating national support, they ensured the, at least temporary, success of the Project. Cahill stated that artists wished to create an art that was accessible and meaningful to their audience. To this end, many artists took contemporary life as their

213 Cahill, 14-15.
subject. They saw the material at their fingertips and the people on the street as subjects that merited their attention. More and more artists commented on their immediate milieu and reacted to life as they saw it. Richard Field wrote that the “American scene was and is the most central vehicle for the encoding of our self understanding.”

During her time on the WPA, printmaker Elizabeth Olds wrote, “with freedom to choose his subjects, [the artist] did not need to restrict himself to gamboling kittens and succulent nymphs (sure-fire sales), but could use any subject matter which seemed real and significant.” Olds believed that by responding to contemporary American life, artists were creating a vital art that had a real and significant value to the American people. As printmaker Mabel Dwight said, art should, “tell stories, express opinions, and ‘take sides.’” The WPA artists created relatively straightforward representations of urban and rural life alongside socially critical prints, and in the process, responded to or commented on the world around them. The variety of approaches to depicting social realism is perceptible in artist Raphael Soyer’s comment:

Well, I think that Social Realism is … one of those confusing words, you know, confusing phrases, you know, Social Realism… But then I think of

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215 Watrous, 108.
218 Olds, "Prints for Mass Production," 142.
people in the street. I painted people who were out of work. I mean, they just sat there, either in the sun or in the shade, and did nothing…Isabel Bishop painted people in Union Square, you know, which also may have been considered Social Realism.\(^\text{220}\)

Soyer’s comment reveals that social realism was not a perfectly defined movement and that there were a wide variety of possible approaches artists could utilize to engage with contemporary American life.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss in extended detail the types of works that were produced. However, by examining a selection of the prints created by project artists, one can readily identify a number of emergent themes. These include prints that focus on issues of employment. Other prints reflect contemporary industry and industrial labor, with a particular focus on mining and factory work. Frequently these prints had a socially critical quality that reveals the leftist leanings of a number of the FAP artists. Others opted for more prosaic scenes of leisure time activities, both urban and rural. Finally, a number of artists chose to use modernist styles, particularly abstraction, in their work. Together, these prints demonstrate the various approaches that the artists took in their work.

Artists’ newfound involvement with labor unions and the labor force produced a wide variety of perspectives on employment. For example, Margaret Lowengrund’s *Loading Bricks* [image 2.2] glorified the worker as he lays “society’s bricks.” The lithograph shows several youthful men at work at a construction site. The workers are shown as robust, youthful and healthy as they quickly and efficiently move the bricks from the lower left corner to the top right of the image by handing them upwards one at a time. This upward movement is echoed both in the musculature of the youths and

\(^{220}\) Oral history interview with Raphael Soyer.
in the rays of light that illuminate their actions. Lowengrund illustrates the upward thrust of urban development and cues her audience into the human factor that is necessary in all building. The workers are literally laying the bricks for a new world. Their open hands, which are strong and able, illustrate a unity of action, and a synthesis of form among the workers. Lowengrund’s lithograph is a striking image that celebrates the strength of the workers’ physiques, the efficiency of well-organized labor and the unity that can be achieved through cooperation. In this sense, the image celebrates the laborer and indicates the artist’s new involvement with the labor force.

Similarly, Louis Lozowick’s Night Repairs, 1939 [image 2.3] celebrates the worker as the critical element in a world that has come to rely more and more on industry and technology. In this lithograph, a faceless laborer, the everyman, works deep into the night to ensure that the train tracks are secured. The spray of the sparks illuminates his head, but not his face, as the worker repairs a length of track. Close behind his body are two containers that store his heat source, perhaps Thermite. To the right of the picture plane, another worker’s body is cropped, allowing only a partial view of our worker’s companion. Lozowick frequently eliminated the human figure from his prints, but here, he centralizes the figure against an eerie, luminescent night sky. In the back, another man walks towards a car. The juxtaposition of these two men calls to mind an implicit class struggle; the man with the car does not have to work, while the worker in the foreground must work deep into the night in order to provide for himself and his family. Thus framed, the central worker is given pride of place in a scene that acknowledges the union between man and technology, as well as
the sacrifices that the worker must make in order to survive. Lozowick reminds the
viewer that the strongest tools at one’s disposal are concentration and hard work.

Elizabeth Olds and Harry Gottlieb created a number of prints that portrayed
scenes of industrial labor. They focused particularly on factory and mine labor and
were moved when they witnessed for themselves the hazardous conditions that
miners faced in the thousands of mines throughout the United States. 221 Their prints
worked to extract what they saw as the essence of the worker experience. Gottlieb
(who received a Guggenheim scholarship in 1932 and was president of the Artists’
Union in 1936) and Olds (who received a Guggenheim scholarship in 1926) had a
shared interest in industrial themes, which led them to take study trips and develop
documentary sketches for their prints. 222 On one memorable occasion, they visited the
bootleg coalmines in Pennsylvania and even became members of an early miners
union. 223 Both later created lithographs derived from their experiences in

221 Cindy Medley Buckner, Art in a Day’s Work: Prints from the WPA: the Baltimore
Museum of Art, 11 June-24 September 2000 (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art,
222 Helen Langa, ”Elizabeth Olds: Gender Difference and Indifference,” Woman’s Art
223 Gottlieb writes, ”I found out about the closing of the coal mines in Pennsylvania. I
happened to have a friend with a car, so we [Olds and Gottlieb] decided to take a trip
to Pennsylvania to see what was going on… we went to the president of the newly
formed mine workers association— they were known as “bootleg miners”
unofficially—and although we had already been many places we asked him if there
was a place that might be particularly interesting. He directed us down the road about
fifteen miles long, which ended in a very lovely area. We parked the car and started to
take out our materials when suddenly about a dozen men with their captain came
towards us. We had a signed pass but they didn’t even give us a chance to say
anything. They said, ‘We’ll give you five minutes to get out of here, otherwise your
car with be overturned.’ We couldn’t understand it. We knew farers, we got to know
many of the miners— so we drove all the way back and went to the president of the
organization and told him what had happened. He said that was disgraceful, but it was
probably because we had a New York license plate… the miners, seeing our license
Pennsylvania. Olds’ *Bootleg Coal, Pennsylvania*, 1936 [image 2.4] is a powerful image that, as Langa notes, “indicates the care with which she recorded the miners' determined digging with improvised equipment. The cropped viewpoint and contrasting angular forms generate a compressed design that effectively conveys the men's fierce determination to mine coal-illegally if necessary-to support their families.”

Gottlieb’s *Bootleg Coal Mining*, 1936 [image 2.5] shows the same scene from a different viewpoint. From Gottlieb’s print, one can see how the miners improvised with the materials that they had at their disposal, such as using a car wheel as a pulley system. Like Olds, Gottlieb shows the overwhelming determination with which these men worked. They are self-sufficient and unabashedly doing what they must to survive. This reflects Gottlieb and Olds’s respect for the miners, as well as the artists’ own struggle for survival during the Depression.

Many artists created a fascinating range of images that portrayed city life images, particularly ones that documented changes to the urban landscape resulting from industrialization and urban development. Louis Lozowick, in particular, stressed the importance of representing the modern features of the American city. In 1927 Lozowick wrote:

> The dominant trend in America of today, beneath all the apparent chaos and confusion, is towards order and organization which find their outward sign...
and symbol in the rigid geometry of the American city: in the verticals of its smoke stacks, in the parallels of its car tracks, and in the squares of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arc of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks.  

The rigid geometry that Lozowick readily identified in the American city emerges in many of his lithographs, such as *Subway Station*, c.1938-1940 [image 2.6]. The lithograph shows two elements of modern New York City: industrial skyscrapers and subway stations. The rigid, cropped angles of the steel beams literally frame the figures, creating a clean, geometric composition that calls to mind the “machine aesthetics” advocated by German and Russian artists-in-exile during the 1920s. Lozowick’s print deals with changing urban structures and the evolution of man’s relationship with technology. On the one hand, it celebrates the successes of modern technology that Lozowick is best known for his precisionist urbanscapes that date from the 1920s. During that decade he created many prints that portrayed urban centers, such as New York, in geometric, architectonic terms. According to Barbara Zabel, Lozowick “expressed appreciation for urban forms without reference to its inhabitants.” His works frequently “display a strong instinct for design, reflecting the precision of form, the mathematical relation of parts, and the economy of the machine. The urban or machine esthetic was based on the premise that technological development was a beneficent and liberating force. But as the economy and the technology which supported it expanded, the artists began to realize that man’s ostensibly rational creation was becoming a threat; by the late 1920s it was no longer clear who had the controls, man or machine. Where the artists had once seen reason and order, they began to find potentially destructive forces. These fears materialized in the catastrophic stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing economic depression. Lozowick, along with many artists in the 1930s, became politically aware and expressed his disillusionment with technological society. The relationship of the worker to technology became his dominant theme. The metamorphosis in attitude which occurs between Lozowick’s art of the 1920s and that of the 1930s reflects his acute perception of the changing relationships between art, society and technology.” This print, like many others that he created in the 1930s, includes figures. It is possible that by arranging the figures within the geometric grid of the beams, he was suggesting that man was a victim of the “unrelenting progress of technology.” See Barbara Zabel, "Louis Lozowick and Urban Optimism of the 1920," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14.2 (1974): 20-21.

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225 Adams, 7.
226 Lozowick is best known for his precisionist urbanscapes that date from the 1920s. According to Barbara Zabel, Lozowick “expressed appreciation for urban forms without reference to its inhabitants.” His works frequently “display a strong instinct for design, reflecting the precision of form, the mathematical relation of parts, and the economy of the machine. The urban or machine esthetic was based on the premise that technological development was a beneficent and liberating force. But as the economy and the technology which supported it expanded, the artists began to realize that man’s ostensibly rational creation was becoming a threat; by the late 1920s it was no longer clear who had the controls, man or machine. Where the artists had once seen reason and order, they began to find potentially destructive forces. These fears materialized in the catastrophic stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing economic depression. Lozowick, along with many artists in the 1930s, became politically aware and expressed his disillusionment with technological society. The relationship of the worker to technology became his dominant theme. The metamorphosis in attitude which occurs between Lozowick’s art of the 1920s and that of the 1930s reflects his acute perception of the changing relationships between art, society and technology.” This print, like many others that he created in the 1930s, includes figures. It is possible that by arranging the figures within the geometric grid of the beams, he was suggesting that man was a victim of the “unrelenting progress of technology.” See Barbara Zabel, "Louis Lozowick and Urban Optimism of the 1920," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14.2 (1974): 20-21.
227 Watrous, 91.
technology and urban development. On the other, it comments on man’s lack of control over features of modern life such as the economy.

In 1936, satirist Mabel Dwight wrote, “Satire implies the presence of disease in the social organism... the real artist sees with clarity and coordinates his thoughts with precision—that is part of his training as an artist.” A number of artists created satirical or socially critical prints that indicated the presence of a “disease in the social organism.” Artists employed a variety of techniques, from comical vignettes documenting the absurdity of man to militant prints that dealt with provocative political themes. Jacob Kainen’s *Lunch*, 1936 [image 2.7] is an example of the former, while Gottlieb’s *Three Lane Traffic*, 1938, [image 2.8] is an example of the latter. Kainen’s lithograph portrays a large, rather grotesque looking woman dressed to the nines and out to eat. We, as the viewer, look directly at her, as though we are sitting across the table from her. She has ordered fish from the counter on the other side of the room and is now seated, ready to begin eating. Her hand in her mouth and the abandoned fork next to her plate indicates her vulgarity. The whole scene is rather off-putting and remarkably comical. By exaggerating her features and by placing the viewer directly in front of the protagonist, Kainen’s print satirizes bourgeois pretension. This woman has dressed up to eat at a cafeteria.

Harry Gottlieb’s print, *Three Lane Traffic* [image 2.9], is much more overt. As Langa observed, Gottlieb uses an “extremely sketchy, expressive form of realism to portray picketers outside an elegant men’s club on a rainy night, a scene that captures a typical moment of urban experience in a strike-prone decade. The sign-bearing

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228 Dwight, 151-152.
strikers, struggling pedestrians, and homeless man in the foreground offer a pointed contrast to the comfortable, wealthy men inside their elite haven.”229 These prints reveal the spectrum of the satirical and critical prints produced by artists on the WPA. Though neither artist was overt or scathing enough in the prints to jeopardize the their employment on the project, both Gottlieb and Kainen used their art to critically reflect on contemporary issues.

Until now, each of the works discussed has fallen into the category of the American Scene. O’Connor saw the American Scene as a broad, overarching category that represented a familiar and popular side of national consciousness. The American Scene became popular among artists and patrons because it represented a sociological and ideological shift away from a dependence on European art in favor of an art with an American focus.230 In his essay, Kainen wrote:

Even those who had some degree of sophistication could not resist the prevailing concern with the American scene… the movement symbolized an effort to break with traditional European sources and find inspiration in American life and culture. In a way, it asserted that an honest and informed naiveté constituted a fresher approach to American artists than a transplanted Europeanism. The economic crisis, which the artists shared with the American people, gave point to this outlook.231

The language that Kainen used here parallels the arguments that the WPA Administration made in support of the Project. This type of wholesome, nationalistic rhetoric reaffirmed the WPA’s role as an Ideological State Apparatus.

The American Scene included historical narratives and portraits, which O’Connor saw as reflective of the retrospective tendencies inherent in American

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230 The term “American Scene” was defined in Chapter One as: “A term used to describe scenes of typical American life.” See O’Connor, *Art for the Millions*, 21.
231 Kainen, 166.
culture of the 1930s. Related to the American Scene were images of the laborer and industry, both of which also represented a search for an authentic American art.

Alternatively, some artists chose modernist or abstract styles in their search for a vital and relevant art. Kainen wrote:

While much of the work was labored and illustrative the strongest examples reflected some of the major stylistic developments of the period. The first wave of modernism in America had subsided and cubist and post-Cezanne composition had been replaced by overtones of surrealism, Mexican proletariat art, and European expressionism, particularly Rouault.

Artists who used elements of modernism in their work were frequently accused of creating “anti-social” art that reiterated a creative dependence on European art. Art that was even remotely out of step with the “dominant utilitarian notion that only what was useful can be considered beautiful” was decried as “art for the self’s sake.” However, there were a number of artists who saw in modernist tendencies an alternative to the American scene. According to Kainen:

The graphic arts were naturally less avant garde as a whole than the easel painters since printmaking had a more conservative tradition. Most of the printmakers had little knowledge of the vital work done by Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch and the German expressionists. In fact, most of them knew little about art history, past or present, and this group formed the hard core of the uninformed, unadventurous, routine practitioners. But the strongest printmakers, even when they produced work that reflected the Depression, showed an awareness of modern tendencies.

As Kainen notes, in order to engage their audience in a different way, artists such as Stuart Davis and Louis Quirt used elements of modernism as an alternative to

232 O’Connor, Art for the Millions, 21-22.
233 Ibid, 23.
234 Kainen, 166.
235 O’Connor, Art for the Millions, 24.
237 Kainen, 166.
creating images that reflected popular sentiments of nostalgia or prints that recorded the challenges of everyday life.\textsuperscript{238}

American artists who were drawn to abstraction or other modernist styles went to great lengths to establish and justify the social relevance of their art.\textsuperscript{239} Stuart Davis, one of the most articulate abstract artists employed by the WPA, saw abstraction as a method through which he could engage viewers’ intellectual processes by presenting them with “meticulously abstracted forms derived from ordinary objects.”\textsuperscript{240} Davis was in his mid-forties when the WPA hired him. Earlier in his career, he had contributed to \textit{The Masses}, had helped organized the Armory Show, had participated in the Artists’ Union and was also a member of the American Artists’ Congress. O’Connor describes Davis as being keenly aware of the social and cultural obligations of the artist—especially the abstract artist.\textsuperscript{241} In his essay for \textit{Art for the Millions}, Davis wrote:

Abstract art has been and is now a direct progressive social force….In addition to its effect on the design of clothes, autos, architecture, magazine and advertising layout, five and ten cent store utensils, and all industrial products, abstract art in its mural, easel and graphic forms has given concrete artistic formulation to the new lights, speeds, and spaces which are uniquely real in our time… Radio, for example is the very essence of abstraction.\textsuperscript{242}

By rooting abstraction in the everyday, Davis stressed the accessibility and relevancy of abstract art.

\textsuperscript{238} Kainen, 166-167.
\textsuperscript{239} O’Connor, \textit{Art for the Millions}, 23.
\textsuperscript{240} Tatham, xx.
\textsuperscript{241} O’Connor, \textit{Art for the Millions}, 24.
\textsuperscript{242} Stuart Davis, "Abstract Painting Today," \textit{Art for the Millions; Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project}, Francis V. O’Connor, ed. (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973) 126.
In his defense of abstraction, Davis condemned regionalism and “social protest art” as being superficial and lacking a vital connection to the values of American society. He wrote, “Art values are social values, not by reflection of other social values, but by direct participation… Abstract art is a realistic art, not different in kind from the realistic experience in our time.” In Art for the Millions O’Connor analyzes the content of Davis’s essay and extracts several critical elements. Davis refuted the idea that abstract art perpetuates social indifference. Rather, he found that abstraction “revitalizes the design of mass-produced utilitarian objects, symbolizes the new dynamics of modern everyday life, and participates, by virtue of its radical departures from conventional artistic norms, in the social revolution.”

The idea of abstract art as being a critical social force with relevant and accessible content seemed to adequately justify its inclusion in the small number of aesthetic styles tacitly endorsed by the WPA. O’Connor notes that Davis’s need to justify abstract art as being socially relevant reflects what he describes as an “obligation imposed by the times to assign a social role to even the most asocial endeavors.”

Regardless of the underlying ideological or social dimensions that may or may not have been present, Stuart Davis and other artists created a number of abstract works. Davis’s New Jersey Landscape, 1939 [image 2.9], like many of his works, evokes the energy of modern life through its fluid, cubist shapes. By juxtaposing shapes and fracturing space, he succeeded in capturing the disjointed, fast pace of life in the modern city. He included a number of architectonic shapes that bring industrial

243 Davis, 121-127.
244 O’Connor, Art for the Millions, 24.
and urban landscapes to mind and literally frames the print in a grid pattern, thus giving the print a sense of carefully controlled chaos.²⁴⁷

Davis saw abstraction as vital, progressive and genuine, aspects he considered lacking from what he called “scenes of domestic naturalism.”²⁴⁸ He wrote, “Abstract art is not a method, a technique, or a style, but a point of view, an attitude toward reality…it is an integral part of the changing contemporary reality.”²⁴⁹ Thus described, abstract art offered a unique alternative to the American scene as a socially relevant and vital art that was not beyond the intellectual abilities of the American people.

While some of the artists employed by the WPA produced works indicating an awareness and active interest in contemporary social, cultural and political movements, the majority of the prints produced by WPA artists portray scenes of leisure time and pleasure activities or vignettes of city and country life. The same artists who created socially critical prints and images of labor and industry also occasionally produced prints with much more commonplace subject matter. Throughout their time on the WPA, Elizabeth Olds and Gottlieb both produced a number of prosaic prints as a precaution against accusations of radical leftism, as a way to fulfill their monthly quota and as a way to create art that they felt would appeal to the masses. Old’s *Me and Her* [image 2.10], which depicts two brightly, colored roosters, is a good example of this. When she created this print, she was experimenting with a new medium, screenprinting, which indicates that the print was

²⁴⁸ Davis, 122.
²⁴⁹ Ibid, 124-125.
produced after the screen-print unit opened in 1938. The print is aesthetically pleasing due to the colors that she chose, but has little to offer the viewer in terms of its pictorial narrative. The subject is unassuming and certainly would not have incited the Administration. Olds’s _Camera Club_ [2.11], is much more appealing because of the internal narrative. The lithograph portrays a group of school children photographing what appears to be a staged diorama of arctic life. At a natural history museum, children can document “nature.” The image is whimsical, almost satirical, but the content is neither political nor overtly critical. Jacob Kainen’s _Banana Man_ [2.12] is another example of a whimsical print that lightly touches on contemporary issues. A slouched fruit vendor is selling yellow bananas for five cents apiece. He does not appear to have had much luck because his cart is still well stocked. Perhaps Kainen is commenting on contemporary unemployment and the fact that everyone, even the banana man, struggled to make ends meet. The print is aesthetically pleasing and reflects on contemporary social and economic issues without being pedantic or overbearing. Thus, Kainen’s print, like Olds’s, fulfilled the WPA’s dictums that the prints produced by Project artists should have aesthetic merit and be appealing and appropriate for a mass audience.

Kainen writes that, in his mind the Graphic Arts Division reached its peak in 1937 and 1938. Certainly these years represented a technological apex. In 1937, it was announced that artists could work in color lithography. Russell Limbach, whose efforts to rehabilitate the medium are discussed in the next chapter, was assigned as
technical advisor. Soon many artists were creating color lithographs and in 1938 von Groschwitz stated:

The reaction of artists and other visitors to the Graphic Arts Workshop who have seen the color lithographs being made there indicates that this heretofore neglected medium may eventually achieve a mass popularity such as it has never had even in Europe, where it has been used by some of the best known artists.

In September of that same year, Anthony Velonis established a silkscreen unit at the New York workshop. Velonis stated that the Graphic Arts Division encouraged frank experimentation and technical exploration. McMahon, in particular, supported the development of new methods of printmaking. In 1939 she stated:

At the present time printmakers in the Graphic Arts Division are opening new avenues of approach to graphic media and are also reestablishing the values of techniques that have been neglected.

However, the momentum driving the workshop began to slow in 1939 with the implementation of a more rigid set of rules, including the infamous eighteen-month employment maximum. Kainen recalls that the program really began to disintegrate around the end of 1940 due to “the war in Europe and Asia, and the obvious determination of the government to discourage artists from continuing on the Project.” Artists were no longer required to produce editions, and, instead, were encouraged to make posters supporting the Allies. After war was declared in 1941, an even greater emphasis was placed on supporting the war effort. In December of that year, a poster unit was set up at the workshop to “satisfy the need for

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250 Kainen, 167.
251 Von Groschwitz quoted in Kainen, 168.
252 Oral history interview with Anthony Velonis.
253 McMahon quoted in Kainen, 170.
254 Kainen, 171.
255 Ibid, 171.
proclamations and simple instructions relating to the war,” and in March 1942, the entire WPA/FAP was renamed the Graphic Section of the War Services Division.256

The Graphic Arts Division unraveled as rapidly as it had been assembled. By 1940, artists’ responsibilities were no longer creative in the same way that they had been at the beginning. Instead of creating self-selected projects, artists were assigned to create propagandistic posters. There were too many artists for this purpose and many were left to stand around the workshop watching and waiting for an assignment. Kainen writes that by 1940, many artists were ready to cut and run and take their chances in the private sector. Near the conclusion of his essay he wrote:

> While the level of the better artists was high, and while their work was a marked advance in American printmaking, the potential existed for a still more exciting advance… But just when the propitious time arrived for exploring new paths, the Project began to disintegrate. 257

Kainen’s comment reveals his frustration at the missed opportunity for further development. However, at other points in his essay, he freely acknowledges that the workshop acted as a catalyst for the revitalization of printmaking in America. The graphic arts workshop bridged the gap between the conservative printmaking traditions inherited from the nineteenth century and the “unprecedented flowering of graphic arts” that took place in the decades following the closure of the WPA workshops.258 The graphic arts workshop played a key role in the technical development of printmaking media and helped to popularize and perpetuate a variety of aesthetic approaches, including modernist styles such as abstraction. As Watrous eloquently states:

256 Ibid, 171.
257 Ibid, 173.
258 Ibid, 175.
Despite discouragements which all the arts endured in the years of the Great Depression, accomplished printmaking was done... and from these programs a multitude of prints were published... It was an odd lot of fine and inferior prints which, regardless of the differing merits, confirmed a nurturing of art and a dispelling of the American timidity toward printing.\textsuperscript{259}

Through a close analysis of Jacob Kainen’s essay recounting life on the Project, and through visual analyses of a number of works produced by Project artists, this chapter has situated the New York City Graphic Arts Division within the Federal Arts Program. WPA printmakers had access to the materials and supplies that they needed in order to produce a minimum of one print a month. Whether they worked at the workshop or from home, the studio environment fostered a spirit of camaraderie and unity among the artists, acting as an assembly point where artists shared ideas, suggestions and criticisms. These exchanges encouraged artists to take risks as they worked towards creating an “art for the millions.” The Administration, while it did not openly condone highly experimental work, encouraged aesthetic and technical experimentation, the most important of which led to the establishment of a color lithography unit and a screenprinting unit in the graphic arts workshop. The development and implementation of these units is discussed at length in the following chapters.

\textsuperscript{259} Watrous, 124-125.
Chapter Three: Prints for the People
Redeeming the Use of Color Lithography as a Fine Art Medium:
Russell T. Limbach and the Works Progress Administration

One of the most significant accomplishments of the WPA’s Graphic Arts Division was the establishment and concentrated use of a color lithography unit in the New York City workshop. Color lithography had been used in Europe as a medium for fine art prints since the early nineteenth century, but was not used widely as a creative technique in the United States until the establishment of the Graphic Arts Division in the late 1930s. The WPA Federal Art Project freed artists from the mechanical and economic restrictions that had limited the production of lithographs in the pre-Depression era. Through the particular efforts of Russell T. Limbach, who dedicated much of his time on the WPA to experimenting with and advising other artists in the use of the medium, color lithography became a widely used creative art medium.

Prior to the 1930s, lithography was principally used in America as a commercial printing method to create labels and ads, or in the creation of chromolithographs—reproductions of paintings that could be sold at low cost. As Russell Limbach stated, due to the ease and economy with which lithographs could be produced, lithography had become the singular property of the commercial world.260 Clinton Adams wrote, “In the process of becoming an industry, lithography lost its attraction to creative artists, who increasingly viewed it as a medium fit only for

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The small number of artists interested in creating fine art lithographs found it nearly impossible to secure the services of sympathetic professional printers to edition their work. However, the access to materials, professional printers and technical instruction that the WPA provided enabled a number of artists to become technically proficient and artistically skilled in the medium.

Artists employed by the WPA were extremely influential in “liberating lithography from the constraints of commercialism and reintroducing it to American audiences as a valuable medium of fine art.” Starting in 1935, artists employed on the Project had the option of creating lithographs in the graphic arts workshop. Through the consistent efforts of WPA artist-printmakers such as Elizabeth Olds, Ruth Chaney and others, and through the particular efforts of Russell T. Limbach, this medium became so commercially and critically successful that in 1937 Limbach was asked to initiate a color lithography program in the New York City workshop. He and others found that both artists and the viewing public were greatly receptive to both lithography and color lithography. As Gustave von Groschwitz stated, the “lithography unit served as a link between the great lithographers in Paris in the 1890s and the American revival of the 1950s which culminated in the superb color lithographs of Jasper Johns, Jim Dine, Nathan Oliveira and others.”

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262 Ibid, 13.  
264 Gustave von Groschwitz in Greengard, 42.
innovations fostered by the WPA renewed lithography’s position as a fine art medium and reinvigorated America’s interest in color lithographs as fine art objects.

This chapter examines how the WPA enabled artists to reclaim lithography from the world of commercial printing, to foster a renaissance in lithography and to establish a school of color lithography in America. First, this chapter contextualizes the use of lithography during the early decades of the twentieth century, before analyzing how, by providing access to materials and professional supervision, the New York City Graphic Arts Division encouraged experimentation in the medium. Through close analysis of testimonials from artists such as Russell Limbach, Elizabeth Olds and Jacob Kainen, this chapter examines how the workshop altered the art world’s perception of lithography as a fine art medium and how the WPA artist-printmakers laid the cornerstone for a great tradition in American art.

Alois Senefelder, a young German playwright who sought a cheaper and faster way to publish his plays, invented lithography in 1798. Unlike copper engraving or woodblock printing, lithography does not require any cutting or scratching into metal or wood. The process relies, instead, upon the chemical repulsion of water and grease. An image is drawn with a greasy crayon onto a flat block of limestone. The lithographer applies water to the stone and then a layer of ink. The ink adheres to the greasy surface, but nowhere else, as the lithographer then presses paper against the stone to produce an image.265

265 For more information on the techniques and process of lithography see Griffiths, 430-520 and Eichenberg, 81-91. Artists can also draw on zinc plates when stones are unavailable.
From the middle of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, lithography was primarily used in the United States as a commercial printing process. The ease with which one could render an image, the rapidity with which they could be printed and the relative economy of the process made lithography attractive to commercial printers. Unlike intaglio printing methods, which are labor-intensive and produce a limited number of prints, lithographs are fast to produce and can be published in unlimited editions. Consequently, the process was both faster and cheaper than traditional methods of commercial printing, with machine-pulled prints costing two to ten cents apiece. As a result, lithography as a fine art took the backseat to commercial ventures such as the production of soup can labels, posters or cigar boxes.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States, there were more than seven hundred commercial lithographic printing establishments employing more than eight thousand people and had a yearly production rate valued at $20 million in gold. The fiscal success of the industry cemented lithography’s reputation as the most effective method of multiplying and disseminating visual images en masse.

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266 Olds, 143.
267 Russell T. Limbach Papers, Wesleyan University Special Collection and Archives, Middletown, Connecticut.
American print shops began to print in color during the 1840s, leading to a proliferation of colorful packaging and reproductions of paintings, posters and calendars. David Mihaly wrote that there was:

a veritable explosion of color that filtered to consumers in mid-19th century America. The invention of lithography has a direct link to the early history of branding and advertising, as manufacturers and merchants began to recognize the powerful appeal of a package over the actual product. Generic goods in barrels, jars, bins, and sacks were replaced by brand name products in eye-catching boxes, cans, cartons, and wrappers. Color lithographed labels provided crucial identification and promotion in a sea of consumer choices.

Mihaly’s comment reveals how widely lithography was used for commercial purposes and how strongly it affected American consumer culture. Advances in printmaking accelerated production, lowered costs and encouraged popular interest in printed images. As a result, lithographs made their way into every general store, newspaper and home.

In order to meet a growing demand for popular images, partnerships such as the New York-based Currier & Ives began to produce lithographs that illustrated facets of nineteenth century American life. Currier & Ives produced black and white lithographs that were “then hand-colored, assembly-line fashion, in accordance with a fully painted model.” Between the 1850s and 1907, Currier & Ives produced more than seven thousand prints. The smaller ones sold for six cents and the larger prints and folios were priced from fifteen cents to three dollars. As former WPA-printmaker Fritz Eichenberg observed, the lithographs produced by Currier & Ives

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269 "The Color Explosion." The Huntington Library.
270 Ibid.
271 Hults, 709.
273 Eichenberg, 63.
have become documents of continuing historical importance because they recorded America’s transformation from an agricultural to an industrialized society during the middle of the nineteenth century with “such flamboyance and in such loving detail.” Adams noted that the prints produced by Currier & Ives met a genuine social, if not artistic, need and were intended to satisfy but not extend the tastes of the audience for which they were manufactured. From Adams’ comment, one comes to understand that the real value of these prints lay in the fact that they brought “art” to every part of America. Their prints appealed primarily to middle-class audiences and as Hults notes, their vast and varied output reminds us that “the United States, while struggling to develop a “high artistic tradition as strong as Europe’s, always had a vernacular art. No matter how banal these works may be, their inescapable abundance is important.” Hults’ comment underlines how strongly lithographs influenced visual culture in America.

Acton argues that despite the success of these color lithographs, “familiarity bred contempt.” The mass production of these “chromos” signaled the temporary demise of lithography as a creative medium. Printmaker Russell T. Limbach assessed the situation in 1946 when he wrote:

The first lithograph printed in the United States was pulled from the stone about 1830 and into the next century was dumped a litter of color reproductions [chromos] that made the nation art conscious in a hurry. Forcing its way into every home in the country, this process of Senefelder’s, which utilized color with such facility, made no claim on the high places of art: for color lithography was a money maker. The men in trade were bringing art to the people on every package and poster. The commercial success of this

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274 Ibid.
276 Hults, 709.
277 Acton, 33.
From Limbach’s essay, one can see how much fine art lithography, both monochrome and polychrome, suffered as the process was used more and more frequently for commercial purposes. Given that lithographs came to be identified primarily as popular and commercial products rather than as fine art, it is hardly remarkable that during the early decades of the twentieth century, artists tended to avoid working in lithography.279

Limbach deduced that lithography became the sole property of the commercial world due to the facility with which images could be created and disseminated. He stated, “The ease with which a drawing could be made and reproduced became, paradoxically, a handicap from which the creative artist is still suffering.”280 He further attributed the commercial dominance of lithography to the growing emphasis placed on limited editions of etchings. In her 1936 essay for *Art for the Millions*, Elizabeth Olds declared her frustration with the practice of producing limited editions. She stated, “In the market, if a limited edition is sold quickly and

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279 Acton, 34.
there is further demand for the print, prices rise...A Speculator’s fiesta!” Limbach took a similar position in his essay for the same anthology. He wrote that the artificial scarcity fostered by the etching revival and by “stock market-minded dealers and collectors” cultivated a level of snobbishness towards lithography as a creative medium, which retarded “the development of an important graphic medium.”

Limbach’s comments reveal that the frustrations that artists felt regarding lithography continued well until the 1930s. According to Limbach, as an autographic process, lithography was the most flexible of the graphic arts and should have been more popular among artists. The artist needed only to draw on the stone with a crayon in exactly the same manner with which he drew on a piece of paper. The process eliminated the necessity of cutting away or scratching beneath the surface of the matrix. Eichenberg wrote that, “Lithography has been recognized as an ideal medium for the painter, because it allows great freedom in ‘painting on stone,’ and it provides a receptive surface with an infinite variety of tonal values through the use of washes, crayon and tusche, rubbing inks, acids, and scraping tools.” However, the features that should have made lithography popular among artist-printmakers were equally attractive to commercial printers and the widespread use that lithography received as a commercial process lowered rather than raised the artistic level of the medium.

As Limbach noted in his 1946 manuscript, during the early years of the twentieth century photoengraving replaced lithography as the most efficient and

281 Olds, 143.
283 Ibid, 146.
284 Ibid, 146.
economic method of reproduction\textsuperscript{285}. As a result, lithography fell out of fashion as a commercial printing method. While lithography was still “burdened by the tradition of replication,” a small number of artists showed interest in revitalizing the medium by creating fine art lithographs.\textsuperscript{286} In 1917, George Bellows wrote “Lithographs—I have been doing what I can to rehabilitate the medium from the stigma of commercialism which has attached to it so strongly.”\textsuperscript{287} He and others, such as Arthur B. Davies, John Sloan and Joseph Pennell created fine arts lithographs during the early decades of the twentieth century, but faced a number of difficulties in their attempts to print their works. As Adams notes:

> The principle of lithography is simple enough, depending on the mutual repulsion of grease and water. However, the practice is so complex and sensitive a process that throughout its history, most fine lithographs have been produced by the combined effort of an artist and a highly skilled printer, working collaboratively together.\textsuperscript{288}

While artists in Europe could work closely with professional lithographic printers in the ateliers of Lemercier and Ancourt in Paris or with Thomas Way in London, there were no similar partnerships in the United States.\textsuperscript{289} Commercial printing shops were the only places capable of providing quality printing, however, they were generally uninterested in producing small editions.\textsuperscript{290} This left artists with three options: they


\textsuperscript{286} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{287} Watrous, 50.

\textsuperscript{288} Adams, \textit{American Lithographers: 1900-1960: the Artists and Their Printers}, 3.


\textsuperscript{290} Commercial lithographs were frequently printed in editions of several thousand. Fine art lithographs were printed on a much smaller scale. As a result, commercial lithographs were generally uninterested in working with artists to edition prints.
could purchase a press and try to print their work themselves, they could work in England or France, or they could try to join a lithographers union and try to learn the techniques of printing.\textsuperscript{291} George Bellows equipped his own studio with a lithographic press and stones but continued to face enormous technical challenges.\textsuperscript{292} In 1905, John Sloan acquired W.D. Richmond’s \textit{Grammar of Lithography} and attempted to learn the technique of printmaking. However, his efforts were less than successful and his need for a professional printer continued.\textsuperscript{293}

It was not until 1914 that a professional provided the specialized printing assistance required by the artists of New York City.\textsuperscript{294} George Miller, who was born into a family of lithographers, got his start at a commercial lithographic plant. He received an apprenticeship with the American Lithographic Company and rose to the position of foreman of the stone-proofing department.\textsuperscript{295} In 1914, his superior asked a personal favor— that Miller help his friend, artist Albert Sterner, recover an image from a stone. Sterner had more experience in lithography than most artist-printmakers.\textsuperscript{296} He had purchased a press and conducted experiments in lithographic printing. He had also spent time in Lemercier’s atelier in Paris and at Klein und Volbert in Munich.\textsuperscript{297} Despite his experience, he continued to struggle and almost ruined a lithographic stone in his attempts to print an impression himself. Eventually, Miller was able to recover the image and, through his encounter with Sterner, he was

\textsuperscript{291} Membership to lithographers unions was generally limited to commercial printers. See \textit{George Miller and American Lithography}, 1.
\textsuperscript{292} Ibid, 1.
\textsuperscript{293} Ibid, 1.
\textsuperscript{294} Ibid, 2.
\textsuperscript{295} Ibid, 1-2.
\textsuperscript{296} Ibid, 2.
introduced to Arthur B. Davies, Joseph Pennell, George Bellows and a small number of other artists interested in working in lithography.\textsuperscript{298} Miller began printing in the evenings for Bellows and Sterner, and in 1917, he established a firm that specialized in printing artistic lithographs.

Sterner is credited with inspiring another lithographic printer to work with artists. Bolton Brown recalled viewing an exhibition of Sterner’s monotypes and lithographs in 1915, after which, he decided to become skilled in the process of lithographic printing. To this end, he spent a year in London learning how to print and upon his return to the United States, set up a press in Woodstock and another in New York City called The Artist’s Press.\textsuperscript{299} He invited Sterner, Sloan and Bellows to work with him. He charged $1.00 per impression, a price that was much higher than Miller’s commission, and frequently countersigned the impressions he pulled with “imp[rime]: Bolton Brown.”\textsuperscript{300} These elements indicate how strongly Bolton believed in the artistic responsibilities of the printer. He understood and was willing to articulate, perhaps more than Miller was, how much the final print depended greatly on the skill of the printer.

Despite the differences in their approaches to printing, both Miller and Bolton were critical in fostering an interest in artistic lithography. In 1919, Bolton gave a lithographic demonstration at Pratt.\textsuperscript{301} Three years later, in 1922, Miller was commissioned by Juliana Force to give a printing demonstration at the Whitney Studio Club where a number of New York artist-printmakers were introduced to the

\textsuperscript{298}George Miller and American Lithography, 2.
\textsuperscript{299}Adams, American Lithographers: 1900-1960: the Artists and Their Printers, 31.
\textsuperscript{300}Watrous, 50.
\textsuperscript{301}Adams, 31.
process for the first time.\textsuperscript{302} Zigrosser recounts that, “Zinc plates were distributed to Bouché, Duffy, Niles Spencer and Kuniyoshi, and were drawn by the artists and printed by Miller on the spot.”\textsuperscript{303} That night Yasou Kuniyoshi made his first lithograph, \textit{Milking the Cow}. Brown and Miller’s willingness to work with and instruct the uninitiated encouraged a whole generation of printmakers to try their hand at lithography. Abetted by the advice and skills of a master printer, a number of printmakers, such as Louis Lozowick, began to create fine art lithographs.\textsuperscript{304}

During the early 1920s, Joseph Pennell, an etching teacher at the Art Students League and an ardent advocate of lithography, organized a lithography workshop at the ASL. He endeavored to teach lithography himself, but as Adams stated, “his advocacy was stronger than his knowledge of the medium and he continually sought Miller’s advice.”\textsuperscript{305} He turned the workshop over to Miller and later to Charles Locke who continued to teach lithography at the ASL for several years. Pennell’s contribution to lithography remains significant as he established one of the first creative lithograph workshops within an art institution. Through his efforts, many young artists were introduced to lithography.

During that same decade, a number of American artists traveled to Europe where the ready availability of lithography printers in France and Germany encouraged them to produce lithographs.\textsuperscript{306} As Carl Zigrosser stated, traveling to Europe was “the American’s urge towards culture, the easy life of the cafes and

\textsuperscript{302} George Miller and American Lithography, 2.
\textsuperscript{303} Zigrosser, The Artist in America: Contemporary Printmakers, 122.
\textsuperscript{304} Watrous, 50, 56.
\textsuperscript{305} Adams, American Lithographers: 1900-1960: the Artists and Their Printers, 49.
\textsuperscript{306} Ibid, 74.
boulevards, the bohemian’s paradise.” Adams writes that many of the artists worked in collaboration with the printers in Paris, most frequently with Edmond Desjoberts, who welcomed Americans into his atelier. Louis Lozowick, Stuart Davis, Adolf Dehn, Yasou Kuniyoshi, Mabel Dwight, Reginald Marsh, Jean Charlot and John Taylor Arms are but a few of the Americans who made lithographs in Europe during the late 1920s. The opportunities to experiment with the medium inspired a number of these artists to continue creating lithographs upon their return to the United States.

After the economic crash in 1929, artist-printers struggled to continue to produce prints as the Depression severely limited the already fragile print market. Any progress in the use of lithography as a fine art medium was stalled after 1929. However, artists in New York soon came together to form the Artists’ Union. The craft union demanded that the government provide employment opportunities as an economic aid for artists. Roosevelt acknowledged that creative workers were struggling along with the rest of the working population in America, and in response to pressure from the AU and at the suggestion of George Biddle, he implemented a series of work relief programs.

The early relief programs, such as PWAP, included printing projects. Nonetheless, it was not until a coalition of artists wrote a letter to McMahon proposing that the WPA initiate a graphic workshop that lithography was explored in a serious way. As was stated previously, the artists who reached out to McMahon

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309 Ibid, 74-77.
expressed a strong interest in building up a tradition of lithography in America to compete with the French and German traditions. The fact that these artists expressed an explicit interest in working in the medium attests to a positive change in the reputation of creative lithography during the early decades of the twentieth century. Audrey McMahon was sympathetic to the vision of the artists and hired Limbach to outfit the workshop. Limbach, as Kainen recalled, was skilled in every form of the graphic arts, but his passion really lay with lithography and it was through his continued efforts that a number of artists experimented with lithography during this period.

In a 1940 letter to Samuel Golden, his editor at the American Artists Group (AAG), Limbach wrote that after graduating from high school, he set out to find what he called a white-collar job that would allow him to make money. He set his sights on becoming an artist and got a job at a local commercial lithographic plant where, for $10.00 a week, he learned to mix colors and correctly handle lithographic brushes. For practice, he copied old Saturday Evening Post covers and worked closely with four professional artists to produce a variety of commercial products. He worked at the plant for several years before attending Cleveland Art School where he studied sculpture, painting and traditional printing techniques. However, he maintained that he learned everything he knew about art at the lithographic plant. During the next

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310 McMahon quoted in Watrous, 96-97.
311 Kainen, 167.
313 Ibid.
several years, he returned to work at the plant a number of times, each time receiving a $5.00 pay raise.\textsuperscript{314}

Limbach’s first experience with lithography was in a commercial print shop and it was many years before he was introduced to creative lithography. In his 1940 letter he wrote:

Although my art life began in a lithograph shop, I did not learn of the use that artists had put to the medium until I ran across an exhibition in which there were some prints by Whistler, not long after that with the death of George Bellows, attention was focused on that medium again. His use of it seemed to me to be just the thing I was looking for and I began to make drawings on zinc at home in the evening, bringing them down to the shop to proof during the noon hour. I didn’t like to bother the transfer man all the time so after the first plate I proofed my own and have done so ever since.\textsuperscript{315}

Limbach’s account of his introduction to fine art lithography is significant because it reveals that during the early decades of the twentieth century, lithography continued to have little connection with the fine arts. Significantly, Limbach’s introduction to lithography as a fine art was not unique. Elizabeth Olds, anther WPA artist-printmaker, studied the basics of lithography at an Omaha, Nebraska printing plant. Helen Langa stated:

In the fall of 1932, Olds went to Omaha, Nebraska, to create family portraits for a local industrialist, Samuel Rees. When she became bored with the repetitiveness of this project, her patron invited her to study the basics of lithography with “Herman the German,” the cranky but competent technical supervisor at his printing business. Olds’s idiosyncratic introduction to printmaking was hardly comparable to study with master lithographer Edmund Desjobert in Paris, who trained several of her peers. Nevertheless, it introduced her to new technical possibilities just as printmaking began to emerge as a vital form of American artistic expression.\textsuperscript{316}

\textsuperscript{314} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{316} Langa, "Elizabeth Olds: Gender Difference and Indifference," 5.
It is significant that Limbach, Olds and Miller discovered fine art lithography through the commercial world. It indicates that creative and commercial lithography were not irreversibly divided and that even commercial lithographers saw creative potential in the medium.

At the age of twenty-five, Limbach quit his position as Art Director at the Union Trust Co. and went to Paris for a year [image 3.1]. While there, he worked with Gaston Dorfinnant, a lithographic printer whose father and grandfather had both been master printers. Limbach wrote, “I made several prints in his shop and thought I really had the idea.” His training now included his experience as a commercial printer, his time at the Cleveland Art School and his hands-on training with a well-respected master printer in France. He drew upon his extensive knowledge when he returned to Cleveland during the early years of the Depression. Like many other artists, he could not sell his works, and turned instead to teaching and experimenting with lithography, and in particular, color lithography. His experience in Europe had introduced him to fine lithographs by artists such as “Goya, Daumier, Delacroix, Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, Signac, Cezanne and many others of the top rank.” Acton surmises that he almost certainly created his first lithographs in color during his time abroad. Limbach believed that color lithography had great potential as a fine print medium and though it was still overshadowed by its reputation as a gaudy, reproductive medium, it would one day play an important role in the art world.

319 Acton, 271.
culture of the United States. However, his color experimentations remained necessarily limited due to fiscal constraints.

Limbach moved to New York in 1933 and was hired by The New Masses, a prominent leftist publication that was founded in 1926. For two years he “got to know a lot of artists around town and to improve [his] drawing by turning out cartoons regularly.” During these two years, Limbach met and became acquainted with a variety of artists in New York. Among those was Bernarda Bryson, who recognized Limbach’s skill as an artist and printmaker. This connection proved to be advantageous for Limbach as the WPA eventually hired him at Bryon’s suggestion.

Despite being employed, his salary at The New Masses was not enough to “live on” and was certainly not enough to allow him to continue his experiments in color lithography. Consequently, for two years his production was restricted to creating works for the publication. He was dismissed from the publication in 1935 when, as Limbach stated, “internal combustion, an election year and the first of many twists and turns in editorial management left me without a job and I turned to the

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321 An article in Time Magazine wrote in 1926 that: Upon the teeming sea of U.S. magazine publishing there was launched last week a smoky vessel, ungainly but powerful, with daubs of red on her lunging bows and red marks here and there on her some-what disorderly running gear. She was the New Masses, a workers' monthly floated (TIME, Dec. 21) to replace the Masses and Liberator by the friends of those defunct organs, with money from the American Fund for Public Service. Copies of the New Masses may be had for 25¢ by addressing: New Masses, 39 West Eighth St., New York City. "New Masses." TIME Magazine.
322 Limbach, Letter to Samuel Golden.
323 Watrous, 96.
324 Limbach, Letter to Samuel Golden.
Capitalist way and sold drawings again.” Consultants said thousands of other artists across the country, was left to rely on purchases by private collectors.

When McMahon offered him the position of Technical Advisor to the graphic arts workshop, Limbach accepted. He was knowledgeable about each form of printmaking and outfitted the workshop with the materials to complete works in any of the graphic media. However, his preferred medium continued to be lithography and he acknowledged some years later that in planning and organizing the workshop he, “tried to orient it in the direction of color lithography in which I had a great deal of faith as a fine print medium but which I hadn’t had time to think about for several years.” Limbach’s comment is critical to our understanding of the WPA’s New York graphic arts workshop because it reveals Limbach’s active and targeted intention to liberate color lithography from its association with the cheap chromos that had been widely produced during the nineteenth century.

McMahon and Gustave von Groschwitz, the Director of the Graphic Arts Division, sanctioned Limbach’s vision and together they took particular care to furnish the workshop with equipment specific to lithographic printing, such as “a special tank and wooden grill for graining stones” and “lithograph stones of various grades and sizes.” Kainen wrote:

> Between August 1935, when work relief for artists was established, and February 1936, when the workshop was ready, the lithographs were printed mainly by Theodore Wahl. Together with Russell Limbach, he had been appointed by Mrs. McMahon at the suggestion of Bernarda Bryson, whose counsel in the early stages of the Project was invaluable. But commissioned printers also produced editions…among those involved were Will Barnet,

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325 Ibid.
326 Ibid.
327 Kainen, 157.
Jacob Friedland, and George C. Miller. Until the Workshop was in full swing, problems of logistics kept the printing output limited...with the opening of the workshop, production began on an expanded scale.328

Kainen’s comments reveal that during the early months of the Project, artists interested in creating lithographs worked closely with commissioned printers, some of who were not directly employed by the FAP. Wahl, Friedland, Barnett and Miller frequently printed in their own studios, using their own presses due to the limited space and technical constraints at the workshop. As soon as the workshop was “in full swing,” von Groschwitz hired Nathanial Spreckley and Joseph Peroutka, two highly experienced lithographers, to work with Wahl.329 From this point on, the printers worked closely with the artists at the workshop.

In April 1936, the first exhibition of prints was held at the newly opened WPA Federal Art Gallery. This exhibition included a number of lithographs, many of which were praised by New York Times critic, Edward Alden Jewell. Jewell wrote:

Harry Taskey’s lithograph, “Near the Battery”; the “Coney Island Creek,” by Hyman Warsager; “Doris,” by Will Barney, a lithograph that looks oddly like a monotype—they and other prints deserve a visitor’s attention. A Particularly sensitive lithograph, “Tight-Rope Performer,” has been furnished by Yasou Kuniyoshi.330

Kuniyoshi’s print [image 3.2] depicts a young acrobat perched high above her audience. She has her eyes closed as she prepares to step off her platform and onto the tightrope. The print is, indeed, quite sensitive. From this print, it becomes clear

328 Kainen, 158.
329 Wahl, himself, was a highly experienced lithograph printer who had apprenticed with Bolton Brown in Woodstock. Before the workshop was fully equipped, he printed lithographs as his studio on MacDougal Street. Jackson Pollack, who worked on the WPA as a painter, printed a number of lithographs with Wahl during this time. See Adams, American Lithographers, 1900-1960: the Artists and Their Printers, 126.
330 Jewell, "Federal Project Opens Art Exhibit."
that in the decade since he was first introduced to lithography, Kuniyoshi had mastered the technique. The inclusion of such a piece in the exhibition was strong evidence for the potential of the lithograph as a creative medium and demonstrated to the public as well as to WPA artist-printmakers how much could be accomplished when artists had the opportunity to work closely with professional printers.

Lithographs were included in each subsequent WPA graphic arts exhibition.

Artist Boris Gorelick recalled:

I did do lithography at that time. As a matter of fact, it was rather a major interest of mine mainly because lithography as an art, was rather a dead art until it was resurrected, so to speak, during that period… the Project became quite interested in developing this as an art form, and whereas it had not been popular for some… about seventy years or so, or from the time of Daumier anyway. It suddenly became a very living art again, and many people traced their early beginnings in drawing and painting, I would say, to their involvement in the lithography projects. And many famous artists were on the lithography project at that time, and their work was shown, exhibited, sold, displayed all over the country, and eventually it became a rather accepted medium for working.\textsuperscript{331}

Gorelick’s report of his use of lithography is a testament to the efforts of the artists and printers who worked for years to demonstrate the potential of the medium. Artists were attracted to the rich variation in tone, the subtle color suggestion and the dramatic chiaroscuro that an artist could achieve on stone. As Gorelick noted, the encouragement of technical experimentation and access to materials inspired many people to experiment with lithography.

Limbach continued his experiments with lithographs in color soon after the workshop opened. In 1935, he completed the first color lithograph printed by a Project artist. \textit{Trapeze Girl} [image 3.3], a lithograph in yellow, pink and blue, was

\textsuperscript{331} Oral history interview with Boris Gorelick.
produced to demonstrate the process of color lithography to other artists. Since Limbach was assigned as a technical advisor of lithography in 1935, he was responsible for instructing others in the use of the technique and for ensuring that the workshop was capable of producing color lithographs on a wide-scale before they opened the option up to the artists. In his 1946 manuscript, he recorded a number of his observations concerning color lithography, many of which he undoubtedly developed during his time on the WPA.

Limbach understood that color lithography followed essentially the same process as basic lithography. In color lithography, however, the application of each color is printed separately through careful alignment or registration. He wrote, “There is no real difference when you come to printing a color lithograph than one in a single color, except that there is more of it…a little more equipment is necessary and a few more precautions have to be taken.” According to Limbach, to successfully produce a lithograph in color it is important to pay attention to the “colors to be used, the order in which they are printed, the transparency of the colors and the effect produced from printing one over the other.” For Trapeze Girl, Limbach prepared a number of stones, one for each color that he intended to use. He printed the most opaque colors first and finished with the most transparent. Thus, Limbach printed in yellow first, then in pink [image 3.4] and, finally, in blue [image 3.5 and 3.6].

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332 Limbach, Draft for Printmaking Book, 7.
333 Ibid, 2.
334 Ibid, 9.
335 According to Limbach, yellow and red are generally considered the most opaque when used at full strength. Ibid, 9.
Limbach recommended that artists simplify the colors in their design as much as possible. With fewer colors an artist can make “each of them do the maximum amount of work…see how much variety of tone you can get from each, discover how many additional tones and colors can be achieved in overprinting.”\textsuperscript{336} He also cautioned the artist to simplify the drawing as much as possible. As Limbach stated, “the bolder and more clearcut your areas, the less difficulty you will have in finding them as you proceed from stone to stone.”\textsuperscript{337} He followed this course of action with \textit{Trapeze Girl}. His lithograph depicts a curvaceous, blond circus performer standing atop an acrobatic rope in a provocative, theatrical pose.

It is ironic that while Limbach’s major achievement during his time with the workshop lay in making possible a clear distinction between lithography as a fine art and lithography in its various commercial applications, the majority of his works are rather simplified and pedestrian in their composition. More than the subject of his prints, we must take note of the methods that he used to create them, as it was his technical skill that set him apart as an artist. As Lynd Ward stated, “Limbach, more than anyone else was responsible for the amazing developments in the creative use of this complicated medium.”\textsuperscript{338}

Two years after Limbach’s successful completion of a color lithograph at the Project workshop, it was announced that artists were free to make color lithographs under Limbach’s guidance as a technical consultant.\textsuperscript{339} Artists such as Olds, Lozowick, Kainen and Riva Helfond, immediately began to produce prints in color.

\textsuperscript{336} Ibid, 2.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid, 3.
\textsuperscript{338} Ward, 11.
\textsuperscript{339} Adams, 124 and Watrous, 98.
These prints, like the others produced on the Project, portray a wide variety of subject matter.

Elizabeth Olds’ *Miners* (1937) [image 3.8] again focuses on industrial workers. This print is a group portrait of three miners. Their faces are strong and expressive, and are characteristic of Olds’s appropriation of Jose Orozco’s aesthetic. Orozco was known for his “unique, highly expressive stylistic vocabulary, whose … rhythmic repetition of forms” we can see in Olds’s lithograph. The image is cropped tightly around the faces of the figures, as though they, and perhaps we, are closed within a mine. The close cropping creates a claustrophobic atmosphere, a feeling that is aggravated by the yellow streams of light emanating from their helmets. Of the colors that Olds used in her print, the yellow is certainly the most striking. The strong projecting lights shine out towards the right edge of the picture plane and contribute to the feeling of claustrophobia. This print is, again, a commentary on the potentially hazardous conditions that miners face.

Lozowick’s *Cluster of Willows* (1940) [image 3.9] is quite different from the majority of his other prints. Rather than depicting an industrial or urban landscape, Lozowick portrays a number of lustrous willow trees, under which a couple has parked their car and is now sitting. Perhaps this print is the antithesis of those he created in earlier years. Rather than focusing on the unrelenting progress of technology, he has chosen to depict nature in its most robust form. Despite advances

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in technology, there remains an untamable, natural element in the world. The print can be seen as a response to his disillusionment with the modern world.\textsuperscript{341}

Helfond’s print, \textit{Johnny at the Bat} [image 3.10], celebrated America’s favorite pastime. During the 1910s and 1920s, Babe Ruth revolutionized the game of baseball and helped popularize the sport across the nation.\textsuperscript{342} Helfond’s print immortalizes the sport in the middle of the batter’s swing. The batter has his right leg bent at a ninety-degree angle, flexed, ready to swing and run. Behind him, the umpire is equally tensed, ready to catch a strike or foul ball. Behind the primary protagonists, spectators fill the stadium. Helfond’s iconic print portrays Americans joining together in pursuit of a common distraction from their personal troubles. Baseball, like art, gave Americans the opportunity to temporarily escape reality.

In 1938, an exhibition entitled \textit{Printmaking: a New Tradition} was held at the Federal Art Gallery. The name was selected to celebrate the “new printing process” of color lithography and also to celebrate and underscore the new and reinvigorated uses of the other printing techniques. Watrous writes that the “prints were among the forecasts of new explorations, conceptually and technically, in American printmaking.”\textsuperscript{343} The exhibition featured 143 prints in all types of media, including twenty-three color lithographs by sixteen artists. The catalogue for the exhibition included a foreword by Carl Zigrosser, an explanation of color lithography by van Groschwitz and a description of color lithography by Russell Limbach. To supplement the catalogue, WPA administrators arranged for Limbach to give a

\textsuperscript{341} See discussion of Lozowick’s \textit{Subway Station} in Chapter Two.
\textsuperscript{342} "The History of Baseball," \textit{Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute}.
\textsuperscript{343} Watrous, 98.
printing demonstration in lithography. Due to the technical complexities of color printing, however, the demonstration was carried out in black and white [image 3.7].

Kainen recalled that to indicate the high quality of the prints, von Groschwitz emphasized that ten of the twenty-three color lithographs had been selected for *Fine Prints of the Year*. He also emphasized that while only four of the 120 prints in black and white were marked “Edition Exhausted,” five of the color lithographs were so marked.344 Kainen recalled that von Groschwitz stated:

> The reaction of the artists and other visitors to the Graphic Arts Workshop who have seen the color lithographs being made there indicates that this heretofore neglected medium may eventually achieve a mass popularity such as it has never had even in Europe, where it has been used by some of the best known artists.345

Von Groschwitz’s optimism reflected the artists’ excitement. Many embraced color lithography and continued to experiment with the medium. From 1937 until 1943, Project artists, such as Jacob Friedland, Ted Wahl, Ida Abelman, Arnold Blanch, Stuart Davis, Emil Ganso, Minnetta Good, Boris Gorelick, Harry Gottlieb, Riva Helfond, Elizabeth Olds, Leonard Pytalk and Joseph Vogel produced more than one hundred and thirty color lithographs.346 For most, including Stuart Davis, these were their first lithographs in color. Warsager reflected on the growing popularity of color lithography among WPA printmakers:

> The French were doing color work, but there was very little color work in this country. [Our time on the Project] was a great stimulation to do color work. It's a matter of seeing the exciting things done by somebody else. It was

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344 Prints were marked “Edition Exhausted” when the entire set had been allocated. See Kainen, 167.
345 Kainen does not cite his source, however we can assume that von Groschwitz’s comment came either from the exhibition catalogue or from a publication immediately thereafter. Ibid, 168.
contagious. Many, even your conservative artists, were encouraged by the fact that so many were doing it, and it didn't represent a great risk to do it. Many people who would be too conservative to even consider it were encouraged to do this by the support they received. You know, they'd come out and see what you were doing and ask questions. And the lithographers, I think, were commercial lithographers, but very good ones, and they had worked with artists and they had a combination of experience. We did work on zinc plates as well as stones and you have to know what happens if you going to learn it strictly by doing them, then you might do a hundred before you had full knowledge of what happens. This way you do a couple, plus the conversations and suggestions, it's almost a lifetime within a couple of months.  

Warsager’s comment reveals that WPA artists responded enthusiastically to the possibility of expanding their creative horizons and creating color lithographs.

The print workshop was a pioneering center where artist-printmakers encountered lithography in a creative context. Adams emphasized this when he wrote:

Without the facilities of the government-supported workshop, the skills of the project printers, and the encouragement of Limbach and von Groschwitz, it is most unlikely that so extensive a development of color lithography would have taken place in the 1930s or even much later, for there is no way in which the artists of the period could have afforded to pay the prices which Friedland, Kistler or Miller would necessarily have charged for the printing of such complex works.  

Adams reiterates that the advantage of working on the Project was that artists had the opportunity to work closely with professional printers, had access to materials and had a certain level of freedom to experiment with the new technique. He also stressed that the prices master printers had to charge would have severely limited the number of artists who could afford to produce color lithographs. Had they been so limited, artists would certainly not have produced color prints in such great quantities.

348 Adams, American Lithographers, 1900-1960: the Artists and Their Printers, 125.
In conclusion, one of the primary accomplishments of the Works Progress Administration was to liberate color lithography from any lingering associations with commercial reproduction. Through the concerted efforts of a number of artists and administrators, such as Russell Limbach, Gustave von Groschwitz, Jacob Kainen, Elizabeth Olds and many others, color lithography regained a position as a fine printing technique. In the few years of the Project’s existence, these artists “produced more fine color lithographs than had even been made before in the United States.”349 The works that these artists created under the WPA prepared a generation to work in the medium of lithography and set the stage for widespread creative use of the medium during subsequent decades. As Russell T Limbach wrote in 1940, “Whatever popularity the color print may have now dates from this impetus.”350

349 Ibid, 123.
350 Limbach, letter to Samuel Golden.
Chapter Four: *The Frontier of American Art*

The Transformation of Screenprinting From a Commercial to a Fine Art Technique
Under the Works Progress Administration

The second major contribution to modern printmaking by the WPA’s Graphic Arts Division was the adaptation of screenprinting as a fine art medium. Through the efforts of a small number of WPA printmakers, particularly Anthony Velonis, screenprinting was developed and used as a creative medium for the first time. While the process had been employed commercially in the United States for several decades, it was not used as a creative process until the mid-1930s, when artists employed by the WPA experimented with the medium. With the refinement of this technique, artists had the opportunity to create large editions of multicolor prints rapidly and economically. As WPA artist Hyman Warsager noted in his *Art for the Millions* essay:

> The economy and ease of this process enables artists to employ sixteen to twenty colors to a print, whereas color lithography and woodblocks are limited to far fewer by both expense and labor. It is the one graphic medium that gives artists the free use of color…The possibilities of silkscreen are so diverse that it has attracted the attention of artists nationally.351

Warsager’s comment confirms that the primary attraction of screenprinting was that it gave artists the ability to economically create prints in a wide variety of colors. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, for a long time chromolithographs had held a certain appeal for middle class audiences. These cheaply produced prints brought color into every house in America and confirmed that consumers responded strongly to color. WPA artist-printmakers understood that color prints held an attraction for

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351 Warsager, 140.
much of America and took advantage of the process of screenprinting to once again create art that had value to and attracted a large national audience.

This chapter examines how the WPA enabled artists to appropriate an existing technique and adapt the process to suit their creative needs. First, this chapter contextualizes the use of screenprinting during the early decades of the twentieth century before analyzing how the New York City Graphic Arts Division encouraged experimentation in the medium by providing access to materials and professional supervision. Through close analysis of testimonials from artists such as Anthony Velonis, Elizabeth Olds, Hyman Warsager and Harry Gottlieb, this chapter examines how the workshop developed a new, creative and egalitarian medium.

Unlike lithography, which was invented by Alois Senefelder, the invention of screenprinting cannot be attributed to one individual. The history of the process remains vague, with little specific data on its origins of use. Scholars attribute the process, in its earliest forms, to the ancient Chinese and Japanese, who used stencil patterns to apply ornamental decoration to fabrics, wallpaper and walls.352 According to Fritz Eichenberg, the Japanese stencil method, which consisted of intricately cut oil-treated paper attached to silk by very thin strands of hair, was used frequently during the Kamakura period, when samurai leather armor and horse trappings were embellished using that process.353 David Acton noted that experimental work in screenprinting was conducted in Germany and England from as the fifteenth century, and that, during the eighteenth century, stencil decorations were frequently applied to

353 Eichenberg, 116.
walls and a number of utilitarian objects such as fabric and paper.\textsuperscript{354} During the colonial period in America, furniture, tin ware, fabrics, walls and other surfaces were decorated using the stencil process.\textsuperscript{355}

During the early decades of the twentieth century, craftsmen in England and the United States made a number of technical improvements in the process of screenprinting. They sought “economical and expeditious ways of color printing placards, pennants, bottle labels, billboards and designs on a miscellany of consumer products.”\textsuperscript{356} The same economic impetus that had led to the widespread use of color lithography as a commercial printing method also drove the technological development of commercial screenprinting. Commercial shops took advantage of the new process that allowed them to rapidly and economically duplicate designs. The method, which was developed during the first decades of the century, used a finely woven silk cloth stretched over a supporting wooden frame to create a taut, porous fabric to which a stencil was then applied. The stencil openings allow paint to be pressed through the exposed areas of the mesh, thus replicating designs and images on the receptive material below it.\textsuperscript{357} Significantly, this process is one of the most autographic printing methods, as the image on the screen does not reverse when printed. As a result, a close, direct relationship is maintained throughout the development of the image.

Although experimentation occurred in Asia and Europe, it was in America that the process was first developed and exploited as a commercial medium. In 1918,

\textsuperscript{354} Acton, 41.
\textsuperscript{355} Eichenberg, 116.
\textsuperscript{356} Watrous, 101.
\textsuperscript{357} Ibid, 102.
the Selectasine Print Company in San Francisco was awarded a patent for a stencil process using fabric screens.  

Other companies across the United States began using the medium to make pictorial prints for home decoration, posters, banners and other consumer products. Acton correctly noted that these products had more in common with “insipid chromolithographs than with contemporary artists prints.” The process was viewed as a medium for mass production without much creative potential. Its association with commercial use kept it generally outside the sphere of the creative arts and artists rarely experimented with the medium. Eichenberg notes that Théophile Steinlen’s *Seated Cat*, which was printed in Paris during the early years of the twentieth century, stands out as one of the rare examples of screenprinting.

The commercial process of screenprinting was fully developed and well established by 1932. That year, Guy MacCoy, a young artist from Kansas was hired by a company in Hoboken, New Jersey to assist in the decoration of shower curtains and candy box covers. To complete a rush order, he and his partner and wife, Geno Pettit, turned to screenprinting. MacCoy purchased the necessary materials and equipment for the process. However, the company went out of business soon after and MacCoy was left with debt from his investment. In order to recuperate some of

358 Acton, 41.
359 Ibid, 41 and Eichenberg, 116.
360 Acton, 41.
361 Eichenberg, 117.
362 Acton, 41 and Watrous, 103.
his lost funds, he decided to produce and sell a number of screen-prints. He created his first two creative prints, *Abstraction no. 1* and *Still Life*, in 1932.³⁶³

When Carl Zigrosser asked MacCoy years later what had inspired his decision to experiment with silkscreen as a creative printing method, the artist said that he had been stimulated by an exhibition of *pochoirs*, hand-brushed stencil works by European modernists such as Picasso and Braque at the Weyhe Gallery in 1932.³⁶⁴ He wanted to achieve similar effects with screenprinting and experimented with using glue to stop out the screens. He also thinned the commercial ink so the prints would dry more rapidly. His work was featured in an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Gallery in 1937.³⁶⁵ Soon after, he and his wife purchased a trailer and lived, according to Watrous, as itinerant artists.³⁶⁶ They gave demonstrations during their travels and proofed screenprints in their trailer, which they sold at low cost.³⁶⁷ However, his venture was unsustainable and in 1940 he moved with his wife to Vermont where he worked as a commercial printer for the next twenty years.³⁶⁸ In part, his lack of success can be attributed to the effects of the Depression and also to the lack of sustainability in art experimentation outside of the WPA. Without the economic and technical support mechanisms of the WPA, MacCoy found it impossible to sell enough screen-prints to support himself. The medium was still burdened by its commercial reputation, much like color lithography had been.

³⁶³ Watrous, 104.
³⁶⁴ Acton, 41 and Watrous, 104.
³⁶⁵ Acton, 42.
³⁶⁶ Watrous, 104.
³⁶⁷ Ibid, 104.
³⁶⁸ Acton, 42.
Anthony Velonis rightly stated in his *Art for the Millions* essay that, “It took the WPA Federal Art Project to prepare the conditions for a real development of silkscreen as a fine art medium.” Velonis played a major role in the adaptation of screenprinting to a creative printing medium. Like Russell Limbach, Elizabeth Olds and MacCoy, Velonis’s career began in the commercial production of prints. He was born in New York City and grew up as the eldest of four children in tenement housing. His father, a musician, was frequently unemployed, and it fell to Velonis and his siblings to support the family. His maternal grandfather and uncle were both artists and they inspired Velonis to draw during his youth. After graduating from the James Monroe High School in the Bronx, Velonis received a scholarship to the College of Fine Arts at New York University. While at the CFA, he studied painting, sculpture, architecture and watercolor with Walter Pach, Frank Jewett Mather and a number of others. He planned to continue working as an artist, but found it nearly impossible when he graduated in 1929, which was “right smack dab in the Depression.” Instead, he took a job at Stern Brothers, where he was a letterer on suitcases and trunks. Three years later, he quit the position in search of free-lance commercial work. During this time he worked primarily in lithography. Velonis recalled that period, stating:

> I did a few things here and there. There was a coffee ad that I did that was reproduced in a poster, in lithography. And then I got fascinated with

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370 Ibid.

371 Ibid.

372 Ibid.

373 Ibid.
silkscreen. There was another artist who I teamed up with at the time, Fritz Brosius, who is now the director of Time magazine. We thought we’d investigate the screen process, and supply houses and so forth, seeing what they had to offer. It was plenty of fun. You discover a lot of technology, especially if you work at it, you know, little by little we went through the whole bit— you know the basic principles. They used it in textiles quite a bit. They also did large backgrounds for, I’d say for department store windows and wallpaper. Some poster work but it was rather crude…there was a studio that did work during the last War and I got a job there for a bit, called Doulberry Brothers. They helped me a lot, after all I didn’t have the capital to open up a shop of my own or anything.  

Velonis’s comment reveals that his experiences with screenprinting were commercial from the beginning. Though his work with Doulberry Brothers allowed him to experiment with the process, his work was primarily limited to poster making.

In 1933, Velonis was hired to work on the Poster Project of the Civilian Works Administration. The municipal program came under Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia’s direction and was headed by Juliana Force, then the director of the Whitney Museum. In 1935, the WPA absorbed the New York City CWA Poster Project. Richard Floethe, a Bauhaus trained artist, was named as the Director of the Poster Unit. Velonis recalled that Floethe was “quite an advanced guy…he wanted high quality. To me that was quite a challenge and I was delighted with the fact that he did. I just said well here’s where I learn as much as I can. It was a great school.” Drawing upon Floethe’s forward-thinking approach to production, Velonis suggested that the unit use screenprinting as an auxiliary printing method [image 4.2 and 4.3].

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374 Ibid. The interviewer incorrectly spelled Doulberry as Dolberry. The correct spelling is found in Acton, 130.
375 Ibid.
376 Watrous, 96.
377 Acton, 42.
378 Oral history interview with Anthony Velonis.
379 Acton, 41.
Floethe approved the proposal, and, as a result, production on the utilitarian unit expanded rapidly. By 1937, the poster unit had created 370,000 posters, many of which were in screenprint. Velonis recalled that:

Naturally, with all the easel painters around us and the fact that my own orientation was painting and so forth, and sculpture, we put two and two together. I said, ‘this is a great medium for the artist. Look what it can do—with the least possible expense you can make all kinds of things.’

Velonis’s comment reveals that the utilitarian project shared a space with the easel painters, another creative unit of the Federal Art Project. Additionally, it reveals that it was his interactions with the easel painters that inspired him to creatively experiment with the commercial process. He also specifically noted the low cost associated with screenprinting. Velonis understood that the economy and simplicity of the color printing process made it a viable commodity in a cash-strapped economy.

Velonis convictions that screenprinting could be adapted to creative use by artists grew steadily. In 1938, he proposed that the WPA incorporate screenprinting into the Graphic Arts Division. He approached the Public Use of Art Committee, a non-Federal commission of artists associated with the Artists’ Union who propagandized on behalf of artists. With the PUAC, Velonis presented his proposal to Audrey McMahon and her board and showed the Administration a selection of his prints, including 6:30 P.M. [image 4.5]. This print portrays a leafless tree against the silhouette of New York City. The sun is setting in the background as the first

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380 Oral history interview with Anthony Velonis.
381 Acton, 42.
382 Oral history interview with Anthony Velonis.
384 Acton, 130.
lights of the city are turned on for the evening. The last rays of sun give way to dusk. The stillness of the tree set against a gray sky exudes a sense of calmness. He explained that the materials needed to create a screenprint were easy to obtain and were inexpensive. Furthermore, the process was easy to use and required no assistance from professional printers. Velonis’s demonstration proved to the Administration that screenprinting could be successfully used to create fine art prints.

That the Administrators allowed screenprinting to enter into the creative realm of the Federal Art Project is not altogether surprising as the color prints represented an appealing product that could be marketed to a mass audience. Since the introduction of the use of color lithography, it had become clear that consumers responded to color in the graphic arts. However color lithography was a difficult medium to master and required specialized equipment and posed a series of technical problems for the artist. WPA Administrators, as well as the artists, were searching for a product that would be widely marketable, would not cost too much to develop and was not technically out of reach for most artists. In this respect, screenprinting was the perfect graphic medium. The Administration was persuaded by the economy of the process, as the materials for production cost less then twenty dollars to assemble and editions could be unlimited.385 The fact that screenprinting required less instruction and supervision than other printing techniques also appealed to the

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Administrators, as it meant artists could use the process to meet the ever-growing demand for color prints.\textsuperscript{386}

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the screenprinting technique was its ability to emulate various graphic art processes and painting mediums.\textsuperscript{387} Gregory Gilbert notes that depending on the viscosity and tone of the ink, silkscreen prints can either emulate the “dense luster of a work in oils, or the subtle translucency of tempera or a watercolor.”\textsuperscript{388} In this sense, as Velonis pointed out, the process “is not a graphic medium at all, but lies somewhere between the duplicating process and easel painting.”\textsuperscript{389} Unlike the lithographic or intaglio methods, artists can manipulate and alter the tonal qualities of a print simply by modulating the pressure applied to the matrix. As a result, screenprints have a more “painterly” appearance than other printing methods.\textsuperscript{390} The adaptability of the medium lent itself well to use by Project artists, as it meant that artists could experiment with achieving painterly effects in a graphic medium.

In September 1939, McMahon reassigned Velonis from the Poster Project to the Graphic Arts Division.\textsuperscript{391} He was assigned as head of a silkscreen unit for a probationary period and was given the mandate to introduce the technique to a small number of artists. To aid in their instruction and to make the process accessible for

\textsuperscript{387} Gilbert, 4.
\textsuperscript{388} Ibid, 4.
\textsuperscript{390} Gilbert, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{391} Acton, 42.
those outside of the experimental group, Velonis published a manual entitled

*Techniques of Silk Screen Process*. The manual was distributed to other WPA graphic art workshops across the country and was also made available to the public free of charge.  

Elizabeth Olds, Harry Gottlieb, Louis Lozowick, Hyman Warsager, Eugene Morley and Ruth Chaney were each assigned to produce four trial prints, which were to be evaluated for artistic and technical merit by WPA Administrators. Velonis trained each of these artists individually and helped them produce their experimental editions. Their work was then submitted to McMahon and the Administration. In August 1939, Project Administrators approved the permanent inclusion of screenprinting in the Graphic Arts Division. Screenprinting quickly became one of the more popular methods among Project artists and by 1940 twenty percent of the Project’s graphic arts allocations were screenprints.  

Carl Zigrosser wrote that:

Velonis became more and more struck with its possibilities as a color print medium for artists. He was aware of the growing popularity of color woodcuts and color lithography produced on the Project by means of expensive technical equipment that was beyond the means of the average artist, and set out to perfect a more fluent and less expensive color printing process. Encouraged by the Project, he and other artists experimented with the new technique.

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393 Acton, 42 and Gilbert, 5.
394 Acton, 42 and Gilbert, 5.
395 Gilbert, 9.
Zigrosser’s posits that Velonis developed the fine art screenprint in response to contemporary developments in color lithography. He sought a more economical and accessible art form. His hypothesis was confirmed by Gottlieb, who stated:

Lithography is a great process, but you can’t carry a lithographic stone around. I carried with me all the equipment for printing—paint, brushes and all the rest of it. There is no other printing process that can be compared to this. There is another aspect which I think is important; if you’re going to do lithography you have to live in a city where a large press exists. With silk-screen you can live wherever you want, up in the mountains, anywhere, because you can get your materials by mail, and the artist becomes much more independent.397

The desire for artistic independence and ease of process became the driving force behind the rapid development of screenprinting. Unlike in lithography, screenprinters did not require a close collaboration with a printer, making the process more direct and personal. This quality appealed to a number of artists, as it gave them a greater level of creative autonomy.

The majority of the artists assigned to the new unit recognized the potential of screenprinting and generally responded enthusiastically to the new medium.398 Harry Gottlieb, in particular, advocated screenprinting as an accessible and relevant art. He recognized and stressed that, due to its inherent economy and accessibility, screenprinting could exert what Watrous called a “demystifying and democratizing effect on printmaking.”399 When referring to the introduction of screenprinting as a fine art, Gottlieb stated, “I was so enthusiastic.”400 His comment gives evidence to the positive reactions that artists had to screenprinting and also underlines the social and

397 Gottlieb quoted in Greengard.
398 Gilbert notes that while many of the original screenprinters created a number of serigraphs while on the Project, Lozowick created just one. See Gilbert, 5.
399 Acton, 43.
400 Gottlieb quoted in Greengard, 55.
ideological implications of the medium. He believed that that screenprinting epitomized both a democratic ideology and vitality in art.\textsuperscript{401}

Elizabeth Olds, another one of the original artists trained by Velonis, certainly shared in Gottlieb’s beliefs. In her \textit{Art for the Millions} essay, Olds wrote:

From the artist’s point of view, the phrase ‘Prints for Mass Production’ has a complex meaning. First of all, it implies that etchings or woodcuts or lithographs possessing genuine artistic merit have been printed in thousands or hundreds of thousands without the loss of their basic significance or intent. By virtue of the fact that prints can be created as multiple originals in an edition numbering thousands rather than tens, their price is low enough so that they can be bought by the average citizen, not just the wealthy collector. After this condition has been fulfilled, there is still the problem of putting these low-priced, mass-produced prints before the people who can afford to buy them…These average citizens are an audience for the artist new to our time.\textsuperscript{402}

Although she submitted her essay before screenprinting was added as an option for artists working in the graphic arts workshop, Olds’ comment captures the most significant qualities of screenprinting. The simplicity and economy of this printing process gave artists the flexibility and freedom to create works in color. Artists could produce large editions, which as Eichenberg noted, corresponded with the WPA objective of reaching a wide, low-income public ready to purchase inexpensive, original works of art.\textsuperscript{403} Artist-printmakers sought to make art available to a newly art-conscious public and many believed that the process of screenprinting could most adequately satisfy public demand for original prints. In 1942, Harry Sternberg wrote, “Silk screen places original works in color within the reach of every person. The silk screen has achieved tremendous popularity with artists, dealers and even with the

\textsuperscript{401} Ibid, 55.  
\textsuperscript{402} Olds, 142.  
\textsuperscript{403} Eichenberg, 126.
buying public.\textsuperscript{404} Sternberg’s comment attests to the growing acceptance of the process among artists and their audience.

Elizabeth Olds was strongly committed to the creation and promotion of an egalitarian art and believed that screenprinting captured those values. She saw prints as having an inherently utilitarian function that wasn’t being harnessed by the artificially small edition numbers editioned by the WPA artists. The program had done wonders to conserve and encourage the “crafts of graphic arts” but was not fostering a true democratization of art by mandating that prints be produced in editions of twenty-five. She was also disappointed that the WPA required that matrices be destroyed so that no more impressions could be printed. She walked a fine line between complying with the strictures imposed by the federal program and her desire for the democratization of art. She wanted everyone to have access to art and believed the WPA/FAP was the most effective vehicle through which to increase public access to fine art. In her essay for \textit{Art for the Millions}, she wrote that “the WPA/FAP has made it possible for every man, woman and child to enjoy art on a popular basis…. Graphic Artists who hope to interest the millions in art must work in terms of what is vital and real to people generally.”\textsuperscript{405} Olds was interested in art as a tool for social betterment and also as a revolutionary weapon against the stuffiness of elitist values and of the academic tradition. Significantly, it was for this reason that she chose to work more and more frequently in a medium that she believed had the ability and the potential to democratize art.

\textsuperscript{405} Olds, 142.
According to Langa, Olds believed that “color prints with contemporary themes could express the diversity of modern society while also enhancing viewers’ visual literacy and aesthetic tastes.” Langa notes that it was not surprising that the subjects that she chose for her color prints were frequently less radical than those produced in other mediums. Rather, they often focused on scenes of leisure, which she believed would attract new collectors. A good example of this is *The Concert*, c.1938-1942 [image 4.7]. This print portrays a comedic mixture of figures preparing to listen to a harp performance. The male singer is leaning forward to introduce the harpist, his smile and enthusiasm encouraging the already excited audience. The harpist sits poised at her instrument, ready to pluck. The colors and the narrative of this print immediately make it very appealing. Olds was consciously drawing a parallel between diversion through music and diversion through art. While this print subtly satirizes middleclass music performances, it isn’t truly controversial or offensive. Rather, it is amusing and could appeal to any audience; particularly a middle class audience could take pleasure in the light irony of her image. In this entertaining color print, Olds created a piece that had the potential to amuse everyone, but one that also expressed and reflected the contemporary political, social and cultural environment. Thus, even while working within the strictures of a federally funded program, Olds was able to create a print that was both thought provoking and widely appealing. She caricatured middle-class leisure time, but did so in a way that was appealing rather than alienating.

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407 Ibid, 8.
Ruth Chaney was another of the original six artists assigned to work with Velonis. Like Olds, she found that screenprinting fit her personal aesthetic and made a number of prints in the medium. Her *Girl in Grey* [image 4.8] demonstrates her mastery of the medium. The print portrays a young woman sitting in a rose-colored armchair. The chair is situated in her parlor, next to a folding table. The table is decorated with a lavish bouquet of red roses. Below the armchair is a brown-blue rug and behind the chair is a patterned wall. The flat spaces of the floor and wall make the print appear very two-dimensional, which may be the result of both Chaney’s newness to the medium and, perhaps also Chaney’s search for an eastern aesthetic. There is a certain quality of *japonisme* in the flat, patterned areas. There is also a certain painterly quality to this print, which is a testament to the aesthetic range made possible by the technique. The print, like Olds’s, is a pleasant example of the American Scene. Her print is subtly critical of the middle class: the youthful figure in gray sits like a young queen on her bourgeois throne. However, like Olds’s, the print is not overtly offensive and is, in fact, quite pleasant.

Harry Gottlieb was one of the biggest supporters of the use of screenprinting as a fine art medium. He saw the medium as liberating artists from their dependence on cumbersome technology and the outside influence of printers. He, like Olds, appreciated that the medium was capable of rapidly and economically producing what he saw as egalitarian art objects.\(^{408}\) Gottlieb’s first screenprint, *On the Beach* [image 4.9] is a whimsical portrayal of labor.\(^{409}\) Printed in nine colors, the print depicts a grounded boat perched high upon iridescent yellow dunes. Three fishermen gather

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\(^{408}\) Gottlieb quoted in Greengard.

\(^{409}\) Gilbert, 5.
their daily catch within the hull of the boat. One man uses a net to scoop the fish into a basket. Meanwhile, a woman working on the beach captures a still-wriggling fish in a sack. The laborers on the boat are framed by an expansive navy sky. Like many of his black and white lithographs, this scene depicts a labor scene. However, this print is not pedantic or overtly leftist. It is, rather, colorful, animated, anecdotal and a perfect example of the American Scene.

As Gilbert notes, the stylistic diversity of the prints produced by artists working in screenprinting underscores the adaptability of the technique.410 The works detailed above can be categorized as representations of the American Scene. However, other artists, such as Velonis himself, created works in an abstract idiom. Velonis’s *Abstraction*, 1939, was reproduced with his article in *Art for the Millions*.411 The number of FAP artists who used elements of abstraction was limited, and the majority produced works that fell under the categories of Social Realism or the American Scene. Like their lithographs and intaglio prints, these artists created screenprints that dealt with the political and economic crises of the Depression. They created prints that documented scenes of labor, leisure and everyday life. In short, they used screenprinting to create works that had the same general content as their works in other mediums. The primary difference between screenprinting and other printing techniques was that artists could use significantly more colors in their works and that screenprints could be made to mimic the effects of painting. Artists such as Olds believed that these characteristics had the potential to attract a wider and more varied national audience for the graphic arts and therefore created her screenprints

410 Ibid, 5.
with this new audience as her target. As was mentioned previously, she avoided overtly pedantic or politicized themes in favor of light, uncontroversial subjects. Gottlieb, too, remained uncontroversial, for while he created a series of screenprints focused on labor issues, he continued “his espousal of the human cause” through straightforward, sharply articulated forms.⁴¹²

In March 1940, the American Contemporary Gallery sponsored a one-man show featuring works by Harry Gottlieb.⁴¹³ When it closed, Gottlieb received an invitation from the College Art Association to visit colleges on the East Coast and in the Midwest. He visited and gave demonstrations at one hundred and fifty colleges.⁴¹⁴ Gottlieb was so enthusiastic about the process that he and Olds eventually founded The Silk Screen Group, an art school dedicated to teaching the screenprinting process and exhibiting works by members.⁴¹⁵ The Group originally included twenty artists and had a workspace on East 10th Street where both WPA and non-WPA artists had the opportunity to create screenprints, exhibitions of which were then circulated to museums and libraries.⁴¹⁶

That same month, two major exhibitions featured screenprints. Working with the Artists’ Union of Western Massachusetts, Elizabeth McCausland, an avid supporter of screenprinting, assembled an exhibition dedicated exclusively to screenprints at the Springfield Museum in Massachusetts. All six of the artists trained

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⁴¹³ Watrous, 107.
⁴¹⁴ Gottlieb quoted in Greengard.
⁴¹⁶ Acton, 43.
by Velonis had works in the exhibition and were joined by a number of other artists from New York and Massachusetts. The other exhibition, curated by Carl Zigrosser, was held at The Weyhe Gallery in New York. The group-show, entitled *Exhibition of New Color Prints in a New Creative Medium*, included works by eleven screenprinters.

Significantly, it was during this show that the screenprinting process was renamed serigraphy. In a 1994 interview for the Library of Congress, Velonis stated, “Just before I got my pink slip [in 1939] I thought that this silk screen process was kind of cumbersome and commercial. We needed something not quite so generic and more specific, and that was serigraphy. I looked it up in the library… and took it to Carl Zigrosser.” Both Velonis and Zigrosser were interested in finding a term that would reiterate a distinction of quality between creative and commercial silkscreens. They settled on serigraphy, derived from the Greek work *seri*, which translates to “silk,” and *graphy*, “to draw.” By consciously using a name that paralleled the technical term of lithography, they sought to establish a certain level of legitimacy for the medium. New York Times art critic, Edward Allen Jewel, wrote in March, 1940 that:

> A new graphic medium has put in an appearance. The name tentatively suggested is “serigraphy”—this by way of applying to the work produced something terser and less cumbersome than ‘silk screen stencil print.’ Despite the antiquity of the stencil process as such, silk screen does constitute something essentially new. Much of the work [at Weyhe’s] is gay and entertainingly decorative. Experiment potentially profitable is underway, and

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417 Acton, 43.
418 Watrous, 107.
419 Acton, 43.
some of the results thus far obtained point to the opening up of a worthwhile graphic field.421

Several months later, another New York Times critic wrote that, “Since the turn of the century, the technique has been used in America for posters and for inexpensive advertising matter. But it took the initiative of the Federal Art Project to realized the value of the technique to the ‘fine arts’ of today.”422 Both articles reveal that screenprinting, or serigraphy, obtained critical success just years after its adaptation to a fine art medium. Watrous commented on this, writing, “historically, few masterpieces of printmaking had been created by artists in the years immediately following the adoption of an extant craft medium unfamiliar to them.”423 While the prints produced by the WPA artist-printmakers are not quite masterpieces, they do confirm the legitimacy of the medium as a fine print process.

By 1940, the “growing acceptance of the commercial craft of screenprinting by artists-printmakers brought forth analogies to the much-earlier technical adaptations in the history of European printmaking.”424 Specific comparisons were made between woodcuts, whose original purpose was derived from the “printing of late medieval designs, symbols or images on textiles, playing cards or religious prints.”425 Screenprinting was also compared to fifteenth century engravings of images on copper. The most obvious comparison was to Senefelder’s invention of lithography at the end of the eighteenth century. As was stated in Chapter Three,

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422 Green Harris.
423 Watrous, 102.
424 Ibid, 102.
425 Ibid, 102.
Senefelder originally sought a method by which he could rapidly reproduce his musical scores. Watrous made a significant comparison when he referred to screenprints made during the later 1930s and early 1940s as *incunabula*, a title which strongly implied a historical analogy to the earliest fine art woodcuts produced in Europe. Watrous’s use of this term bestowed a sense of scholarly approbation on the medium, further cementing its position as a fine art printing method.

The first large public demonstration of the screenprinting process was held on August 11, 1940 at the WPA pavilion at the New York World’s Fair.  

Harry Gottlieb was selected to demonstrate the various techniques that artists utilized in screenprinting [image 4.4]. He then continued to travel around the country and lecture in the technique.  

His lectures generally dealt with the technical aspects of the process and he frequently demonstrated the process and invited the audience to pull their own prints. Gilbert writes that:

> [Gottlieb’s lectures] exemplified the ideological thrust of the WPA’s art programs, as he actively sought to broaden the public’s awareness and appreciation of the graphic arts...Gottlieb attempted to forge a more personal and immediate link between this new democratic art form and a responsive public.

His commitment to perpetuating the dissemination and development of screenprinting was also realized when, in 1940, he was featured in a film that depicted the silkscreen technique. The film, produced by Julius Roffman of the Educational Institute of New York University, featured Gottlieb demonstrating the various steps of the process.

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426 Gilbert, 8.
427 Ibid, 9.
428 Ibid, 9.
429 Ibid, 9.
430 Ibid, 9.
screenprinting process and was promoted as the cinematic counterpart to Velonis’s 1938 technical manual published by the WPA. Together, the manual and the film allowed for a widespread dissemination of the technique to areas that lacked WPA graphic art workshops, Community Art Centers, college art programs or art schools.\({431}\) Gilbert believes that Gottlieb and Velonis’s efforts were directly responsible for the rapid growth of printmaking studios, university graphic workshops and a burgeoning market for screenprints in the 1950s and 1960s.\({432}\) It was Velonis who first instigated a wide scale investigation into the creative potential of the technique and his technical manual spread knowledge of the medium throughout the country. Throughout the 1940s, Gottlieb traveled to hundreds of colleges throughout the United States and had helped to implement studio programs in screenprinting. Together, Gottlieb and Velonis encouraged widespread experimentation in a technique that only years before had been exclusively utilized as a commercial medium.

Significantly, WPA administrators and artists promoted screenprinting as being the only fine art printing method developed exclusively in the United States. As printmaker Edward Landon stated in 1964, screenprinting is “the one truly American contribution in the fine art fields, having been discovered and evolved in this country by American artists.”\({433}\) As an easy, economic and a “truly American” printing method, screenprinting epitomized the values of democracy and vitality that were promoted by WPA administrators and by the artists themselves.

\({431}\) Ibid, 9.
\({432}\) Ibid, 9.
\({433}\) Landon, 18.
As was discussed in Chapter Two, the onset of World War II prompted a rapid dissolution of the Project. Artists were commissioned to produce propagandistic prints for the war effort. In March 1942, the entire WPA/FAP was renamed the Graphic Section of the War Services Division and the government provided additional lithographic and serigraphic equipment. Artists were obligated to create works “supporting the allies.” Gilbert notes that the technical experimentation that had insured the rapid maturation of serigraphy was openly discouraged by the Administration and the process was utilized primarily for the printing of utilitarian governmental posters. This change in the function of the Graphic Arts Division put an end to the development of screenprinting as a creative medium under the aegis of the WPA. However, artists such as Gottlieb continued their experiments on an individual basis. Over the next decade, a small group of artists in Europe and the United States continued to create fine art screenprints. Nevertheless, it was not until the 1960s, that artists once again made widespread use of the technique. A number of Pop and Op artists employed the technique. Ironically, Op art’s emphasis on flat planes and intense hues and Pop art’s appropriation of popular media imagery served to reiterate the strong commercial associations that the WPA printmakers had worked so hard to negate. Regardless, the widespread use of serigraphy during the 1960s was a direct result of the pioneering efforts of the WPA screenprinters during the 1930s. Velonis, Gottlieb, Olds and the others were pivotal figures in early development of screenprinting as a fine art medium.

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434 Ibid, 9.
435 Ibid, 9.
436 Ibid, 9.
The Works Progress Administration successfully incorporated screenprinting into the Graphic Arts Division as a creative printing method. While employed by the WPA Federal Art Project, Anthony Velonis and a number of others artists had the opportunity to experiment with the medium and confirmed that the process had creative value as a color printing method. In a short number of years, screenprinting broke loose from its reputation as a cumbersome commercial printing method and was given the new, technical name of serigraphy. Lynn Ward, who succeeded von Groschwitz as the director of the New York City Graphic Arts Division, stated that, “the development of the silkscreen process as a medium for artists came about through the vision and courageous persistence of Anthony Velonis, the missionary work of the Public Use of Arts Committee… and the sponsorship of the New York City WPA Art Project.” Through the efforts of the Graphic Arts Division and the specific efforts of Velonis, Olds, Gottlieb, Lozowick, Chaney and Morley, screenprinting became a widely used creative medium. The artists who chose to utilize the medium were particularly aware of the social and political connotations of the medium. They saw in screenprinting the potential for an egalitarian art that epitomized the values promoted and propagated by the WPA and by the Roosevelt Administration. Many of the serigraphs produced by WPA artists depict vignettes of American life as the printer-artists experienced and interpreted it.

The prints created during the WPA remain significant as artifacts that document the development of screenprinting as a fine art technique and also as the pulse of American popular culture at the time. The artists involved with the

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437 Ward quoted in Jewell, "In the Field of Prints.”
screenprinting unit of the Graphic Arts Division were uninterested in producing limited edition masterpieces to be exhibited on museum walls. Rather, they were interested in producing works that would decorate living rooms. Serigraphs were truly prints for the millions: multi-colored, attractive, relatable and appealing to a mass audience. Accusations of kitsch might today be leveled at the WPA artists, but they understood that screenprinting, perhaps more than any other media, had intrinsic value as an art for the masses.
Conclusion: A Century of Progress
The Lasting Effects of the Federal Art Project on the Development of the Graphic Arts in the United States

The Federal Art Project (FAP) succeeded in changing the relationship that the American artist had with society by marketing the works they created as being democratic and vital to the nation as a whole. However, by the early 1940s, domestic opposition to the Roosevelt Administration from anti-New Dealers gathered strength.438 Mounting political tensions reached a peak in 1938 when the Dies Committee branded the Federal Writers’ and Theater Projects as “agents of Communism Party propaganda.”439 The following year, Congress disbanded the Theater Project and placed new restrictions on the FAP. While the FAP avoided a direct condemnation, all WPA cultural programs were effectively accused of supporting a communist agenda.440 The simultaneous growing threat of war helped to rejuvenate the American economy, leading to concerns over the necessity of the FAP. The diminished need for a federal relief plan eventually led to the termination of the Project in 1943. Nevertheless, despite its brief tenure, the Federal Art Project catalyzed a number of important aesthetic and technical innovations in the graphic arts.

The Project was disbanded in stages. Jonathan Harris writes that by 1941, eighty percent of Project work was being produced for the National Defense Program. In March 1942, the Works Progress Administration was renamed the Graphic Section of the War Services Program, and less than a year later, on February 1, 1943, all

439 Ibid, 163.
440 Ibid, 163.
statewide art projects were officially disbanded. Remaining employees were reassigned to work on a range of utilitarian activities such as illustrating instruction manuals, camouflage design, map making and canteen decoration.\textsuperscript{441} The artists’ complicit involvement in the orientation of visual media towards a strategic defense policy became explicit in 1942 when two \textit{Art-in-Defense} exhibitions were mounted at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the \textit{Artists for Victory} exhibition opened at the Metropolitan Museum. The artists involved wished to demonstrate that they were “alive to their job in the fight against fascism. Alive with patriotism which stirs their souls to produce their best work…artists can produce weapons as necessary as arms.”\textsuperscript{442} Thus, the role of the artists was once again reframed. Artists were no longer citizens striving to produce art for the millions; they were rather loyally fulfilling their patriotic duties by creating art for the allies.\textsuperscript{443}

While there was an effort to incorporate the artist into the nation’s war effort, there was a simultaneous movement to reinstate the artist within the private sector.\textsuperscript{444} This movement meant a rejection of, or at least a reaction against, almost a decade’s worth of carefully calculated Federal rhetoric on behalf of the artist. There was an effort to “relegitimiz[e] the production of contemporary art within economic and social relations between private individuals and capitalist corporations” by repositioning the artist as dependent on individual buyers.\textsuperscript{445} Art Critic Elizabeth McCausland stated that without the economic security that the FAP had provided, artists were destined to...

\textsuperscript{441} Harris, 150.
\textsuperscript{443} Harris, 151.
\textsuperscript{444} Ibid, 151.
\textsuperscript{445} Ibid, 152.
return to their “previous condition of servitude, to that free market in which [they have] the glorious liberty of starving to death.” However, McCausland’s protests about the marginalization of artists in a capitalist society and her defense of the Federal Art Project were not endorsed by many others as any form of state art had become synonymous with communism or fascism and “government support for the arts now meant government interference.” This shift in rhetoric reveals a rejection of the political, social and aesthetic stance that the government had taken throughout the 1930s. Harris stated, “Despite the efforts of the Federal Art Project to synchronize the relations of artistic production with those of industrial labor and to argue for arts as an integral component of American community and culture, a concept of arts as different from, and antagonistic toward society resiliently reemerged.” Artists were once again perceived as being outside of society.

This thesis has demonstrated that the institutional support that the Federal Art Project gave to artists was short lived and almost from the beginning, the Project was targeted by opponents of the New Deal who continued to view federal support for the arts as suspicious and as a waste of funds. Despite the government’s sustained efforts to promote the creation of art as an integral facet of the WPA’s work-creation program, many continued to doubt the practical relevance of art to “national survival and economic well-being.”

446 Elizabeth McCausland, “Art Week,” Elizabeth McCausland Papers, Archives of American Art.
447 Harris, 153, 155.
448 Ibid, 155.
449 Ibid, 155.
450 Langa, Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York, 205.
However, despite accusations of boondoggling, the Project was ultimately an important and successful development within the history of the arts in America. As Langa notes, and as has been discussed over the course of several chapters, artists vigorously asserted that the WPA/FAP had not only saved them from starvation and destitution, but had also effected a positive transformation in the relationship that artists had with the American people. As can be seen in artist testimonies, particularly in essays by Jacob Kainen and Elizabeth Olds, secondary source material and a number of the prints produced by artist-printmakers, the Federal Art Project was critical in reframing the artist as an integral contributor to society.

Kainen defended the Program when he wrote:

Today, when printmaking is so widely carried out in the United States, we should not overlook the importance of the WPA Graphic Arts Division in providing the initial impetus... The Project created a new audience, also. The public, on a national scale, had been educated to accept and collect prints, which they had become familiar with through the WPA collections in schools, libraries, hospitals, military bases, government offices and through exhibitions in WPA/FAP community art centers.

Olds expressed a similar sentiment when she wrote, “In making it possible for every man, woman and child in America to enjoy art on a wide popular basis, the WPA/FAP has played a major role.” In their identification of the FAP as the mechanism through which a new relationship was forged between artists and their audience, Kainen and Olds refute accusations of profligacy leveled at the Project.

As was discussed in Chapter One, the Works Progress Administration created the conditions by which a new paradigm in American printmaking was established.

451 Ibid, 205.
452 Kainen, 171.
453 Olds, 142.
The WPA, which was established in 1935 and ran until 1943, was a New Deal work-creation program implemented by the Roosevelt Administration in a wide scale effort to mitigate the economic effects of the Great Depression. The Federal Art Project (FAP), which came under the heading of the WPA, hired artists on a wage-labor system, a feature that emphasized the Roosevelt Administration’s efforts to identify artists as laborers within a democratic, capitalist-industrial economy. The government’s application of a propagandistic rhetoric challenged the myth of the artist as outside of and in opposition to society and engendered a social milieu in which the artist was able to participate as a contributive laborer and citizen. This hegemonizing discourse relied heavily upon what Harris refers to as conflated understandings of citizenship, nationhood and patriotism. As a result, the WPA can arguably be interpreted as an “Ideological State Apparatus” (ISA), and as was discussed, while the WPA was not formally outside of state control, it worked within the extant economic and political strictures “to preserve and entrench the power of monopoly capitalism in the United States.”

Chapter Two demonstrated that by providing economic and emotional support for artists, the Federal government facilitated an ideological realignment between artist-printmakers and their audience. The changes that occurred as a result of the Roosevelt Administration’s intervention within the arts sector are still apparent today as evidenced by widespread and long-term use of the medium by former WPA artists such as Russell Limbach, Stuart Davis, Harry Gottlieb and their students. While printmaking was not used with great frequency as a creative medium during the

454 Harris, 7.
455 Ibid, 8.
1940s, there was a renaissance in printmaking during the 1950s and 1960s. As Kainen stated, “The project artists bridged the gap between the old moribund etching societies and the unprecedented flowering of graphic arts that has taken place during the [1950s and 1960s]. When Stanley William Hayter came to this country in 1940 to open his experimental arts studio, Atelier 17, he found the artists ready.”⁴⁵⁶ By acknowledging a connection between the technical and aesthetic developments fostered under the FAP and the subsequent utilization of graphic media, Kainen’s comment attests to the enduring consequences of the FAP.

FAP printmakers were uniquely able to fulfill the government’s mandate for and the widespread need of an art for the people. Prints accounted for the majority of the FAP allocations to schools, hospitals, housing projects and libraries and were included in many of the major FAP exhibitions. As was stated above, Kainen believed the FAP was responsible for introducing Americans to the graphic arts, “which they had become familiar with through the WPA collections in schools, libraries, hospitals, military bases, government offices and through exhibitions in WPA/FAP community art centers.”⁴⁵⁷ Wider exposure to an oftentimes-neglected medium had convinced the public that prints could be as “imaginative and original as paintings, and much less expensive.”⁴⁵⁸ As a cheap, vital, and egalitarian medium, prints held a unique position among the fine arts. Artists who produced prints acknowledged and took advantage of these features of the medium. By viewing their prints as a method through which they could communicate with their audience,

⁴⁵⁶ Kainen, 175.
⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, 175.
⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, 175.
printmakers experienced a revitalized sense of social responsibility and sought to create works that engaged their audience in new ways.

The WPA was the mechanism through which printmakers were able to challenge the extant printmaking paradigms and customs in favor of a variety of styles such as abstraction, social realism, precisionism or regionalism. These aesthetic styles represented a rejection of the status quo in favor of styles that the artist felt most suitably addressed contemporary political, social, cultural and economical issues. FAP artists rejected the idea of art for art’s sake in favor of an art for society’s sake, which they believed would lead to a renewal of vitality in art. As a result, the works produced on the Project encompassed a visual codex of the political, social, cultural and aesthetic attitudes that defined Depression-era America. By temporary eliminating the “caprice of private patronage,” artists had the opportunity to create works that appealed to and reflected a large portion of society.459 The emergence of a popular art during the darkest years of a nation-wide depression demonstrates that, given the opportunity, artists in any era have the potential to create an “art for the millions.” The democratic nature of their art, from the materials they used and the content of their work to the exhibition and allocation methods, highlights the importance of federal art subsidization.

Chapter Two confirmed that these prints remain embedded in history as products of an era that shook the core of this country. They are mirrors that reflect human social needs as they manifested themselves during the Great Depression and are records and products of the implementation of an unprecedented federal aid

program in the United States. Implicit within these prints is an expression of national identity, which echoes the explicit reframing of each Federal Art Project artist as an artist-citizen and artist-laborer. The artists’ new function as producers of a nationalized art culture, particularly of a democratic and vital “art for the millions,” gave them a “warm feeling of boon companionship in a common enterprise.”

Charismatic printmakers such as Russell Limbach and Anthony Velonis, who realized that they could broaden the materials and techniques available to artist-printmakers, found a niche within the Graphic Arts Division of the WPA. While on the Project, they were able to experiment with and perfect the processes of lithography and screenprinting in ways that would otherwise have been impossible. As was demonstrated in Chapters Three and Four, through the support of the Federal Art Program, artists reclaimed these two techniques from the commercial world for creative use. The broadening use of lithography and screenprinting gave artists the opportunity to move away from the “narrow, conservative and repressive hegemony of the etching societies” that dominated and constricted American printmaking during the early years of the twentieth century. These developments are of particular importance as the majority of the prints produced during the 1950s and 1960s were lithographs and screenprints.

As has been shown in this thesis, the implementation of the Federal Art Project catalyzed a series of technical and aesthetic developments in the graphic arts. While American artists had created prints during the early decades of the twentieth century, it was only while working as employees of the FAP that they had the

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460 Kainen, 175.
opportunity to experiment in new and innovative ways. This experimentation and attendant development altered the trajectory of printmaking in twentieth century America.
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Figures and Images

Harry Hopkins, Director of the Works Progress Administration in Washington D.C.

Federal Project Number One
Employed over 40,000 Americans from 1935-1943

Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), Henry Alsberg, National Director, 1935-1939

Historical Records Survey (HRS), Luther H. Evans, National Director 1935-1939

Federal Art Project (FAP) Holger Cahill, National Director 1935-1943

Federal Theater Project (FTP) Hallie Flanagan, National Director, 1935-1939

Federal Music Project (FMP) Nikolai Sokoloff, National Director 1935-1939

Washington-appointed field advisors, hired to monitor activities across country

Regional and state Art Directors
Appointed to oversee 42 administrative units across the United States and to supervise production on a regional level
Audrey McMahon, Director of the Region of New York City

Art Supervisors,
Hired to oversee individual programs at local level

Figure 1.1 The Works Progress Administration, 1935-1943
The Federal Art Project (FAP)
Holger Cahill, National Director

The Easel Division
108,000 Paintings

The Mural Project,
2,500 Murals

The Graphic Arts Division,
239,727 impressions from 11,200 print designs

The Sculpture Project,
17,000 Sculptures

Utilitarian Projects:
Community Art Centers
Art Lessons
Traveling Exhibition Program
“Useful Arts”

The Index of American Art
22,000 pictorial records of “authentic American design”

Figure 1.2 The WPA Federal Art Project, directed by Holger Cahill
Figure 1.3 The Federal Art Program in New York City under Audrey McMahon
Image 1.1 Harry Gottlieb's Artists' Union Membership Card
1935
Image from Smithsonian Archives of American Art

Image 1.2 Art Front, the monthly journal of the Artists' Union
November 1934
Image from Smithsonian Archives of American Art

Image 1.3 Artists' Union Rally
1935, photograph
Image from Smithsonian Archives of American Art
Image 1.4 Harry Hopkins and Holger Cahill at the Museum of Modern Art during the exhibition “New Horizons in American Art,” 1936, photograph
Image from Smithsonian Archives of American Art

Image 1.5 Audrey McMahon (center left) and Holger Cahill (center right) With a Group of People
February 15, 1938, photograph
Image from Smithsonian Archives of American Art
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Image 2.2 Margaret Lowengrund, *Loading Bricks*, lithograph, The New York Public Library

Image 2.4 Elizabeth Olds, *Bootleg Coal, Pennsylvania* (1936), lithograph, Elizabeth Olds Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

Image 2.5 Harry Gottlieb, *Bootleg Coal Mining* (1936), lithograph, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Image 2.6 Louis Lozowick, *Subway Station* (1936), lithograph, The New York Public Library

Image 2.7 Jacob Kainen, *Lunch* lithograph, The New York Public Library
Image 2.8 Harry Gottlieb, *Three Lane Traffic* (1938), lithograph,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Image 2.9 Stuart Davis, *New Jersey Landscape*, lithograph,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Image 2.10 Elizabeth Olds, *Me and Her* (c.1938-1943), screenprint, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Image 2.11 Elizabeth Olds, *Camera Club* (c.1938-1943), lithograph, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Image 3.1 Russell T. Limbach in Paris, 1931, photograph
Russell T. Limbach Papers, Wesleyan University Special Collection and Archives, Middletown, Connecticut.

Image 3.2 Yasou Kuniyoshi, *Tight-Rope Performer* (1936), lithograph
ARTSTOR
Image 3.3 Russell T. Limbach, *Trapeze Girl* (1935), color lithograph,
Smithsonian American Art Museum

Image 3.4 Russell T. Limbach, *Trapeze Girl* in pink and yellow (1935), color lithograph AP,
Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT
Image 3.5 Russell T. Limbach, *Trapeze Girl* in blue (1935), color lithography, AP, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT

Image 3.6 Russell T. Limbach, *Trapeze Girl* in yellow, pink and blue (1935), color lithography, AP, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT
Image 3.7 Russell T. Limbach giving a demonstration in lithography at the Federal Art Gallery, January 18, 1939, WPA FAP Photography Unit
Wesleyan University Special Collections and Archives

Image 3.9 Louis Lozowick, *Cluster of Willows* (1940), color lithograph, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Image 4.2 Alice Selinkoff working on a design for the Federal Art Project Poster Unit (1939), photograph Archives of American Art
Image 4.3 Anthony Velonis, seated at desk, working on a poster matrix, Denver, Colorado (1943), photograph
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Image 4.4 Elizabeth McCausland at a screenprinting demonstration at the WPA Pavilion at the World's Fair (1940), photograph
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Image 4.5 Anthony Velonis, *6:30 P.M.* (1938),
screenprint,
New York Public Library

Image 4.6 Elizabeth Olds, *The Concert* (1938),
screenprint,
The Smithsonian American Art Museum
Image 4.7 Ruth Chaney, *Girl in Grey* (c. 1938-1940), screenprint, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Image 4.8 Harry Gottlieb, *On the Beach* (c.1938-1940), screenprint, The Metropolitan Museum of Art