

Communication Café

(New College, University of Toronto, Spring 2009; exercise created by Leora Freedman)

Spring 2009, Café #1

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The Art of the Great Depression

Here is some background information about the context in which this art arose:

The Great Depression is usually dated between 1929 and 1939, though the economic effects actually started earlier and lasted until the US entry into WWII in 1941. This economic downturn followed a “boom” period of speculation during the 1920’s, and it led to a situation in which, by 1932, stocks had only 20% of the value they’d had in 1929; manufacturing output was 54% of its former level; 11,000 of the US’s 25,000 banks had failed, and 25-30% of the workforce was unemployed. Until Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) was elected president in 1932, the government did little to intervene, as most people believed that free-market forces would eventually correct the downward spiral. As a result, consumer spending dropped and the depression deepened (“The Great Depression”).

After FDR took over the presidency in 1933, his overall relief plan called “The New Deal” created programs that employed many different types of individual workers, including visual artists, writers, musicians, and actors. The goal of arts programs like the Federal Art Project (part of the Works Progress Administration or WPA) was to help artists survive the Depression years and to create art for public buildings (“Federal Art Project”).

Here is a summary of some of the key aspects of this art, based on *A New Deal for the Arts*, by Bruce I. Bustard:

American attitudes toward the arts

In the ideology that became popular during this era, artists were seen (and saw themselves) as workers whose role was to create a necessary social product, just as factory workers manufactured parts or laborers built buildings, roads, or bridges. Many believed that art needed a connection with “the people”, with rural life on the land, and with urban workers. It was felt that artists should participate in the life of their time instead of being marginalized and turning to more esoteric subjects.

Jobs were given without reference to an artist’s politics; thus, many were political radicals. They had to be unemployed (qualifying for relief), and could earn up to \$100/ month to practice their art for an hourly wage.

There were always those with opposing views: that artists should be able to have a paying public in response to the quality of their work and that government intervention in the arts is not desirable.

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Art glorifying “the people”

There is a strong Socialist Realist influence in the design of much Depression-era art. Artists working in this style glorified ordinary people and made art that was intended to be accessible. This art often expressed a scornful view of bankers, financiers, etc. In keeping with the mood of the times, in which Americans generally felt the society had to pull together to overcome the Depression, much of the art glorified the worker and the community, and tried to document and preserve American history and culture.

Visual artists made paintings and prints; they also designed and executed large-scale murals and sculptures in post offices, schools, and even prisons. Many of these depicted the life of a certain region or town or values important to a certain group, like farmers or college students.

Artists had freedom in their choice of subject matter, but the art ultimately had to be seen as acceptable for public display, often as a permanent part of the environment of a small town. Thus images were sometimes changed in accordance with local values (e.g. an artist could not depict a landscape that wasn't exactly faithful to the real landscape in a place; or a painting showing farmers with up-to-date machinery might be substituted for one that showed farmers struggling without such machinery). There were sometimes tensions between artists and the people whose lives their creations were intended to enhance.

Social criticism in art

Some art of the era was inspired by Communist ideals and was very critical of the handling of social problems in the US. In particular, much art focused on the struggle for unionization, which during this era resulted in the organizing of many workers and the institution of collective bargaining.

Eventually the programs came under attack due to the liberal or radical stance of many of the artists and the increasingly conservative political climate in the US Congress. Some arts programs were ended or severely curtailed before WWII; by 1943 all the projects were ended.

Sources:

Bustard, Bruce I. *A New Deal for the Arts*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.

“Federal Art Project.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*. Oxford Reference Online, 2008.

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“The Great Depression.” Modern American Poetry at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
December 22, 2008 <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/about.htm>

Group Activity (Art of the Great Depression)

Look at the examples of Depression-era art with your group. For each picture, try to answer the following questions:

1. Look at the overall design of the picture. What is in the foreground? The background? How does your eye become drawn into the picture, and what route does it take around the image(s)?
2. Most of these pictures are highly symbolic. Evaluate the use of symbolism in each picture: what is meant by the various symbols? How effectively are symbolic images used? Look at small details as well as the larger images.
3. What social and political messages do you detect in these works? Do you see a tension between some of these messages?
4. How artistically competent is the picture? On what do you base this judgment?
5. How can this picture be “read” as an historical document? What does it suggest about the society and era in which it was created?

Here are some larger issues to discuss:

- Ideally, what is the role of the artist in a society? How does this contrast with the artist’s actual role?
- Should there be an expectation that artists can make a living with their art?
- What should be the role of the government in supporting the arts?
- During a time of economic downturn and layoffs, should the government aid companies and organizations, or should the focus be on aiding the individual, as in the New Deal?
- Should governments attempt to protect “cultural production” in times of economic distress?

Be prepared to share some highlights of your group’s discussion with the larger group.

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