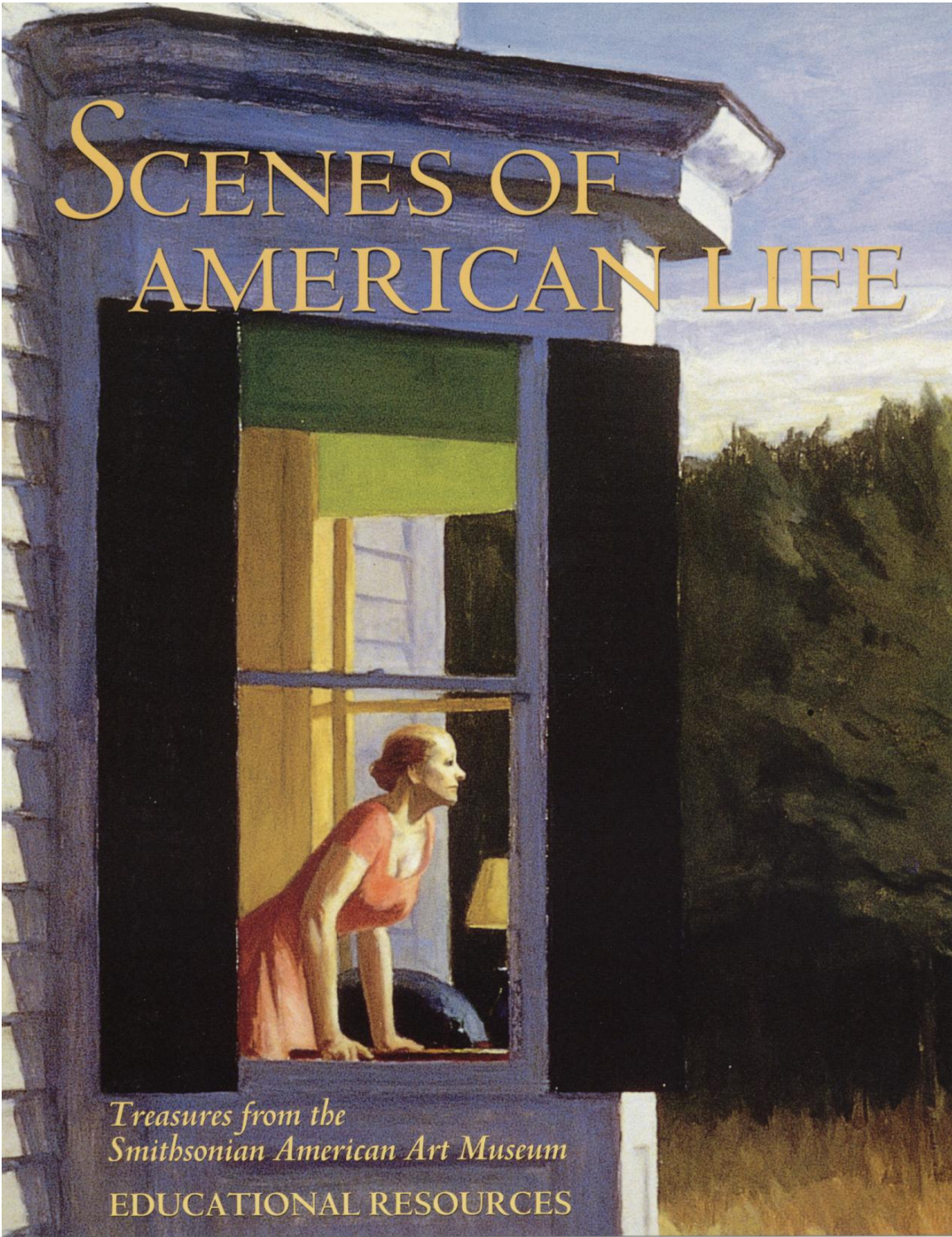




Smithsonian
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture*
Smithsonian American Art Museum



UNIT TWO

The Great Depression

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UNIT TWO

The Great Depression

U.S. History National Standard

Students should understand how the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state.

Students should be able to explain the cultural life of the Depression years in art and evaluate the government's role in promoting artistic expression.

BACKGROUND

The 1920s were sometimes known as the “Machine Age,” the “Jazz Age,” and the “Age of Prosperity.” However, the stock market crashed in October of 1929, precipitating the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Depression lasted until production began for World War II in the late '30s and early '40s, reanimating the economy. Meanwhile, the nation was thrown into despair as millions of Americans lost their jobs and savings. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, elected in 1932, pledged himself to a “New Deal for the American people,” a plan for restoring prosperity which he launched in the first one hundred days of his administration. His idea was to enhance the welfare and security of the common man through legislation. Many of the measures, such as providing aid for home and farm mortgages, and constructing public works such as bridges and dams, were intended as temporary relief to help create jobs for the thirteen million unemployed. Other measures were directed toward artists, whom Roosevelt’s administration viewed as useful and productive members of our culture. They were given employment under the auspices of such New Deal programs as the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), and later the Federal Art Project under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). These projects were intended “to work toward an integration of the artists with the daily life of the community.” The WPA was terminated in 1943.

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O. Louis Guglielmi, *Relief Blues*, about 1938, tempera, 24 x 29 7/8 in.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Guglielmi's painting depicts a man and three women seated together in a small room. All of them wear simple clothes except for the woman seated at the table writing on a sheet of paper, still in her hat and coat. The man stares at her with a worried look as the woman in the foreground looks at us with the same disturbed expression. At left, seated on a sofa, a younger woman scrutinizes herself in a hand mirror, seemingly oblivious to the tension of the moment. The room has only a few pieces of furniture; in the foreground, the presence of a stove suggests the lack of central heating. In the small room behind the figures we can see the outlines of an iron bedstead, emphasizing the small living space and lack of privacy.

WHAT DOES THE PAINTING TELL YOU?

The scene depicts a family in financial difficulties because of the Depression. The woman in street clothes is a government employee, a "relief worker," tak-

ing notes to determine whether the family qualifies for federal assistance, or “welfare relief.” The artist created an underlying sense of distress in the image by emphasizing an unstable composition and the inhabitants’ worried expressions and postures. Guglielmi added touches of red in the shoes and tablecloth as if to suggest hope, but these elements also serve to highlight the family’s attitude of discouragement.

WHY WAS IT PAINTED THIS WAY?

Relief Blues documents the harsh conditions suffered by many in the Depression era. Many of the unemployed during the 1930s were forced to depend on government support to survive the economic hardships of the time. The painting’s title suggests that the effects of the Depression were both economic and psychological. Welfare was offensive to many; they wanted jobs instead. It was considered shameful by many to receive hand-outs from the government. The family portrayed here embodies these notions. At the time Guglielmi produced this painting, the Depression had persisted for almost nine years. He himself benefited from the New Deal but opposed the stigma of “relief” associated with his work.

WHO IS THE ARTIST?

O. Louis Guglielmi (1906–1956) was born in Cairo, Egypt. In 1914, Louis and his mother joined his father, a violinist, in New York, arriving from Milan, Italy. He was naturalized as an American citizen in 1927, and found employment in 1934 by the PWAP as a painter. In his later career the artist tended to paint in an abstract style, but his work of the 1930s remained narrative and concentrated on Depression subjects.

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Moses Soyer, *Artists on WPA*, 1935, oil, 36 1/8 x 42 1/8 in.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Six artists are at work in Soyer's sober, gray interior. In the background, unfinished works share some of the dark, neutral tones of the studio but the artists have already begun to transform their paintings into cheerful, colorful images of children at play in bright summer landscapes. Soyer's combination of a somber mood and creative activity is appropriate for a depiction of a government-sponsored work program for the nation's artists.

WHAT DOES THE PAINTING TELL YOU?

In a letter, Soyer wrote that *Artists on WPA* represents a group of young artists and a model, seen in the foreground, who were assisting him while he was in charge of a Portable Murals Project, depicting the theme of children at play. The murals were installed in schools and libraries. He noted that he was employed by the WPA as a supervising artist to execute 8 or 10 portable murals. He was provided with a studio in New York City and with a group

of artists and models to assist him. This painting depicts Soyer's assistants working on the murals upon which he had traced his designs.

WHY WAS IT PAINTED THIS WAY?

Soyer wanted to show how the government was helping put artists to work. He observed that “the WPA art project has given dignity to the artists. It gave them a feeling of belonging, of being useful members of society. They worked with enthusiasm and have produced fine work in many media. It was a fine and hopeful period for American Art.” It was also a credit to Roosevelt’s administration that it recognized that artists are an integral part of our society. Many artists supported by the WPA went on to make valuable contributions to the country’s visual heritage.

WHO IS THE ARTIST?

Moses Soyer (1899–1974) came from a family of noted artists. Born in Russia, he emigrated to the United States in 1912, coming of age artistically about the time of the Great Depression. His primary subject was the human figure, and he was described by one museum director as “unquestionably one of the important figurative painters of this century.” Working principally in New York City, Soyer often said, “My message is people.”

RESEARCH

Grades 7–8

- The events we learn about in history class, including the Depression, may have shaped the experience of your family members. Interview family members who lived through the Depression years, or ask other family members what they know about the family history during the Depression. Where did they or their family find employment? How did these years affect the family emotionally, financially, or otherwise?
- Narrate an oral history of your family during the Depression years for your class. Use anecdotes where possible.

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- Choose one of the many artists hired by the government during the Depression. Research what department they worked for and what they produced.

Grades 9–12

- Research and report what the New Deal did for the American public. What was “new” about it? How did it differ from President Hoover’s approach to the Depression? Who most benefited from the New Deal?
- There were many art programs funded by New Deal agencies, such as the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP), the Portable Murals Project (PMP), and the Federal Art Project (FAP). Research those programs, paying attention to the dates they existed and what kind of projects they funded. Were there public art projects in your area? What were they and who were the artists who created them? Compare the results of the various art programs.

RESOURCES

Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974)

Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

David Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983)

Virginia Mecklenburg, *The Public as Patron* (College Park, Md.: The University of Maryland, 1979)

For works of art from the Depression era and interviews with artists, visit the National Archives link: <http://www.nara.gov/exhall/newdeal/newdeal.html>

Also visit a student-created site for ThinkQuest:
<http://library.advanced.org/50062/Depression/depression.html>