

Wall Text and Extended Labels

1934: A New Deal for Artists

INTRO PANEL

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The United States of America was in crisis as 1934 approached. Art seemed irrelevant as the national economy fell into a profound depression after the stock market crash of October 1929. Thousands of banks failed, wiping out the life savings of millions of families. Farmers battled drought, erosion, and declining food prices. Businesses struggled or collapsed. A quarter of the work force was unemployed, while an equal number worked reduced hours. More and more people were homeless and hungry. Nearly 10,000 unemployed artists faced destitution.

The nation looked expectantly to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was inaugurated in March 1933. The new administration swiftly initiated a wide-ranging series of economic recovery programs called the New Deal. The President realized that Americans needed not only employment but also the inspiration art could provide. On December 8, 1933, the Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts organized the Public Works of Art Project. Within days sixteen regional committees were recruiting artists who eagerly set to work in all parts of America. Between December 1933 and June 1934, the PWAP hired 3,749 artists who created 15,663 paintings, murals, sculptures, prints, drawings, and craft works. The PWAP suggested “the American Scene” as appropriate subject matter, but allowed artists to interpret this idea freely. PWAP images vividly capture the realities and ideals of Depression-era America. The PWAP art displayed in schools, libraries, post offices, museums, and government buildings lifted the spirits of Americans all over the country. The success of the PWAP paved the way for later New Deal art programs, including the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project.

In April 1934, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., exhibited over 500 works created under the PWAP. President Franklin Roosevelt, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and government officials who attended the exhibition acclaimed the art enthusiastically. The Roosevelts selected thirty-two paintings for the White House, while senators, representatives, and cabinet secretaries chose works to adorn their offices. During the 1960s hundreds of these PWAP paintings were transferred to the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where they open windows into the America of 1934.

1934: A New Deal for Artists is organized and circulated by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with support from the William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment Fund and the Smithsonian Council for American Art. The C.F. Foundation in Atlanta supports the museum’s traveling exhibition program, *Treasures to Go*.

WALL QUOTES

Every artist . . . is so keyed up to the importance of the situation, amounting practically to a revolution for him, that he is without exception, putting every ounce of his energy and creative ability into his work as never before.

—Harry Gottlieb to Edward Bruce of the PWAP, January 2, 1934

The Project has been a recognition of the value of culture and the arts in American life. It is a significant example of the President’s desire to give the people of this country “a more abundant life.”

—Edward Bruce, *National Exhibition of Art by the Public Works of Art Project*, 1934

TOMBSTONES AND LABELS

Kenneth M. Adams (born Topeka, Kansas 1897 – died Albuquerque, New Mexico 1966)

Juan Duran

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.148

Juan Duran, the New Mexican man who posed for this portrait, brings the brilliant light and vivid colors of his native desert landscape into the artist's studio with him. In works like this one Kenneth Adams, who had left New York to join the artists' colony in Taos, adapted the bold colors and geometrically faceted forms of European modernism to painting New Mexican landscapes and people. In Adams's daring rendition, Duran's hair and mustache are shown as green rather than the gray they probably really were. The bright colors of Duran's clothing are reflected in the skin of his broad, strong hands and blunt face. Even as this powerful man sits smoking with his hands resting on his knees, the lively hues and vigorous brushwork of the painting suggest the energy he will bring to his work when he finishes his cigarette.

E. Dewey Albinson (born Minneapolis, Minnesota 1898 – died Mexico 1971)

Northern Minnesota Mine

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.149

A vast open-pit iron mine dominates this painting as iron mining dominated northern Minnesota. As steam shovels dug out the ore and trains carried it away, the oval excavations hungrily ate away the land. Artist Dewey Albinson showed houses and gardens suspended precariously above the edge of a widening pit. The wearily stooping miners in the foreground have finished their shift and wait for a train home while a new shift works the mine. Albinson shows the mine in operation, but work was not always steady during the early days of the Great Depression. One Minnesota iron miner recalled his week's workdays declining from six to four or less; then in 1932 he had no work at all for six months.

Albinson, a native of Minnesota, knew the iron mines of northern Minnesota's Mesabi Range well; in 1932 one of the big mining companies had hired him to paint local scenes, including the Spruce and Mesabi Mountain mines. In his PWAP painting, Albinson took evident delight in the characteristic rusty orange of the iron-laden soil, playing it against a pale blue sky, green bushes, and a vivid turquoise shed.

Ivan Albright (born Harvey, Illinois 1897 – died Woodstock, Vermont 1983)

The Farmer's Kitchen

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.74

Ivan Albright's obsessively detailed painting style put on canvas the crushing impact of drudgery and advancing age. The swollen, red-knuckled hands of this farmwife preparing to clean radishes, pushed forward until they are impossible to ignore, evoke an aching sympathy. The cast-iron stove has become a tool of torture this woman cannot avoid in her daily grind. Wrinkles multiply over her drooping flesh, speaking too eloquently of years full of ceaseless labor. The family cat offers this farm wife no companionship, but shrinks away from her. Outside in the fields must be a farmer husband equally worn by long labor. The burden of empathy for this hard life, made yet harder by the Depression, is almost unbearable.

Who is this poor farmwife, limp with weariness and lined with toil? One of Albright's neighbors in Warrenville, Illinois, posed for the painting. But no individual can explain the emotional freight of Albright's depiction. He aged and distorted every person he painted, young or old. Albright painted flesh that does not heal as living flesh does, but crumples and shows the scars of every event with equally cruel clarity.

Paul Benjamin (born New York City 1902 – died Bennington, Vermont 1982)

Cross Road—Still Life

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service
1965.18.18

Rural Free Delivery service brought word of the outside world to this dairy farm via mail and newspaper boxes conveniently located on the farmer's property. Artist Paul Benjamin, who lived in New York, was obviously charmed by this rustic assortment of wooden and metal boxes mounted on poles leaning at conflicting angles. He left the boxes and the road sign without lettering, allowing the setting of this rustic still life to read as a universal American farm rather than a particular family's home and place of business.

Benjamin wrote to Juliana Force, chairman of the New York Region of the Public Works of Art Project, that he was painting "based upon sketches made in and around Arlington, in southern Vermont." For the urban artist, this small town and the surrounding farmland between the Taconic and the Green mountains must have seemed worlds away from the anxieties of Depression-era New York. In Vermont there were no crowds of artists keenly competing for limited opportunities. Yet Benjamin's unpretentious canvas did well in national competition; it was one of thirty-two PWAP works to win a coveted spot in the White House.

Saul Berman (born Russia 1899 – died Los Angeles, California 1975)

River Front

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.169

Saul Berman's detailed, reportorial painting shows workers busily clearing snow from the New York Navy Yard during the challenging winter of 1933 – 1934. Piles of timbers recall the fleets of sailing and steamships built by these shipyards on the East River in Brooklyn for the United States Navy and for commercial use since the eighteenth century. However, as the empty dry docks along the river in the background show, during the fall and winter of that year New York shipyard workers often had nothing better to do than clear snow.

The old brick building in the foreground displays the Blue Eagle symbol of the National Recovery Administration in its window to indicate that the lumber company adheres to the NRA's codes for prices, wages, and work hours. The negotiation of NRA codes set off strikes in many industries, and the shipbuilding business was no exception. In early 1934, after the strikes were settled, New York shipyards still lacked work and pleaded for federal government projects to keep men employed. A few years later World War II would bring record numbers of workers to the shipyards that languish idle here under gray skies.

Beulah R. Bettersworth (born St. Louis, Missouri, 1894 – died 1968)

Christopher Street, Greenwich Village

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service
1965.18.7

A wintry corner of Greenwich Village lives in this painting as Beulah Bettersworth knew it when she and her husband inhabited 95 Christopher Street, a block away. Closely observed details draw the viewer into the painting to join Bettersworth's neighbors hurrying through the slushy snow, catching a whiff of tobacco from the cigar store in the foreground. Snow melts from the roof of St. Veronica's Catholic Church, whose towers are visible behind the Ninth Avenue "L" station. The elevated train station had been an elegant adaptation of a Swiss chalet when it was built in 1867, but by Bettersworth's time it was an aging relic soon to be torn down. Like the rusting "L," the famous bohemian artistic colony that had enlivened Greenwich Village in the early twentieth century faded as the decades passed. Yet artists like Bettersworth still found homes there and with the advent of the Depression, low rents attracted a new generation of poverty-stricken young poets and painters to the Village's storied garrets. Perhaps the colorful aura of the Village appealed to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who chose this modest canvas to hang in the White House.

Ilya Bolotowsky (born St. Petersburg, Russia 1907 – died New York City 1981)

In the Barber Shop

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.79

Brilliant reds, blues, and greens bring a strange luminous intensity to this otherwise ordinary New York barbershop. Artist Ilya Bolotowsky remarked on a form describing his painting for the PWAP, “The problem is to show a typical average drab barbershop and at the same time get a decorative effect through color.” Among the vivid hues that catch the eye, the artist added prosaic details: the barber using a straight razor to shave the man in the chair, the red cash register ready to ring up the bill, the spittoon on the floor, and rows of bottles repeatedly reflected in “the endless corridor of two oppositely situated mirrors.” The Russian emigrant Bolotowsky induced fellow immigrants to pose for him. He noted, “All the four people in this picture were very carefully selected and are especially fitted for it: the barber a handsome Italian, the customers a Greek, the next one a nervous slim Irishman, the last one a heavy tough Irishman sitting clumsily in a dainty chair.” For Bolotowsky, when folk from around the world gathered in a New York barbershop they embodied the American scene. And when the artist added decorative hues to the interior, he infused his canvas with the inventive spirit of American modern art.

Robert Brackman (born Odessa, Russia 1898 – died New London, Connecticut 1980)

Somewhere in America

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.75

American looks out at the world from the eyes of a child in this painting Robert Brackman made for the Public Works of Art Project. The artist’s accustomed portrait subjects were rich white people or nude models who took careful poses in the artist’s studio. This African American child afforded the artist, an immigrant from Russia, a very different view of the American scene. Brackman suggested the child’s modest American home by placing her in a ladder-back chair at a table with a red plaid cloth. But the domestic interior is far less compelling than the bold child, who fixes the artist with her unflinching gaze. Her stuffed toy lies forgotten in her lap while she scrutinizes Brackman at his easel. She wiggles restlessly, not caring that her dress has hiked up to reveal the tops of her stockings. The ambitious young immigrant artist identified this little girl with far more than her home in New York. He allied her independent spirit with the future of the whole country, titling his portrait of her *Somewhere in America*.

Leo Breslau (born New York City 1909 – died Pompano Beach, Florida 2005)

Plowing

1934

oil on plywood

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.2

A farmer walks behind an old-fashioned horse-drawn plow, cultivating the soil as Americans have for generations. Warmed by exertion, the plowman has removed his jacket and hung it on his horse’s collar. Steeply rolling hills make plowing this soil heavy work. No doubt the farmer’s work will bring a plentiful harvest; the surrounding vegetation is a deep green, promising that this is fertile land.

Leo Breslau created a classic depiction of farm life in response to the Public Works of Art Project’s suggestion that artists depict “the American Scene.” Yet it seems unlikely that the artist left his native Brooklyn to find this scene demonstrating American ideals. The idyllic rural setting of this painting, like his previous paintings for the PWAP titled *The American Home*, is in the artist’s imagination rather than any specific place. What could be farther from the despairing of breadlines in Depression-era New York City or the Dust Bowl than this green, rustic realm where honest work is richly rewarded? The farmer, raising a new crop, offers hope for the nation.

Arthur E. Cederquist (born Titusville, Pennsylvania 1884 – died Titusville, Pennsylvania 1954)

Old Pennsylvania Farm in Winter

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.37

Snow has blanketed this Pennsylvania farm, but Arthur Cederquist's painting shows that the farmer is not cut off from the world. A prominent row of poles carries telephone service and possibly also the relative luxury of electric power as well. Only about a quarter of Pennsylvania's farms had electricity during the early nineteen thirties, but this was far above the national average of ten percent of farms that were electrified. Railroad tracks run in the foreground. A car, which has recently driven down the snowy farm lane leaving tire tracks, is parked by the farmhouse. Cederquist was clearly proud of the modern technology serving the old but solid wooden farm buildings.

Either train or car would have brought Cederquist from his home in New York back to Pennsylvania, where he was born. Like many of the artists involved in the Public Works of Art Project, Cederquist studied art and kept a home base in New York, but his art featured his birthplace. His three paintings for the PWAP were all set in rural Pennsylvania.

Daniel Celentano (born New York City 1902 – died 1980)

Festival

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.55

This painting fairly bursts with the raucous sounds, pungent smells, and vibrant characters of Manhattan's ethnic street life. Artist Daniel Celentano, an Italian American from the uptown neighborhood called Italian Harlem, saw many a Catholic procession like the one shown here. Such street festivals, or *festa*, were vital social events that helped the Italian American Catholic communities of New York survive the stresses of the Depression as they had endured previous decades of poverty and oppression. Celentano contrasted the solemnity of the traditional procession with the swing band on a platform at the right, which blares out popular tunes for people dancing joyfully in the street. A market, providing familiar fare to the throngs, includes a fish seller, a pizza vendor, and a butcher hawking their wares in front of a spaghetti house.

The lively scene, evoking the scents of tasty Italian food, is overshadowed by the immense natural-gas tanks at the right that once blighted Manhattan's immigrant slums. Only those too poor to live elsewhere settled in the Gashouse District along the East River, where the gas plants leaked noxious fumes. By the time of Celentano's painting, however, the gas plants had nearly vanished, along with the worst of the nineteenth-century slums.

Max Arthur Cohn (born London, England 1903 – died New York City 1998)

Coal Tower

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.4

The London-born artist Max Cohn often painted New York industrial scenes like this one, showing the men and machines that kept the great city working. In this painting the viewer looks up from a pier at the dark silhouette of a coal tower standing over a coal-laden barge. The windows of the tower glow golden, showing that men are inside running the giant scoop that unloads coal from the barge and drops it onto a conveyor belt within the tower. From there the coal that has just arrived by barge from Pennsylvania or New Jersey goes to power one of New York's electrical generating stations or factories. Cohn spent time among the docks and coal towers where he learned how men worked to provide fuel for the city. With a striking combination of light and dark, lines and masses, the artist describes the grimy dockside world. Cohn's paintings reveal his fascination with the rough, modern geometry of New York's barges, tugboats, warehouses, and factories and the men who worked in them.

Tyrone Comfort (born Port Huron, Michigan 1909 – died Los Angeles, California 1939)

Gold is Where You Find It

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service
1965.18.49

This painting thrusts the viewer deep into a California gold mine where a sweating miner braces one foot against his powerful pneumatic drill. He is wedged into a crevice, boring holes that will be stuffed with dynamite, which will blast open new sections of the gold vein. California painter Tyrone Comfort brings the viewer uncomfortably close to this miner, stripped to his shorts and work boots in the suffocating heat of the mine. The vibrating drill fills the narrow space with jarring noise and throws dust and bits of rock at the unprotected man. Rough logs are all that hold up the low ceiling of the shaft. Comfort's vigorously painted image leaves no doubt that a professional miner needs tremendous strength and toughness to endure these conditions.

Rising gold prices during the Great Depression caused many old mines to reopen and sent the hopeful across the American West in search of new strikes. When President and Mrs. Roosevelt chose this painting to hang in the White House, it represented a rapidly rising industry helping to fuel the reviving American economy.

William Arthur Cooper (born Hillsboro, North Carolina 1895 – died St. Louis, Missouri 1974)

Lumber Industry

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.154

This painting of a Tennessee sawmill processing raw tree trunks looks like a straightforward image of a thriving southern industry. But the beginning of the Great Depression had curtailed American building. Starting in 1929, mills like this one had been closed. For three years, "there was no hard-wood industry." By January 1933, the American forest industries that supplied boards for construction were in a crisis, termed "one of the pressing national problems of the day." Finally, as Federal construction projects began around the country in the spring and summer of 1933, the hardwood industry and other suppliers began to recover.

Logging crews returned to southern forests and logs poured into reopened saw mills like the one portrayed by William A. Cooper. Cooper, an African American minister who used art to explore the character and situation of his race, specialized in portraits. While this painting stresses not people but machinery such as the cranes and chute that take lumber into the sawmill, it might easily escape our notice that many of the workers in mills like this one were black. The white plumes from steam-driven band saws and the piles of logs ready for sawing were welcome sights for Cooper's southern African American community and their white colleagues.

Douglass Crockwell (born Columbus, Ohio 1904 – died Glens Falls, New York 1968)

Paper Workers

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U. S. Department of Labor 1964.1.152

The paper plant where these men are laboring was the mainstay of Glens Falls, New York, where Douglass Crockwell had his studio. Crockwell, like many artists on the Public Works of Art Project who anticipated the public exhibition of his painting, proudly depicted the chief industry of his town. The workers are smoothing and stamping an enormous roll of newsprint, the plant's principal product.

Crockwell noted that in this scene dominated by mighty iron machinery he took "some liberties with the human form" because "the whole composition of the picture requires hard structural forms." By showing the workers as blocky figures that appear to be roughly carved out of wood, the artist visually likened the men to the source of the wood pulp from which they made newsprint. The workers appear powerfully identified with their work. The question "what do you do for a living?" became a poignant one during this time when so many had no answer. Crockwell, a busy illustrator for much of his life, recalled that when "the depression arrived . . . there wasn't much work."

John Cunning (born Albany, New York, 1889 – died New York City, 1953)

Manhattan Skyline

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.44

This panoramic view of lower Manhattan seen from Brooklyn was an absorbing artistic project for artist John Cunning. He wrote to the Public Works of Art Project asking for more time. The artist needed many days to study the scene, capturing winter light effects on the many structures he described in detail.

New York City goes about its varied daily businesses in Cunning's painting, despite the Depression. Whether or not their offices were full of workers, the Farmer's Trust Building, 120 Wall Street, the Bank of Manhattan, 60 Wall Tower, and the Singer Building towered proudly against the gray sky. Commuters who still had jobs had come from the outer boroughs in the ferry boats shown tied up at the Manhattan docks. Tugboats steam up and down the East River pulling barges and guiding the great ships that arrived in New York from all over the world. On the Brooklyn shore, cargo ships are tied up for loading or unloading. The men in the foreground are removing snow from the roofs of a coffee warehouse on Water Street near the Brooklyn Bridge.

Thomas James Delbridge (born Atlanta, Georgia 1894 – died Long Island, New York 1968)

Lower Manhattan

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.51

Lower Manhattan's glorious skyscrapers inspired all New Yorkers, including the city's artists, through the worst hardships of the Great Depression. Looking from the dock of a harbor island, Thomas Delbridge showed the dark mouths of Manhattan's ferry terminals; above them ever taller buildings climb out of red shadows into gold and white sunshine. The crisply outlined forms evoke such famous structures as the Woolworth Building to the left and the Singer Building to the right without placing the buildings precisely or describing specific details. The skyscraper at the center suggests the mighty Empire State Building as it had stood incomplete before its triumphant opening on May 1, 1931. Even as the stock market foundered and thousands were thrown out of work, New Yorkers had gathered in excited throngs to watch their tallest tower rise. The Manhattan skyscrapers in the painting appear to be pushing back dark clouds, creating an oasis of brilliant blue around the island.

Ross Dickinson (born Santa Ana, California, 1903 – died La Jolla, California, 1978)

Valley Farms

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.40

Stark hills seem to threaten the lush farms at their feet in this vivid painting of a Southern California valley. Californian artist Ross Dickinson dramatized his home state's eternal confrontation of nature and man by exaggerating the steep slopes of the hills and the harsh contrast between the dry red wilderness and the green cultivated land. The artist stressed the centrality of water in California. A river, reflecting the pale sky, is a milky curve against the verdant valley. The irrigated farms are luxuriant, while the hills during the summer dry season are an arid brown. Dickinson reminded the viewer of the constant threat of fire by showing a farmer burning brush or trash in the foreground, with the red flame sending up a thin column of smoke. In the background, a larger plume of smoke suggests a chaparral fire going out of control, a potential threat to the little white houses in the valley. The danger parallels other stresses that faced the region during the Great Depression, as the homeless and hopeless from the drought-plagued Dust Bowl poured westward in search of agricultural work. The destitute hordes demanded far more jobs than California could offer.

Alice Dinneen (born New York City, 1908 – death date unknown)

Black Panther

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.89

A black panther surrounded by tropical foliage hardly seems part of “the American Scene” that Public Works of Art Project artists were asked to depict. Yet the artist’s taste for the exotic was common in an era when American city dwellers longed for the momentary escape provided by movies, plays, radio shows, and even the zoo. New Yorkers like Alice Dinneen found all these resources close at hand. She explained to the PWAP, “I am making studies of animals from life at the Bronx Zoo, and tropical plants, which I will compose together.” The New York Botanical Garden, conveniently located next to the zoo, provided plants for Dinneen to study. A palm and a banana plant stand in the background, while an elephant ear and a caladium sprout just behind the reclining cat. Prayer plants add bright red and green touches to the lower corners of the painting. Grouping these common, imported plants around the reclining panther whose relatives roamed distant Africa and Asia, Dinneen created an appealingly lush imaginary retreat.

Julia Eckel (born Washington, DC 1909 – died Washington, DC 1988)

Radio Broadcast

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.66

Gathering around microphones as in Julia Eckel’s painting, actors and musicians of the 1930s created drama, comedy, and musical performances enjoyed by radio audiences across the country. During the Great Depression Will Rogers’s humor, Bing Crosby’s crooning, Graham McNamee’s news coverage, and series like “Fibber McGee and Molly,” were part of the American scene. President Franklin Roosevelt explained his decisions to the nation through his famous radio broadcast “fireside chats.”

Artist Julia Eckel used tightly spaced figures and controlled gestures to illustrate the close cooperation among star actors, secondary players, and musicians performing live on the air. The painting shows musicians playing during an interlude in the action as the leading lady, dressed in red and green, stands poised to speak her next line. Viewers of the painting, like radio listeners, feel the tension as they wait for the action to resume. Eckel kept her visual drama taut by leaving out such distracting practical details as the scripts and sheet music, which are prominent in publicity photographs of radio performances.

Karl Fortess (born Antwerp, Belgium 1907 – died Woodstock, New York 1993)

Island Dock Yard

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.94

Trains, trucks, and industrial buildings were what Karl Fortess envisioned when the Public Works of Art Project suggested that he depict “the American Scene.” The artist left his home in the picturesque artists’ colony of Woodstock, New York, and traveled ten miles to Kingston to make this painting. Kingston had long been a thriving Hudson River port town that supplied Pennsylvania coal and local brick, stone, and cement to New York City. The Depression slowed shipping, but a newly invented concrete mixture stimulated the local cement business. Fortess’s pictorial research at Kingston was demanding, as he noted, “Inclement weather and bad roads have made it impossible to go into Kingston as often as necessary.”

Fortess described his painting as “a view of the Kingston Point railway yard, showing track intersections, [a] station, freight trains, . . . shacks, and [a] background of buildings with a suggestion of a plain and barren winter trees [on] a grey day.” The artist emphasized the angular geometry of the structures. He played the predominant shadowy gray colors against spots of intense red, yellow, and blue. Trucks and trains hurry to and fro, but the action proceeds without the presence of a single visible human figure.

Gerald Sargent Foster (born Westfield, New Jersey 1900 – died Orangeburg, South Carolina 1987)

Racing

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service
1965.18.9

With exhilarating speed yachts sweep across the choppy waters of Long Island Sound, the water foaming white against their hulls. In the foreground, three small Atlantic-class boats lean precariously to stay on the course of their race. In the middle ground, a pair of larger craft catch the wind in bellying spinnakers as they sail in nearly the opposite direction.

Artist Gerald Sargent Foster, an avid yachtsman, often depicted yacht races. He knew every rope and spar of these boats, but minimized such technical details to avoid distracting the eye from the clean geometric shapes that dominate the painting. The artist repeated and overlapped the streamlined hulls and taut sails of the boats, creating an elegant pattern silhouetted against blue sky and water. Yet the geometry is not cool and detached—every line and color speaks of the keen excitement of yacht racing. Even in the teeth of the Depression, this sport of New York's wealthy continued to be popular.

Lily Furedi (born Budapest, Hungary 1896 – died New York City 1969)

Subway

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service
1965.18.43

In this painting Lily Furedi boldly did something that few dare to do: she looked at people on the subway. She took the viewpoint of a seated rider gazing down the car at her fellow passengers. The Hungarian-born artist knew of the subway riders' customary avoidance of staring at one's fellow riders; most people in her painting keep to themselves by hiding behind a magazine or newspaper, or by sleeping. Those who violate the unwritten rule do so furtively. A woman takes a quiet sidelong glance at the newspaper read by the man next to her, while a man steals a peek at a young woman applying lipstick. Only two women in the foreground, who obviously know each other, dare to look directly at each other as they talk companionably.

Furedi takes a friendly interest in her fellow subway riders, portraying them sympathetically. She focuses particularly on a musician who has fallen asleep in his formal working clothes, holding his violin case. The artist would have identified with such a New York musician because her father, Samuel Furedi, was a professional cellist.

Charles L. Goeller (born Irvington, New Jersey 1901 – died Maplewood, New Jersey 1955)

Third Avenue

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.142

Charles Goeller would often have passed the dramatic Manhattan vista looking north from East 19th Street along 3rd Avenue to the soaring Chrysler Building. The artist lived just a few doors east of this corner, yet his rendition of the familiar scene is strangely dreamlike. Like his fellow painters in the precisionist movement, Goeller stressed the clean geometry of the modern city. All elements of his painting direct attention to the rising spire of the Chrysler Building, a vision of an ideal future shaped by American engineering. Such foreground details as trash lying by the curb and scarred red paint where a sign has been removed from a wall seem deliberately introduced to contrast with the flawless edifice in the distance. Trained in engineering and architecture, Goeller crisply rendered the elevated rail tracks and building facades in precisely receding perspective. He neatly situated pedestrians, like the structures around them, to lead the viewer's eye back to where the white and silver tower rises against the blue sky. Goeller perfected the shapes in his painting, even removing the gargoyles from the Chrysler Building itself to avoid breaking its sleek outline.

Harry Gottlieb (born Bucharest, Romania 1895 – died New York City 1992)

Filling the Ice House

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.19

As workers like these knew well, it was cold, hard work filling the icehouses of upstate New York. In January 1934, artist Harry Gottlieb signed on with the PWAP and looked for American workers he could paint near his home in the artists' colony of Woodstock, New York. He found these men harvesting ice off lakes and streams as local men had done every winter since the early 1800s. They sawed the thick layer of natural ice into long strips and then cut off large blocks. As Gottlieb's painting shows, the red-faced workers dressed in warm coats used long hooks and wooden ramps to maneuver the slick, heavy ice into large commercial icehouses where they neatly stacked the blocks. Straw or sawdust packing minimized melting in warm weather. Throughout the year icehouses along the Hudson River stored ice that was shipped by train to New York City. Families and grocers put the ice into insulated iceboxes that kept food from spoiling. Artificial freezing dominated ice production after World War I, and then electric refrigerators became popular. When Gottlieb documented the natural ice business it was gradually melting away.

O. Louis Guglielmi (born Cairo, Egypt 1906 – died Amagansett, New York 1956)

Martyr Hill

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.125

The eerie loneliness of Louis Guglielmi's painting *Martyr Hill* seems surreal. Yet the Grand Army of the Republic Hall in Peterborough, New Hampshire, actually looks much as it does in this painting. Guglielmi, who spent many summers at the MacDowell artist colony in Peterborough, knew the place well. He altered the scene slightly but effectively to create an uneasy, melancholy mood reflecting the troubles of the time.

Sweeping diagonal lines draw the viewer's attention to the GAR Hall, with its spiky finials and a cannon aimed to menace the viewer. In fact, the cannon stands on the opposite side of the hall's lawn. Guglielmi removed the windows from the hall's side wall, creating the solid red parallelogram he placed very near the dark front wall of the house in the foreground. This causes the eye to lurch disconcertingly from foreground to background. Nothing in the painting casts a shadow—the buildings therefore look oddly insubstantial. The sculpted bronze soldier on the Civil War Memorial, his head bent in sorrow, underlines the lack of a living person in the scene. The Nubanusit River flows under a bridge and out toward the viewer, who is left with no place to stand.

E. Martin Hennings (born Penn's Grove, New Jersey 1886 – died Taos, New Mexico 1956)

Homeward Bound

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.62

E. Martin Hennings's painting for the Public Works of Art Project portrays two Native Americans from Taos Pueblo: a man wrapped in a traditional white blanket and a woman wearing a colorful shawl. This serene painting speaks of the deep love Hennings felt for Taos, New Mexico, where he was a leading member of the artists' colony. His subjects walk quietly through the snow together as the sun sets behind them. In works like this, Hennings created poetic visual connections between the people of Taos and the stunning high desert where they lived. Here the artist contrasts the man's warm blanket, lit by the golden sunset, with the cold covering of snow on the ground, cast into blue shadows by the hills in the west. Hennings links the two figures to their home landscape by likening them to the tall native sunflowers standing against the sky with their long stalks gracefully intertwined. While many PWAP artists documented timely scenes of the Great Depression, Hennings chose to celebrate the continuity of local traditions.

Pino Janni (born Venice, Italy 1899 – death date unknown)

Waterfront Scene

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.5

Pino Janni's depiction of New York City's East River docks is all about hard work. The viewer looks over the shoulders of two burly longshoremen about to unload or load freight from a cargo ship. Towering cranes and booms are ready to lift the heaviest cargo ashore. A nearby tug boat works with ship pilots to guide the enormous vessels to and from the piers. The hawser looped around a bollard shows that a ship is tied up just out of view, bringing employment to these men. During the Depression dockworkers were desperate for scarce jobs, despite their low hourly wages. In January 1934, at the time when Janni was making this painting, a fight broke out among hundreds of longshoremen competing for work.

The red band around the tug's funnel is the only note of bright color in this work-a-day painting. Heavy black outlines define the powerful forms of the men and the harbor. Janni's painting of the noisy, dirty waterfront is as vigorous and straightforward as the longshoremen's labor. The artist could identify with his subjects; as an article about the PWAP stated, "the administration has determined that work must be found for artists as well as for longshoremen."

J. Theodore Johnson (born Oregon, Illinois 1902 – died Sunnyvale, California 1963)

Chicago Interior

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.82

The warmth from the radiator is almost palpable in this painting, contrasting with the snowy city seen through the window. The distinctive blue-tiled tower of the American Furniture Mart identifies the setting as Chicago, where artist J. Theodore Johnson and his wife, Barbara Salmon Johnson, came to attend an exhibition of the artist's work shortly after they had wed in New York in December 1931. The artist lovingly portrayed his beautiful young wife reading in their hotel room. The warm browns, yellows, and oranges raise the visual temperature, heightened further by hot touches of red in the drapery and in Mrs. Johnson's lips, cheeks, magazine, and chair. A heavy fur coat laid out dry by the radiator shows that Mrs. Johnson has recently come in to escape the frigid winds from Lake Michigan. Her husband was one of many artists who participated both in the Public Works of Art Project and in later Federal Art Projects. In 1937 and 1939 Johnson returned to Chicago to fulfill commissions from the Treasury Section of Fine Arts for historical murals in the Morgan Park and Oak Park Post Offices.

Joe Jones (born St. Louis, Missouri 1909 – died Morristown, New Jersey 1963)

Street Scene

1933

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.114

These workers are demolishing a St. Louis building as evening falls and street lights begin to glow. In the midst of the Great Depression, modest houses and shops around Market Street gave way to wider streets, graceful parks, and the Municipal Auditorium. The pointed tower of the new Civil Courts Building in the background, built in 1930, shows how the city was being transformed.

A few months before Joe Jones made this painting, he had told the St. Louis Artists' Guild, "I am not interested in painting pretty pictures to match pink and blue walls, I want to paint things that will knock holes in walls." Yet the warm light on the dilapidated street and the industrial smoke that veils the new buildings in the background suggest that the artist did not embrace these changes uncritically. Jones lived in a houseboat on the Mississippi not far from the construction around Market Street; he knew the old neighborhood that was vanishing and would miss the people and businesses pushed aside in the name of progress.

Morris Kantor (born Minsk, Russia 1896 – died Nyack, New York 1974)

Baseball at Night

1934

oil on linen

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Morris Kantor 1976.146.18

Stadium lighting was still rare in 1934 when artist Morris Kantor saw this night baseball game in West Nyack, New York. The artist strove to convey in his painting “the panoramic spectacle of the field, the surrounding landscape, the people, the players, and the nocturnal atmosphere.” Kantor showed the field proportionately smaller than it actually was to fit all this into his painting, along with a radio booth, flags waving against the night sky, and a runner taking his lead off first base. Major league baseball would not begin night games until 1935. However, in the early thirties Minor league, Negro League, and exhibition stadiums like this one used portable or permanent lighting for night games that would draw crowds of people who worked during the day.

The Sports Centre at the Clarkstown Country Club, in West Nyack was a versatile venue that hosted baseball games played by minor league teams, barnstorming professionals, local semipro groups of firemen and policemen, and Country Club members. Catering to the Depression-era thirst for varied, affordable entertainment, the Centre also staged boxing and wrestling matches. Eccentric proprietors Pierre A. Bernard and his wife, Blanche de Vries, even maintained a herd of performing elephants.

Paul Kelpé (born Minden, Germany 1902 – died Austin, Texas 1985)

Machinery (Abstract #2)

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.27

What kind of industry does the man holding the levers control in Paul Kelpé’s painting *Machinery*. There are no hints; the smokestacks emit no smoke and no product piles up on the factory floor. In fact, Kelpé’s mechanism manufactures nothing. He was actually an abstract painter whose concerns were aesthetic. In his paintings for the Public Works of Art Project, he knew that he needed to somehow address “the American Scene.” “As they refused to accept ‘nonrepresentational’ art,” he said, “I made a number of pictures with geometric machinery.” But Kelpé, unlike the many PWAP artists who factually depicted industrial scenes, studied no real-life factories. He created his own independent visual world, reflecting the kind of technological progress of which Americans were proud. The artist thoughtfully balanced large and small shapes, warm and cool colors, to create a harmonious mechanistic vision. A pattern of diagonal brushstrokes on the painting’s surface catches the light to suggest action. The wheels seem to turn with the soft hum of a well-tuned machine.

Arnold Ness Klagstad (born Marinette, Wisconsin 1898 – died Minneapolis, Minnesota 1954)

Archer Daniels Midland Elevator

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.196

Cars and trains, industry and agriculture, trees and smokestacks meet in this busy image of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Local painter Arnold Klagstad gently guided the viewer’s eye into the painting along a curving stretch of road with a car and two pedestrians to lead the way past a brick house, trees, and green lawns. Two white railroad crossing signs signal an abrupt transition to the confusing complex of commercial structures crowded along the railroad tracks. Among the many buildings is the Harris Machinery Company at the far right, announced by a bold black and white sign, while a towering Archer Daniels Midland grain elevator dominates the view. The density of businesses may suggest a thriving economy, but in fact drought and low farm prices made for hard times in 1930s Minnesota. The juxtapositions of greenery with steel, and agricultural structures with manufacturing signal the tensions among farmers, business owners, and unions that led to violent confrontations in the streets of Minneapolis in 1934.

Attributed to Martha Levy (birth and death dates unknown)

Winter Scene

1934

oil on fiberboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.215

This simple, timeless winter scene of a man walking through a snowy wood is probably set near Woodstock, New York, the rural artists' colony where Martha Levy made paintings similar to this unsigned work. The simple house surrounded by snowdrifts, evergreens, and bare trees makes an idyllic picture that would be at home on a Christmas card. Yet the hunter with his rifle and red hat adds an uneasy note. Most hunters in the early 1930s were sportsmen as in previous years, but a hunting columnist noted in 1931, "The prevailing opinion in Michigan is that the deer will be hunted harder than ever this year, because with many of the hunters, it is a question of meat, rather than an emphasis upon the sport." Michigan was not the only state where unemployed men used their hunting rifles to feed their families. In Arkansas, hunters were seen on city streets selling game to supplement their incomes. Does this hunter, with no game in hand, have a family at home waiting anxiously for him to return with meat? Is he just out for a day's sport? The artist leaves the questions unanswered.

Erle Loran (born Minneapolis, Minnesota 1905 – died Berkeley, California 1999)

Minnesota Highway

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.104

Chilly and brown, this view of Minnesota farms seems at first glance as bleak and unpromising as the Great Depression that gripped the nation. The trees are bare and remnants of snow streak the empty fields with white. Yet artist Erle Loran imbued this painting of his home state with hope. The sky is an intense blue and the fluffy white clouds are blowing away. Streaks of red, gold, and purple enliven the brown tones of the scene. The rapid brushstrokes defining the trees and plowed fields are full of vitality, promising green leaves in the coming spring. The houses tucked among the hills shelter farmers who will care for the crops and reap the harvest. A truck speeds into the distance, preparing to head out of the painting to the right. What is around the corner? Loran demonstrated his stake in this place and its future by showing a sign in the foreground with Minnesota's distinctive yellow star design identifying the highway as Route 5, which ran near his home in the Twin Cities. Then he signed his name on a mailbox, identifying himself with this landscape.

Herman Maril (born Baltimore, Maryland 1908 – died Hyannis, Massachusetts 1986)

Sketch of Old Baltimore Waterfront

1934

oil on fiberboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.187

Herman Maril opened a window onto the history of his native city in this view of Baltimore harbor. Maril was a modernist painter who simplified the forms in the painting to make "the abstract structure . . . dominant," yet he retained enough details to situate the scene in a past era. A schooner typical of nineteenth-century shipping is tied up in the foreground, its sails furled after a journey that could have brought it from almost anywhere in the world. The domed Merchants and Exchange building visible in the background stood at the corner of Gay and Water streets in Baltimore's inner harbor from 1815 until it was razed in 1901.

This painting is thus set before Maril's birth in 1908, in an era cut off from the artist's life time by the disastrous fire of 1904 that destroyed Baltimore's inner harbor docks along with much of the city. Maril's wife recalled that the artist "took pleasure in looking at the architecture and changes in the city over the years," particularly enjoying "the harbor where he walked with his father." Baltimore's vanished past remained key to Maril's personal conception of the American scene.

Paul Kirtland Mays (born Cheswick, Pennsylvania 1887 – died Carmel, California 1961)

Jungle

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service
1965.18.51

A lush, charming scene filled with tropical greenery and beautiful, gentle animals welcomes the viewer of *Jungle*. This is no scientific study of a foreign land. The blackbuck at the far left is the only identifiable animal; the others are stylized generalizations rather than real species. This is a fantasy jungle, devoid of biting insects and threatening predators. The painting is as delightfully impossible as popular Depression-era jungle movies like the 1932 *Tarzan*, *The Ape Man*, featuring Indian elephants alongside African chimpanzees. The frustrated ape at the center of the painting is reminiscent of the chimps in the Tarzan movies. Like the Hollywood products of its day, this painting offers viewers a colorful temporary refuge from the grim realities of Depression-era America. The parallels between canvas and film are no accident. A few years earlier artist Paul Kirtland Mays had painted fantastic visions on the walls of Hollywood movie palaces like the Paramount Theatre and Grauman's Theatre. The artist wrote to the PWAP that his career painting murals in California had been "frustrated or shattered" by the financial crash of 1929. He was delighted that the government's art program allowed him to work again "as a decorator craftsman."

Austin Mecklem (born Colfax, Washington 1894 – died Kingston, New York 1951)

Engine House and Bunkers

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.46

Storm clouds blow and rain pelts down on the busy Hudson River port and rail hub of Kingston, New York. Artist Austin Mecklem lived in rural Woodstock, New York, but when the Public Works of Art Project called for artists to paint "the American Scene," he left his serene home to depict this gritty view of Kingston's shipping activity. The complex of dock cranes, warehouses, and steam trains struck the artist as characteristic of American life in the 1930s. He showed the scene in tones of red, green, gray that stress the industrial might of men and machines moving freight.

Mecklem detailed his composition in a letter to Juliana Force, chairman of the New York Regional Committee of the PWAP:

For subject matter I have chosen a familiar railroad scene with strong dramatic possibilities. It includes machine-shops—[an] engine house—bunkers—roundtable—water-tank and tracks stretching into the middle distance where a river and the buildings of a small town are discernable. The buildings in the foreground arrange in an angular pattern contrasted by the horizontal feeling of the town structures and the river bank, emphasizing the dynamic aspect of the scene. Distant hills faintly seen through a rain-swept sky complete the composition.

Robert A. Darrah Miller (born Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1905 – died Solebury, Pennsylvania 1966)

Farm

about 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.140

Robert Miller's painting of a Pennsylvania farm amid snow-covered hills seems the very picture of cold rural silence. No one travels the road running past the farm. The people and livestock all shelter in the solidly built house and barn. Even the trees are under cover for winter, cut back without a leaf braving the frosty air. Yet the sky is a rich blue, and the barn and house glow in warm tones of red and yellow. The diagonal lines of the trees and buildings suggest suppressed life waiting for spring.

The farms around Miller's home in New Hope, Pennsylvania, held the promise of more than sprouting crops. He was only one of the artists and writers attracted to Bucks County by the picturesque scenery. As the Depression pushed down real estate values, New York City theatrical luminaries such as George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart bought newly affordable Pennsylvania farms. They made an old mill into the Bucks County Playhouse. In New Hope, as in artistic centers across the country, the fresh life emerging in the spring of 1934 would be both creative and agricultural.

Carl Gustaf Nelson (born Horby, Sweden 1898 – died United States 1988)

Central Park

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.119

Neither the cold of winter nor the gloom of the Great Depression kept the children of New York City from enjoying Central Park, the city's greatest green space. Artist Carl Nelson had almost as much fun as the children, drawing by the hour despite the chill of February 1934. When his hands got cold, Nelson recalled, he "would go to the monkey house in the Central Park Zoo to warm up."

Nelson shows the park on a weekday afternoon when it is full of mothers taking their toddlers out to play while the older children are in school. The brightly colored coats worn by the children and their mothers evoke their innocent delight. The southern end of the park, near the elegant hotels in the background, was designed for children. They could romp on the playground, ride the carousel, or play games in the Children's Cottage. A little girl in an orange coat has plenty of fun just feeding the squirrels. Nelson's charming image does not include the grimmer reality farther north in Central Park, where homeless people squatted in a shantytown or "Hooverville" as they waited for better times.

Kenjiro Nomura (born Gifuken, Japan 1896 – died Seattle, Washington 1956)

The Farm

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.36

A farm scene with green trees would seem to be a positive view of the American scene, but Kenjiro Nomura's painting suggests a hidden threat. Clouds gather and darkness fills the barn and sheds while the foreground road is in shadow. Not a figure or animal is to be seen.

In the Seattle area where Nomura lived, many of his fellow Japanese Americans made their living as fruit and vegetable farmers. Since 1921 they had been subject to anti-alien laws that prevented foreign-born Japanese Americans and other aliens from owning or leasing land. Those born in America who could own farmland still suffered from prejudice. During the Great Depression many Japanese American farmers barely managed to survive, living only on what they grew themselves. It is no wonder that Nomura's view of a farm during this period is disquieting.

As other Americans emerged from the Great Depression during World War II, Nomura and other Japanese Americans were victimized again by being removed from their homes, businesses, and farms to be interned in camps. Like his PWAP painting, Nomura's images made in internment camps feature dark skies and deep colors that evoke the shadow of injustice.

Carl Redin (born Sweden 1892 – died Los Gatos, California 1944)

At Madrid Coal Mine, New Mexico

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.166

The men of Madrid, New Mexico, went to work every day in these hulking, rusty buildings that led to the coal mines of the Albuquerque and Cerrillos Coal Company. Artist Carl Redin specialized in painting picturesque New Mexico landscapes, but to find "the American Scene" requested by the PWAP, he turned to the mines of Madrid. It was a company town in which every citizen's life was dominated by coal and the company that owned the mines, stores, and houses. The company provided distractions to keep the miners and their isolated families content—an amusement hall, Christmas and Easter celebrations, Fourth of July parades, a baseball team. The Christmas lights were so famous that they attracted tourists to town. But Redin centered his painting on the grim mines that produced the coal and the train that hauled it away. Sheds, smokestacks, machines, and slag heaps cover the New Mexico hills and smoke fouls the air. Not a human figure is to be seen. Except for the engineer of the train, all the men are underground.

Charles Reiffel (born Indianapolis, Indiana 1862 – died San Diego, California 1942)

Road in the Cuyamacas

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.176

A narrow, winding path entices the viewer into this rocky wilderness in Southern California's Cuyamaca Mountains. Above the rugged peaks, clouds gather in formations that repeat those of the rocks below. Golden light streams down between the clouds, picking out a boulder here and a treetop there. Artist Charles Reiffel used bright dabs of red, orange, and blue paint to suggest sunlight sparkling on rain-wet stones and pine needles. It was this kind of spectacular scenery that had persuaded Reiffel to make an unplanned move from his home in Connecticut to San Diego in 1925. In this painting of the California countryside he loved, Reiffel spoke to viewers in distant Washington, D.C., praising the beauties of nature.

Earle Richardson (born New York City 1912 – died New York City 1935)

Employment of Negroes in Agriculture

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.183

Earle Richardson depicted his fellow African Americans working barefooted in a southern cotton field, but the artist denied demeaning stereotypes to stress the dignity of his subjects. These workers are not bent over to pick cotton; the three youthful figures have a monumental aspect, using their impressive strength to handle heavy baskets of cotton. Only one older woman bends over her task. The workers' quiet pride transcends their identity as manual laborers. They stand at the front of the painting, where they confront the viewer as equals who are ready for a better life.

The Public Works of Art Project welcomed African American artists like Richardson who would paint "Negro themes." Yet they counted only about ten such artists among the thousands employed on the Project. Richardson was also rare in showing a scene far from his home. The artist was a native New Yorker, but he set his painting in the South in order to make a broad statement about his race. Richardson and fellow artist Malvin Gray Johnson planned to say more about the history and promise of black people in their mural series *Negro Achievement*, slated to be installed in the New York Public Library's 135th Street Branch, but neither young man lived long enough to complete the project.

Harry W. Scheuch (born Elizabeth, New Jersey 1906 – died Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 1978)

Workers on the Cathedral of Learning

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.157

Harry W. Scheuch (born Elizabeth, New Jersey 1906 – died Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 1978)

Finishing the Cathedral of Learning

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.42

Workers scurry like busy ants to complete the University of Pittsburgh's lofty Cathedral of Learning. The men and trucks trample the winter's snow into mud as they labor through the frigid winter of 1933 – 1934 to house much-needed new classrooms. Carpenters nail timbers together to finish the scaffolding. The main part of the structure rises at the upper right, already clad in limestone blocks, while masons are still covering the lower stories of the façade in stone. Behind the Cathedral of Learning stand the gleaming white columns of the Mellon Institute Building, which was also under construction.

Artist Harry Scheuch painted the Cathedral of Learning twice for the PWAP. The first image is a close-up view of the masons at work, while this second painting is a more distant view that reveals the horde of workers involved.

Together the two paintings tell the story of this mighty undertaking. The forty-two-story structure was not substantially completed until 1937, and some interior work continued for decades after that. Like the Empire State Building and the Golden Gate Bridge, the Cathedral of Learning demonstrated that the Great Depression could not stop Americans from accomplishing great things.

Millard Sheets (born Pomona, California 1907 – died Gualala, California 1989)

Tenement Flats

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service

1965.18.48

These ramshackle tenements were home to poor families in the Bunker Hill neighborhood of downtown Los Angeles during the Great Depression. The artist failed to show that just to the left of this view a cable car line called Angels Flight offered a ride up the steep hill. In the painting a lone figure trudges up steps toward once elegant Victorian mansions that had degenerated into boardinghouses. Millard Sheets, an up-and-coming young California artist, enjoyed drawing and painting the people and houses of this colorful neighborhood. Here he shows women who have finished washing and hanging out their laundry in the days before electric appliances lightened these chores. Now the women stop to gossip while leaning on stair rails, or sit in the shade to avoid the hot afternoon sun.

Sheets, like many artist members of regional committees, proudly gave his painting as a gift to his country. The shabbily dressed women in *Tenement Flats* would be startled to discover that this painting would hang in the elegant surroundings of the White House. PWAP paintings like this one were displayed in reception areas to show President Roosevelt's commitment to art and to ordinary Americans across the country.

Raymond White Skolfield (born Portland, Maine 1909 – died Freeport, Maine 1996)

Natural Power

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.47

From wood fires to hydroelectricity, Raymond Skolfield's painting tells how power shaped the town of Proctor, Vermont. Sutherland Falls, roaring down the middle of this snowy image, is also central to the town where the major industry is a large marble quarry powered by the falls. Part of the marble quarry complex is visible at the top of this painting. A standpipe for the quarry stands near the creek, colorfully enclosed by blue siding with red trim. Originally, a water-powered mill used belts to drive saws and other heavy equipment for the quarry. In 1905 the marble company replaced the mill with a hydroelectric plant, seen at the right in Skolfield's painting. A large pipe running parallel to the waterfall feeds surging water into the plant, which powers the quarry and the town. This power helped to carve out snowy white blocks for such projects as the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C., under construction in 1934. But as Skolfield points out in his painting, more old-fashioned, natural sources of power persisted as well. A man in the foreground uses muscle power to load his sled with logs he will split and burn in his fireplace to keep the winter cold at bay.

Jacob Getlar Smith (born New York City 1898–died New York City 1958)

Snow Shovellers

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.22

Many artists went out into the cold to find subjects after the PWAP began in December 1933. Jacob Getlar Smith found men hired by the government's new work relief program, the Civil Works Administration, to shovel snow from the streets and park paths of New York. Some of the snow shovellers sport crisp fedoras and warm overcoats while others wear battered caps and ragged coats; some have practical boots while others wear shoes more suited to office work. Men used to physical labor stride along vigorously; those accustomed to sitting behind desks walk more slowly, bowed with weariness after a morning spent clearing snow. Black and white, poor and middle class—all had lost their jobs to the Great Depression. Smith showed them gathered into the ranks of the New Deal social programs

that offered them all the means to get through the winter. A boy pulling a sled walks alongside the men, a reminder of the families who looked to these men for their support.

Paul Kauvar Smith (born Cape Girardeau, Missouri 1893 – died Denver, Colorado 1977)

The Sky Pond

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.59

This stunning Colorado view is one that hikers in Rocky Mountain National Park can see to this day. Artist Paul Kauvar Smith portrayed the brown rocks of the central mountain, Taylor Peak, as red as if they were illuminated by a sunset. However, the sky seen above the mountain and reflected in Sky Pond is the brilliant blue of midday. The snows of Taylor Glacier glow blue-white between the rugged boulders, showing how cold it is in the high Rockies even when the slopes are clad in summer greenery. Smith's sun-drenched colors and grand mountain scenery evoked a wild paradise all too distant for those caught in the gritty urban poverty of Depression-era America.

Smith probably encountered the Civilian Conservation Corps, a work relief program for young men, as he explored the Colorado Rockies in search of picturesque landscapes. By spring 1933 the CCC was at work in Rocky Mountain National Park, building the trails and roads that visitors would travel to experience remote wilderness spots like Taylor Peak and Sky Pond for themselves.

Gale Stockwell (born Kansas City, Missouri 1907 – died Colorado Springs, Colorado 1983)

Parkville, Main Street

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.124

A mother and her young son walk down Main Street in this brightly colored scene of a small midwestern town overlooking the green valley of the Missouri River. Perhaps they are in downtown Parkville, Missouri, to shop in the little stores that line the street with goods piled appealingly in their front windows. Unable to find much market for his fine artworks in the Kansas City area during the Great Depression, artist Stockwell made his living as a commercial artist working for a chain of stores. He added appeal to this quiet town scene by using brilliant reds, greens, and blues like those he might have used in his advertising designs. In his commercial work, however, Stockwell was confined to creating an eye-catching version of nature. In fine art pieces like this one, he was free to choose and distribute hues for expressive purposes.

Ray Strong (born Corvallis, Oregon 1905 – died Three Rivers, California 2006)

Golden Gate Bridge

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service 1965.18.50

This panoramic depiction of the Golden Gate Bridge under construction pays tribute to the ambitious feat of engineering required to span the mouth of San Francisco Bay. Artist Ray Strong painted looking north from the San Francisco side to the hills of Marin County, where the first bright orange tower rises. Tugboats and a freighter sailing across the deep blue waters typify the busy shipping that would routinely pass beneath the span. The bridge therefore had to have the highest deck ever built. The two massive concrete structures in the foreground are anchors for the cables supporting the deck. The vast structures on the San Francisco side dwarf the men working around the anchorages and pylons. Strong's painting, with its intense colors and active brushwork, conveys an infectious optimism. Hundreds of tourists who shared the artist's excitement came to gaze at this amazing project that continued despite the financial strains of the Great Depression and the disastrous storm that washed away a trestle on Halloween of 1933. It was only fitting that President Franklin Roosevelt chose this painting celebrating the triumph of American engineering to hang in the White House.

Agnes Tait (born New York City 1894 – died Santa Fe, New Mexico 1981)

Skating in Central Park

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.15

Agnes Tait had long wanted to make a large, festive painting of winter revelers in Central Park, but without a patron she could not take on this project. When the Public Works of Art Project gave her support in the winter of 1933 – 1934, the artist had her opportunity. As skaters and sledders flocked to the frozen lake and snowy slopes of Central Park, Tait joined them to sketch the winter fun. Then she retreated to her studio to make her painting.

Tait showed the park in late afternoon as the Manhattan sky began to blush and the street lamps to glow, but skating and sledding were still in full swing. Once she had the landscape painted, Tait added figures in groups to create a colorful pattern against the snow and ice. The dark branches of the bare trees make a more subtle design against the white snow and mist and the golden sky. Around the ends of tree branches and in patches along the snowbanks, Tait painted areas of gray into which she drew snow-covered twigs and grasses by scraping away the gray paint with the end of her paintbrush.

Ila McAfee Turner (born Gunnison, Colorado 1897 – died Pueblo, Colorado 1995)

Mountain Lions

1933 – 1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor 1964.1.80

Two mountain lions gaze serenely over their home range from atop a ridge of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Artist Ila McAfee Turner brought out the gentle beauty and fleeting companionship of these big predators during the days a newly mated pair spends together. During the rest of the year the mature cats live in separate territories.

Turner lived in Taos, New Mexico, but was well acquainted with this dramatic, steep-sided Colorado canyon and its animal inhabitants. She had grown up riding horseback around her family's ranch outside the mining town of Gunnison, Colorado. In a song titled "Did You Ever Hear of Gunnison?" the artist described her childhood home as she showed these mountain lions, "way up there, in thin clean air, far away from anywhere, up on the beautiful wester slope, high in the rugged Rocky Mountains."

Winthrop Duthie Turney (born New York City 1884 – died New York City 1965)

Selection from Birds and Animals of the United States

1934

oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the General Services Administration 1974.28.75

Artist Winthrop Turney created this painting as a fantasy gathering of American wildlife visually spanning his nation from coast to coast. The artist hoped that this painting of animals grouped around a lavender-tinted tree would become a large mural to adorn a school. The mural would show urban schoolchildren American animals from a variety of environments. Denizens of the eastern coast and swamps inhabit the foreground: the Florida alligator basks below a flying American pelican and a tern; an anhinga spreads its wings to dry; and an egret stands in the lower right corner. The woodland animals are further back: a gray squirrel perches on a tree branch while the striped skunk, groundhog, black bear, wolverine, American porcupine, and red fox stand on the middle ground. In the background are creatures native to the western plains and mountains: the coyote, turkey vulture, pronghorn antelope, mountain lion, and mountain goat. Like the children for whom he painted, Turney lived in New York. He probably knew the gray squirrels of Central Park better than the other animals in the picture, which he saw only in pictures and New York-area zoos.

Unidentified artist

Underpass—Binghamton, New York

1933 – 1934

oil over photograph on canvas mounted on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Transfer from the Internal Revenue Service through the General Services Administration 1962.8.41

The street and sidewalks are empty; not a person, car, or even a stray dog is to be seen. What is the viewer supposed to see in this unpopulated street illuminated by glowing street lamps? Do the yellow street sign and the modest fireplug have some unexpected significance? The real subject of the painting turns out to be a newly built underpass designed to safely route cars under the train tracks in Binghamton, New York. During the 1930s several underpasses around Binghamton were upgraded by federal and New York State agencies working to improve city infrastructure while providing employment to those thrown out of work by the Great Depression. The stark lighting of street lamps at night shows off the clean lines of the freshly cast concrete as if the underpass were a modernist sculpture or an elegant new office building. The Smithsonian owns two other paintings documenting railroad underpasses built elsewhere in the country during the same era. All three were painted by unidentified artists working over photographs printed on canvas. Through documentary projects of this kind civil works became allied to artworks, providing employment for builders and artists alike.