

A Job and a Movement

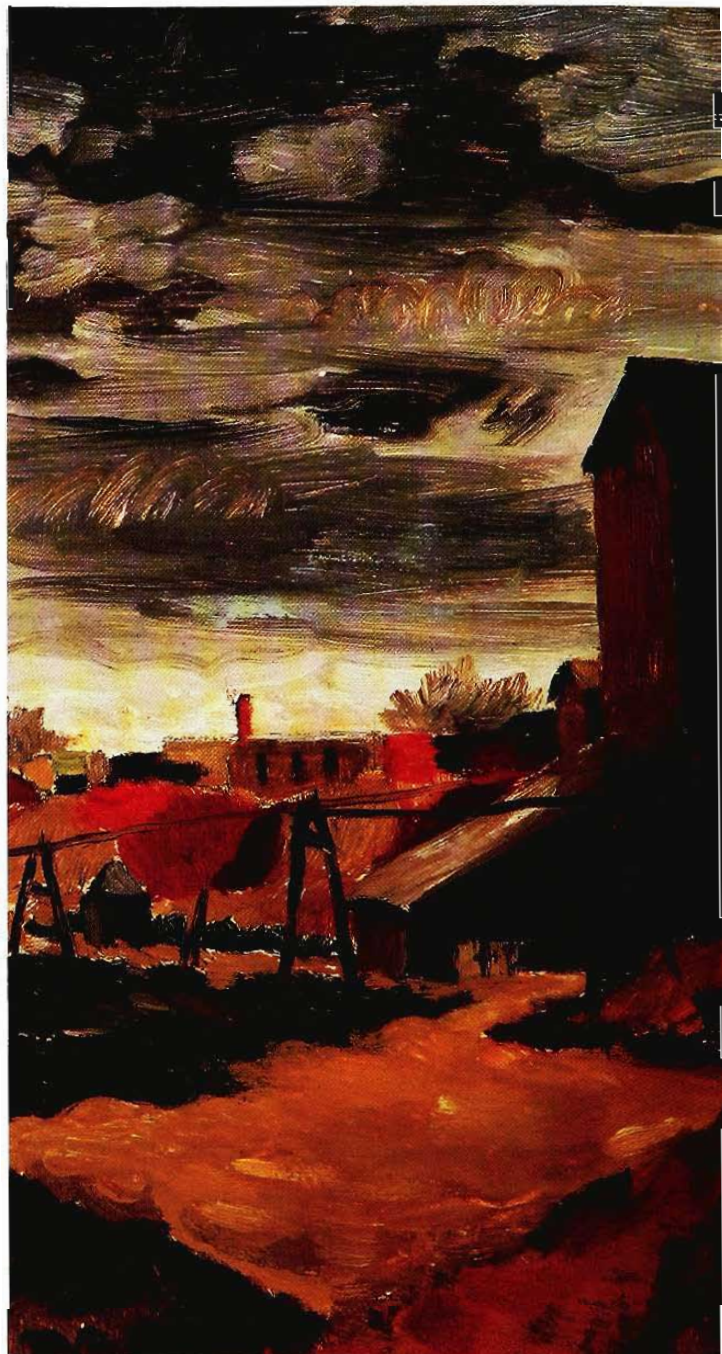
THE WPA FEDERAL ART PROJECT

Thomas O'Sullivan

From 1935 to 1943 the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) employed artists in Minnesota to participate in "the first true portrait of America"—a record of the nation's varied people and places by the artists who knew those subjects best. The Minnesota Historical Society's collections of books, newspapers, photographs, manuscripts, oral histories, and artifacts preserve the story of the character (and characters) of the state's FAP unit. And



Terra-cotta bust of mother and child by I. E. Edwards of the art project's sculpture division



PROJECT IN MINNESOTA



Mac Le Sueur, Frills (color lithograph, ca. 1940). While Minnesota's FAP artists (and their audiences) tended to shy away from theory-bound modern styles, some displayed their acquaintance with the work of Picasso and Braque in images like this.

Henry Holmstrom, Sand Plant (oil on board, 1935). Blue-collar landscapes—factories, mills, and construction sites—were favorite subjects of FAP artists nationwide. Holmstrom's vivid palette and bold brush strokes give this otherwise mundane scene a distinctive look.

the paintings, prints, and objects in the society's collections are vivid reminders that art was indeed the project's middle name.¹

The sheer volume of this artwork is impressive. A tally of the Minnesota project's output during its first five years listed 444 oil paintings, 538 watercolors, and 128 editions of lithographs; murals in 35 buildings and sculptures at 18 sites; and posters, dioramas, stage scenery, and exhibits in communities from Moorhead to Minneapolis to Mabel. This variety illustrates the FAP philosophy of art, on both national and local levels. National director Holger Cahill stated, "The aim of the Project will be to work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community, and an integration of the fine arts and the practical arts." He saw the FAP as a way to "break down the artificial barrier which exists between these forms of art expression."²

Minnesota's project director, Clement B. Haupers, saw this ideal as an opportunity to employ his state's artists, illustrators, teachers, and craftspeople under the FAP umbrella. Haupers relished the memory of plotting a program for hundreds of art workers: "Well, when I saw the manual of procedures, on the flyleaf of which was stated, 'to maintain and increase skills,' I said, 'Now wait a minute, there are a lot of people of our training. The advertising field had any number of them,' he recalled in a 1981 interview. "So I wrote up a project of four hundred, and Holger Cahill came storming out here. . . . The Covered Wagon restaurant down on Fourth Street [St. Paul] had a cabin inside which was air conditioned . . . so we took that over, he and I, and we worked out this program . . . as a result we went not only from what we called 'fine art,' we went out into visual aids." These ranged from posters to scientific illustrations to a three-dimensional relief map for the use of blind students.³

Minnesota artists embraced the regionalist or American-scene approach to art as a recognizable image of everyday life. They reflected a generally hopeful attitude toward a society in crisis. Most Minnesota pictures illustrated people busy at work rather than idle or angry. Landscapes depicted farms and factories, Main Streets, and city skylines. But the artists interpreted life's underside as well as its genial facade. Painter Stanford Fenelle was supervisor of the easel-painting division of the state's FAP. "I was not controlling the content of the painting or the style; I wanted the work to come from their own creativity—that was the value of this project." Pictures of ruined buildings and eroded fields were fewer in number than busy street scenes and peaceful farmscapes, but the contrast gave them all the

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more impact in conveying the grim reality of the Great Depression.⁴

Project artists worked in styles that encompassed the 1930s spectrum of realism, from meticulously rendered scenes to broadly brushed compositions. Few of the local artists ventured into surrealist- or cubist-influenced imagery, though the novelty of such work attracted popular attention. But everyday life, bluntly depicted, struck some critics as a dreary art. Writer Brenda Ueland, for one, took issue with local artists in her column in a Minneapolis newspaper: "I will reopen my quarrel about the plug-ugliness of modern art. I may eat my words. But maybe not. Mr. Syd Fossum kindly writes me a fine letter telling me where I am entirely wrong: 'I don't believe you have the right to make the generalization that an artist always paints a gas tank from some kind of theory, and never from love and enthusiasm for his subject.'" Neither Ueland nor Fossum converted the other, but the ongoing exchange in her column is one example of public discussion of the art scene.⁵

¹Thomas C. Parker, "Frontiers of American Art," in *Frontiers of American Art*, ed. Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (San Francisco: M. H. DeYoung Memorial Museum, 1939), 9. For New Deal art programs nationally, see, for example, Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). For programs in Minnesota, see Nancy A. Johnson, *Accomplishments: Minnesota Art Projects in the Depression Years* (Duluth: Tweed Museum of Art, 1976); Susan R. Euler, "Art for a Democracy: The WPA's Art Education Programs in Minnesota, 1935-1943" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1990); Patricia Campbell, "The Minneapolis WPA Handicraft Project," *Hennepin County History* 48 (Fall 1989): 21-24.

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²Minnesota Art Project, *Accomplishments*, pamphlet, [1940?], in Clement B. Haupers and Clara G. Mairs Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); "WPA Federal Art Project of Minnesota, What It Is . . . What It Does," *Minnesota Artist*, Mar. 15, 1939, n.p.; Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 19.

³Jane H. Hancock, *Clement Haupers: Six Decades of Art In Minnesota* (St. Paul: MHS, 1979), 17; Clement B. Haupers, interview by Thomas O'Sullivan and Elizabeth Knight, Apr. 3, 1981, transcript, 7-8, MHS.

⁴Lea R. DeLong, "Depression Era Art in the Upper Midwest," in *New Deal Art of the Upper Midwest: An Anniversary Exhibition*, ed. DeLong et al. (Sioux City, Ia.: Sioux City Art Center, 1988), 6-8; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1982, p. 10G.

⁵*Minneapolis Shopping News*, June 4, 1943, p. 4.



FAP painting and tapestry of Swede Hollow, an immigrant neighborhood in St. Paul, 1936. Handicraft-project workers used contemporary and historic art as models. Gerry Hudson holds the painting by Dewey Albinson.

Mac Le Sueur, *Untitled [Booya]* (lithograph, ca. 1940). FAP artists pictured common experiences as well as the features that made their home state special. This tavern scene could have been anywhere—but where else would one find booya?



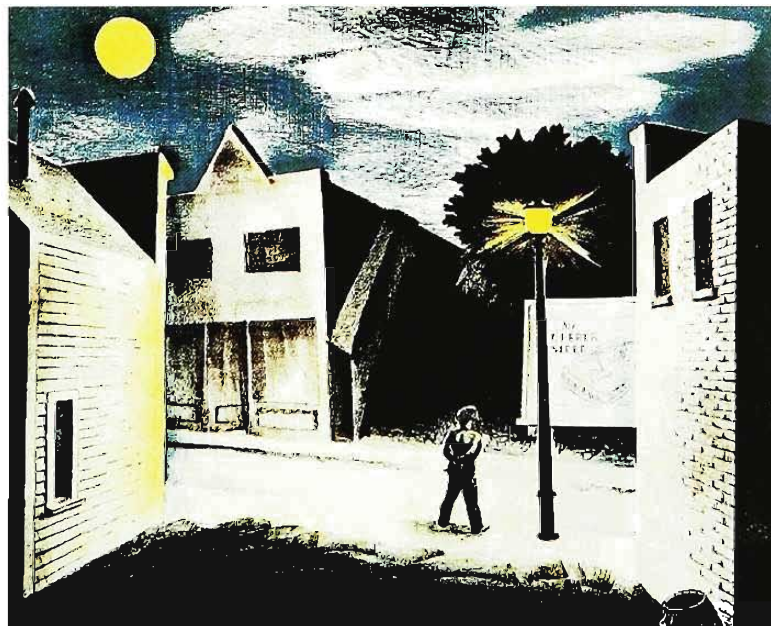
Bennet Swanson, *My Mother* (lithograph, 1939). Pictures like this suggest FAP artists' feel for everyday life. At a time of depression and upheaval, such reassuring images were also icons, reminding viewers of the roots of Minnesota communities.



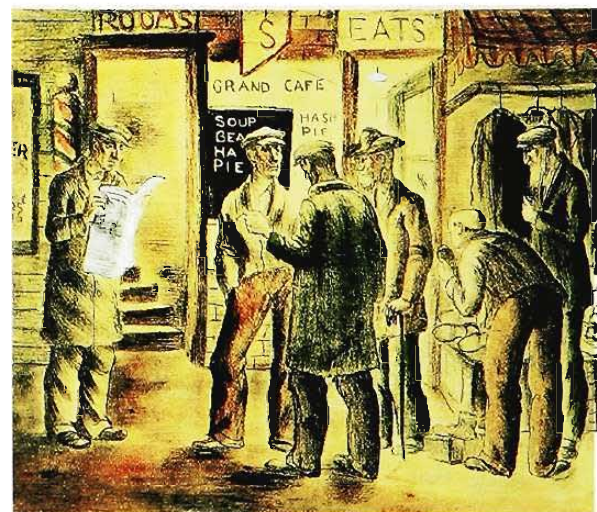


Miriam Ibling, *Attending the Opera* (gouache on paper, ca. 1938; gift of J. R. Turner III). This mural study was part of a series illustrating American music for Galtier Elementary School, St. Paul. Ibling also applied her rhythmic, stylized approach to murals in Stillwater and Owatonna schools.

Alexander Oja, *Nite in North St. Paul* (color lithograph, 1941). The use of a few rich colors and stark lighting effects gives a film noir cast to this small-town scene. Streetlight and moonlight, cop on the beat and sleeper on the billboard—Oja made his simple subject a study in contrasts.



Dorothea Lau, *Evening in the Gateway* (color lithograph, ca. 1940). The Gateway was Minneapolis's Skid Row in the 1930s. An FAP exhibit label noted Lau's sympathetic portrait of the district's men: "Just as Steinbeck draws his characters in Tortilla Flats, she has treated them with loving care, somewhat hazily in a warm bath of close color harmonies."





Arthur Allie, *Old Court House, St. Paul* (oil on board, 1936). The WPA/FAP saw its work as an intersection of art and life. In scenes like this, project artists portrayed the familiar in a straightforward style. St. Paulites would recognize this building, made obsolete by a new Art Deco skyscraper.

Syd Fossum, *Gas House District* (screen print, 1940). FAP artists favored the streets and neighborhoods of working people over more elegant and pretentious quarters. This silk screen derives from Fossum's much larger oil painting of the previous year, *Residences Below the 10th Avenue Bridge, Minneapolis*, but the different palette suggests that he approached this version as a new work. The FAP's print program allowed artists to adapt a favorite image to different media. Fossum's papers at MHS are a major source for the study of depression-era art projects and for Minnesota art at midcentury.





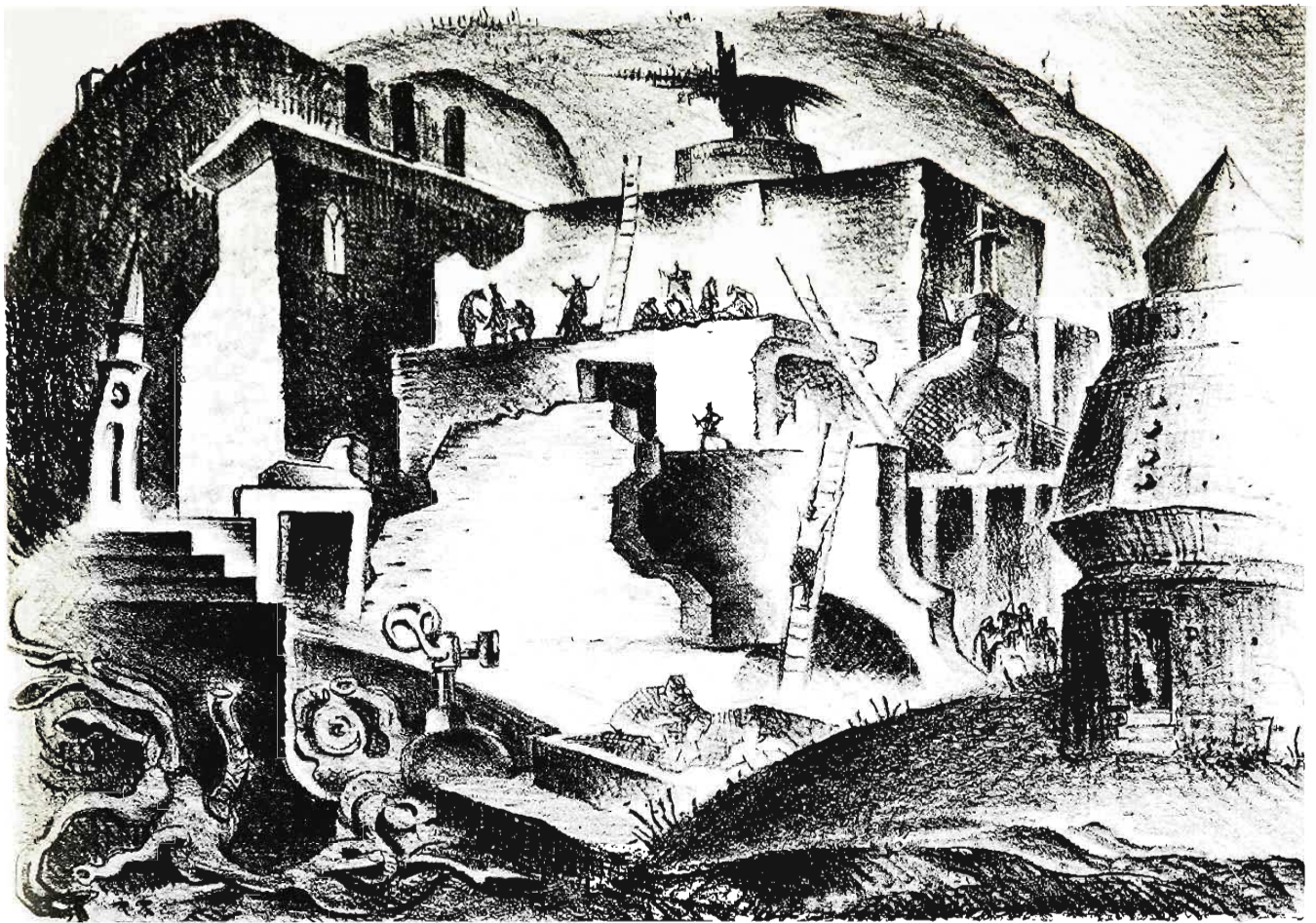
Display at the St. Paul Public Library, 1936; the large painting at center is Arthur Allie's Old Court House, St. Paul. The FAP placed exhibits in schools, libraries, town halls, and even shop windows so Minnesotans could easily encounter the work of their state's artists.

Miriam Ibling and her mural of Mother Goose characters for a children's clinic at the Lymanhurst Health Center, Minneapolis. Artists painted on canvas in a central studio; the murals were later adhered to the wall of the sponsor's building.



Clement Haupers, director of the FAP in Minnesota and nearby states, and Alma Kerr of the WPA Women's and Professional Division. MHS has several hours of oral histories narrated by Haupers, a flamboyant advocate for the arts.





Bob Brown, *Possession* (lithograph, ca. 1940). Brown drew perverse inspiration from the razing of St. Paul buildings to make way for Kellogg Boulevard. His paintings and prints interpret the demolition as a Tower of Babel-like urban apocalypse.

MURALS AND PRINTS carried the vision of the Federal Art Project to many communities, placing, for example, murals as large as seventy feet in length in public buildings across greater Minnesota. Haupers recalled his goal: “[The FAP] had one very good side effect in bringing the awareness of the visual sense into areas that didn’t have it. I made a deliberate effort to do as little in the [Twin] Cities as possible. Because I wanted to get out . . . the Cities had enough.” Artists planned each work to reflect the history or use of its host site, as in Miriam Ibling’s mural of Alice in Wonderland characters for a Minneapolis children’s clinic

or Richard Haines’s panorama of town history for a Sebeka school. In some cases, photographs and papers provide the only extant record of murals later destroyed during the demolition or reuse of buildings.⁸

Lithographs, screen prints, and wood engravings brought FAP art to Minnesotans in a more portable format. These media allowed artists to produce many impressions of one image for wide distribution. Project artists worked side by side with skilled printers to produce lithographs in black and white and in color. The FAP used the silk-screen technique that was common in commercial printing to make posters and classroom visuals, but artists like Fossum and George Beyer also adopted the process for art prints that had vivid colors and a distinctive texture.⁹

The names of some participating artists are well known, today as in the FAP’s heyday, but it was not the project’s aim to develop superstars and masterpieces. Here again, Cahill and Haupers voiced the lofty na-

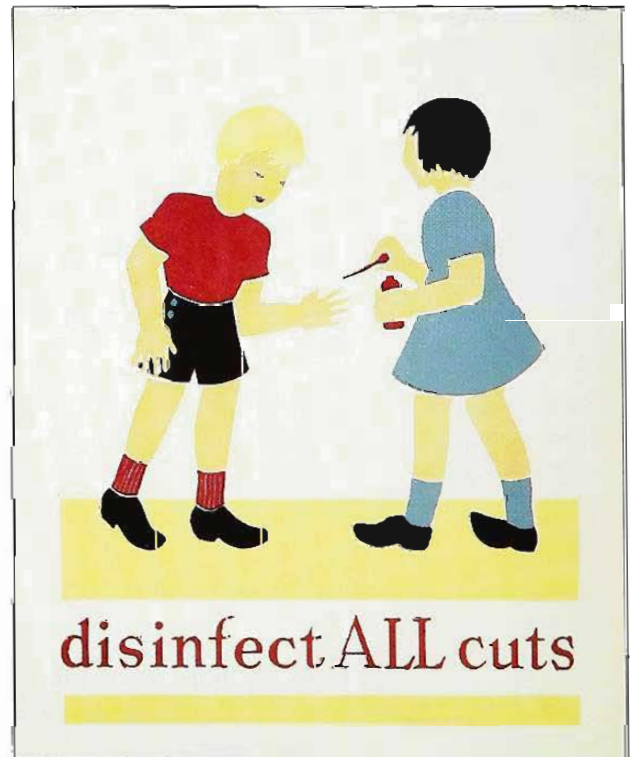
⁸Johnson, *Accomplishments*, 3; Haupers, 1981 transcript, 9.

⁹Johnson, *Accomplishments*, 7. See also [Smithsonian Institution], *WPA/FAP Graphics* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1976); Christopher DeNoon, *Posters of the WPA* (Los Angeles: Wheatley Press, 1987).



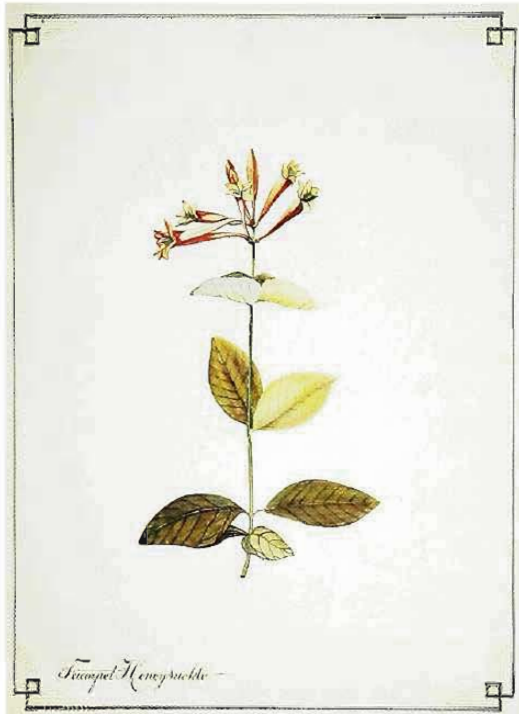
Glen Ranney, *Side Road* (oil on canvas, ca. 1940). Men at work! Minnesota's project artists often pictured workers going about their business, turning their backs on the widespread unemployment of the day.

Disinfect All Cuts (silk screen, ca. 1940). One from a portfolio of seventeen extant child-health posters, artist(s) unknown. FAP posters advertised plays and concerts, promoted safety, and publicized WPA accomplishments.



Painted wooden salad bowl and salad servers from the FAP handicraft project, Minneapolis





Walter Gray and Emma Gordon, Trumpet Honeysuckle (watercolor, pencil, and ink on board, 1940). Illustrators and commercial artists turned their skills to nature renderings, such as this delicate specimen from a series on Minnesota wildflowers. Such work not only maintained skills at a time when employment was scarce but also produced illustrations available at schools and libraries.

Stanford Fenelle, Landscape with House (gouache on paper, 1937). FAP painter and supervisor Fenelle's landscapes of the period portrayed midwestern architecture, like this ghostly farmhouse in a grove of barren trees.





Henry Bukowski, *The Squire's Grave* (lithograph, ca. 1940). Bukowski gave this small-town scene a macabre twist. Not only is the focal point of this placid image a graveyard, but several tombstones bear the names of Bukowski's art-project fellows.

Minneapolis artist Stanford Fenelle with one of many gouache paintings he executed for the FAP, 1940. Fenelle brought the credibility of a nationally exhibiting artist to his task of supervising the project's easel painters. "They liked me . . . because I was a sympathetic baby-sitter."

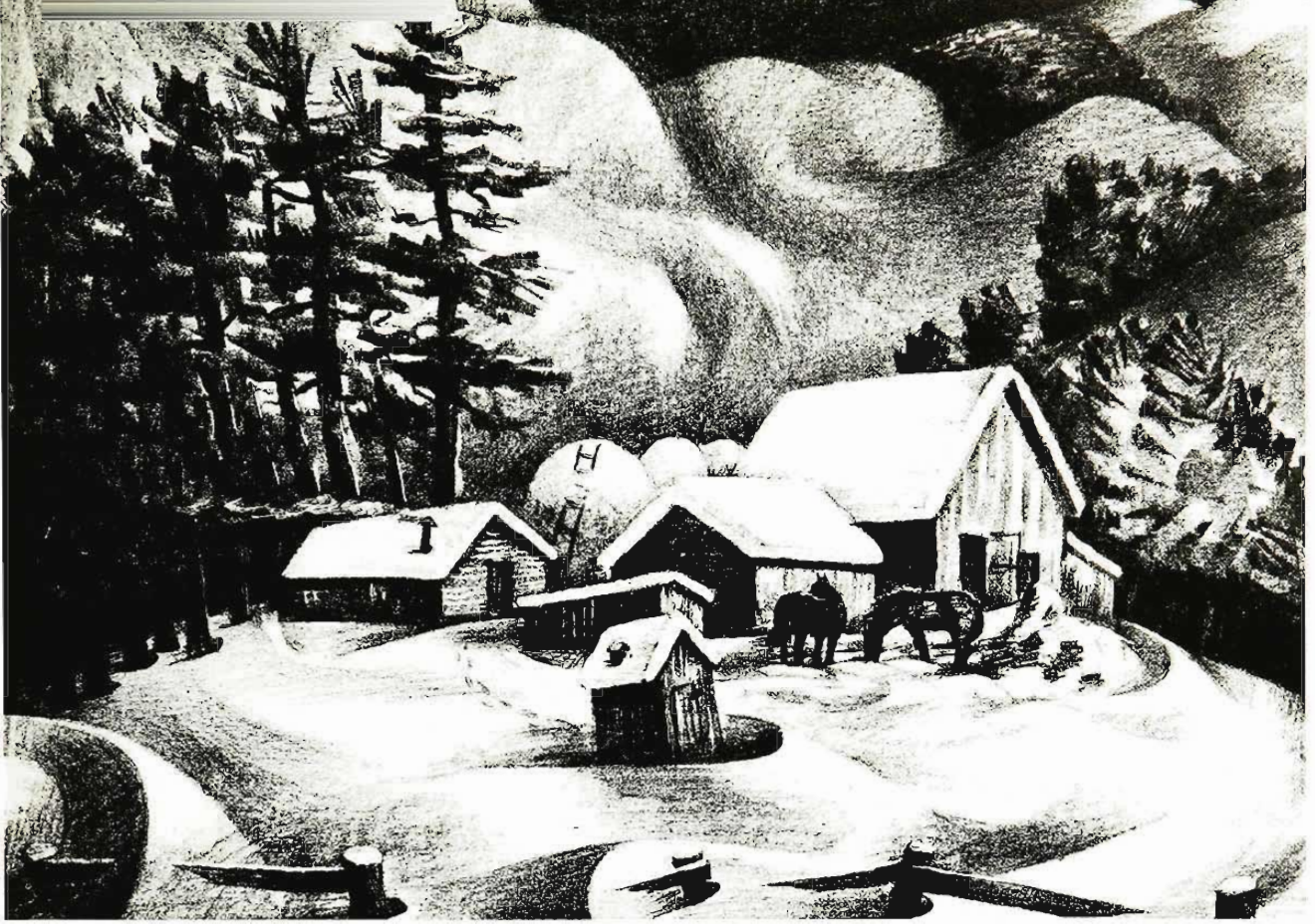


tional philosophy and its workaday local application: "The organization of the Project has proceeded on the principle that it is not the solitary genius but a sound general movement which maintains art as a vital, functioning part of any cultural scheme," Cahill wrote. "In a genuine art movement a great reservoir of art is created in many forms, both major and minor." Meanwhile Haupers upheld this philosophy on the front lines. He had a ready answer for a St. Paul school official who questioned the quality of FAP work. He recalled her words forty years later:

"Now, Mr. Haupers, if I could be sure, be very, very sure that these go down as great art, I'd be all for it." Well, that was just a little too much so I said to her, "I doubt that when Michelangelo lay on his back painting the Sistine ceiling [he] had any idea that he was creating great art, he was doing a *job*. That's what these people are doing."

THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT did give Minnesota artists a job to do. But did the state's FAP also succeed in fostering a "sound general movement"? A national

¹Cahill, *New Horizons*, 18; Clement B. Haupers, interview by Jane Hancock, May 1979, transcript, 14, MHS.



John M. Socha, Snowed In (lithograph, ca. 1940). A muralist who worked with the Mexican masters Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, Socha executed large commissions for schools in Winona, Crookston, and New Ulm. Even his small prints show the muralist's sense of large, full forms.

magazine surveyed the arts in Minnesota in 1943 and reported, "Greatest single factor toward the development of the younger artists has been the WPA under the able direction of artist Clement Haupers. With Government aid a whole talented generation was enabled to remain at home, working steadily and relatively peaceably instead of being forced either to abandon skills, starve, or migrate East or to Europe." Artists and historians today echo those sentiments and further acknowledge the Federal Art Project as the grandparent of more recent public programs for the arts. The artists may have the last word; their works attest to their survival and spirited response to the hard years of the Great Depression. Muralist Ibling reflected in 1982: "Thank God and Franklin Roosevelt and a few knowledgeable citizens who learned from the WPA: Art, Music, and other cultural projects could come out of the talented people of the USA."⁹

⁹Martha Davidson, "Regional Review: Minneapolis-St. Paul 1943," *ArtNews* 41 (Jan. 15-31, 1943): 10; Miriam Ibling to the author, May 9, 1982.

The photos on p. 184 (left) and 192 (bottom, left) are by Peter Latner. All artwork is from the MHS collections.

Lynn Kepman, The Three of Us (lithograph, 1937). FAP artists delighted in the fashions of their day, a part of the vibrant life around them. In portraying this trio, Kepman recorded no names but nonetheless captured the individuality of each sitter.





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