The New Deal in Art: The Fine Arts Project and the Evolution of Abstract Expressionism

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THE NEW DEAL IN ART: THE FINE ARTS PROJECT AND THE EVOLUTION OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

by

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ABSTRACT

THE NEW DEAL IN ART: THE FINE ARTS PROJECT AND THE EVOLUTION OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Sarah Coon Stoops
Old Dominion University, 2004
Director: Dr. Linda F. McGreevy

The formation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal, in conjunction with the Depression and World War II, can be credited with changing the face of international art of the twentieth century. The majority of the artists who were later to be known as Abstract Expressionists participated in the Fine Arts Project (FAP) branch of the WPA in New York throughout the 1930s. This government support of the artists gave them a chance to commit to painting as a career, and their painting styles evolved drastically during this time. Through this support, the connections that were made among the artists through various organizations, and the unity created through adversity, a community of artists was created that had not existed on such a large scale in American history.

To trace the origins of the Abstract Expressionist movement, the history of abstraction in America and its reception must be recognized. Public opinions based on the International Exhibition of Modern Art in 1913 and on movements in Europe throughout the 1920s impacted the critical reception of such a radical movement, and were the basis for much of the governmental ire that was roused against state-supported abstraction. The New Deal and its programs engendered much controversy, but none as much as they FAP. The Congressional reaction against abstraction and the paranoia about Communist
infiltration led to the investigation of many of the artists, a surveillance and suspicion that followed many of them through the end of their lives.

The Abstract Expressionist movement was a turning point in American art, and though it did not impact publicly until the mid-1940s and 1950s, its roots in the Depression and the government supported programs of the era should not be overlooked. This critical gestation period and the community that was created provided an impetus that had been lacking in previous years and created an impact in the international art world that still resounds greatly today.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The formation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal, in conjunction with the Depression and World War II, can be credited with changing the face of international art of the twentieth century. Until the late 1930s and 1940s European cities like Paris and Vienna were considered the home to significant art, while American art was largely considered sub par in the international forum. In the 1940s, the center of the art world slowly shifted from the great European cities to New York, where it would generally stay through the end of the twentieth century. The bonds formed between artists involved in the WPA and in the various artists’ groups of the period impacted American art in a way that would be apparent through the 1960s, and created an impetus that would shape American painting permanently. Were it not for the political and humanitarian crises of the time, Western art and culture would have remained European in nature.

During the 1930s, when most of the younger generation began their painting careers, prevailing aesthetic viewpoints were being shaped by economic, political, and social calamities: at home by the Depression; abroad, by Hitler’s rise to power, the Spanish Civil War, the Moscow trials, the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact; and in 1939 by the outbreak of World War II.¹ The 1920s saw great experimentation in American

abstract art, but the major artists of the era were primarily foreigners living in New York City.

An American artist working abstractly during the Depression was commonly perceived as too highbrow or radical for the times. The avant garde was perceived as too elite, accessible only to the wealthy, and the art of the 1920s was dismissed outright as an example of how decadent those years had been. The reactions were so severe that even the more sincere works of the decade were dismissed along with the more frivolous movements, a sign of collective guilt and anger over excess.

Political considerations also helped form public opinion; abstract works were identified with radical politics, including Socialism and Communism, while realistic paintings were seen as patriotic and middle-of-the-road. The popular art of the time was either Regionalist, depicting scenes of America’s agricultural roots and isolationist ideologies; or Social Realist, portraying Marxist ideologies and the struggles of the American working class. Though these movements did carry a political message, this was often overlooked by the general public because they depicted identifiable themes and the common man.

Various groups had been trying unsuccessfully to establish a federal art program in America since before 1910, when a national institute for the arts was denied funding in Congress. In 1913 an attempt at establishing an American Academy of Arts and Letters failed as well, possibly because of either an opposition to a nationalization of culture or to the feeling that American culture was inferior to a European one. That same year also saw the International Exhibition of Modern Art, best known as the Armory Show, which

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may have strengthened governmental opposition to the arts. Eleanor Roosevelt remarked on these insecurities in 1934, when she stated “I think that we all of us now are conscious of the fact that the appreciation of beauty is something which is of vital importance to us, but we are also conscious of the fact that we are a young country, and we are a country that has not had assurance always in its own taste.”

The government imposed restrictions in the 1920s that further hindered the sale, exhibition, and distribution of artworks by raising tariffs on imported pieces and placing restrictions on art exports. These restrictions may have played a part in the gradual expansion of American art’s popularity with collectors. The last two years of the decade saw a surge in the popularity of contemporary American art. This boom collapsed with the advent of the Great Depression, and the arts population, never the most prosperous to begin with, was devastated. By 1931 many New York artists, seeking to find a direct market, looked to Paris to trade their art for any reasonable price. Burgoyne Diller, an abstract painter and later head of the Fine Arts Project’s Mural Division, recalls that people were skimping on necessities like food to be able to buy paint, and that galleries were not showing the work of artists interested in the contemporary movements even before the art market disintegrated.

In his book Government and the Arts: Debates over Federal Support of the Arts in America from George Washington to Jesse Helms, Alan Howard Levy writes of the

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4 Levy, p 55.
change in taste that occurred around the time of the WPA’s inception:

In the thirties, a conscious challenge to this sense of inferiority, rose a desire for increased national and sectional identifiability in the arts. Not only had artists, writers, and musicians continuously taken cues from the latest developments in European capitals, but audiences had also appeared to remain wedded to the notion that European culture was somehow better.\(^8\)

The bias against American art was so pronounced that Diller was able to relate the tale of a French artist who, upon moving to America, was unable to sell his any of work until his return to France, when Americans started buying his paintings again.\(^9\) In a time when American artists were often unable or unwilling to move to Europe to study and work, the influx of European artists to American cities such as New York encouraged an anti-American bias in collecting and exhibiting which dealt the art community a severe blow.

In order to explore the evolution of American art during and immediately following the period of the WPA, one must first look at the popular movements of the era preceding. This begins with the public reaction to works exhibited in the Armory Show and ends with the Social Realists and Regionalists of the 1920s and 1930s. The Armory Show of 1913 is one of the most important influences on the Abstract Expressionists for several reasons, though most of the painters were too young to have attended the exhibition. Many of the exhibited artists, including Picasso, Kandinsky, Duchamp, and Matisse had direct influence on the younger American painters. Though Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery in New York had exhibited modern art as early as 1908, its sphere was small and only a limited number of patrons and artists had viewed modern European art. The Armory Show was the first major exposure the American general public had to abstraction, and the negativity it engendered in the public sphere remained through the

\(^8\) Levy, 56.
\(^9\) “New Deal and the Arts Oral History Interviews Conducted by the Archives of American Art, 1963-1965”
Abstract Expressionists' development. American abstract painters were often compared to the artists exhibited in the Armory show, especially during government investigations and debate over the funding of art that included accusations that all abstraction was subversive. Possibly most importantly however, the exhibition resulted in a number of resources the American artists utilized in the evolution of their own styles, especially those living in New York during the Depression. For example, were it not for the Armory Show, Miss Lillie Bliss would not have been convinced to establish New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) at the urging of two members of the American Association of Painters and Sculptors, the organization behind the Armory Show. Without the collection at the MoMA, several of the artists of the WPA would not have developed as quickly in their chosen stylistic direction.

THE ARMORY SHOW OF 1913

The International Exhibition of Modern Art, commonly referred to as the Armory Show, was produced by the American Association of Painters and Sculptors in 1913. It was one of the most influential art exhibitions of the twentieth century, and one of the most controversial. The large scale exhibition included Impressionist, Fauvist, and Cubist artwork, among other radical aesthetic innovations in art that had occurred in Europe over the previous forty years, and the general public was caught unprepared.

Early reviews were mixed: the New York Sun stated that the AAPS “has wrought something like a miracle,” that the show was “sensational” and “an event not to be missed,” while the American’s critic wrote that the original intentions of showing developing movements was lost in “excessive size, massive advertising, and circus
atmosphere,” and the selection of works was “uninformed, unequal, and unfortunately the
selection of a single man...[the show] was going to be a bomb-shell.” Harriet Monroe,
an art critic for the Chicago Daily Tribune, attended the preview and published columns
titled “Art Show Open to Freaks” and “American Exhibition in New York Teems with
the Bizarre,” but her reviews about the exhibition in New York were largely favorable. It
was not until the show opened at the Art Institute in Chicago that her reviews became
negative, keeping her reviews in line with her peers and with public opinion in that city.

The most conservative and disgusted critic was the New York Tribune’s Royal
Cortissoz, who wrote that Cézanne “was a complacent ignoramus,” Van Gogh a “crazy
incompetent,” and Picasso was “a man whose unadulterated cheek resembled that of
Barnum.” Cortissoz also wrote that Kandinsky’s Improvisation no. 27 resembled
“fragments of refuse thrown out of a butcher’s shop upon a bit of canvas.”

There was positive press. Some of the critics, like the New York Globe’s Arthur
Hoeber, saw it as having historical significance, which should be viewed with no
preconceived notions about art. Borglum even wrote in defense of the show, calling
American art “timid” and “without aesthetic courage.”

The most notable figure to comment on the Armory Show was President
Theodore Roosevelt, who visited the exhibition on March 4th, the day of Woodrow
Wilson’s inauguration. In an article titled “Layman’s View of an Art Exhibition,” first
printed in the Outlook, he compared the artwork with Navajo rugs and the puzzles printed

11 Andrew Martinez, “A Mixed Reception for Modernism: The 1913 Armory Show at the Art Institute of
Chicago,” Museum Studies 19, no.1: 37.
12 University of Kansas, The Organizers of the Armory Show (Lawrence: University of Kansas Museum of
Art, 1964), 16.
13 Meyer Shapiro, Modern Art of the 19th and 20th Centuries (New York: George Brazillier, Inc., 1968),
14 University of Kansas, 17.
in the Sunday papers. He lauded the American artists, but in the more extreme artists he saw a danger that:

change may mean death, not life, and retrogression, not development. Probably err [sic] in taking most of these pictures seriously. It is likely that many of them represent in the painters the astute appreciation of the power to make folly lucrative which the late P.T. Barnum showed with his faked mermaid. There are thousands who will pay sums to look at a faked mermaid, and now and then one with enough money will buy a Cubist picture, or a picture of a misshapen woman, repellent from every point of view.\(^{15}\)

Roosevelt’s view was shared by many Americans at that time. The President of the Art Institute of Chicago, the exhibition’s next stop, had agreed to host the show only reluctantly, being skeptical of the art’s merit and afraid of its influence on the students attending the school. He went on vacation for the duration of the exhibition to publicly distance himself from the show and the work displayed, which, considering much of the uproar that ensued, was a logical move.

Members of the Illinois senate, after viewing the show, condemned it. The anonymous “Guardian of Morals,” a self-appointed individual, had the show investigated by the Illinois Vice Commission, and the Law and Order League spokesman announced that “The idea that people can gaze at this sort of thing without it hurting them is all bosh.”\(^{16}\) Letters to the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* reinforced his worries. The Art Institute was condemned for showing the work by some, while others praised the Institute for daring to show new and controversial artworks. A Chicago high school art teacher petitioned the Board of Educators to ban all schoolchildren from viewing the show, as it contained “nasty, lewd, immoral, and indecent” works.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{16}\) Brown, 124.

\(^{17}\) Martinez, 50.
The Cubist room was reportedly so crowded that it was difficult to gain admittance, and the crowd around Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* (Illustration 1, page 14) was the most dense. People would gather around the painting looking for the figure. Cartoon caricatures were published, with titles like “Rude Descending the Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway).” *American Art News* offered a ten-dollar prize for the cleverest interpretation of the painting in an article titled “Making Insanity Profitable.” The *Chicago Daily Tribune* published a mocking article titled “Sunday Crowds see Cubist Art” on March 31, 1913. The subtitled section “How to Get the Cubist Idea” read:

> You are not supposed to actually see what the artist does. Perhaps it would not be exactly delicate. There is a formula by which you can see just what is represented. Take a careful survey of the picture, study the purported idea, whirl around three times, close your eyes, count twenty, bump your head twice against the wall, and if you bump hard enough the picture of the nude descending the staircase will be perfectly obvious.\(^{18}\)

Duchamp’s *Nude* was sold, sight unseen, to a San Francisco art dealer who displayed the work and refused to sell it until 1927.

**ART IN THE 1920s AND 1930s**

Much of the art coming out of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s was incomprehensible to the American public, and, like the art of the Armory Show, was dismissed outright by a majority of the populace. The situation in the newly formed USSR also contributed to a general wariness towards abstraction and, ironically, linked abstraction and oppressive politics permanently in the American psyche.

Art in postwar Europe took a serious turn, often involving themes of the misery of

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the war or espousing political ideas. In France, a return to classical subject matter, such as still life, landscape, and religion became apparent, even though many of the artists involved continued to use new technical and stylistic approaches. The political situation in France was especially influential, as the country needed to reclaim its great artistic heritage and national identity during this time of crisis. Themes concerning the war were common, as most Europeans had no prior experience with modern warfare. The outbreak was expected, as the social climate was volatile and minor skirmishes had already erupted, but the reality of modern weaponry came as a shock to most, who had continued to think in terms of the Franco-Prussian war of forty years before. The Great War was the bloodiest, most intensely fought war in history, and by the armistice the total number of direct battle deaths, not including secondary infections or epidemic casualties, was over 10 million.19

Issues of land and religion were paramount, largely due to the reclamation of Alsace and Lorraine from the Germans and a resurgence of Catholicism throughout France. The casualties of war left a country of grieving families who turned to religion in a way not seen in the country in close to a century. The legal separation of church and state was not reinstated upon reclamation of Alsace and Lorraine, and tentative ties were established between France and Rome.20

All of these considerations appeared in the art of many of the painters and sculptors who had participated in the Armory Show, and who later influenced the Abstract Expressionists. Picasso, though a Spanish citizen, remained in Paris and maintained contact with his colleagues on the front, including Apollinaire, Braque, and

Derain, and who returned to a more natural painting style and collaboration with other local artists. Apollinaire wrote of the situation of the Parisian avant garde:

Derain is in a motorcycle unit in the north, Georges Braque was recently in Le Havre as a second Lieutenant, Fernand Leger is at the front with the supply corps... and Dufy is in Le Havre, waiting. Picasso, whose health is too weak to allow him to do anything other than his invaluable work as an artist has outdone Ingres in his admirable drawings without even trying, according to a letter I received.  

The return to classicism and the landscape can be compared to American Regionalist paintings, dealing with nostalgic themes of a rapidly disappearing rural lifestyle, though the group resisted the idea of comparison to European painters. This isolationism in painting was a deliberate move to create a unique art that reaffirmed American themes and values. Thomas Hart Benton, the best-known Regionalist painter, believed that modernism was alien to the American character; he used traditional techniques and a sentimental subject matter to reinforce themes of community, especially in the Midwest. Despite themes of community and socialism, however, the paintings of the Regionalists do not reflect the economic hardships of the Depression. This proved popular, and Benton's paintings and murals remain an intrinsic expression of the American social landscape of the 1920s and 1930s.

Social Realism in America utilized similar isolationist ideals as Regionalism, though the focus was an urban landscape and the plight of the American worker. Parallels may also be drawn between Social Realism and the socialist paintings of the Mexican muralists, as they both dealt with similar themes of workers' rights and community among the working class. These political movements made the emerging Abstract Expressionists wary of including political themes in their artworks, though most

of them believed in leftist ideals and participated in leftist organizations. This desire to remain free from labels, names, and interpretations grew out of the political and artistic climate that was prevalent in the era; two of the most important forces in intellectual life, Stalinism and Surrealism, made these artists wary of any ideologies used to shape and measure art.

Other influential French movements also came out of the return to Classicism. The Purist movement of Amadee Ozenfant and Le Coubusier was seen as a return to order and to the neoclassical aesthetic after the chaos of war. Essentially Cubism stripped down to clean lines and form, Purism was a modern movement imbued with classical theory, a classic example of which is Ozenfant’s *Still Life with Red Wine Glass*, 1921 (Illustration 2, page 14). Fernand Leger's involvement with Purism lightened the forms and added energy, and in 1921 and 1922, Picasso, who had developed the Cubist idea with Georges Braque, also enlivened the Purist movement with figural works.

The European artists, from the postwar neoclassical revival through Dada and the Surrealists, all had immeasurable influence on the New York art community and with it eventually on the abstract artists of the New York School. While many of these artists spent World War II in New York, there was very little interaction between the older, established artists and the emerging abstract painters of the city. One of the few artists of the younger generation to have interacted with the older generation was Robert Motherwell, who recalled:

People nowadays have very little sense of how little intermingling there was. I mean everybody now knows that the European artists in exile were here during the war and they all assume that these artists were everywhere and that everybody saw them. It wasn't that at all... They were very alienated and very frightened. During the first three years of the war it looked as though the Nazis might very well win and that all of European civilization would collapse. On the other hand,
the Americans had been on the WPA. Nobody would buy one of our pictures for seventy-five dollars when a Dufy would sell for several thousand dollars. So on the American side there was a lot of bitterness and discontent, and so on.²²

The American government was suspicious of many of the artists who sought asylum in the United States during the war because of their ties to various political groups, and maintained records of surveillance on many of the artists. Picasso, though he never entered the country, has the largest FBI file maintained on an artist. Some of the émigré Europeans had either ties to or sympathy towards Socialism, Communism, and in the case of Salvador Dali, the new fascist Spanish government. But none of these movements caused more concern with the American government than the young Soviet state, and Lenin and Trotsky's support of the arts was ominously noted.

The government of the USSR under Lenin was supportive of all styles of art, including abstraction, whereas Stalin's state was concerned with art as a propaganda tool, and severely restricted subject and technique. Constructivism, Productivism, and kinetic studies in sculpture and architecture excited the international community with their bold new ideas in abstract art until 1928, when Stalin banned all art that did not meet his taste, and proclaimed that all artists should only produce Soviet Realism. It is ironic that the American government, after this ban, declared that abstraction was still the work of the Soviet government and that its popularity was a means to undermine the American government. As many of the artists of the era were at least sympathetic to the leftist political parties, they were under the shadow of governmental disapproval and investigation.

Indeed, the artists of the Abstract Expressionist movement had several obstacles to overcome, among them the dearth of a true American artists' community, the reluctance of the American public to accept abstraction as a valid art, pressure from the government and political groups trying to push their art into numerous directions, the difficulties of working for a government that was openly hostile to their style, and the circumstances of living in New York City during the Great Depression. Despite these and other considerations, Abstract Expressionism persevered and even triumphed in the postwar world as a legitimate American art movement.
Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (no. 2), 1912

Figure 2: Amadee Ozenfant, *Still Life with Red Wine Glass*, 1921
CHAPTER II
GOVERNMENT SUPPORTED ART PROGRAMS

THE PUBLIC WORKS OF ART PROJECT

In December 1933 a grant was given to the Treasury Department to form the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the first federally funded arts program in America. The PWAP was not the first attempt by Roosevelt to create a government funded arts program: in 1932, Governor Roosevelt had authorized a work relief program for New York artists.¹ His election to the Presidency offered him an opportunity to take the initiative to a Federal level. Though the project lost funding in 1934, during its 5 months of existence it provided work to 3749 artists in the 48 states, and resulted in the creation of 15,663 works of public art.² Those governing the PWAP had a dual purpose: to provide relief to artists affected by the Depression and to have those artists produce quality works to be placed into tax-supported institutions. This emphasis on “quality” caused some bitterness among artist communities, as only a limited number were chosen to participate, though many “contributed pieces of work or gave their services without pay in order to have part in the enterprise.”³

In his essay “For the Present We Are Busy,” originally written for a proposed report to Congress on the value of the WPA’s Federal Art Project, Beniamino Benvenuto Bufano remarks on this willingness to participate:

Long before the WPA/FAP came into existence, I offered my services to several communities at day-labor wages if they would supply the materials and let me work. There must have been many artists with this same spirit, enough so that their voices could be heard beyond the provincialism of their own towns. Movements like a government art project are not an accident; they come from great needs, the need of the artist to give something to the world as much as from his need to survive.4

Eleanor Roosevelt also spoke about the positive response she was getting from the arts community as a result of the new programs:

I have been tremendously impressed by the interest which has developed since art and the Government are beginning to play with each other. I have been interested in seeing the Government begin to take the attitude that they had responsibility toward art, and toward artists. I have also been interested in the reaction of the artists to an opportunity to work for the Government. I have had a number of letters, saying, "I have been working on a Government project. It is the first time that I ever felt that I, as an artist, had any part in the Government." I think it is a wonderful thing for the Government, and I think it is a wonderful thing for the people—for the people of the country in general—because through many of these projects I think there are more people today throughout the country conscious of the fact that expression—artistic expression—is something which is of concern to every community.5

The issue of finding artists to work on the PWAP was a daunting one: in some areas weekend hobbyists were applying for jobs, and very few could provide the credentials needed to participate. In others, such as New York City, there were so many eligible artists that they were put to work repairing and cleaning the city’s many existing statues and monuments. Local officials selected artists who met their own standards, a political maneuver that worked for them only so long as they suited the local tastes, and oftentimes if they had the right connections. This policy caused considerable dissatisfaction and rancor in the art communities. In writing about the New York regional chairman Juliana Force, who was also the director of the Whitney Museum of American

5 Eleanor Roosevelt.
Art, Jackson’s brother Sande Pollock deemed her “a political designing woman who will stop at nothing to see that her clique of fa[li]ries are given work. She is a bitch and actually amounts to an Art Dictator and is rapidly becoming a serious menace to Art in general here in NY.”

Controversy about the PWAP also raged in Washington; both President Roosevelt and the First Lady campaigned for the arts relentlessly, making their case before the public and Congress. Supporters and detractors of the project were engaged in a relentless tug of war, debating the issues of need vs. quality, and attempting to structure a new program that would satisfy all parties. The art projects were dismissed as “New Deal boondoggling at its most wasteful and wrongheaded. ‘That the government should provide both artists and white-collar people with useless projects’” was stigmatized as “both immoral and ruinous of the economy.”

Jackson Pollock was pulled from the relief rolls and placed on the project in February 1935, assigned to the monument restoration division. He earned $1.75 an hour to clean the Firemen’s Memorial at 100th Street and Riverside Drive, a job that was miserable in the winter months. By spring, his brother Sande joined him in working on the statue of George Washington in Union Square, a tedious assignment that they made the best of, often attracting crowds with their humor. Unfortunately, their antics attracted the supervisors’ attention, and in June he was demoted to a Stonecarver’s Helper with half the pay. He would only stay with the project another month.

When funding for the PWAP ran out in April 1935, however, almost all of the projects were abandoned, with the exceptions of a few that were adopted by different

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6 Naifeh, 271.
7 Naifeh, 272.
8 Naifeh, 272.
agencies (including the monument restoration division). This seemingly fickle
government action enraged artists who had their livelihoods swept out from under them
so abruptly. Membership in the Artists' Union almost doubled as they fought for more
rights in the work they were given, rights that included job stability.

THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

In his April 28, 1935 Fireside Chat introducing what was to become known as the
Works Progress Administration, Franklin Roosevelt stated the goals of the initiative:

We are losing no time getting the government's vast work relief program
underway, and we have every reason to believe that it should be in full swing by
autumn. In directing it, I shall recognize six fundamental principles: First, the
projects should be useful. Secondly, the projects should be of a nature that a
considerable proportion of the money spent will go into wages for labor. Third,
projects which promise ultimate return to the Federal Treasury of a considerable
proportion of the costs will be sought. Fourth, funds allotted for each project
should be actually and promptly spent and not held over until later years. Fifth, in
all cases projects must be of a character to give employment to those on the relief
rolls. And finally, projects will be allocated to localities or relief areas in relation
to the number of workers on relief rolls in those areas.9

Each of these six "fundamental principles" would later be argued hotly in the press, in
public opinion, and in Congress.

The WPA was a relief project, but one that gave participants the chance to work
for their income. Within the next six years, the WPA would provide jobs to "an average
of 2,100,000 Americans, spend $2 billion, and begin work on almost a quarter million
projects, from raking leaves to building airports."10 Socially, the work of the WPA
provided confidence, stability, and a new influx of money into communities. In the arts,

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9 Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Works Relief Program," Fireside Chat of April 28, 1935; Franklin and
Eleanor Roosevelt Institute; available from http://newdeal.feri.org/chat/chat07.htm; Internet; accessed
10 Naifeh, 273.
the WPA's TRAP (Treasury Relief Art Project) and FAP (Federal Arts Project) programs provided employment for thousands of artists, approximately half of whom were based in New York City.

The arts branches of the WPA were not solely a means of employment for artists: the program helped broaden awareness among Americans by supporting community art centers, art instruction programs, galleries, and local industry. In 1939, Senator Robert Wagner of New York remarked on the social influences of these programs. "People who would otherwise never see an oil painting or a woodcut, attend a musical concert or a legitimate theater production have become acquainted with these arts for the first time through the WPA."11 This social influence was one of the goals of the program, though the strongest impact was the positive effect employment had on a devastated community of artists, still reeling from the decline of the art market. By instilling a sense of confidence in the individual painter, the program had a greater long term influence on American culture than the social programs.

Though the various arts projects constituted only five percent of the WPA's overall budget, they were to remain highly controversial throughout the relief efforts. By the end of the program, only about 38,000, or 2% of the WPA's employees were in the fine arts, a number including not only the painterly traditions but also the Federal Writers Project, the Theater Project, the Music Project, and assorted scholarly research endeavors.12 The idea of federal arts funding remained the paramount controversy, but other issues included relief needs versus quality, acceptance of various styles by the administrators, and the possibly subversive activities of the artists, both within various

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12 *ibid.*
organizations and on the personal level. Other critics of the program argued that the overseeing of funded arts represented an unacceptable level of governmental influence. Charges of frivolity and waste dogged the program throughout its existence.

At a basic level, the WPA as a program to end the relief rolls was met with skepticism. In a November 1935 editorial “This Business of Relief,” *The Nation* had several points to address regarding the fledgling program:

When the WPA was launched as the solution of the unemployment problem, the President announced that "the federal government must and will quit this business of relief." The new program was to give a job to every able-bodied man whom the new prosperity did not place in private industry. WPA in New York City has put 223,000 persons to work. This still leaves 750,000 unemployed who can hope for no help from WPA, since it has already reached its quota. [...] the Works Progress Administrator promises a steady "deflation" of the WPA program. This will inevitably throw the released WPA workers back on the local home-relief rolls, repeating the cycle of home relief to local made work, to home relief, to federal CWA, back to home or work relief, back again to federal WPA, then on to home relief. And so round and round.¹³

The same article also references the disintegration of Roosevelt’s fourth fundamental principle. Within the first few months of the program, New York’s Controller chose to use extra income earmarked for the relief programs to pay off loans the city had taken out in 1934.

This extra income was a result of the WPA’s success, generated by the extra income workers were earning and spending in the city. This money, as per the fourth fundamental principle, should have gone back into the program, to either fund new jobs or to raise the pay rates of existing workers. The majority of each dollar ($0.77) invested into the program went to paying for labor, providing a fluid income for the program’s

participants. The remaining $0.23 went directly to local suppliers of the materials necessary to complete the projects.\textsuperscript{14}

THE TREASURY RELIEF ART PROJECT AND THE FEDERAL ARTS PROJECT

The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) and the Federal Arts Project (FAP) were initiated simultaneously as part of the WPA in August 1935. TRAP was considered the more elite of the two, as it had a limited number of available spaces, better wages, and more ambitious projects. TRAP's administration was so selective that it was unable to fill its quota of five hundred artists for its more than 1900 projects, mainly murals in post offices and other tax supported institutions. This exclusivity caused pressure to be placed on the administration by artists' organizations to hire based on need as well as on artistic merit, and in 1936 the program quickly began to fill the available space with easel artists, including Mark Rothko.\textsuperscript{15}

Rothko was appointed to TRAP in June 1936 at $96.30 a month for approximately 60 hours' work.\textsuperscript{16} Four months after his appointment TRAP began a slow reduction and in May of 1937, he was transferred alongside 41 other artists to the easel division of the FAP. The priority given to the TRAP artists entering the FAP caused protests among the list of 2000 New York artists on the waiting list for a space in the program:

For the past several months, funding cutbacks, a hiring freeze, layoffs, welfare investigations, conflicts between artists and administrators, and rumors of the project's termination had made the New York 34th Street office the scene of verbal protests, picketings, and a sit-in which produced police beatings and the arrest of 219 artists. A


\textsuperscript{15} Breslin, 119.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}
month after Rothko’s transfer, an ordered 25% reduction in personnel provoked massive work stoppage, sit-ins, and other demonstrations.\textsuperscript{17}

Rothko would continue working for the FAP until August 1939, despite regulations passed in 1937 restricting the programs to American citizens only.

The Federal Arts Project was formed under the umbrella of the Civil Works Administration (CWA) to provide work for unemployed artists whose works were meant to be placed in fully or partially tax-supported institutions. The FAP was a much larger organization than PWAP, and artists were chosen by professional merit rather than connections or position in the artistic community. In New York, the director, Holger Cahill, can be at least partially credited for the impact the program had on American art, though he saw modernism as “related to the worship of aesthetic fragments torn from their social contexts, and to the idea of art for the select few,” and was drawn to the idea of making art that was accessible to all.\textsuperscript{18}

Cahill was recruited from a museum background, and had the ability to relate to the artists and to other museum professionals in a way that helped the project achieve its goals. His policy of allowing unknown artists to participate in the project provided them a chance to work uninterrupted, form friendships based on a common bond, and foster a sense of professionalism among the younger aspirants. The flexibility of Cahill’s administration gave artists like Pollock, Reinhardt, de Kooning, and Rothko, among many others, the chance to evolve their styles at a much quicker pace than if they had been working sundry odd jobs, though oftentimes they were encouraged to submit more objective works to the project, and create abstraction on their own time.

\textsuperscript{17} Breslin, 120.
\textsuperscript{18} Levy, 77.
At the project’s inception, painters assigned to the Easel Division were made to travel to the main offices to clock in at 8:00 a.m., return to their studios to work, and return to clock out at 4:00 p.m. in order to receive payment for the day. This policy was changed by 1937, allowing them to turn in a certain number of works within an allotted time for their pay. It was at this time Jackson Pollock transferred from the Mural Division into the Easel Division. Undoubtedly, many of the artists submitted, as Adolph Gottlieb admitted to doing, their “most bland and neutral work, to avoid difficulties in allocation,” and to be able to keep their stronger and more experimental work.\textsuperscript{19} Artists attached to the Mural Division had a more rigid schedule to work from, and were strongly advised on style and subject matter. A small stronghold of abstractionists did exist in the administration, however, and assigned artists to work with the likes of Arshile Gorky and Stuart Davis, though few of the abstract works were put in place.

At a time when people fortunate enough to have jobs were making as little as $7.00 a week, and the average WPA worker earned approximately $60 a month, the artists on the FAP were resented for their flexible, at home hours and higher pay rates. Tensions were mounting within the program as well, and abuses of the program were becoming commonplace, especially when artists would pilfer supplies. A 25% loss of supplies had been worked into the program from the start, to adjust for this pilfering, but Charles Mattox, a supply clerk for the project and assistant to the artist David Smith, the supervisor of technical projects, recalls: “A lot of the artists were very resentful that they couldn’t just take what they wanted.”\textsuperscript{20} In bureaucratic retaliation, Mattox and Smith carefully calculated how much sizing and how much paint were required to cover a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Breslin, 121.
\item Naifeh, 275.
\end{enumerate}
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canvas—"we took into account if somebody used more impasto"—how much thinner the cleanup would consume, and how much "mileage" a painter could get from a brush, and doled out supplies strictly according to the formula.\textsuperscript{21}

Other minor grievances are exemplified by Sande Pollock's name change, spurred by a WPA policy forbidding two people in the same household with the same surname from being eligible to work on the project. In order to avoid relocating, to be able to work, and to be known as someone independent of his brother, Sande changed his name from Pollock to McCoy, their mother's maiden name. Others were taking hidden second jobs and moving into more upscale apartments, which would have had them expelled from the projects.

Willem de Kooning joined the FAP in the Easel Division at a rate of $23.86 a week, but transferred to the Mural Division and an assignment working on the French Pier with Fernand Léger, who was in New York for his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. de Kooning describes his experience working with the French cubist, and the cessation of his own insecurity as an "American" painter:

Here's an internationally known painter who arrives in New York. We were so reverent, then all of a sudden he sticks a brush into some paint—just like we did—he makes a couple of strokes on the canvas that look kind of dumb—like we did—and suddenly all of that old mystery vanished. We thought, well, we can do that too, so maybe American artists aren't so bad after all.\textsuperscript{22}

de Kooning, who was Dutch, spent only fifteen months on the FAP, his experience cut short by the same regulation barring non-citizens that Rothko had evaded. He recalled a conversation held with Burgoyne Diller, in which he exclaimed, "This country is marvelous! Imagine, they pay someone who isn't even a citizen a good salary to stay

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{ibid.}
home and paint all day!” to which Diller responded, “I didn’t hear what you just said.”

After his experience with the FAP, however, he had the confidence to dedicate himself to his painting full time, instead of holding secondary positions in other related fields.

Perhaps the most dangerous influence on the art community was the Communist Party. The WPA artists were on sounder financial footing than many of them had ever experienced, and were starting to believe that the government had a duty to support their endeavors. The Communists, who had gained influence in the Artists’ Union, were quick to point out the close relationships between Communist governments and artists. This influence added to the controversy surrounding the projects on the federal level, and prompted the investigation of many of the artists for suspected subversive activities.

The Relief Bill of 1939-40 reduced projects to a minimum and transferred authority to the states. The FAP officially was changed to the WPA Arts Program, and artists who had been involved for more than 18 months were supposed to be dismissed. Young men applying for relief were encouraged to join the army. The Program was officially disbanded in 1943 though many of its artists were kept on to create public service posters and war propaganda. After the WPA and the Project were disbanded, much of the work created by these artists was lost or sold off by the pound to scrap dealers and members of the public.

The FAP’s impact on art was much more far-reaching than the originators could have expected. Participants on the projects, who made up less than half of the FAP’s workers, turned out “2566 murals, 17,744 pieces of sculpture, and 108,099 canvases.”

On a technological front, acrylic paint was developed under the FAP, and advances in

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23 ibid.
24 Weisberger.
printmaking, including silkscreening, carborundum etching, and lithography spurred the general public's interest in art reproductions and original prints.

THE MURAL DIVISION AND ABSTRACTION

The WPA arts programs were caught in the middle: the left felt they were not doing enough to ennoble the arts; the right that there was too much being done. As Burgoyne Diller put it, "If it wasn't somebody from the extreme left, it was somebody from the extreme right, or if it wasn't them, it was a neurotic old maid, or something else, you know, setting up a storm about something -- well, just, say, obscenity of artists in general. You'd be surprised at the idea, you know, artists being let loose in a school where children were attending school." The mural projects were most often held up as examples, as they were in the public eye more prominently than the easel paintings. The murals were visually realistic and contained images of mainstream America, though some abstractions did exist. The abstractions were harder to place: every mural had to have a sponsor, and realistic works were more acceptable. Most public officials were requesting realistic works to suit their taste: "I want little boys in Dutch shoes on the walls of my hospital. I'm superintendent of this hospital—I'm going to be superintendent of this hospital for a long time, and if I want little boys in Dutch shoes on my walls, I'm going to get 'em. See?"26

Lee Krasner, an abstract artist associated with the Mural Division, remarked on the difficulties involved in getting a mural placed. "An organization as large as this one

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was, with its complex administration, would get wound up in its own red tape [sic]. […]
Unfortunately, art doesn’t work well when subjected to democratic processes.
Predictably, the abstract artists were not much in demand.27 Her mural for [the radio
station] WNYC went homeless, while more traditional works were accepted and hung.

“There were lots of us working on abstract murals, but the whole thing was sort of
mythical. We’d do murals and nothing ever came of them. They were never put in place,”
recalls painter George McNeil.28 Sande Pollock McCoy added, “If and when an artist is
given a chance at a wall he is bound by a stinking Art Commission headed by the
superpatriot, Jonas Lie. So as a result what few murals are being done are merely wall
decorations of the lowest order.”29 Given the negative reaction of the public, Arshile
Gorky’s award of the mural at the Newark Airport was a coup for the abstractionists, but
one that took considerable political maneuvering.

Gorky’s career had been fairly well established by the time he began work on a
mural for Floyd Bennett Field in 1935. His reputation was strong enough that he was
placed on the FAP on the day of its inception as a Master Artist, at a wage of $115 a
month. Within a few weeks, he was involved in the design for a mural at the new Floyd
Bennett Airfield. The mural was a collaboration involving themes from the photographs
of Wyatt Davis and the painting of Gorky, and would include aviatorary themes, including
propellers, lamps, and related mechanicals (figure 3, page 29). It was Burgoyne Diller’s
idea to pair the two on the project:

it seemed like an airport was a very contemporary activity and a place that could
stand a good contemporary painter’s work you know. But even then I did temper

27 Pepe Karmel, ed., Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews (New York: The Museum of
Modern Art., 1999), 27.
28 Naifeh, 275.
29 ibid.
in that case by having Wyatt David, Stuart Davis's brother, photograph planes and parts and so on, and then having them blown up and then Gorky coordinating them into a design. It certainly had a good deal of formal value, but at the same time it had enough of the objects and particularly, you know, recognizable, discussable by people concerned with aviation and so on. There wasn't too much of a debate on it before we presented it to the Mayor for his approval. Floyd Bennett Airport was his baby.30

Various art commissions had to give approval to the murals proposed, a daunting task in an environment still fairly hostile to abstraction. Another contender for the mural had submitted a realistic sketch, and the two were submitted to Alfred Barr, head of the Museum of Modern Art, for his opinion on the matter. When he was told where the mural would be located, he decided Gorky's would be preferable "from almost any point of view except a purely conventional or academic."31

On December 27, 1935, Gorky attended a function at the Federal Art Gallery, meeting with several notables from both the WPA and the city of New York. From this meeting came an exchange with Mayor La Guardia, one that would be embellished over time in local legend (figure 4, page 29). This exchange and the mayor's remarks to the press would also eventually lead to the mural being awarded to the other contender by a nervous administration. The mayor reacted negatively to another abstract piece, and Gorky was promptly ushered over to the mayor to speak about his preparatory drawing for Floyd Bennett Field. He spoke in defense of abstraction to the interested La Guardia, who remarked "I'm a conservative in my art, as I am a progressive in my politics. That's why I perhaps cannot understand it."32

31 Spender, 146.
32 Spender, 148.
Gorky was dropped from the project by the Department of Docks, but Diller and
his division worked on placing him on another high profile project, a mural at the Newark
Airport, in 1936. This mural was awarded based on themes he had explored while
preparing the piece for Floyd Bennett Field, but without using photographs for
inspiration. The exchange with La Guardia also added to his reputation with the other
artists on the FAP, as with the Newark mural he had executed the largest abstract mural
to be successfully placed. In addition, he had participated in two exhibitions the previous
year, faced down Mayor La Guardia, and Holger Cahill had been one of his pupils, giving
him a connection within the bureaucracy of the FAP to which few could aspire. 33

Even Gorky, nonetheless, was not spared the scrutiny of officials looking for
leftist references in the work of FAP artists, though he was careful not to bring his
political beliefs into the open. His Newark mural, for example, was accused of having a
Communist symbol—a red star—painted into it. When asked, he stated the star was the
red star of Texaco. Another, more subtle reference remained unnoticed: he had
surreptitiously painted the clenched fist and paintbrushes of the Artists’ Union into the
work. Gorky defended the work in his essay “My Murals for The Newark Airport: An
Interpretation:”

The first three panels of "Modern Aviation" contain the anatomical parts of
autogyros in the process of soaring into space, and yet with the immobility of
suspension. The fourth panel is a modern airplane simplified to its essential shape
and so spaced as to give a sense of flight.

In the other three panels, I have used arbitrary colors and shapes; the wing is
black, the rudder yellow, so as to convey the sense that these modern gigantic
implements of man are decorated with the same fanciful yet utilitarian sense of
play that children use in coloring their kites. In the same spirit the engine becomes

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33 Spender, 151.
in one place like the wings of a dragon, and in another, the wheels, propeller, and motor take on the demonic speed of a meteor cleaving the atmosphere.\textsuperscript{34}

Gorky's experience with the FAP was different from many of the other artists' in that he purposefully avoided making personal connections with his assistants and with some of the other painters. The arts community in general, however, was connecting in a very social way, establishing friendships and working off of each other. Various organizations were also a factor in building a group of isolated artists into a society.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS

"Through the painting done on this project there has begun the development of a tradition which, together with the rest of American art, should lead to a school of painting that in the near future is likely to be the most vital and energetic in the world."\textsuperscript{35} Donald J. Bear, a painter and administrator with the WPA wrote those words in 1939, in defense of the WPA and its art programs. Participation in the program helped diminish rivalries and create a bond of mutual interest. Though easel painting was a solitary endeavor, the artists would come into contact with each other regularly, first while in the WPA offices and the coffee shops they all frequented, later by choice. This bond of interdependence led to an exchange of ideas and experience that would prove invaluable to the many artists who would later be known as the New York School or the Abstract Expressionists.

Another influence, both positive and negative, on the artists in New York may have been the influx of Europeans in the mid 1930s. The rise of Fascism in Germany, and later the surrender of France prompted artists to seek refuge in the United


\textsuperscript{35} Francis V. O'Connor, ed. \textit{Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Arts Project} (Boston: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1975),136.
Figure 3: Left: Arshile Gorky, preparatory study. Right: Wyatt Davis photograph

Figure 4: Mayor LaGuardia and Arshile Gorky in front of a preparatory sketch for Floyd Bennett Field, December 27, 1935
Figure 5: Gorky working on a section of the airport murals, 1936
States. Though the Europeans tended to form expatriate communities while in New 
York, many of them held positions teaching art and had exhibitions of their work at 
various galleries and museums throughout the city. The presence of the more successful 
European artists also had a negative effect on the struggling Americans.

For the first time, a movement was occurring in America that could be considered 
comparable to the ones in Europe. Instead of small isolated groups, a community that 
involved thousands of artists was forming in the bars and coffee houses, one that was, in 
the words of Charles Pollock, “a fraternity of painters.”\textsuperscript{36} The American realist pictures 
of the 1930s had not been able to rival the avant-garde in Europe, and they found it 
increasingly difficult to make excuses for the Social Realists, because what was good for 
political causes was not necessarily good for painting. Drinking became the community’s 
new ritual, one that would be the downfall of more than one of the artists in the core 
group. It was a fraternity based on “machismo and beer,” as sculptor Ibram Lassaw 
describes it, “the project changed many things, but most of all it changed the image of the 
artist. It put an end to the idea that being an artist was somehow unmasculine.”\textsuperscript{37}

Under the surface, the seeming utopia of the arts community in New York was 
seething with bitter rivalries and petty jealousies. The better a painter was, the more 
enemies he would have. There was a lot of competition for the best jobs at some levels, 
and political, philosophical, and artistic rivalries were driving them further apart. Despite 
the negatives, however, most of those involved with the projects looked on it as a positive 
experience. Robert Motherwell spoke of many of the factors that led to the Abstract 
Expressionist movement:

\textsuperscript{36} Naifeh, 276.
\textsuperscript{37} ibid.
(they were) browbeaten, low, depressed, on the WPA. And I think that as much as anything was the catalyst that led to abstract expressionism... the American scene was... hostile to us because if, as we thought to make an authentic gesture without any a priori idea of how it would turn out with the real gambit, then everything, "hard-edge" abstraction with its ideology, social realism with its ideology, regionalism with its ideology, landscape painting with its sentimentality, portrait painting with its class background, anything you imagine, was equally threatened by our premise. So that if the Europeans didn't know we existed, and the collectors who collected Europeans didn't know we existed, all other American artists hated us as one man as probably the only coalition there's ever been from left to right among American artists was against abstract expressionists.38

At the beginning of their FAP experience, many of the artists who would later be known for their abstract works were working in a more realistic manner. Their mature styles would evolve slowly throughout the WPA and into the war years. Perhaps the most dramatic changes can be noted in the work of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko.

JACKSON POLLOCK, 1934-1938

Jackson Pollock’s artistic evolution exemplifies the changes in American art that can be at least partially attributed to participation in the Federal Arts Project. Pollock studied with Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Students League in New York, and would be closely associated with the Regionalist painter until Benton left for the Midwest in 1935, though there was a bond between the two that would be apparent for the rest of Pollock’s life. Pollock would copy and work from Benton’s drawings and paintings as a student and picked up aspects of the artist’s personality as well during their years together. This machismo would later become part of the Pollock (and Abstract Expressionist) legend: the hard drinking, brawling, misogynistic “man’s man.”

The two paintings, Benton’s *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley* and Pollock’s *Going West* (figures 6, 7, page 38) illustrate the stylistic influence

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38 Cummings interview.
Benton had on Pollock’s early work. The Regionalist painter used themes of everyday rural life, one that his pupil would soon abandon. More importantly, when comparing the student and the pupil is the obvious influence Benton had on Pollock’s mature work, most noticeably the curved lines, soft shapes, and skewed perspective. It is rumoured, though Benton denied it in later life, that the harmonica player in the bottom center of *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover*... is a portrait of Pollock.

Pollock frequently experimented with styles and media, working with lithography, ceramics, sculpture, and painting in various styles. He and Sande had spent the summer of 1936 working with the Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, and he briefly adopted the styles of both Siqueiros and Orozco. He also was exposed to Oceanic and Native American art at the Museum of Natural History, Gorky’s lectures on Picasso, and the influx of Surrealist artists in New York City. The European artists and the American ones did not frequent the same social circles, but their presence, and their artwork, was constant in the city through the war years.

When contrasted with the 1934 work, *Going West, Flame* (figure 8, page 39) shows a number of these influences, and though the curving lines and perspective of Benton’s work are still present, it is a clear move toward abstraction. With its disturbing colors, jagged shapes, and frenzied composition, it is also an indicator of the ever-worsening alcoholism, suicidal tendencies, and his impending nervous breakdown in 1938. Though it is still recognizably subjective, *Flame* is clearly a move towards the pure abstraction he would become best known for.

*Bird* (figure 9, page 39), painted between 1938 and 1941, is a radical departure from both *Going West* and *Flame* stylistically and subjectively. It is clearly influenced by
a number of sources, including Native American artwork and the Jungian analysis he was undergoing. It is also one of the first examples we see of the incorporation of sand and other materials into his painting, something he would become very well known for in subsequent works. It was during this time that Pollock's life descended into turmoil; he was dismissed from the FAP in June 1938 due to his erratic production and absences. He was suffering from stress related to his work, his family, and his alcoholism, and he would be hospitalized for four months later that summer.

Two examples of Pollock's late works can be found in figures 10 and 11 (page 40). *Lavender Mist, Number I* is one of his most recognized works, in the "drip" or "spatter" style for which he is best known: it is pure abstraction, signifying nothing. A return to more figurative works near the end of his life is exemplified by *Easter and the Totem*, executed just three years before his death in 1956. The genesis of his late style is visible in his early works, but they lack the impact and confidence found in his more mature paintings. By the late 1940s he was no longer searching for his style; he had found it and was exploring it thoroughly.
Figure 6: Thomas Hart Benton, *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley*, 1934

Figure 7: Jackson Pollock, *Going West*, 1934
Figure 8: Jackson Pollock, *Flame*, 1934-38

Figure 9: Jackson Pollock, *Bird*, 1938-1941
Figure 10: Jackson Pollock, *Lavender Mist, Number 1*, 1950

Figure 11: Jackson Pollock, *Easter and the Totem*, 1953
MARK ROTHKO, 1934-1940

A good example of Rothko’s work can be found in the untitled watercolor on page 43. The undated work, probably from 1933, was painted while visiting family in Portland, Oregon, and camping in the hills above the city. A nephew recalled having a closet full of these early landscapes, though by the time Rothko had developed his mature style, he was completely urban. This early watercolor shows signs of his later work, however, in the broken bands of color throughout, as well as in the use of suggestive shapes instead of hard forms.

*Street Scene* (figure 13, page 43), painted while Rothko was working for the WPA, is a rare social commentary about the Depression and the displaced families he saw on a regular basis. The family is drawn together, huddled closely, while the entire painting is done in a muted palette of greys and browns. This departure from his usual color-saturated style in his cityscapes of the 1930s only emphasizes the subject matter. The cold exterior of the building and its brown tones contrast with the family, who almost blend into the stairs and sidewalk. This painting may also have an empathetic relationship with his family’s experience in immigrating from Dvinsk to America in 1913.

By 1940, Rothko was using his sketchbook to form free associations with objects and people in his surroundings. He struggled with figurative drawing, a tradition he was reluctant to break with. He remarked on this dilemma, “I belong to a generation that was preoccupied with the human figure and I studied it. It was with utmost reluctance that I found it did not meet my needs. Whoever used it mutilated it.”

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39 Breslin, 87.
40 Breslin, 171.
14, page 44) exemplifies this struggle; the melded figures are struggling, contorted, and looking in different directions. It may be the personification of the artist himself— the primitive figure, divided into its masculine and feminine aspects. He has not yet abandoned the figure as he would in his late works, but it is at odds with the background of the painting, a background that pushes itself forward on the picture plane. The background is fighting to become the painting, a process that he slowly adopts in his later works.

Rothko’s painting *Rites of Lilith*, 1945 (figure 15, page 44), details his postwar struggle with figure and background and is one of the last mythically themed paintings he created before moving into the realm of pure abstraction in the last half of the decade. By 1949’s *Untitled* (figure 16, page 45), his best-known color field paintings had developed into a style he would continue to refine for the rest of his life.

The trials and triumphs of the Abstract Expressionist painters and their experiences on government assistance allowed them to paint freely, although not without compromise personally. The connections they made through the WPA were not their sole source of socialization with other artists, however. The many artist unions and coalitions, as well as common politics and later common persecution would draw a diverse group of artists together, no matter their personal differences. The late 1930s saw a bitter war in Congress against abstraction and against government supported arts programs, a war that their livelihoods would not survive. This struggle, the government condemnation, investigations, and the persistence of the artists in the face of widespread disapproval would shape the generation as much or more than their freedom to experiment artistically.
Figure 12: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1930s.

Figure 13: Mark Rothko, *Street Scene*, 1936
Figure 14: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1940

Figure 15: Mark Rothko, *Rites of Lilith*, 1945
Figure 16: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1949
CHAPTER III
POLITICAL CONCERNS

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE ARTISTS’ ORGANIZATIONS

The 1930s saw the formation of a number of artists’ associations, but the United States government was largely concerned by the implications of the Artists’ Union and the American Artists’ Congress. Both associations had political leanings and ties to leftist organizations, chiefly to the Socialists and the Communist Party. Through these groups and others like them, artists made contacts beyond the WPA and debated their work and their positions in the art world. Unfortunately, also through their activities with these groups, they drew the eye of the government. Many of them were investigated and even accused of espionage, like Lee Krasner in 1957, or of collusion with agents of the USSR, as was Ad Reinhardt.¹

The willingness of artists to embrace alternative ideologies was largely rooted in the Depression. Capitalism was a failure, and socialism seemed a more viable system. By the end of the 1930s, however, communism had split; the more liberal Leon Trotsky appealed to many artists because of his belief that art should remain independent, unlike Stalin’s USSR which used art as a propaganda tool, restricting style and subject matter to fit the Communist agenda. Stalin’s stance on modernism lost Communism a number of artists, but Trotsky’s open belief that a more radical artist was more likely to embrace the new government’s ideals attracted many.

¹ David Craven, Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 98.
New York artists formed the Unemployed Artists Group, later the Artists’ Union, in 1933 because they realized that unlike theater and musicians’ groups, they had no representative organization to protect their rights or to pressure the government into providing aid or relief. One of the goals of the Union was to create a Federal Bureau of Fine Arts “as the agency for perpetuating and carrying on permanent government support for the arts in America.”

Its over 900 members believed that government support was necessary, not only for the artists but as a stimulant for the growth of American culture. Most of the fine arts of the time were imported from Europe, and the Armory Show of 1913 had accentuated the great gap between the art being created in Europe and that made in America, one that was only reinforced by the isolationist art that was popular at the time. It was not only painting and sculpture that was lacking, in their eyes. Much of the theatre, music, and literature consumed by the public were also imported, and artists in all fields were feeling the lack of a solid American arts culture.

By November 1934, the Artists’ Union was publishing the magazine *Art Front*, a vehicle concerning the state of the arts in America. Stuart Davis, the head of the Artists’ Union, often included political commentary. The first issue, for example, called for mass demonstrations for jobs and immediate relief for all artists, and demanded a government project that would “differ from the PWAP in that there would be no discrimination against artists’ styles and complete freedom in the conception and execution of the work.” Aesthetically, however, *Art Front* and the Union maintained liberal stylistic diversity. Indeed, politically they were not simply confined to calls for governmental

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2 O’Connor, 38.
3 Ashton, 62.
support of art, but also for domestic movements on behalf of racial equality, opposition to U.S. imperialism abroad, and the embrace of classical liberal civil liberties at home.

The Union, originally meant to be a vehicle for communication and networking, eventually took on a decidedly radical leftist stance. Within a year, it had drawn members from all over the artistic and political spectrums, and Union meetings became notorious for their infighting and heated discussions. Ad Reinhardt likened them to the guilds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and in 1954 lamented the failure of their original intentions: “These efforts to establish a community of modern artists were exciting and free in their early and spontaneous stages, then exploited, institutionalized, and made into businesses and careers later.”

The Communist Party had been active in unions in America throughout the 1920s; they had worked their way into the textile workers, ladies’ and men’s garment workers, miners, steel workers, and maritime workers unions. Where members were upset with corrupt leadership, the Communist Party stepped in and led the unions in different directions. Their positive tactics heartened disappointed workers, but the need to follow Communist Party line provided little leeway to the workers and their chosen representatives. Strikes in 1925 and 1926 for concessions that had already been granted led to further disaster on behalf of the Party and their goals. The strike of the New York members of the International Ladies’ and Garment workers of 1926, for example, had no real basis but the Communist slogan “no class collaboration.” Party members held a voting majority on the union’s board, which had made the decision to strike.

THE ARTISTS’ UNION AND THE ARTISTS’ CONGRESS

Members of the Artists’ Union with leftist sympathies did not respond to the Communist Party’s authoritarian methods in the same way the trade unions did. Artists attached themselves to the Union and wrote political pieces because they felt art and politics were intertwined. Modernists, however, chafed under the attempted control by the Communists, who tried to persuade them to work with techniques and subject matter that would further the Party’s goals. The themes of Marxist class analysis the Communists were advocating were in direct contrast with the abstract turn the modernists were beginning to take, and seemed a return to the Social Realism many of them were rebelling against. The Abstract Expressionists desired to be free from the labels and interpretations that followed art and the push to remain in line with Party policy caused more disillusionment with the Union and with the Communist Party.

Lee Krasner, a lifelong Trotskyist, recalled this period in a 1976 interview with Bruce Glaser:

Many of us took part in demonstrations and sit-down strikes. In fact, I was arrested many times myself. But as far as I can see, this had no connection with my painting. My experience with Leftist movements in the late 1930s made me move as far away from them as possible because they were emphasizing the most banal, provincial art. They weren’t interested in an independent and experimental art, but rather linked it to their economic and political programs. Eventually the Communist Party moved into the Artists’ Union, which had been formed to protect the rights of the artists on the WPA, and started to take over. Then I decided it was time to leave. The trouble was that the union didn’t meet to discuss any problems in painting, though occasionally they would put on some sort of exhibition. Their primary emphasis under the domination of the Communist Party was a quest for political power and influence.⁶

The rise of the Nazi party in Germany and its propaganda against communism led

⁶ Karmel, 27.
the Party to adopt a friendlier stance, dismissing their former revolutionary slogans and promoting communism as "Twentieth Century Americanism" instead. Although this so-called United Front had a more lenient cultural policy, it still expected artists to follow Soviet foreign policy. After the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939, the Abstract Expressionists who had remained affiliated with the Artists' Union broke ties and rejected most of the ideals the Communists claimed to represent.

The Communist influence in the world of art was hampered by modernist painting, as the artists most likely to embrace radical ideologies were also the ones most likely to work more experimentally than adopt the realism supported by Stalin's USSR. Many of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists did embrace radical political stances: Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, and Gottlieb were anarchists and Pollock and Reinhardt remained sympathetic to the USSR. Some of the artists’ sympathies were based on their experiences and contacts made within the artists associations and the FAP, while others, like Jackson Pollock's, dated from before they joined the Project or the Union.

Within a year of the formation of the Artists' Union, the artists had broken into myriad factions, divided along stylistic and political lines. Whatever solidarity had previously existed was shattered in numerous quarrels and heated exchanges. The prospect of the First Artists' Congress Against War and Fascism superficially drew the ranks together once more, though the difficulties of organizing the event served to heighten the tension between groups. The Artists' Congress was intended to bring artists throughout the United States together to discuss their place in the crisis of the Depression and to attempt to find a remedy in national artistic solidarity, to increase public aid to
artists, to protest censorship and other attacks on civil liberties, and to make a public
denouncement of Fascism in Italy and Germany.

The First Artists’ Congress, held over three days in February 1936, hosted over
360 American artists, a delegation of 12 from Mexico that included Siqueiros and
Orozco, and a number of students.\(^7\) The meetings resulted in the formation of a
permanent organization “to achieve unity of action on the artists of recognized standing
in their profession on all issues which concern their economic and social security and
freedom, and to fight War, Fascism, and Reaction, destroyers of art and culture.”\(^8\) The
American Artists’ Congress had its main offices in New York and branches in major
cities throughout the US, ensuring that artists nationwide would have adequate
representation.

The Congress adopted the motto “For Peace, Democracy, and Social Progress,”
and their touring exhibitions of work by members espoused similar themes. The
Communist Party gained a stronger hold on the American Artists’ Congress than was
possible in the Artists’ Union, as it was formed as an organization with an overtly
political agenda. The actions and political stance of the Congress are outlined in this
statement by Lincoln Rothschild, the organization’s Treasurer:

With a considered belief in the fundamental interrelations of broad political and
economic problems with the welfare of professional artists, the Congress has
studied all vital public issues, taking action, for example, in support of the
Spanish and Chinese people in their fight against aggression, in support of exiled
art and artists, in favor of truly protective neutrality legislation, of free speech and
democratic rights for labor, as well as protection of individual artists from
bureaucratic suppression of their works.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Ashton, 64.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) O’Connor, 252.
Though the Congress was originally intended to be non-partisan, the Communist Party again started pressuring artists to work in selected styles and themes, and used the meetings to further the party agenda. Like the Artists’ Union, the American Artists’ Congress started losing members due to the pressures placed on artists. Lee Krasner stated that “To me, and to the painters I was associated with, the more important thing was French painting and not the social realism and the picture of the Depression that they were interested in, even if it was going on right under our noses. Painting is not to be confused with illustration.”

Several events led the Abstract Expressionists away from the Congress. The invasion of Finland by the Soviets in December 1939 caused a group of dissident painters to leave the association. The Congress praised a fascist sponsored art show in Venice and a conference attended by Soviet and Nazi art officials, which contradicted the organization’s stated goals. Meyer Schapiro and some of his supporters petitioned the communist dominated board for an open meeting to discuss the Communist Party’s control of the organization, but they were ignored. Instead, in April 1940 the board “presented a report justifying the Soviet pact with Germany, the invasion of Finland, and the refusal to aid the refugees.” In the same report they also pleaded for American neutrality. Schapiro and his friends called for artists to resign from the Congress en masse. Many of the artists left to join other organizations like the American Abstract Artists, which included several displaced European painters among its ranks, while others formed their own associations, like Gottlieb and Rothko’s Federation of Modern Painters.

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10 Karmel, 27.
Though many of the artists remained loyal to leftist causes, the Communist Party failed to create a unified front in the arts in America due to their regimented agenda. Their attempts at unifying artists and the flirtation many of those artists had with the groups, however, attracted the negative attention of the United States Congress. Federal support of the arts had always been a contentious issue among the more conservative factions, and the overtly leftist leanings of many of the participants of the WPA programs fueled Congressional debate and led to the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1937.

THE HOUSE UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES COMMITTEE

The relationship between the United States government and modern art has always been contentious. The FAP and other art subsidies were some of the most hotly contested topics in both the government and the public forum, and by 1936 the increasing hostilities in Congress toward the various art programs threatened the New Deal as a whole. President Roosevelt retreated from his outspoken support for the programs to save the New Deal, paving the way for numerous investigations into the practicality of the FAP and the politics of the artists' communities.¹²

Pressure from the right and the uncertain future of government sponsored arts programs created the only lasting unity among the cultural community, largely as a means of self-defense. Much of the initial hostility was focused on New York, a city denounced angrily by many, especially in the South and the Midwest, as a hotbed of radical politics and foreign influence. The conservative members of the government and

¹² Ashton, 49.
the press exploited these perceptions and the general public’s fear of Marxism, and any hints of subversion in government projects, like the WPA, provided irresistible targets for public debate.

By 1937, frustration was mounting in the public sphere over President Roosevelt’s careful “manipulation” of the media with his carefully timed Fireside Chats and news releases, charges of graft in the WPA, and the apparent failure of the New Deal in combating the Depression. These concerns, coupled with growing apprehension over the actions of the Soviet State, created an ideal atmosphere for critics of the New Deal. Rep. Martin Dies of Texas seized the opportunity to push through an agenda aimed at dissolving the WPA projects and investigating the “subversive” activities that had permeated the New Deal. The Dies Committee, also known as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was formed in May 1938. The WPA and the New Deal were its first targets, as Dies had stated publicly his belief that the New Deal was the product of the Russian infiltration of the US government.

Since modern art had been a target of public suspicion in America since the Armory Show, it remained a focal point for both public and governmental ire in the fight against leftist politics. Though the following statement was made in 1959 by representatives of the HUAC, it reflects the common position of the Committee during the 1930s and 1940s as well: "modern art is communistic because it is distorted and ugly, because it does not glorify our beautiful country... art which does not glorify our beautiful country in plain, simple terms that everyone can understand breeds dissatisfaction. It is therefore opposed to our government, and those who create [it] and promote it are our
Though part of this attitude was rooted in international politics, another contributing factor involved the foreign roots of modernism; the isolationist art of the Social Realists and the Regionalists was accepted as American, while the abstractions of modern art were perceived as an international conspiracy of sorts, and against all of the American values espoused in the popular art of the time.

It was common belief that abstract art, though no longer official art in the USSR, was being used intentionally by Russian sympathizers to undermine Western art and society, a misconception directly in opposition to the Communist Party’s attempts to dictate art in America. One Congressman stated his belief that the United States had been “invaded by a horde of art manglers, who were…selling our young men and women a subversive doctrine of -isms, Communist inspired and Communist connected.” Perhaps the most telling statement comes from Robert Motherwell's FBI dossier: "art texts today failed to record the abstract art movement as an international communist cultural weapons... from 1917 to 1931 it was official art in Russia. In 1931, [deleted] expelled abstraction from the borders of Russia and uses it now intentionally to undermine the art of the Western tradition."

The influence of the media and the dramatic changes occurring in the House and Congress in 1938 allowed the Dies Committee more influence than Roosevelt, who publicly denounced the committee and their actions, was able to handle effectively. Were it not for the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and the need for an experienced national leadership, the actions of the combined forces would have undoubtedly rosted him from

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13 Craven, 98.
14 Cox, 30.
15 Craven, 98.
office. This may have been part of the Committee’s plan; in December 1938 Martin Dies’
public approval rating was at 74%, 19 points higher than President Roosevelt’s.16

The majority of the media of the day showed a definitive anticommunist bias, and
the Nazi-Soviet pact and the outbreak of war in 1939 spurred the media into further
support of the HUAC. Their methods were rarely questioned, and when criticism was
levied, it was often tempered with support of the Committee’s goals. Walter Lippman, for
example, condemned the Dies Committee as “a violation of American morality; it is a
pillory in which reputations are ruined, often without proof, and always without the legal
safeguards that protect the ordinary criminal; it is a tribunal before which men are
arraigned and charged with acts that are, as a matter of fact, lawful.”17 But even his harsh
criticism of the HUAC’s actions was moderated by the belief that the methods should be
reformed rather than abolished. It was “a center of resistance to evils which could not
otherwise be brought to light and checked.”18

HUAC called for the investigation and testimony of numerous citizens, and the
newspapers and other media would report the names and occupations of those accused,
often offering no chance for rebuttal. When asked about these methods by the President,
Dies informed him that the tactic would compel citizens to sever their ties with leftist
organizations to avoid public alienation. People whose names were mentioned during the
Committee’s meetings were labeled as having “alleged Communistic associations” and
accused of radical activities. The majority were union leaders, liberal politicians
(including Senators and Congressmen), and New Deal bureaucrats. Frances Perkins,

16 Kenneth Heineman, “Media Bias in Coverage of the Dies Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-
17 Heineman.
18 Ibid.
Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor, was not exempt from the accusations; she was a woman in a powerful position, she did not relate well to the media, and she was eventually the most despised member of Roosevelt’s cabinet. This left her open to the accusations of the Dies Committee, who stated that she had surrounded herself with Communist allies, had protected “red aliens,” and eventually charged her with criminal misconduct and called for her impeachment. The committee also criticized Eleanor Roosevelt, but their attempts did little damage to her reputation or public standing.

Dies’ popularity led to the disastrous (for the New Deal) midterm elections of 1938, where 153 congressmen moved from a neutral to a pro-committee stance on HUAC, and moved to dismiss Roosevelt’s instructions to terminate the committee. Support for the New Deal waned, and the work of HUAC led to the Relief Bill of 1939-1940, which cut the projects to a minimum, transferred control to the states, and abolished the Theater Project entirely. A subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations had denounced the whole arts undertaking as wasteful and unproductive, and when the vote was called, the programs lost funding and governmental support by a vote of 321 to 23. The FAP was transferred to the War Department, and the artists who were able to stay on the project were put to work on posters, models, and camouflage kits until the programs were finally terminated in 1943. The work of HUAC made artists wary of working with the government on future occasions; though artists still with the Project were kept on to create patriotic posters during the war years to boost morale, the same Congressmen opposed the notion, fearing hidden leftist messages in the work.

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19 Ibid.
20 Levy, 83.
At the core of the investigations and the eventual elimination of the programs was the carefully instilled paranoia about communist infiltration of the government and of government sponsored associations. Work that was considered indecent, offensive, or politically biased was a target, but the notion of government involvement in the arts was also paramount and crossed party lines. The idea of government sponsored artists, no matter the subject, has haunted American politics throughout its history, and the concept behind the words of several elected representatives, though alien in their specific content, still ring as loudly today as in 1939 when the notion was contested hotly:

If you want this kind of salacious tripe, very well vote for it. But if anybody has an interest in real cultural values, you will not find it in this kind of junk.
-Republican Representative Everett Dirksen, Illinois

Through such material the cardinal keystone of communism - free love and racial equality - is being spread at the expense of the God-fearing, home-loving American taxpayer who must pay the bill for all this dangerous business.
-Democratic Senator Robert Reynolds, North Carolina

Let them go on and preach their doctrines, let them sing their hymns of hate against America, but let them find support from a place other than the public payroll.
-Democratic Representative Francis Walter, Pennsylvania

Condemnation of the arts and of the government programs was never fully supported, however, as many of the believers in the arts and their benefits were vocal in the continued support of the WPA and its art programs. Art outreach programs and travelling exhibitions were often the sole exposure many Americans had to the fine arts. Paintings completed by artists participating in the FAP were in public places, making them more interesting and providing more valuable exposure to the "cultured" aspects of

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21 Ron Hutcheson, “WPA art exhibit shows that debate over public funding is not new.” Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service (August 8, 1997) p808K7092.
22 “Comparisons of WPA and NEA sentiments.” Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service (August 8, 1997) p808K7093
American living. Where many were concerned solely with the possible content of such pieces, others were vocal in their support for the exposure to the arts that the general public received throughout the programs' numerous activities.

The investigations by the Dies Committee into artists on the FAP affected them in various ways. Many of the artists, including Krasner, Motherwell, and Reinhardt were observed by the FBI throughout their lives due to their participation in the various organizations surrounding the WPA. Many of the artists were either communist or had leftist leanings, however, many of which dated back to before their participation in the WPA.

ARTISTS AND THE HUAC

Jackson Pollock’s radicalism dated back to high school in Los Angeles, where he attended Communist meetings and was labeled a “rotten rebel from Russia” by many of his teachers.23 When he moved to New York in 1930, he continued to associate with radicals, including his brothers, and joined various artists’ associations. During the 1930s, he associated with Mexican radical artists, spending the summer of 1936 working with Siqueiros and picking up themes from his work, while also embracing some of the Surrealist concepts from France. When the FAP came under scrutiny by the Dies Committee, Sande wrote to their brother Charles, “We have been investigated on the project. Don’t know yet what the result of it will be...They are mighty clever at keeping the employees in a constant state of jitters.”24

23 Karmel, 86.
Mighty Trapper ... But He Misses the Big Ones

Figure 17: Political cartoon criticizing the Dies Committee, 1942
In October 1940, Jackson also wrote to Charles, describing some of the attempts to discredit artists and remove them from the Project:

They are dropping people like flies on the pretense that they are Reds, for having signed a petition about a year ago...we remember signing it, so we are nervously awaiting the axe. They got twenty in my department in one day last week... The irony of it is that the real Party People I know didn’t sign the damn thing and it is suckers like us who are getting it. I could kick myself in the ass for being a damn fool.

[...] “We on the project have been forced to sign an affidavit to the effect that we belonged neither to the Communists or Nazi parties. A wholly illegal procedure. And now I understand the army is snooping around the Project finding out how the artists could fit into the Defense Program.”

The stresses of remaining on the Project under government scrutiny affected Pollock deeply. His already fragile mental state in the summer of 1938 was exacerbated by the personal aspects of the investigations.

Lee Krasner became a leftist through her work on the WPA. In 1935, she and Harold Rosenberg were assigned to work with the mural painter Max Spivak. He preferred to work alone, but kept the two assistants with him so he could converse while he painted, and the three of them spent their afternoons discussing intellectual and political topics. She was a leader in the Artists’ Union, a member of American Abstract Artists, and participated in political rallies and demonstrations, though she claims to have never joined the Communist Party. The FBI files on Krasner that have been released are heavily censored to protect a confidential source, so the grounds the government had to investigate her on suspicion of espionage for the Soviet Union are unavailable.

The FBI files of five major Abstract Expressionists have been declassified: Lee Krasner, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt.

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25 Ibid.
Reinhardt’s files are the third largest on an artist released to date: Picasso’s is 187 pages, Ben Shahn’s 146, and Reinhardt’s 123, 100 of which have been released, albeit heavily censored. In comparison, Motherwell’s is the next largest of the Abstract Expressionists at 45 pages, and Krasner’s the smallest at 2.26

Most of Reinhardt’s dossier is marked SM-C, or Security Matter C, which means that from 1941 to 1966 he was perceived as constituting a major national security threat as a potential collaborator with foreign agents. The government agencies on record as having monitored Reinhardt’s activities include the State Department, foreign embassies of the US, the navy, and a counterintelligence branch of the US Marine Corps. Reinhardt was raised in a Socialist environment, and was one of the few artists of the period to retain a lifelong loyalty to the Communist Party and its principles, politically, even after the Nazi-Soviet pact and World War II when most of the other artists had abandoned Communism for its restrictive stance. His painting, however, was deliberately absent of subject matter, political or otherwise. His art as art dogma marked a retreat from political utopianism in art. He stated “the one thing to say about art and life is that art is art and life is life, the art is not life and that life is not art.”27 In his view, art did not need to be justified by religion or politics; it should stand alone. Yet, Reinhardt’s observation may be due to his membership in more than thirteen organizations that were under government surveillance, including the American Artists’ Congress, the Artists’ League of America, the Civil Rights Congress, the National Council of Arts, Sciences, and Professions, and the American Jewish Labor Council.

26 Craven, 3.
27 Cox, 107.
Reinhardt is unique in that he is the only member of the Abstract Expressionist movement who participated in the FAP who did not begin his career as a subjective painter; the much younger Motherwell is the only other abstract painter of the group to have begun as an abstractionist, but he did not participate in the WPA and began to create art after completing a degree in philosophy. Reinhardt's solely abstract style is more difficult to trace than the painters who moved from traditional styles to abstraction in the course of their WPA participation.

Reinhardt worked for the FAP between 1936 and 1939, and the paintings of the era shift from visually frantic imagery and an almost subjective theme to a more subdued and carefully composed style. His untitled painting from 1937 (figure 18, page 66) is a good example of the work he was doing while painting for the FAP. It is oil on wood, done in muted colors, and has a unified, busy compositional quality that was present in the work of many of the Abstract Expressionist artists at this time. There is no focal point, and though it lacks the elegance and well planned composition of his later work, it is a successful, if early, example of the work the painters of the New York School would become known for.

His Composition 1940 (figure 19, page 66), though still an abstract work, hints at subject matter. The colors and technique are reminiscent of artists working in Germany and France, including Kandinsky and Klee, and the painting is indicative of his further experimentation with style and technique. He may have been influenced by the artists working around him, but it is more likely that he was looking toward Europe and the stylistic evolution of abstraction in the years preceding the war. Reinhardt would eventually formulate his own philosophies of art and abandon all stylistic influences.
His mature work was without title or any suggestion of subject; he is often considered one of the fathers of minimalist art. This deliberate withholding of information allowed the observer a chance to interact with the art on an individual level, for art was art, and nothing else. He eventually abandoned all color in favor of form and presence, and the sonorous black paintings of the 1960s remain his best known. His untitled screenprints from 1966 (figures 20 and 21, page 67) shows the use of rigidly controlled geometric form and deceivingly complex design to create art that stands on its own, as art.
Figure 18: Ad Reinhardt, *Untitled*, 1937

Figure 19: Ad Reinhardt, *Composition 1940*, 1940
Figure 20: Ad Reinhardt, *Untitled*, 1966

Figure 21: Ad Reinhardt, *Untitled*, 1966
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

The combination of political and community forces in the 1930s created a rapid evolution in American art, one that is unrivalled by any other period in its history. Several of the individual factors that contributed to the genesis of a truly unique, driving force in painting have been analyzed by various sources, but they must be seen as a melding of circumstantial events instead of favoring one aspect of their experiences over the whole. Painters such as Pollock, Krasner, de Kooning, Rothko, and Reinhardt, among many of the artists who emerged in the United States during the Depression, created a genre of American painting that, though many of them had roots elsewhere, was more truly American than the often stereotypical work of the popular painters that preceded them. Innovative and defiant, the artists and their work continue to stand in the twenty-first century as significantly and independently as when they were first thrust upon the art world in the middle of the twentieth century.
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Yorktown University Inc., Hampton, Virginia
Director of Instructional Design, Registrar
Director of Instructional Design: Build and maintain courses for 52 faculty members online, copyright and permissions research and requests, troubleshoot faculty problems, maintain records of all posted course materials.
Registrar: Evaluation of applicant transcripts, track course progress and creation and implementation of confidential student database. Communication with state agencies to maintain University qualifications and with federal and independent accrediting agencies.

The President Benjamin Harrison Home, Indianapolis, Indiana
Scout Programs Coordinator (Education)
Selection, creation, and presentation of programs for Girl Scout members, relevant to the history of the Harrison family and the Victorian era in rural America. Each program ran two weeks, with a different program presented monthly. Monthly attendances totaled between 200 and 300 third to sixth grade students. Also aiding Education department in revision and presentation of tours for school groups and review of select grant opportunities for eligibility.
The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia

Development Intern
Updating and revision of Constituent files. Research into development and membership methods of comparably sized institutions, compilation of data and presentation of suggested revisions to membership benefits and levels, fund raising methods, and programs. Public relations and advertising to help meet a large matching grant.

The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia

Education Intern
Organization and presentation of student programs with daily attendances between 250 and 400 fourth grade students. Creation of Modern Art outreach packet at the secondary school level. Creation and implementation of glassmaking presentation, as well as fulfilling docent duties when necessary.

The Valentine: The Museum of the Life and History of Richmond, Virginia.

Registration Intern
Accession of incoming objects, assistance with incoming and outgoing loan agreements, determining location and cataloging items from collection. Conversion of paper files into electronic database (Argus). Inventory, condition, and conservational cleaning of items in the 1815 Wickham House.

Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, Inc., Richmond Virginia.
Accession, condition, and research of permanent collection. Design and utilization of archival storage systems on a severely limited budget. Incoming loan agreements, exhibition preparation and design.

Skills:


Photography: 35mm, 120mm, and 4x5 black and white processing and printing. Color printing of all film media. Studio lighting and design. All digital still image formats.

Languages: Reading knowledge of German, resuming studies for oral and written proficiency.