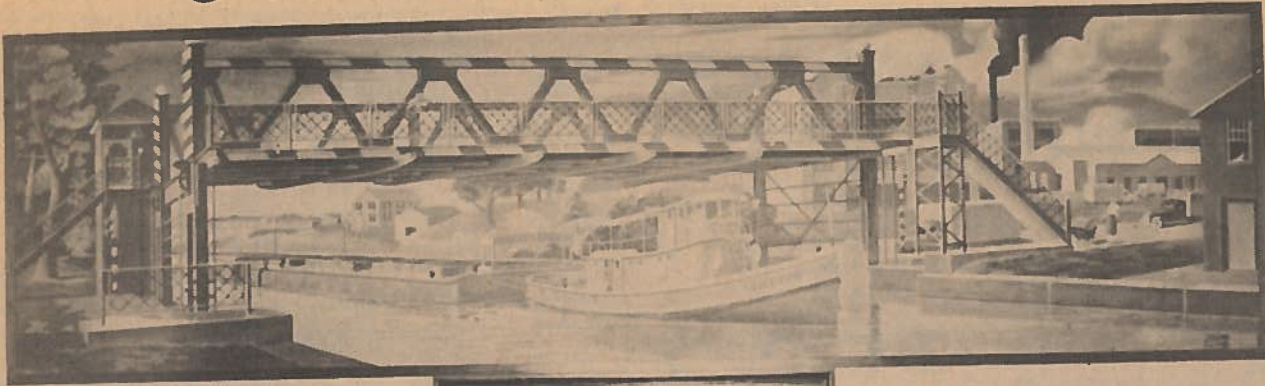


Bethinking of Old Orleans

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OUR WPA MURAL L. Monacelli photo

Perhaps one of the greatest periods of art renaissance in modern times was during the depths of the Great Depression 1932-33 and the ten-year period which followed. From the time of the stock market crash in October 1929 things grew progressively worse until Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal sparked rejuvenation. Through the "New Deal" arts programs were initiated by the Federal Government - the largest and most memorable was through the Works Progressive Administration or WPA. In 1933 there were about 15 million, or over one-fourth of the American labor force unemployed. It is understandable that the unemployment rate for artists was even greater. With the Depression, the market for art works virtually disappeared and young artists in particular were in a hopeless position.

The New Deal sought to solve a wide variety of problems in many fields with an attempt to alleviate the suffering of the unemployed. By the end of October 1933, over two and a half million individuals or one out of five had received relief in New York State alone. To qualify for WPA work an artist first had to prove that he was destitute. Between 1931 and 1943 eight arts projects were funded either by the U.S. Department of Treasury or through government relief programs which were responsible for every piece of public art produced. This of course, put talented artists to work creating what has become one of the greatest legacies of the 1930's and early 1940's. Through this kind of WPA relief assistance, artists earned on the average \$22.00 a week. The government's attempt was not so much to decorate public buildings as it was to give relief to impoverished artists.

Before our attention was diverted to World War II, 5,000 artists created 2,500 murals, 18,000 sculptures, 108,000 easel paintings, 200,000 prints of 11,000 designs and 2,000,000 silk screen posters of 35,000 designs. Naturally it was the urban areas in our nation at the time which received the greatest number and best public art works. This State was fortunate because by 1937 forty-five percent of all artists employed in the United States worked in New York.

We are also fortunate to have a handsome example of WPA art in Orleans County. It is located on the south wall of the U.S. Post Office in Albion and is the only WPA public work in this county. Now, forty-five years old, it is an oil on canvas which was attached to the wall and then enclosed with a simple frame. As illustrated, it depicts what I would call a generic scene along the Barge Canal with lift bridge raised. The tug pulling a barge is named "Fritsid". Obviously the subject of this mural was deemed appropriate for a new U.S. Post Office completed in 1938 for an old canal town. The artist who created the mural signed his name in the lower right hand corner - Judson Smith 1939. This particular mural is over ten feet in length and remains in excellent condition. Many WPA public art works such as this have been destroyed in other areas of our State. I would imagine that many people, if they look at all above the postmaster's office door, never appreciate this mural for its artistic and now historic value.

"Love art for its own sake, and then all things that you will be added to you. This devotion to beauty and to the creation of beautiful things in the test of all great civilizations; it is what makes the life of each citizen a sacrament and not a speculation."—Wilde