

can be nothing but chaos. But perhaps beyond this lies great beauty. Given time to work out its harmony, this may prove the only road to a fulness of life such as we cannot even dream of. Of course it may prove the end of civilization. But if we can see hope in the new attitudes, even while we do not like

them, if we can see the lack of courage and truthfulness and self-respect as the gropings of a new ethic, we shall have gone more than half way to meet the radical view. And they can come half way to meet us by taking this attitude themselves.

Few of them will take this stand as

yet. Instead, they use the clumsy device of considering most of the world their enemy to whom they owe no obligation. If they could really rise above bourgeois prejudices and see that their radicalism was in the field of ethics rather than economics, they could spare themselves the strain of so much hate.

# An Art Renaissance Under Federal Patronage

By George Biddle



## [Editor's Note:

About a year ago—May 9, 1933—George Biddle wrote a letter to President Roosevelt containing the following statement:

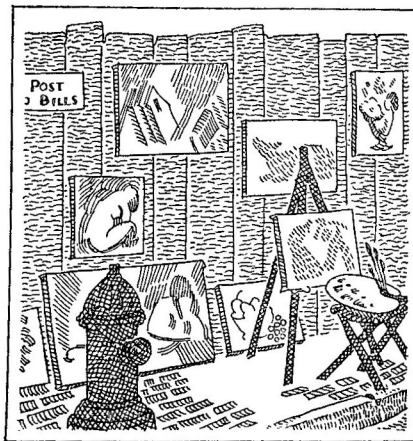
There is a matter which I have long considered and which some day might interest your administration. The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumbers' wages in order to express on the walls of the Government Buildings the social ideals of the Mexican revolution.

The younger artists of America are conscious as they never have been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through and they would be very eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form, if they were given the Government's co-operation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve. And I am convinced that our mural art with a little impetus, can soon result for the first time in our history, in a vital national expression.

## On May 19 the President replied:

I am interested in your suggestion in regard to the expression of modern art through mural paintings. I wish you would have a talk some day with Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Robert, who is in charge of the Public Buildings Work.

From this correspondence developed the Public Works of Art Project which employed 3000 artists. In the project, Mr. Biddle sees the beginning of a revival of art whereby the artist will move from the periphery to the core of national life.]



**T**HOMAS CRAVEN, in a recent article "Art and Propaganda" (SCRIBNER'S for March), demonstrates in a very convincing manner that the painter in the great cultural periods of art has always felt a dominant faith or idealism. In giving expression to this faith he thus has a universal appeal. In the culmination of Gothic art in the thirteenth century the church supplied this central faith, which, canalized by Dante, Giotto and the west portals of Chartres Cathedral, expresses in these complete and perfect symbols the entire culture of the age. Two centuries later city-state or city-tyrant nationalism became a substitute for religious faith, which was weakening under the impact of science and the growth of capitalism.

During the four centuries of economic and social readjustment which followed the Italian Renaissance the artist, no longer expressing a universal be-

lief, moved from the centre of life to its periphery. As an artist he still continued to evaluate, criticize, and recreate life about him. But if he sympathized with the peasant he could not with the king. If he believed in the benefits of science he could not swallow the categorical imperatives of church dogmas. More and more he became an outsider, a rebel, a bohemian, a "fauve." Mural painting declined and was replaced by the easel picture, the growth of the private collection, and the emphasis on individualism in art. In a very real sense the artist became a prostitute in that he was no longer recognized as a functional necessity of society. Like the prostitute he was often well paid and slept in expensive beds, because he was fulfilling an extra-legal necessity.

As Mr. Craven points out, communism offers the artist an ideal or faith, the expression of which will bring him again from the periphery to the core of life; and until the artist returns to the core of life we will never have a vital national art. This does not mean, however, that communism is the ultimate haven for the artist. Human truths and values must always be of general interest. Particular religions or political creeds serve their purpose and die. How can an artist evaluate or criticize freely if he signs up to or takes orders from a party? Suppose that as an artist I hate intolerance, waste, and stupidity. I must hate them universally if my message is to have a universal appeal. If I am merely the propagandist of a political party and not of a general

truth, my message will only appeal to the latitude of the interest in that party; but what is more dangerous is that as a judge of life, having signed a party pledge, my judgment is biased and my sincerity impugned.

The artist cannot expect "to win salvation merely by transferring his allegiance from one social group to another" but I take issue with Mr. Craven in his belief that in America today there is not a "dominant idealism, a spiritual force uniting artists in a common purpose"; and that "in the absence of a Utopian scheme, the artist must adapt himself to realities, put living above painting and do his best in the worst of worlds."

Is there any real conviction today that all Americans share and to which an artist could give universal expression? I think indeed there is such a universal conviction in America, although it has never been abstracted like the positive faith of the middle ages or the material agnosticism of the eighteenth-century encyclopedists. It is a pragmatic conviction that life could be beautiful and is not. And we see this universal conviction reflected from many angles of contemporary thought, through the works of Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, Sandburg and others; through the popular interest in such books as *Middletown*, Stuart Chase's *Men and Machines*, and the criticisms of American civilization by Lewis Mumford, Van Wyck Brooks, and others.

In our painting, too, there is a social self-awareness which is vastly different from the earnest, egotistic individualism of the rebels of fifteen or twenty years ago. The line of cleavage today is between the artists that paint still life—and by that I mean onions, flowers, nudes, models, they are all the same—and the artists who have social ideas to express.

Nothing is more typical of this swing of the pendulum away from art for art's sake, from esthetic self-probings, from "isms," technique, manner and quality—away from painting as such, if you will—than the growing interest in two particular fields of art: mural painting and the genre lithograph.

Architecture is perhaps the most collective, the least individual of all arts, in the sense that even the private house, which is the architectural expression

for the individual, embodies many collective necessities. For not only does the individual house contain a small community but it is—and today more so than ever—part of a community. And so mural painting, to a greater degree than any other painting, is collective and social, rather than aristocratic and individual. And it is further obvious that the more collective and social is the nature of the building the more readily it adapts itself to noble, universal themes for mural work. If I am painting a mural in a dining-room it must be something that the owner and the successive owners of the dining-room can live with, and so my theme is restricted in emotional scope. But if I paint a mural for a post-office building, a railroad terminal, a theatre, the emotional range is greatly enhanced. It is not strange that at a picture gallery we meet with an abundance of flower pieces, landscapes, and nudes. It is a sad corollary of this fact that if an artist wishes to paint a theme which moves him, there is but one gallery in New York where it can appropriately hang and that is the John Reed Club. Not that artists are all communists, thank God; merely that moving themes hang sheepishly at a Fifth Avenue art dealer's. So for my part I am glad to see this reawakening of mural interest in America. Fresco is, as Michelangelo said, the most detached, impersonal, and masculine of all media. It does not lend itself to the "bel canto" tradition, to quality, atmosphere, or individual tricks. It expresses with austerity the nobility or meagreness of the design and, becoming actually part of the wall, it seems to fuse into the very marrow of the architecture.

## II

During the past century Currier and Ives prints were a popular art in the best eighteenth-century English tradition of satire and sentiment. In their humble way they took the place with us of the much more beautiful Japanese prints among the Japanese, stemming and degenerating from a much greater art current. But the particular merit of the former was not so much their inherent worth as the fact that they functioned as art in our social life. They were not bought through snobism to become part of a "collection," a thing

divorced from social life; but were popularly bought as were the Japanese prints; with no more self-consciousness and in the same spirit as scenic post-cards were bought, also to serve a social purpose, a generation later. The tradition of the Currier and Ives prints is dead. But the vitality of the movement of which they were a part is evidenced by their influence on many of our modern American artists. George Bellows revived, not for the people but for the collector, the interest in genre lithographs. And I think one of the most wholesome things about art today in America is the popularity, the cheapness, the almost universal excellence of our contemporary lithographs. On account of the narrowness of the scale and medium, the artist can put into them a social or emotional feeling, which on a more ambitious scale might frighten the conservatism and apathy of the public.

It is not enough, however, for an American renaissance in mural art that there exists today a universal yearning for a happier social order and a universal recasting of the ultimate values of life. Nor is it enough that among our artists there is a growing desire to express in their work this latent American faith. There must also be sufficient liberality and intelligence among those who dispense public mural spaces to make this yearning a reality. Until the present, neither liberality nor intelligence has been shown by architects and governmental departments, but during recent months many changes have come about. An examination of what has been accomplished at Washington should convince the most pessimistic that the stage is now set for what may become a very real renaissance in American art.

On November 29, 1933, L. W. Robert, Jr., Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, in charge of Public Buildings work, made the statement:

Provision for the encouragement of the fine arts has always been recognized as one of the functions of the Federal Government, and it is obvious such provisions should be enlarged in times of depression. The work of artists and craftsmen greatly aids every one by preserving and increasing our capacity for enjoyment and is particularly valuable in times of stress. Hitherto this field has not been adequately developed. As the Treasury is the Department concerned with Federal buildings, a movement to aid the fine arts and artists and craftsmen is its particular concern.

We consider it a great pleasure and privilege

to encourage this movement and hope that it will promote the appreciation of art in our country. It will be the purpose of the committee to find merit wherever it exists and the search will not be dominated by any particular school or group. We plan to find opportunities for this work in the embellishment of Federal building, with murals, sculpture and craftsmanship, in similar work on state and municipal buildings financed by the Federal Government, and in other directions where the opportunity develops.

We hope that private enterprise will follow our lead and realize that the encouragement of art is a vital factor in our civilization and culture and should be continuously supported in depressed as well as in boom periods. . . .

Such a statement could not conceivably have been made by a high government official in any former American administration. For the first time in our history the government has recognized the social necessity of art in life. Not only does it recognize the same responsibility to indigent artists as to indigent plumbers or bricklayers, it accepts a further responsibility to foster art and keep it alive during the depression. Such a statement and attitude may indeed mark the beginning of an epoch. It may be of interest to the artists of the country to know that the accomplishment was a result of correspondence with or an active participation by the President, Mrs. Roosevelt, Secretary Ickes, Secretary Morgenthau, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Robert, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Tugwell, Commissioner Harry L. Hopkins, Colonel Waite, Deputy Commissioner of the P.W.A., Henry T. Hunt, his legal counsel, Doctor Alexander Sachs, formerly chairman of the Research Committee of the NRA, and others.

But what has actually been accomplished by this government participation in the fine arts?

The Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts was at once created and held its first meeting in Washington in December. It was felt that the committee could act with a greater weight of authority if it did so in conjunction with the advice of the leading museum directors throughout the country, who in turn could set up their own regional committees.

The members of the Advisory Committee of the Treasury on Fine Arts are Frederick Delano, Chairman, Harry L. Hopkins, Rexford G. Tugwell, Henry T. Hunt, Charles Moore, and Edward Bruce, Secretary. It would be difficult to appoint a more intelligent

and liberal group to look after the interests of American artists, and Bruce as the active administrator of the committee deserves the greatest credit for its far-reaching results.

The first thing the committee did was to set up the Public Works of Art Project, with Forbes Watson as a technical director, to spend and administer with the least delay and greatest efficiency the grant of about a million and a quarter dollars given it from the Civil Works Administration. So much has been written about this project that I wish here only to focus attention on certain aspects of it. There were very strict legal limitations to this grant of money. It had to be spent in relief work, to go to needy artists without jobs. The money could be spent only in employing artists. It could not be spent in buying works of art. The work done by the artists belongs to the government and can only be placed in buildings supported by taxes. Lastly the original grant, made on December 8, had to be spent by February 15. A subsequent grant extended this time to April 28.

One could not necessarily expect great works of art to come out of such a grant. Nor was that the intention. The immediate purpose of the P.W.A.P. was to keep alive some 2500 artists during a pretty cold winter and thereby to lift the morale of the artists throughout the country. It was to be expected that such a policy should be sabotaged by the Communists, even by Communist artists on the government payroll. The more an intelligent administration does for destitute men, the less chance is there to engender class hatred and foment class warfare. The P.W.A.P. was also sabotaged by organizations whose members in happier days had been contracting at \$30 to \$35 a square foot for mural paintings. If the government dared to employ a starving artist at rates between \$22.50 and \$42.50 a week, would such a policy cut into their swill? With more business acumen they might have supposed that a revived interest in art and mural art throughout the country would bring them, too, in course of time, their plums. But they did not see things in this light and when the news was first released to the papers there was more than one New York society ready to "board a train for Washington and

fight things to the finish." Then the word was whispered about that an attempt to obstruct governmental relief to needy artists would not put the obstructionists in the happiest of lights, and the overt howling quieted down. But I suspect that sabotage has been going on and will continue.

Actually "the first artist was employed on December 9 (the day after the P.W.A.P. began business). The growth of the project is indicated by the following figures: on December 20 there were 736 artists and three laborers employed; on January 3, 1444 artists and twenty-seven laborers; and on February 7, 2294 artists and 168 laborers. Every State in the Union is represented in the employment of artists."<sup>1</sup>

I have myself seen in the P.W.A.P. offices in Washington some two or three hundred examples, water-colors, oils, and engravings, of the work done. Even supposing that this work represents the cream of the accomplishment, I consider it quite on a par with much of the French and American art exhibited at the very best New York dealers. And it must be remembered that much of the work is by younger and unknown artists.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the grant, the lack of funds for equipment and the short space of time allotted, the Federal Government now owns some seven thousand paintings which are being framed and distributed to schools, hospitals, colleges, and hung in the offices of the senators and representatives in Washington.

By the end of December some fifty mural projects were under way all over the country. Nine mural projects were started in Dallas, Texas; two more in McKinney, three in San Antonio, two at Denver. In Philadelphia murals were begun at the Philadelphia Normal School, several high schools, the Ellen Fleisher Vocational School and in several kindergartens. Murals were under way in Pittsburgh; two more in the Colorado State Home for Dependent and Neglected Children; in New York many mural designs have been undertaken; in Iowa a series of murals for the State College and the State Hospital; others in Georgia, and at New Haven, Connecticut. Twenty-six artists

<sup>1</sup> "Implications of the Public Works of Art Project," by Edward Bruce, *American Magazine of Art*, March, 1934.

are at work on as many panels in one project in California. In New England, by the end of February 125 projects were started and applications for 350 additional projects were on file. Throughout the country 501 murals have been completed or are nearing completion.

The accomplishment was made possible through the voluntary contribution in services and for equipment in different communal centers. The sixteen regional chairmen and some 500 men and women on their committees, museum directors, art patrons, teachers, and collectors are giving their services free. "Not one penny has been expended for the offices of any of the regional committees, all space having been donated. Colleges and art museums and art schools have donated the space for the artists to work. Art departments in colleges have turned their students over as assistants on projects and credited the work done to the students as part of their curriculum." In one week in which the payroll was \$85,000 the entire cost of materials amounted only to \$175! "Towns where work was to be done held public meetings and by private subscription raised the cost of equipment."

The subject matter of these various regional mural projects becomes a loose graphic survey of the contemporary American scene. No more Greek ladies, with cheese cloth bound about their nipples, cluttered up with scales, lambs, sheaves of wheat. No more Hellenic nudes representing the spirit of American Motherhood, Purity, Democracy and the Pioneer Spirit. Here are some of the subjects of these mural projects: the basic industries of Texas; development of education in Texas; food resources, giving the different elements that go into the cultivation and marketing of food; clothing and shelter; the modern treatment of the stage;

primitive art contrasted with modern art; education and agriculture; the Uncle Remus cycle; the industries of New Haven; Charles Goodyear and rubber, Chauncey Jerome and clocks, Brewster and carriages, Thomas Sanford and the match; industrial production, food production and agriculture: the city life resulting from both; recreational life, indoors and out-of-doors; pictorial records of public works and civilian conservation camps, such as Boulder Dam and reforestation.

Once the subjects are decided upon and allotted, the artists themselves are allowed complete technical freedom of execution in the work. In one project in California, for instance, the regional director, Mr. Walter Heil, writes: "The artists themselves are enthused about this project and show a most encouraging spirit of co-operation. They have elected one of their own group as a director, in order to co-ordinate the scale and palette in co-operation with the committee."

Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson are receiving daily letters from artists all over the country, who for the first time in our history are beginning to recognize that they are filling a need in our social structure and that a great democracy has become their patron. And although the actual grant of money could only employ about one out of four needy artists, yet Bruce writes me that "we get less than two complaints a week from the entire United States as to the fairness and impartiality of our chairmen in selecting artists." But let one letter indicate what this project has meant to all of us. From Woodstock comes this testimonial: "The spirit in which the artists in Woodstock are going at it would, I am sure, please you very much, and make you feel how worth while it is, as they are more than anxious to do their best and to produce things which will do them

credit. We almost feel as if we had a new lease on life, as though suddenly we had a new incentive for existence."

Such an accomplishment should convince the most sceptical that the P.W.A.P. has been more than a temporary relief measure. If it had not even been that, one could still have argued that a million dollars could not have been spent more intelligently as propaganda to make the whole country art conscious. Personally I do not believe that an equivalent sum of money was ever so judiciously laid out by any government in the acquisition of public works of art.

The Advisory Committee to the Treasury hopes that April 28th is not the end of it all. And so while carrying on the P.W.A.P. relief work, the committee is listing all such Federal buildings as already have Treasury allocations for mural work. Through their regional committees they are listing all state and municipal buildings, which could properly be decorated through state or municipal aid. They are studying the possibility of earmarking a fraction of all building money, loaned by the P.W.A. to be set aside for murals, decorative sculpture and the crafts.

So we see that during the past four months a small beginning has indeed been made, and there need not be too much pessimism about the "artist's adapting himself to realities" and "doing his best in the worst of worlds." On the contrary, I think, he should feel that as long as we have a President who has recognized the necessity of art in life, and among his administration leaders who are intelligently putting that recognition into practice, the government has paved the way for a national revival in American art, and the artist need not feel too gloomy about the future ahead of him.

## YOU ARE THE LIVING HEIRS

*By Kimball Flaccus*

IMPETUOUS young minds in other countries  
That eastward front the far American shore,  
Sweet-bodied girls, strong boys by the Pacific,  
You are the living heirs, and you must be  
Draftsmen of life, and engineers of peace;  
Your contract holds you to infinity.  
Today is yours, today the abundant earth  
Is beautiful with spring in Illinois;

High Blue Ridge meadows drowse beneath the heat.  
Among damp leaves along the Wissahickon  
White blood-root springs to contradict the mold:  
So shall you pierce all fears and ceremonies,  
So shall the petals like a crown of candor,  
Fed by thick roots that draw strength from the soil,  
Stand up unwithering in a world of change.