

Coaxing the Soul of America Back to Life

How the New Deal Sustained, and Was Sustained by, Artists



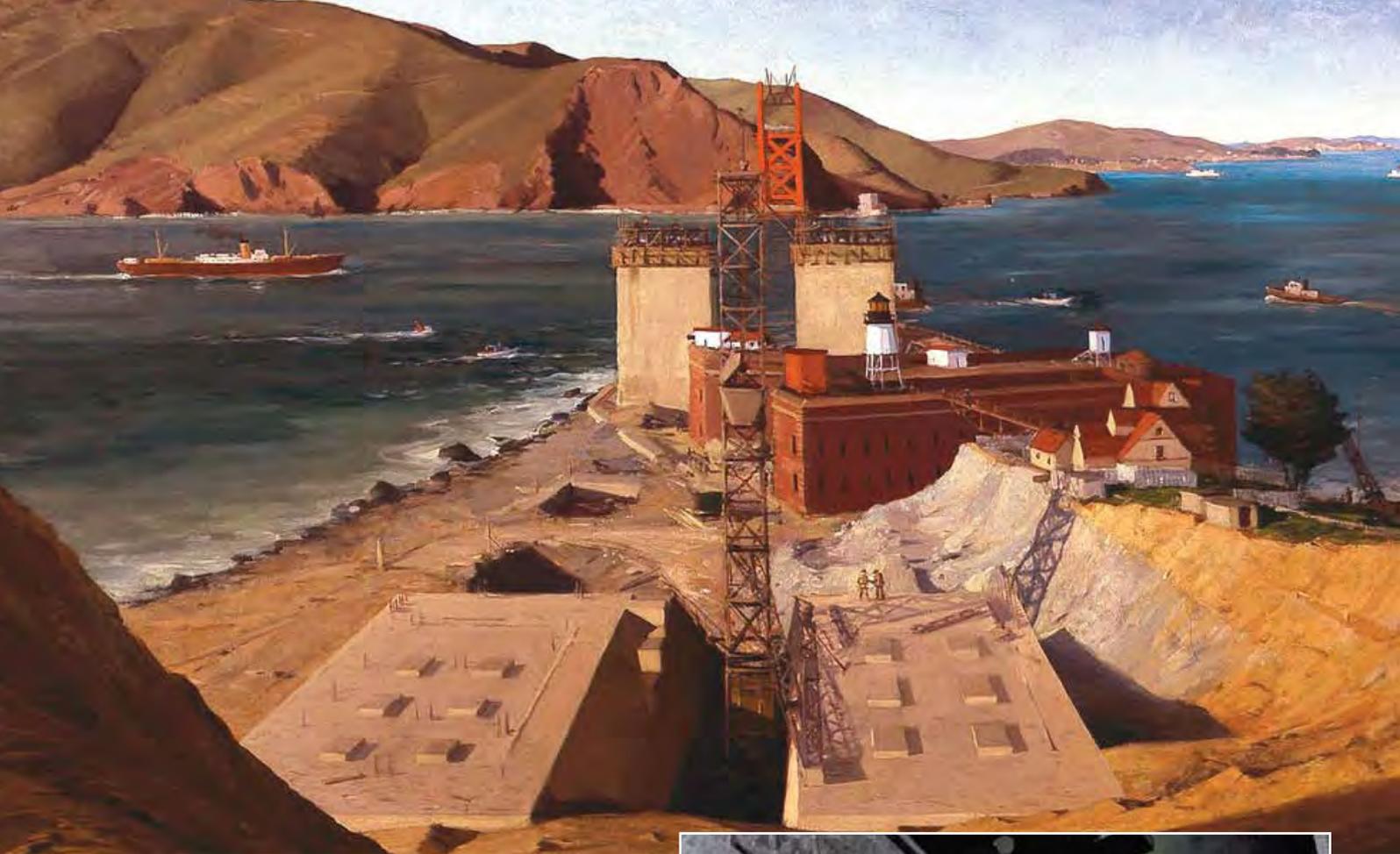
PLOWING, BY LEO BRESLAU, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)

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

The nation looked expectantly to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was inaugurated in March 1933. The new administration swiftly initiated a wide-ranging series of economic recovery programs called the New Deal. The president realized that Americans needed not only employ-

ment but also the inspiration art could provide. On December 8, 1933, the Advisory Committee to the Treasury on Fine Arts organized the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). Within days, 16 regional committees were recruiting artists who eagerly set to work in all parts of America. Between December 1933 and June 1934, the PWAP hired 3,749 artists who created 15,663 paintings, murals, sculptures, prints, drawings, and craft works.

The PWAP suggested “the American Scene” as appropriate subject matter, but allowed artists to interpret this idea freely. PWAP images vividly captured the realities and ideals of Depression-era America. The PWAP art displayed in schools, libraries, post offices, museums, and government buildings lifted the spirits of Americans all over the country.



GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE, BY RAY STRONG, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)

So begins 1934: A New Deal for Artists, an online and traveling exhibit by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. With our nation enduring the worst recession since the Great Depression, it's a good time to recall and appreciate the extraordinary artwork that captured and sustained the American spirit during one of our nation's most trying times. The paintings shown here, and the article below, are drawn from the exhibition book. To see the full exhibit, as well as related educational materials, go to <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2009/1934/index.cfm>.

—EDITORS

BY ROGER G. KENNEDY

“One hundred years from now my administration will be known for its art, not for its relief.” When President Franklin Roosevelt made this remark, was he commenting on the way memory works? Or was he reflecting upon the experience that hunger passes and shame passes and desperation passes, while a picture or a sculpted image lasts? Some might object that necessity trumps all—including art, beauty, truth, or happiness—as surely it may, in the

Roger G. Kennedy is the former director of the National Park Service and director emeritus of the National Museum of American History. He has written numerous books and articles on the history and architecture of the United States. His essay for the 1934: A New Deal for Artists exhibition book, from which this article is excerpted, was drawn from his most recent book, When Art Worked: The New Deal, Art, and Democracy, designed and edited by David Larkin and due out in October 2009 (Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.).



PAPER WORKERS, BY DOUGLASS CROCKWELL, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)

EMPLOYMENT OF NEGROES IN AGRICULTURE, BY EARLE RICHARDSON, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)



moment. But after a necessitous moment, memory swirls in, carrying upon its flood those recollections that assure us that we are a species that can transcend necessity. When we again breathe freely, creation renews and from creation comes—art.

In his "Rendezvous with Destiny" speech in 1936, Roosevelt cited the statement of "an old English judge" that "necessitous men are not free men." He followed the citation with references to the specifically American and constitutional grounds for respecting values transcending mere subsistence: "Liberty requires opportunity to make a living—a living decent according to the standard of the time, a living which gives man not only enough to live by, but something to live for." Roosevelt was speaking to a nation still mired in depression, but he was able to remind the people that things had improved since he took office three years earlier in the hideous winter of 1933–34, when "for too many of us life was no longer free; liberty no longer real; men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness."¹

The New Deal had often stumbled, but it had rallied the people, including the artists among them, to a political program based upon the conviction that "government in a modern civilization has certain inescapable obligations to its citizens, among which



PARKVILLE, MAIN STREET, 1933 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)

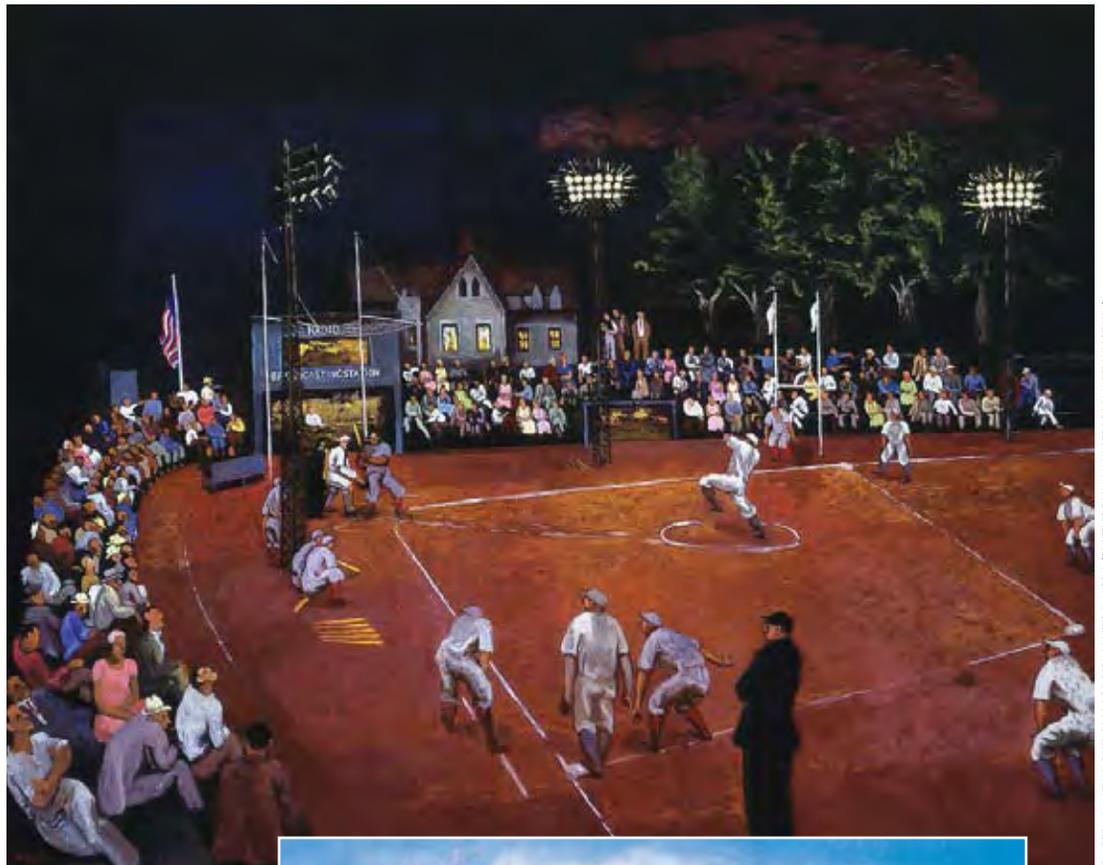
are protection of the family and the home, the establishment of a democracy of opportunity, and aid to those overtaken by disaster. Artists were among the helped, and thus were mobilized among the helping. Their paintings emerged from an otherwise dispirited nation as it sought an enhanced sense of itself, its common heritage, its common possibilities, and the common ground it occupied.²

Art came as the response of creative citizens to a challenge issued to them by their government. It offered those who needed it a meager living and in return they fulfilled a prediction made by the sculptor Gutzon Borglum to Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's relief administrator. "Aid to the creative ones among us," wrote Borglum, would "enliven the Nation's mind" and help "coax the soul of America back to life."³

The New Deal was built upon the precept that the pursuit of happiness of each citizen was only possible in freedom from want, fear, hunger, and hopelessness. When the Roosevelt administration took office in 1933, its first order of business for the arts administrator, as for those administering programs across the country at large, was to make good on Herbert Hoover's assertion that "no one starved." Next, it sought "to put people to work." The national unemployment rate, which had been 3.2 percent of the workforce in 1929, became 25 percent in 1933—13 million people out of work—and did not fall below 10 percent until 1942. In 1934, there were many places in the nation, in cities and in the countryside, where half the willing workforce could find no jobs.⁴ In the 1920s, the affluent had danced the Charleston as the riffs of the Jazz Age mocked the miseries of the poor. Rural people had been afflicted for six years by crop failures, natural disasters, and falling farm prices. In 1933, the farmers had already been trying over and over again for seven years to get up and to stay on their feet, with dust and blood in their eyes, through the collapse of markets, insect plagues, blizzard, and drought.

The industrial system built upon the automobile industry had convulsed and collapsed; long before the stock market crash, fewer and fewer people bought cars. The industrial system went into its early convulsions as demand fell off for steel, rubber, copper, electrical products, and machine tools. Then an international banking and credit structure high on speculation became dysfunctional. Extravagance and imprudence no longer exhilarated corporate headquarters. The stock market crashed not once but thrice: in 1929, in 1933, and again in 1937.

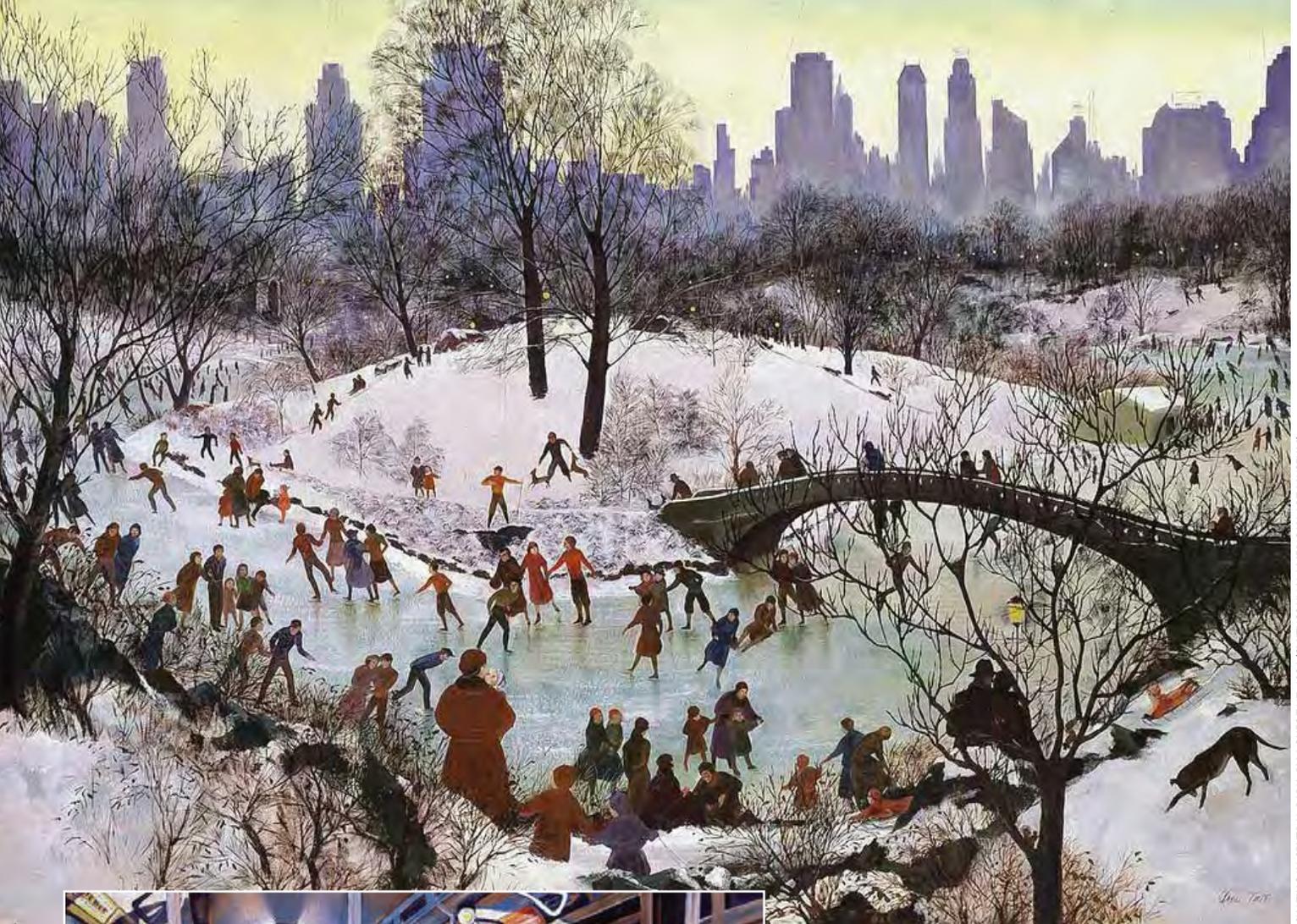
The 1929 crash shook all expectations. The second and third shattered them. Some major industrial stocks lost four-fifths or nine-tenths of their bubble prices and some never fully recovered. And where it mattered, in the real, tangible economy, nothing seemed to function properly. Millions were out of work, out of food, out of hope. None of the customary systems of society functioned in the



BASEBALL AT NIGHT, BY MORRIS KANTOR, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)



CROSS ROAD—STILL LIFE, BY PAUL BENJAMIN, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)



SKATING IN CENTRAL PARK, BY AGNES TAIT, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)



SUBWAY, BY LILY FUREDI, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)

face of layoffs, strikes, lockouts, and an unrelenting dust-in-the-mouth hopelessness.

The American experiment in a respectful government of, by, and for the people was in peril. "Fear itself" filled the hearts of the nation. Hate was ready to follow fear, as it had in Germany. After the Nazi Party won half the seats in the Reichstag in the 1933 elec-

tions, the Dachau concentration camp was set up in March and the Enabling Act of March 23 made Hitler dictator. In 1934, he became supreme commander of the armed forces and entered his alliance with Mussolini. Stalin consolidated his power in Russia and sought to export his brand of bureaucratized terror.

There were plenty of homegrown führers available. Some of them were operating in the Midwest, leading Hubert Humphrey to take the threat presented seriously enough to read Lawrence Dennis's *The Coming American Fascism* even before he read Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The disaffected turned to the Communist Party, to fascist thuggery such as the German-American Bund, to the Ku Klux Klan, and to left-wing and right-wing demagogues and ideologues such as Floyd Olson, Huey Long, Gerald L. K. Smith, and Father Charles E. Coughlin. Some intellectuals took to Marx and Engels; others commended Dennis.

1934 was a bleak year. Yet the paintings created for the New Deal's Public Works of Art Project are not bleak. They defy depression. Their aye-saying asserts unquenchable creative life at a time when every effort the people made to get things right again seemed to fail. Nothing brought its expected outcome. Invisibly and irresistibly, life and its expectations had come apart—in ways no one fully understood. Yet the nation did not dissolve into chaos or civil war. Armed gangs did not take over the cities. Country people did not turn to killing



TENEMENT FLATS, BY MILLARD SHEETS, 1933-34 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)

each other as they did during the wave of social cannibalism that gripped China and Russia, nor did farmers and farm laborers join doomed but destructive insurrections. Although there was a communist menace and there was a fascist menace, democratic government was sustained. The circle was not broken. The community held together—barely. Because the result was so uncertain, and because it often seemed as if the people could rely upon little more than Roosevelt’s positive energy, an assertion of life in art—a demonstration of energy through creativity—mattered. The content of that art mattered as well. Often paintings such as these told us who we were, who we had been, and who we might become. □

Endnotes

1. Speech before the 1936 Democratic National Convention, Philadelphia, in Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, ed. Samuel I. Rosenman, vol. 5, *The People Approve, 1936* (New York: Random House, 1938), 233. (On the Web, see www2.austinncc.edu/patrick/his2341/fdr36acceptancespeech.htm.)
2. For government’s obligations, see Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1948), 59.
3. Gutzon Borglum to Harry Hopkins, quoted in Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, 59.
4. For Herbert Hoover on “no one starved,” see David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 86; and for “put people to work,” see FDR’s first inaugural address, March 1933, Washington, D.C., in Roosevelt, *Public Papers and Addresses*, vol. 2, *The Year of Crisis, 1933*, 13.



SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA, BY ROBERT BRACKMAN, 1934 (SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM)