



The Canvas Mirror: Painting as Politics in the New Deal

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The Canvas Mirror: Painting as Politics in the New Deal

Of all the arts during the period of the Great Depression, perhaps the most prominent was painting, particularly mural painting. And yet there remains, even among otherwise well-informed individuals, a great deal of confusion about exactly which governmental agency of Roosevelt's New Deal was primarily responsible for this. It is commonplace today (and even during the depression) to refer to all art produced under the auspices of the New Deal as "WPA art," but this is only partially correct. The WPA, or Works Progress Administration (later retitled the Works Project Administration), was a large umbrella organization that funded a wide range of programs. In addition to its other areas, the WPA created several projects dealing directly with the arts: the Federal Writer's Project (FWP), which funded writers and focused on guide books to the then forty-eight states; the little-known Federal Music Project (FMP); the Federal Theater Project (FTP), which was responsible for such highly controversial theatrical productions as "living newspapers" that commented on current events; and the Federal Art Project (FAP), popularly known as "The Project," which funded unemployed artists.

The roots of the FAP go back to 1933 with the creation of a national art project based on the works of the Mexican School, sponsored by Mexican President Alvaro Obregon. Although the socialist and Marxist murals of artists such as Diego Rivera, Clemente Orozco, and David Siqueros expressed quite different political views from what George Biddle envisioned for America, he approached Franklin Roosevelt about the possibilities of promoting Roosevelt's "revolution" by means of such public art. "Noting the grand achievements of the Mexican Muralists, [Biddle] portrayed young American artists, supporters of a Roosevelt-guided social revolution, as being eager to express the ideals of that revolution on the public walls of America" (1).

The result was the creation of the short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), which lasted only until June 1934. The

PWAP, under the directorship of Edward Bruce, sought to promote images of the "American Scene" and did not confine artistic productions to murals, but promoted easel painting as well. The "American Scene" focus (which was encouraged by the PWAP, but not insisted upon) featured optimistic visions of America during a time of economic desperation, a vision that coalesced into what has been termed "Regionalism," which we will explore shortly. Paintings funded by the PWAP, however, were not monolithic in their bucolic optimism, and there were several radical departures from this, especially Seymour Fogel's canvas painting of a Klan lynching in the Deep South.

The short-lived existence of the PWAP did not destroy the impetus for such public art, and in 1935 it was replaced by the WPA, specifically the FAP. However, between the demise of the PWAP and the advent of the FAP the federal government created another agency devoted to art, the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, later renamed the Treasury Section of Fine Arts and popularly contracted to "The Section," which was created in October of 1934. The chief focus of the Section was mural art, especially art in post offices, and much of what is popularly known as "WPA art" was, in fact, Section art. The Project and the Section existed concurrently, and most artists on the public payrolls during the 1930s drew checks and commissions from both agencies.

As we have already stated, the impetus for such art projects, especially mural art in public buildings, was largely propagandistic. It was intended to advertise Roosevelt's vision of an America restored to economic and emotional health by means of governmental largesse. As such, Regionalism would seem to be the most rosy, and most obvious, result. However, Roosevelt's America was still one of dire hardship and personal tragedies, despite his efforts at restoration, and many artists sought to depict America as it really was, rather than America as it was once and was hoped to soon be again. Such artists approached their vision of America

from a decidedly leftist—even Communist—slant, interpreting the desolation and misery all around them as an indictment of the capitalist system and of its ever-present dichotomy of “haves” and “have nots.” They were usually referred to as Social Realists. The problem existed when it came to public art, especially mural art. If the avowed purpose of public arts projects was to improve morale and advertise the success of Roosevelt’s paternalism, depictions of the downtrodden would not be very suitable vehicles.

It should come as no surprise that Regionalists and Social Realists, due to their vastly different philosophies, did not particularly like one another, although some artists bridged both philosophies in their work, especially if the prize of a mural commission depended on their ability to be philosophically flexible. This acrimony is well illustrated by the public feud between Thomas Hart Benton (a Regionalist) and Stuart Davis (a Social Realist). At one point Davis declared that “Regional jingoism and racial chauvinism will not have a place in this great art of the future which Benton foresees, but the ideological basis of which he is unable to understand,” to which Benton, in an equally acid tone, replied by equating Social Realists with what he perceived to be social undesirables, bemoaning the “concentrated flow of aesthetic-minded homosexuals into the various fields of artistic practice.” This sorry equation of one’s enemy with sexual variance goes back to the days of the Bogomils and the Templars.

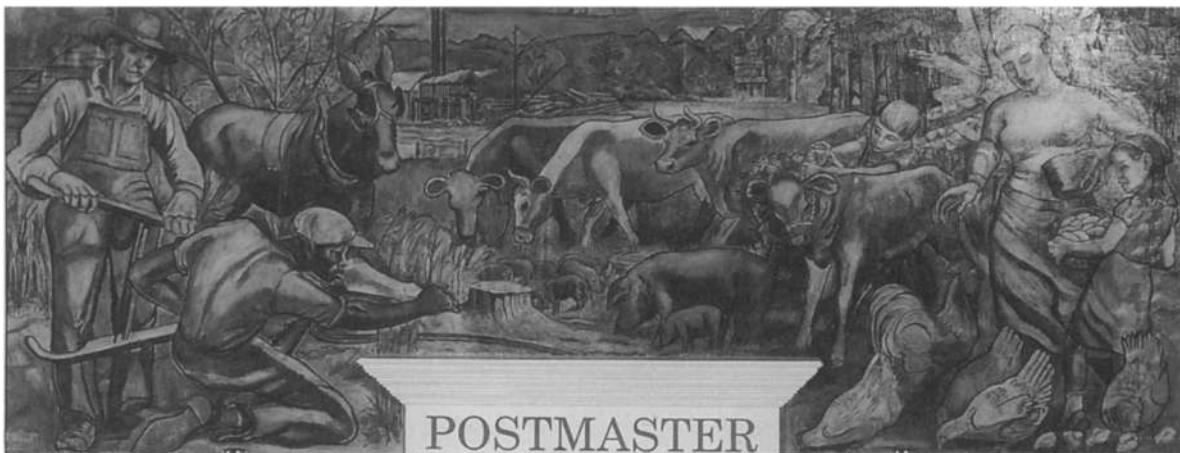
Despite their mutual animosity, there was actually one point of convergence between the two schools of both thought and art. Both, in their own ways, championed the common man. The Regionalists looked back to the days of Jeffersonian democracy where people lived out noble, bucolic lives free of the manacles of governmental control, often delving back into history for larger than life examples of the heroic, independent American, such as Daniel Boone, while the Social Realists, true to their leftist leanings, saw the common man—the worker—as triumphing over the dictatorial constraints and exploitation of a greedy and bloated

capitalist system. If public art was to serve both to employ unemployed artists of both persuasions and to fashion propaganda in paint for Roosevelt’s vision of America, it must appeal to this convergence.

The result was what we have termed American Idealism (2), a paean to the nobility of the average American, be they farmer or worker, and the wonders of economic recovery effected by governmental programs that had their best interests in mind. Thus, workers pose in front of shining new factories all over the public walls of America, while farmers till rich, corrugated fields soon to produce a bountiful harvest. American Idealism was intended to be propaganda for the goodness of America, and it brought together often warring artistic factions in order to accomplish this. Largely a product of the Section, whose director was Edward Bruce (formerly of the PWAP), this artistic alliance was not to use public walls for personal agendas. Bruce was on record as opposing “abstractionist tripe” and seeking to stop the “Mexican invasion on the border” (3).

Both Regionalists and Social Realists found common ground not only in American Idealism but in their mutual hatred for, and opposition to, Fascism. The rise and spread of Nazism in Germany during the Great Depression was a source of real concern for all. Regionalists opposed Fascism because it violated the basis of democracy so evident in the local town meeting, while Realists, as leftists, were implacably opposed to all philosophies adhering to the far right. The result of this opposition to a common foe was anti-Fascist art, which surfaced largely toward the latter years of the Great Depression, as World War II loomed inevitably. Such art occurred within some Project and Section work, but was largely relegated to war posters produced under the auspices of such early 1940s groups as Artists for Victory. As was the case with mural commissions (especially those awarded by the Section), poster designs were the result of national competitions, where the best and most compelling composition would be awarded the job.

Having established the above four artistic classifications prominent in depression-era art, we will now set about examining and contrasting examples of each. The discussion that follows deals largely, although not exclusively, with various works by Seymour Fogel. This is not only because the authors have done in-depth research on this artist in a previous book, but also, and more importantly, because Fogel’s work demonstrates that although Regionalism and Social Realism often had a hostile attitude toward one another, they were not



Spring, a mural by Caroline S. Rohland, offers an idyllic portrayal of rural life. In this, the artist was adhering to the standard themes of Regionalism. (Courtesy of the Georgia Southern University Museum.)

mutually exclusive, and artists often crossed the lines when commissions demanded that they do so or when new expressions of public art evolved. For example, Fogel was primarily a Social Realist, dealing with the plight of the underprivileged, yet produced American Idealist work for the Section, anti-Fascist work for the wartime Artists for Victory competition, and even Regionalist work when certain commissions (such as Safford, Arizona, or Cambridge, Minnesota) required such a concept. No matter how adamant artists might be about political persuasions, they still had to survive in difficult economic times, and survival often required flexibility. Besides, Fogel, who dabbled in leftist activism for a brief time, rapidly came to believe that politics sapped an artist's creative energies, and he was devoted to his art first and foremost.

Regionalism

As we have already indicated, Regionalism or American Scene, celebrated a bucolic paradise free of the ravages of dust storms or dispossessed farmers or cows lying dead from starvation in the fields. It represented a cozy ideal of what America should be, but never really was. It is a pristinely naïve view of an America where moral values assume larger-than-life proportions, often embodied in images of folk heroes or of historic events where home, family, freedom, and the worship of God are all celebrated not so much as part of the real world, but as images painted on a stage backdrop, an environment fit for a play that involved more than a little "suspension of disbelief."

Such considerable departures from the world as it really was angered those who were concerned about the dire dimensions of the everyday reality of the 1930s, namely the Social Realists. Karal Ann Marling writes, "By choosing to look at the positive, colorful side of the national picture, while ignoring the negative and controversial, Benton alienated the political left" (4). We have already heard what Benton had to say in reply.

Among the most prominent proponents of Regionalism were John Steuart Curry, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood. Marling writes, "the existence of distinctive, indigenous, American cultures was an article of faith in the '30s. Benton, Curry and Wood were hailed as the fathers of a Middle-Western 'Regionalism' that owed much to manifestos of regional solidity issued by Southern agrarian writers of the '20s" (5). Whereas one of the goals of the FAP was to introduce art into rural communities (and keep local artists employed locally), the Section "found itself in the anomalous position of directing a homogenizing, national Renaissance in an era of ardent belief in sectional distinction that were both cultivated and challenged by New Deal programs" (6).

The works of Curry, Benton, and Wood are well known, perhaps so well known that they are taken for granted and have



Tom Lea's *Pass of the North*, while depicting a subject wholly different from Rohland's *Spring*, also offers an example of Regionalist themes.

become clichés. In discussing regionalism, therefore, we have opted to discuss two little known works, one depicting bucolic harmony and the value of the family, the other depicting the stolid, noble virtues of American rural life.

Spring is a mural painted by Caroline S. Rohland, a little-known artist born in 1885 in Boston, Massachusetts. The date of Rohland's birth makes her one of the older artists on the governmental payroll during the 1930s and early 1940s. *Spring* was a mural she executed in 1941 in Sylvania, Georgia, a small, rural town near the South Carolina border. The painting was meant to celebrate rural life in Georgia, along with the values associated with it.

Like most if not all Regionalist work, *Spring* is very much an idyllic portrayal. To the left of the composition we see an overall-clad farmer grasping a plow. His body is broad and solid, his expression serious and determined, and his hands inordinately large (a feature seen also in Social Realist art meant to emphasize the importance of the part of the body that does physical work). A black man, an apprentice or farm hand (not a slave), kneels down to sharpen the plow, while a rather winsome mule looks upon the scene. To the right we see a mother (a rather buxom lass) with her daughter and son. The mother and daughter are smiling as they feed chickens and gather eggs, while the blond-haired boy—did you expect anything else?—is occupied doing boy-like things such as tethering a calf. At the center of the composition, we see cows grazing, as well as pigs, and in the background are sawmills, reflecting the local livelihood. The whole scene fairly exudes goodness and well-being. Men and boys, as well as women and girls, are engaged in doing precisely those activities that are socially acceptable for their gender, while the theme of "family values" is carried to such an extreme that virtually every living, breathing organism in the mural is seen in a family unit—people, cattle, pigs, and even chickens.



Seymour Fogel's *Okies* offers a commentary on the hardships of the Great Depression. (Courtesy of Fogel Art, LLC.)

The odd man out in this mural is the black farm hand. Was it Rohland's intent to show him as a member of the farmer's extended family or as a racial subordinate (7)? Opinions differed markedly on this point, and the local NAACP chose to view Rohland's portrayal as demeaning and condescending and had the canvas mural removed from the Sylvania Post Office's wall in the early 1980s, much to the disappointment of the local citizenry, white and black alike. One of the authors (Fogel) found it in 1995 wadded up into a large canvas ball and stuck in a post office closet. It has since been professionally restored, and is now on permanent loan by the federal government to Georgia Southern University.

Tom Lea's mural panel *Pass of the North* in El Paso, Texas, demonstrates the historical aspect of Regionalism. In it we see conquistadors, priests, ranchers, cavalry, and pioneers posing in front of a backdrop of mesas and desert. The poses are rigid, grim, and determined. The Catholic priest stares almost defiantly at the viewer, and the wooden cross he grasps in his right hand is at the very center of the composition, indicating the centrality of Christianity to rural communities. A pioneer in fringed buckskin stands proudly (and, yes, grimly) with his left hand on his hip and a rifle grasped in his right hand. The action of this panel seems to be occurring off to our right and out of view, for the cavalryman riding to the rescue from the left, the pioneer, and the conquistador all seem to be looking and pointing in that direction. One is tempted to interpret the focus on the right in political terms (more to the point, the cavalry could be riding to repulse an attack from their left!), but this is pure conjecture.

The fact is that Regionalists, who were definitely on the right of the political spectrum sought to represent basic "American" values in idyllic bucolic settings and in selected incidents and individuals in history. Some non-Regionalist artists were more or

less forced by public demand to redesign murals in a Regionalist manner in order to please the vanity and mythology of local communities. Seymour Fogel's mural for Safford, Arizona, is a case in point. Due to public furor over the subject matter of his winning submission, he was required to do a series of uninspired vignettes entitled *The History of the Gila Valley*.

Social Realism

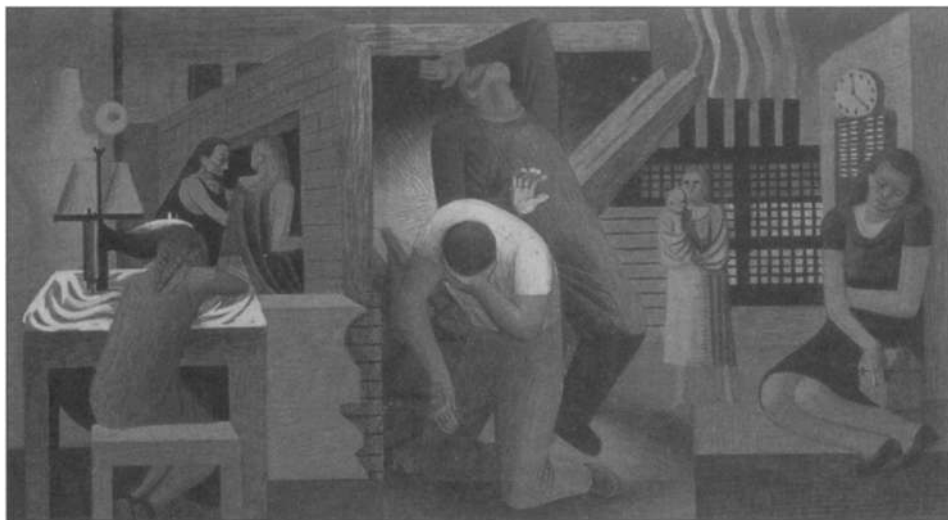
Social Realism has been defined in different ways, depending upon whom you consult. A consensus, however, would favor the definition that Social Realism was a style of art, usually public art, that represented "reality" from the perspective of a decidedly ideological slant. It was, basically, art in the service of ideology rather than "reality" per se. In this sense one could see it as being as much at variance with the "real world" as Regionalism, but with one important difference. Social Realism, which during the period of the Great Depression was invariably associated with a leftist or Marxist agenda, did not shrink from depictions of the utter poverty, misery, and social inequality that prevailed in 1930s America. As such,

these representations combined to form a visual indictment of the evils of a capitalist system, where the "haves" had no concern for, and often no real awareness of, the desperate plight of the "have nots." Thus, the Social Realism of the Great Depression could find equal voice in the glorious depiction of the worker, muscled arm grasping weighty hammer (or sickle, for that matter), as well as in the homeless "Okie" trudging miles of desolate roadway, searching for enough money to afford a plate of beans. For the purpose of our present discussion we have chosen to focus on this latter aspect. Social Realism as depiction of the noble worker and the industrial and technological fruits of his labor will be taken up in our discussion of American Idealism.

Seymour Fogel was primarily a Social Realist. His drawings and lithographs done in the early 1930s (1933 and 1934, in particular) focused on the plight of the masses—battered victims of bread riots, poor black sharecroppers in the South, those abused by the police, and the tragic recipients of racial violence, as revealed in his lynching works for the PWAP. Much of his leftist philosophy derived from his mentor, the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, and his vision of class inequality and the bloated, uncaring nature of unchecked capitalism is seen in much of what Fogel produced during the 1930s. In 1934 he hitchhiked throughout the South and Midwest to see the state of the nation for himself. One of the color studies he made during this time, sketched in Paul's Valley, Oklahoma, was of a family of "Okies" trudging the road. ("Okies" was an insulting and pejorative term for those who fled the ravages of the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma, as was the term "Arkies" for those who left Arkansas and "Dust Bowl Refugees" for all of them.) In this study we see the man in the lead, his face bent down and haggard. His entire body is bent over from the weight of a large brown sack he has hoisted over his left shoulder, a sack containing

all the worldly possessions of this family. The sack is so heavy and burdensome that he supports it underneath with his right hand. The burden represents a good deal more than just the physical weight of what few wretched possessions they own. It is the horrible burden borne by all who suffered as a result of the Great Depression—those who had no home, those who had no hope. Following behind the man is his pregnant wife carrying a child on her back. The woman's black dress suggests mourning. This theme is further enhanced in the background, where a row of blue-roofed houses appears to be a line of tombstones until one takes a closer look. Following between the man and the woman is a tan dog whose skeletal form and humped back recalls the man, and is intended as a commentary on the level to which this man's life has descended.

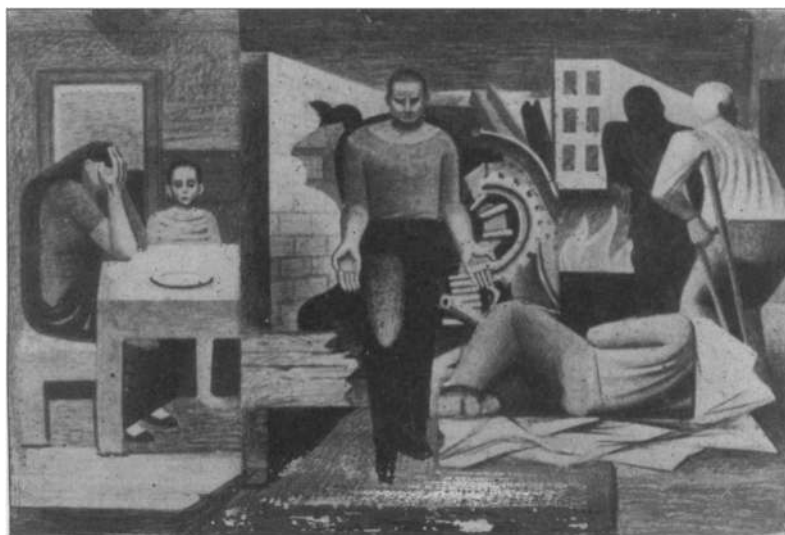
In Fogel's earliest studies for the murals he executed in the Social Security Building in Washington, D.C. (which we will discuss again later in this article), the panels entitled *The Nation—Security and Insecurity* provide a further example of Social Realism. In the earliest finished study, the left of the composition features a distraught woman with her head in her hands seated at a table whereon only an empty plate is featured. Sitting at the table with the woman is her emaciated son staring down at the empty plate with his dark, hollow eyes. On the right, we see homeless men sleeping in the streets or hobbling about on crutches, trying to stay warm near a fire. At the center is a man with his head down, his arms at his sides with his palms facing out, as if desperate and



A later study for Seymour Fogel's *Insecurity* series, depicting the dangers of the unregulated workplace. Child labor, workplace injury, and every day exhaustion all find a place in this work. (The Wolfsonian, Florida International University.)

helpless. Behind him is a broken cogwheel, symbolic of joblessness but also a revealing symbol of Fogel's own uneasiness with technology and its limitations, a recurrent theme in his work of this time.

An additional study for the *Insecurity* series shows a different set of circumstances. Here we see not the horrors of joblessness (the empty plate, the homeless men) but rather the horrors of the workplace when not regulated by a benevolent federal government. Roosevelt's controversial National Recovery Administration (NRA), which was soon declared unconstitutional, required "each industry in the country (to) draw up a code of practices that would be acceptable. These would cover wages, working conditions, and, as it turned out, prices and production" (8). This was Big Government in its most obvious and aggressive form, but such governmental concern for the plight of those ruthlessly and uncaringly exploited by unchecked capitalism had a definite appeal for Social Realists and was consistent with their ideology. In the *Insecurity* designs, Fogel was ostensibly creating a scenario reflecting the miseries of life without Social Security, but in this study especially, as opposed to his earlier one, we cannot help but see the shadow of the now-defunct NRA in the composition. To the right we see the usual iconography of the factory with its smokestacks, but rather than seeing proud and well-muscled workers parading in front of it we see an exhausted girl slumped beneath a time clock. To the left we see a girl, a mere child, with a sewing machine bent over some fabric that she is sewing with a sewing machine. Child labor laws were a twentieth-century necessity to protect children from such exploitation, but no doubt many who were underage sought whatever work would put food on their family's table during these dark days. At the center of this study we see two men who are obviously the victims of a workplace



The earliest finished study of Seymour Fogel's *The Nation—Security and Insecurity*. In this panel for the *Insecurity* series, Fogel deliberates on the horrors of unemployment. (Courtesy of Fogel Art, LLC.)

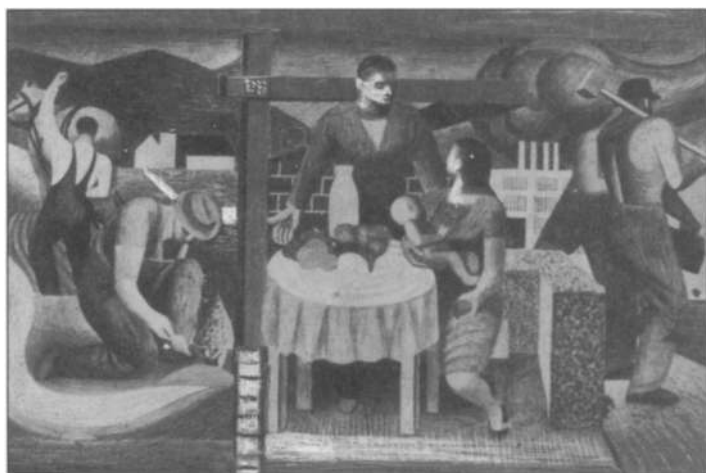
explosion of some sort. Although these initial studies were for murals that would be painted in 1941, they date to 1939, a time when the sting of the depression was still keenly felt. This theme of people dehumanized and victimized by industry rather than its proud (and unionized) workers is carried forward in works of some of the FSA photographers, especially the photographs of John Vachon.

American Idealism

We have defined American Idealism as a synthesis of Regionalism and Social Realism that created a new and vibrant vision of the country under the Roosevelt administration where a rural America, proud of its history, was being transformed into a new Utopia by technology and the grit and can-do attitude of the American worker. It borrowed the stalwart independence of the heroes of America's past (the contribution of Regionalism) and combined this with the centrality of industry and technology that were associated with the noble worker (the contribution of Social Realism) to produce a revived view of America rising, phoenix-like, out of the ashes of poverty and desperation. The girder, the sleek train, the factory belching forth plumes of smoke, begin to be part of the once rural landscape, and even when these are absent, technology's presence is indicated by depictions of advanced farm machinery busily reaping the bounty of the American soil. The steel cathedrals of industry were spreading everywhere across the land, bringing with them the message of a brighter day under Roosevelt's guidance. In essence, big government had entered small-town America, and American Idealism pro-



The Wealth of the Nation, by Seymour Fogel, focuses on positive portrayals of modern industry. (Courtesy of Fogel Art, LLC.)



The earliest study for the *Security* panel of Seymour Fogel's *The Nation—Security and Insecurity* reveals American Idealism's sometimes awkward pairing of Regionalist and Social Realist themes. (Courtesy of Fogel Art, LLC.)

vided a canvas mirror reflecting America under the paternal hand of Roosevelt.

Edward Bruce emphasized the need to make the art he approved for Section commissions relevant to the local community where it was to be housed. Submissions had to include aspects of local history, topography, or livelihood, and absolute authenticity and accuracy was demanded. One could not effectively celebrate the dawning of a new era if the local citizens did not feel they were invited to the celebration, which was to be hosted by the Roosevelt Administration. American Idealism was the New Deal in paint. It was art in the service of FDR.

Whereas the FAP embraced regional themes in its effort to bring art out of the big cities and into the small towns, the Section, the chief proponent of American Idealism, found itself in a somewhat awkward position. "The FAP and the state guidebooks issued by the WPA Writer's Project endorsed and even idealized cultural pluralism, while the accelerating drive toward big government under Roosevelt—like the Social Security Act or the ill-fated NRA—transferred power from town halls and statehouses to offices on the Potomac. Like the administration whose brainchild it was, the Section assumed an ambivalent stance in the tug-of-war between the sentimental appeal of regionalism and the realpolitik of nationalism" (9). Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz state: "In the midst of the heated politics and polemics of the first half of the 1930s, when the main thing the Regionalists and Social Realists agreed upon was their dislike of French modernism, the Section in effect formed a coalition of artists" (10).

This ambivalence characterized American Idealism and its hoped-for synthesis of opposing philosophies not just of art but of



The Security of the People, also known as *The Family*, by Seymour Fogel. This study replaces the farm with more subtle representations of rural themes, such as the climbing plant, the jug of milk, and the idealistic portrayal of the family. (Courtesy of Fogel Art, LLC.)

curred. No longer titled *The Nation—Security and Insecurity*, we now have *The Wealth of the Nation* and *The Security of the People* (also known as *The Family*). *The Wealth of the Nation* keeps the factory on the right but eliminates the farm on the left. In its place we see a scientist peering through a microscope while at the center of the composition the table with food is replaced by a kneeling man examining blueprints and the iconographic half-naked muscular worker just behind him straining in front of large cogwheels. This is all industrial—it is concrete and steel and brick. The rural theme is transferred to the companion panel, *The Security of the People*, although in a disguised form. There are no farmers, horses, and well-plowed fields here. Rather, the Regionalist theme of the family is represented in a thoroughly antiseptic setting: the husband to the left reads a newspaper at a dinner table displaying fruit and a decorated jug of milk (a cipher for the now excised farm), while a mother holds her naked child at the center of the composition. The mother,

the nation as a whole. As a result, some American Idealist works were a blatant grafting of two foci into one composition. Seymour Fogel's studies for the Social Security Building in Washington (i.e., "big government") in 1941 are prime examples of this. These studies were intended to represent the advantages of the new Social Security system over the former state of affairs in the nation and were entitled, fittingly, *The Nation—Security and Insecurity*.

The earliest study for the *Security* series shows both Regionalist and Social Realist themes in an awkward synthesis of American Idealism. To the left of the composition two farmers are seen, one planting a tree while the other hitches up a horse to a plow. A barn and silo are seen in the distance. To the right appear typical icons of Social Realism, a muscular worker stripped to the waist with a hammer on his shoulder and a pristine factory building in the background. At the center, as if to show the benefits not just of the fledgling Social Security system but also the synthesis of farm and factory, a woman and her child sit down to a table loaded with food (the produce of the farm) presided over by a man who appears to be more of a waiter at a restaurant than the woman's husband (presumably representing the higher standard of living provided by the presence of industry as much as Social Security). However, Fogel, ever-ambivalent about industry and technology, includes an out-of-place gibbet-shaped girder assemblage just to the left and above the well-laden table that, although indicative of new industrial construction and a brighter future for the country, appears positively threatening, hanging above the heads of the figures like the sword of Damocles, or a gallows awaiting a noose.

In the final mural designs that Fogel executed for the lobby of the Social Security Building, some significant changes have oc-

no longer sitting sedately at the table as before, has assumed the centrality of the man in the earlier study, while the child has now lost his clothes. The composition again features a gridwork of girders to the right (industry), but this is balanced on the left by a trellis grid supporting a climbing plant (a stand-in for the farm). In these compositions we see the progressive attempts at synthesis that characterized American Idealism.

Fogel revisits this theme in yet another study for the Social Security mural. Just to the left of center a powerfully built man, again with the iconographic hammer over his left shoulder (his



Yet another study for the Social Security mural by Seymour Fogel. Here, Fogel once again introduces depictions of the farm. (Courtesy of Fogel Art, LLC.)

right hand grasps the stereotypical symbol of the worker, a lunch pail), strides toward the viewer in the exact same manner as the woman in the composition discussed above. (Fogel throughout his work transfers power between men and women equally, highly atypical of Section art and well ahead of his time.) To the right of the work, farmers once again reappear. A kneeling man in overalls with his back turned to the viewer is seen stacking ears of corn, while a man just beyond and above him threshes wheat. The tie-in between the farmers and the industrial workers is provided by a surveyor just to the right of center (science) surveying a stretch of winding river and mountains (Regionalist serenity). Once again we see the ominous girder gibbet, now placed above the striding worker with the hammer.

Other American Idealist works attain a more seamless synthesis between industry and rural settings. H. Louis Freund in his sketch for Paris, Arkansas, for the 48 States Competition (*Gateway to Mt. Magazine Federal Park*) depicts a broad vista of wheat fields and table mountains that also features sleek automobiles on a modern highway and a factory. Bruce Mitchell's 48 States sketch for Westerly, Rhode Island, depicts a stone-cutting operation replete with cogwheels and girders. Joe Jones's *Turning a Corner* (USPO Anthony, Kansas, 1939) depicts a farm scene, but one dominated in the foreground not by bucolic horses and plows but by modern farm machinery.

In virtually all aspects of American Idealism, artists attempted, however successfully or unsuccessfully, to synthesize regional themes with the machinery, technology, and industry of big government, a focus that had appeal to Social Realists who were concerned about the miserable plight of the masses in a country that formerly would not address their needs. When Natalie Henry painted her Springdale, Arkansas, mural *Local Industries*, she used the term "industry" in a strictly Regionalist manner, depicting people picking fruit and feeding chickens. Yet, Mitchell Siporin in his Decatur, Illinois, mural *The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry* was addressing this New Deal dilemma of valuing local integrity yet championing progress and technology by painting a mostly Regionalist scene of farmers and miners that nevertheless included, directly next to the Regionalist icon of the family, machinery symbolic of industry. This fusion was carried even further by Harry Sternberg's Ambler, Pennsylvania, mural *The Family—Industry and Agriculture* that not only used the centrality of the family unit in the middle of the composition to join the farm on the right with the industrial mills on the left (placements appropriate politically as well as compositionally), but appeared to imply by means of his title that both agriculture and industry comprise the New Deal "family" that included all Americans. Park and Markowitz note: "A number of murals attempt to represent the relation between agriculture and industry. Some of these are about the processing of agricultural products into manufactured goods; some are about the brotherhood of workers in those industries; and others simply reflect the mixed economies of certain towns. Examples of the first sort are the sheep and woolen mill depicted in Eaton Rapids, Michigan, and the milk processing

and bottling operation in Mount Vernon, Washington. Works of the second carry two ideas: first, that to recover from the Depression, workers must pull together in a balanced economy; and second, that the identification of factory and farm workers and the recognition of their common interests could produce a better society in the future" (11).

Anti-Fascism

In 1938 Hitler annexed Austria, justifying his act of aggression by stating that all Germanic peoples should be reunited in his "Thousand Year Reich." In 1939 he snapped up Poland, and in 1940 he invaded France, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. At about the time that Hitler made his move on Austria, the Spanish Civil War was taking place. The Axis powers used Spain as a dress rehearsal for World War II, and they backed the Fascist Generalissimo Francisco Franco, who would eventually take over the country, leaving much of it (especially Toledo) in shambles.

The late 1930s were an odd time in America. Due to Roosevelt's skillful management, America was pulling up from the depths of the Great Depression, and optimism was further stoked by the opening of the 1939 New York World's Fair, which rose out of the dust and desolation of the decade like the Emerald City of Oz. Its promise of a wonderful world of the future was backed by the many fabulous inventions on display (including television), and people flocked to be a part of it all, to be citizens of "Democracy," at least for a day. Regrettably the year 1939 is also found stamped on the back of Nazi medals, and by the fair's second year, 1940, the future did not look bright at all. World War II had broken out in Europe.

American artists, who had come together, however uneasily, in the Section "Realist Coalition" (Park and Markowitz) now had an enemy common to both the left and right, to Social Realists and Regionalists. Seymour Fogel addressed the Fascist threat as early as 1939 and executed many works of mobiliary art exploring the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. In one of his more powerful colored studies, we see a group of women gathered amidst the slanting remains of bombed out buildings. The women are seen as mere bits of rubble themselves, as a line of them fades away to the left into forms indistinguishable from the jagged edges of war-shattered concrete.

Fogel in much of his anti-Fascist work depicts the horrors of war through the theme of the mother and child. He used his theme extensively during the 1930s as a symbol of stability, hope, and the promise of a future lived in better circumstances than that of the Great Depression. In his war and anti-Fascist works, this icon is used to indicate the opposite of all this. The mother is usually shown grieving, and the child is often dead. In a work dating to 1936, we see the first representations of this theme. A mother with her back to the viewer is shown holding her lifeless child, who is slumped in her arms. The composition is virtually monochromatic, a uniform gray except for a band of rose reminiscent of blood.

Most anti-Fascist work was confined to the war years themselves, when the government encouraged artists to submit designs for war posters. A number of slogans were established such as "Deliver Us From Evil" or "Slave World/Free World," and artists were challenged to come up with artistic renditions of the slogan. "Deliver Us From Evil" called to mind, at least in Fogel's submissions, Nazi concentration camps, replete with victims of starvation, barbed wire, and Nazi flags. Other proposed designs included once again a mother and child wrapped in the vise-like grip of a red python emblazoned with swastikas. And in one of his more shocking designs, he represented a large red hand with a swastika drawn on it, dripping with blood and poised above a number of tiny people, ready to crush them as if they were so many insignificant flies. The theme of "Slave World/Free World" inspired a figure violently breaking the chains of Fascism that had formerly bound him. And in another odd pencil and red-ink study, which may or may not have anti-Fascist meaning, seven naked men strain at a gigantic yoke in the exhausting act of pulling forth an enormous and roughly sketched statue of a seated figure. This puzzling sketch, because of its ambiguous (and unfinished) nature, has not previously been commented upon by the authors. It could be historical or even mythological, but the dating of its conception could well link it with Fogel's other anti-Fascist compositions.



In this powerful work, Seymour Fogel depicts the horrors of Fascism by showing the effects of war on women's lives. (Courtesy of Fogel Art, LLC.)

In conclusion, then, the growing menace of Fascism in Europe served to further coalesce Regionalists and Social Realists beyond their tenuous alliance achieved by the Section. Faced with an enemy common to both ideologies, as well as to the democratic foundation upon which America and her freedom of speech and expression was built (which allowed such heated dialogue to be carried out in the first place), we find such ideologically divergent artists as John Stuart Curry and Seymour Fogel working to artistically address a common threat. Just as the war made such federal programs as the Project and the Section superfluous, due to the vigorous economic boost that the war provided, America's Axis enemies made for strange artistic bedfellows. □

Endnotes

1. Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 5.
2. Jared A. Fogel and Robert L. Stevens, *Crying Out in Protest: The Formative Years of the Art of Seymour Fogel*, unpublished manuscript, 1997.
3. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, 57.
4. Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 41.
5. *Ibid.*, 68.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Sue Bridwell Beckham, in her insightful study of depression murals in the South, speaks of Rohland writing of another mural she painted in Bunkie, Louisiana, in 1939 that "she wanted to paint 'the darky' picking cotton and that 'it would not seem that the southerners could be offended if I (included) a glorified white overseer'" (page 187). The dominant position of the white farmer above the black man in the Sylvania mural could be interpreted as a reflection of a similar attitude on Rohland's part.
8. Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression, America 1929–1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984/1993), 158.
9. Marling, *Wall to Wall America*, 68.
10. Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 138.
11. *Ibid.*, 54–55.

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