

Art for a People: An Iconographic and Cultural Study of Mural Painting in Minnesota's New Deal Art Programs

*People of the Soil. Life in Grand Rapids and the Upper Mississippi. Favorite Recreations. Early Logging at Koochiching Falls. Production. Discovery of Ore.*¹ These murals and dozens more decorate the walls of post offices, schools, hospitals, and town halls across the state of Minnesota from Ely and Brandon to Rochester and Minneapolis (Image 2.5). They show images of men working in Minnesota industries and on farms of different types. Other murals show historical scenes of regions and communities in significant or representative moments. There are scenes of children playing, of men and women dancing, and of Native Americans in their traditional lifestyle. The murals depict scenes in rural areas and in the wilderness, though few urban backdrops. There are even a few rare abstract, surrealist, or more modernly artistic images. In the figurative murals, communities gather together and individuals do their part. Life appears prosperous and steady. Rather than expressing any extreme emotion, either overly happy or sad and distressed, characters appear determined and incredibly focused. Overall, these murals present a fascinating collection of both unmistakable patterns and striking similarities, along with a certain degree of diversity in artistic styles and subject. These are the murals of the New Deal art programs in Minnesota.

These murals have been a part of their respective communities for over 60 years, yet few people fully realize the heritage and history that these images carry with them and the significant

¹All images are located in the back appendix section—These can be found at Images 2, 19, 21, 1, 16, and 20 respectively.

part they played in an innovative and unique government program. These murals, dating back to America's Great Depression in the 1930s, were created by the New Deal art programs, government-funded projects that commissioned art programs and artworks of all types for public buildings around the state and nation. These programs not only created artwork for communities spread throughout the state and nation, but also aimed to aid struggling, unemployed artists. Throughout the decade that these programs were active, thousands of artists employed nationwide impressively created over 223,600 artworks at a total cost of approximately \$83,500,000.² These programs were a one of a kind occurrence in this nation's history, for not only was this the first nationwide federal government sponsorship of the arts at such a large scale, but also, after these programs ended with the coming of World War II, no similar programs have been attempted since.³

These New Deal art programs not only kept a sizable portion of the nation's struggling artists in work during the Depression years, but they contributed significantly to the artistic life and legacy of individual communities nationwide. The artwork created through these programs became an enduring and significant part of each community where people would see it for years to come. These programs encompassed a great array of sponsored projects and forms of artistic expression from easel painting, sculpture, and printmaking to art education and design research.

One of the Federal Arts Programs' most lasting legacies came from its extensive programs of

²The data about the approximate total cost can be found in Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts*. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1997) 128. The amounts of artworks are listed (some approximately) by different program in Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 27, 39, 66, and Francis V. O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973). The specific figures are: Public Works of Art Project (PWAP)—15,663 pieces of art and craft (McKinzie 27); Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (Section)—1118 buildings decorated in 1083 cities (McKinzie 66); Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP)—89 murals, 65 sculptures, over 10,000 easel paintings (McKinzie 39); WPA's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP)—196,694 artworks (2566 murals, 17,744 sculptures, 108,099 easel paintings, 11,285 fine print masters, 22,000 Index of American Design plates, and 35,000 poster designs) (O'Connor 305).

³Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983) 18.

community mural painting, the art form most commonly associated with the New Deal.⁴ Through the New Deal mural programs, artists were chosen on the basis of either relief eligibility or artistic competition to paint murals in federal and non-federal buildings such as post offices, schools, town halls and hospitals in rural and urban areas across the nation. The creation of these murals makes a unique study because of the intense relationship of the artist as creator, the government as patron, and the society and public as a constant audience. The murals' added role as public art makes their content and iconography significant, not only to the communities where the murals were placed, but also as a picture of Minnesota's idealized life and communities within this Depression period and as expressions of differing philosophies of the New Deal arts programs themselves.

Few people know about these New Deal art programs, despite their significance in the 1930s and their continued national presence. For example, it is very common to see all New Deal art today referred to and collectively labeled as "WPA art," after the well-known Federal Arts Program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA/FAP).⁵ This relief program has become nearly synonymous with the New Deal.⁶ However, there were actually four distinct New Deal arts programs, organized by the Federal Government under several headings and sponsoring divisions: the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) of 1933-34, the Section of Painting and Sculpture of the Treasury Department ("The Section") of 1934-43, the Treasury

⁴Nancy A. Johnson, *Accomplishments: Minnesota Art Projects in the Depression Years* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Gallery, 1976) 6.

⁵In my research, I have run across several examples of this mislabeling, both in general secondary sources and even by reputable historical centers. In my hometown of Litchfield, MN, the post office painting *Street Scene* done by Section artist Elof Wedin was incorrectly labeled by the Meeker County Historical Society as a "WPA painting." (See "*Street Scene* by Elof Wedin," Meeker County Historical Society Archives, "Post Office" file, no date.) Even at the Minnesota Historical Society Archives, their set of 66 slides of twelve different New Deal murals statewide, the original inspiration for this thesis project, is labeled as "WPA Murals in Minnesota Buildings," yet seven of those twelve murals were actually created through the Treasury Section! Please see Appendix I for an attached list of mural slides at the Minnesota Historical Society – *WPA Murals in Minnesota Buildings* (Minnesota Historical Society, Sound and Visual Collection, slides taken 1976). Lists of the Treasury Section murals in Minnesota and of the WPA/FAP murals in the state are in Appendixes II and III, respectively.

⁶Bustard, 11.

Relief Art Project (TRAP) of 1935-1938, and finally the Works Progress/Projects Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) of 1935-1943.⁷ The WPA, the largest of the New Deal art programs, receives the bulk of the public acclaim of the New Deal arts program. Few people have ever heard of the other three, even the second largest Treasury Section program which had its own substantial scale and national reach in both rural and urban areas. Despite the attitude that the programs are either interchangeable or one and the same, the differences between the two major New Deal art programs, the WPA/FAP and the Section, are distinctive in their goals, criteria for hiring artists, and artistic tolerance, visually shown in the murals of each project.

Within the state of Minnesota, both of the two main New Deal art programs, the WPA/FAP and the Treasury Section, kept the field of mural painting active. Artists painted over 42 murals across the state through the WPA/FAP and another 21 through the Section.⁸ The murals that still exist today make an interesting inquiry, for through their idealized content and primarily realist style, they give insights into the history, art, and social attitudes of the period by reflecting life and values. Though not direct propaganda, these murals often portrayed life in a particularized, ideal style, meant to promote positive societal values amidst the struggles of the Depression. Furthermore, they reveal these insights within the distinct frames of the different New Deal arts programs and their goals for New Deal art. Through an iconographic content analysis of the New Deal murals in Minnesota and an exploration of existing secondary research, this study will investigate the question of what these murals portrayed to the American and, more specifically, the Minnesotan people. It will discuss these murals in terms of the artistic images

⁷Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*, 19.

⁸See Appendix II and III for lists of murals, as adapted from Park and Markowitz, p. 215-216 for Treasury Section murals and, for the WPA/FAP, from Euler, p. 94 with additional images found on the Minnesota Historical Society's online Visual Resources Database. These lists are discussed more fully in Note 4 above on p. 3.

they reflect of real life, society, and regional history in Minnesota during those Great Depression times, as well as of the significant societal attitudes toward work and community. In addition, this discussion will show how those images and their content also demonstrate the differences in mission, objectives and structure between the two major New Deal art programs, the Treasury Section and the WPA/FAP. This project will attempt to contextualize the murals' reflection within both the historical and art historical worlds at that time. By probing these subject matter, style, category, and attitude aspects in mural content, this study hopes to bring about a better understanding of these murals' expression of the American and Minnesotan scene, both in the WPA/FAP and Section murals. As this paper will go on to discuss, these murals are shaped in their subject matter and style by both the popular ideals, atmosphere, and controversial issues of the Depression era, as well as significantly by the different goals and organization of the distinct New Deal arts programs. These shaping factors are noticeable in the location, style, and subject matter of the murals and particularly in the underlying themes of work, community, and time period.

Historiography

The New Deal Art Programs, the mural projects, their breadth and impacts are not an overly studied area. However, over the past few decades, they have been the focus of limited new scholarship, prompted by the 1973 publication of Francis O'Connor's *Art for the Millions*, an edited collection of the memories and reflections of the New Deal's WPA artists.⁹ The New

⁹Francis O'Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973). As early as 1936, this book was already envisioned as a final report and reflection on the New Deal art programs, particularly the WPA/FAP. However, due to reorganizations within the programs and a periodic lack of interest, it was not until O'Connor took over the project in the 1960s that it could finally be published.

O'Connor has also published *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1972) and *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now; a Report on the*

Deal art programs in general have been the focuses of several studies by scholars at the national level.¹⁰ These general studies all portray the federally-funded New Deal art projects in a positive light, calling attention to their uniqueness in the field of government art patronage and the invaluable assistance they provided to the artists, despite some bureaucratic complications and conflicts that occurred in the attempt to balance government sponsorship and artistic freedom and process. More specific and useful studies of the national mural projects themselves discuss the art history and iconography of national mural paintings, the interaction between citizen, artist and government, comparisons between the artwork of the two main art programs (the Treasury Section and the WPA/FAP), and gender roles in New Deal artwork and theater.¹¹

New Deal Art Project. (Greenwich, CT: NY Graphic Society, 1969), an in-depth and specifically detailed look at the New York New Deal art projects, including project listings, budget information, and artist reactions. As early as 1936, this book was already envisioned as a final report and reflection on the New Deal art programs, particularly the WPA/FAP. However, due to reorganizations within the programs and a periodic lack of interest, it was not until O'Connor took over the project in the 1960s that it could finally be published

¹⁰ The majority of later secondary sources quote Richard McKinzie's 1973 study on New Deal art projects, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) as an essential and comprehensive general work on the New Deal's visual art programs, including all of the four separate programs: PWAP, the Section, TRAP, and WPA/FAP. Milton Meltzer's 1976 *Violins and Shovels: The WPA Arts Projects* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976) covers all the WPA's "Federal One" art projects from the frame of personal recollection, including not only the subdivision of the Federal Art Project, but the Federal Theatre Project, Federal Writers' Project, and Federal Music Project. Bruce Bustard's *A New Deal for the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1997) is an informative, but non-scholarly summary of the four projects and a catalog of the 1997 National Archives and Records Administration exhibition of the same name

¹¹ The most helpful and in-depth study in this category is Karal Ann Marling's 1982 book, *Wall-to-Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), which examines the iconography of post office murals sponsored by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (not the WPA/FAP) from an art history perspective. In this work, Marling relates common themes and subjects in New Deal art and shows it as a gauge of public taste at the time. Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz's text *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984) also deals with the Treasury Section program, though its focus is more the program's unique balance of bureaucrat, artist, and citizen. Park and Markowitz also delve into the interplay between the involved forces of fine art and democracy and of regionalism and nationalism. Both these texts cover their subject with great depth, but their focus is only the Treasury Section program, not the WPA, and their conclusions and study are based on a national, not state level. The relationship between the two main programs, the Section and the WPA, their directors Edward Bruce and Holger Cahill, and their differences in mission and practice are the main strands in Belisario Contreras' *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), another helpful book on this subject. Barbara Melosh's 1991 revisionist study *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in the New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution, 1991) is also useful in the study of the iconography and content of New Deal murals, but within the more narrow topic of feminist critique and gender portrayals in New Deal art and theater.

From an art history perspective, if these New Deal programs are mentioned at all in American art textbooks, most authors mention them briefly and more for the uniqueness of the federal sponsorship of the artists than for the merit of the works of art themselves.¹² Stylistically, the actual artwork is generally overshadowed in favor of the modernism that was emerging in the American art scene, as well as the mainstream Regionalist style exemplified by Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton.¹³

Though the New Deal arts projects were active in Minnesota, researchers have dedicated little scholarship to the topic of New Deal mural painting in Minnesota. Susan Ray Euler discusses the WPA's art education programs in her 1990 dissertation and there are a few articles written for the journal *Minnesota History* that discuss Minnesota's New Deal arts projects in general.¹⁴ There have been no studies done specifically on mural painting in Minnesota, nor on the content or iconography of the mural painting in the state. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever even compiled a master list of all New Deal murals within the state.

This study, unique to the field, will attempt to narrow that gap of information and research by finding these mural images and focusing directly on the content of the Minnesota's

¹² For example, as Barbara Rose stated in her text *American Art since 1900*, "the WPA programs produced very little art of any consequence that has survived." Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975) as quoted in Roy Rosenzweig and Barbara Melosh, "Government and the Arts: Vices from the New Deal Era," *The Journal of American History* (September 1990, 77 (2)) 599. .

¹³ Art historians Francis O'Connor, Matthew Baigell, and Belisario Contreras, and Karal Ann Marling, were among the first to take this New Deal genre of art seriously, thus making them unusual within the discipline in the 1970s and 1980s. See Rosenzweig and Melosh, 599.

¹⁴ Susan Ray Euler's 1990 University of Minnesota doctoral dissertation, entitled *Art for a Democracy: The WPA's Art Education Programs in Minnesota, 1935-1943* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), is the most comprehensive study done on New Deal art in Minnesota, discussing at length the diverse elements of the WPA's art education programs within the state of Minnesota. She includes information on the mural programs and the structure of the WPA/FAP in the state, but she mentions murals only in relation to their educational role. The WPA/FAP is the only mural program she includes.

In other scholarship, both Thomas O'Sullivan and Keith Hendrickson have written articles on the New Deal arts projects in Minnesota for *Minnesota History*, a publication of the Minnesota Historical Society. See Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr., "The WPA Federal Art Projects in Minnesota, 1935-1943," *Minnesota History* (Vol. 53, No. 5, Spring 1993) 170-183. Both articles appeared in the same issue of *Minnesota History* and provided complementary information. These present a brief introduction to the programs, rather than an in-depth study, and they focus on all areas, not merely mural painting.

New Deal mural painting in the variations found. These variations, as this paper will discuss, reflect differences characterized by the distinct goals and procedures of the New Deal art programs and the shaping effect of the ideals and discussed issues in the 1930s. These differences and similarities will be particularly examined in the murals' treatment of significant common themes of work, community, and time period.

Background to the New Deal Art Projects

The New Deal arts projects were one part of the federal government's dramatic legislative attempt to combat the grim effects of the Great Depression, the "worst economic collapse in national history." The Great Stock Market Crash of 1929 threw the United States into a decade-long financial and social panic. Banks failed, confidence dropped, unemployment skyrocketed, and the nation was caught in a seemingly endless cycle of poverty and struggle. In his first inaugural address on March 4, 1933, United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared, "Our greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously." To accomplish this monumental task, Roosevelt put into motion the New Deal, a wide, ambitious, and unprecedented collection of government social relief programs. The programs not only attempted to put the nation to work and solve the unemployment crisis, but it also aimed to make the best, most productive use of the participants' labor, skills, and talents to benefit the nation.¹⁵

Within the New Deal, there was a great range of programs with varied ways and means of attempting to cure the ills of the Depression. Programs such as the Federal Emergency Relief

¹⁵See Victor Bondi, ed. *American Decades: 1930-1939* (New York: Gale Research, Inc., 1995) 218; Catherine Reef, *Working in America: An Eyewitness History* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2000) 204; and Franklin D. Roosevelt. *1933 Inaugural Address*. Reprinted in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Vol. 2*. (New York City: Random House, 1938) 11.

Administration (FERA), the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) emphasized merely getting relief money to as many hungry, unemployed citizens as possible. Thus, they operated more with a dole system, creating work for people, regardless of how meaningless. The other school of thought within the New Deal emphasized quality over relief, exemplified in the Public Works Administration (PWA) programs. Within the PWA building programs, the emphasis was on creating something tangible for the United States and using that normal production and employment of skilled workers to spur on the economy. The base of this program was not broad enough to have a large effect in the economy, but the President was still in favor of programs that avoided a direct dole. As Roosevelt stated, a dole is “a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit...I am not willing that the vitality of our people be further sapped by the giving of case, of market baskets, of a few hours of weekly work cutting grass, raking leaves or picking up papers in the public parks.”¹⁶ The creation of another New Deal agency, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was the attempt to reconcile these two forces by providing useful, productive projects that would actually use the skills of its large number of workers nationwide. This theme of emphasis on quantity of relief vs. quality of productivity was constant throughout the New Deal and became a significant difference between the New Deal’s art projects as well.¹⁷

Motivation for the New Deal’s federal art projects stemmed from this same discussion of how best to put the nation back to work and bolster the economy. Politicians noted that, though there were many programs set up for the destitute, there were few alternatives in government work relief programs for white collar workers to find aid and use their skills.¹⁸ Creation of the

¹⁶Meltzer, 13.

¹⁷Information obtained through an interview with Ken Jones, Professor of Twentieth Century American Political History at St. John’s University, pending further secondary research.

¹⁸Hendrickson, 170.

FERA and CWA were in part the federal government's early answer to this question with their introduction of professional and white-collar positions, but those programs still did nothing for the nation's starving and struggling artists.¹⁹ As Harry Hopkins, the chief of the FERA, CWA, and later the WPA, memorably stated regarding these artists, "Hell! They've got to eat just like other people."²⁰ The challenge then was creating a program by which these artists nationwide could both find the relief they needed and use their skills the greatest benefit of the nation.

These art projects sponsored through the Treasury Department and the WPA were remarkably comprehensive in the spheres of art they each included. The Treasury Department, which focused its three programs mainly on the decoration of public buildings, commissioned artists to create easel paintings, sculptures, fine prints, and murals. The WPA's Federal Arts Project widened the scope even more, integrating fine art production with art education programs, art design research, poster creation, community art centers and federal art galleries. These programs gave the arts in the United States a needed boost in terms of economic advantages and participation. Though these arts programs in general spread into the many different parts of the art world, both sponsoring bureaus dedicated one of the largest parts of their focus to national programs for the production of community murals. These murals and their artistic and ideological content are the focus of this particular study.

One specific source of original inspiration for federal patronage of the arts, especially of the federal mural projects, evolved from a contemporaneous national mural project among Mexican artists. From the early 1920s until roughly 1940, the great Mexican muralists Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as well as several other minor painters, took part in a "massive propaganda campaign" sponsored by the Mexican government

¹⁹O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1969) 17.

²⁰Park and Markowitz, 5.

to promote revolutionary ideals of Mexican nationalism, Mexican heritage, and the post-revolutionary Mexican state.²¹ These creatively artistic, dramatic, political-charged, and often controversial murals produced under this Mexican mural “renaissance” soon became celebrated in the art world.²² They revitalized the mural art form and renewed emphasis in the role of socio-political art.

This mural reawakening and social art movement first seriously came to the attention of the American government with a letter written in May of 1933 to President Roosevelt by George Biddle, an old classmate of Roosevelt’s from his Groton and Harvard days. Biddle was a painter himself who eventually went on to work for the Treasury section.²³ In this noteworthy letter, Biddle wrote:

The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possibly because Obregon [the Mexican president] allowed Mexican artists to work at plumber’s 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 cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the **social ideals that you are struggling to achieve**. And I am convinced

²¹Leonard Folgarait, *Mural Painting and Social Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940: Art of the New Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 6.

²²Folgarait, 9.

²³Bustard, 4.

that our mural art with a little impetus can soon result, for the first time in our history, in a **vital national expression**. [emphasis added]²⁴

Just as the Mexican murals showed the nationalistic ideals of the post-revolutionary Mexican state within artistic expression, it was Biddle's vision that these American murals would express a sense of the United States and its essence. Thus, from the very inception of the mural projects, the ideology behind the murals was every bit as important as the beneficial and practical function for the artists. What were these social ideals that led to this "vital national expression"?

The significance of an American movement like this, beyond merely the funding for artists and creation of fine artwork, lies in the theory behind mural painting as a genre. In their New Deal definition, murals are paintings permanently fixed in a public location or importance and common use by the community. In discussing the difference between large paintings and murals, Euler writes, "A mural, no matter how it is attached to the wall, carries with it a social intent. It is meant to be displayed in public, and to be readily understood by the public."²⁵ In other words, the mural is a true social art form. Because mural painting is inherently public art, its content matters. These murals were deliberately located in places like post offices, town halls, schools, and hospitals where there would be steady streams of people, providing a sure and usually wide audience. In the words of Holger Cahill, the director of the WPA arts project, "Mural painting is not a studio art; by its very nature it is social. In its great periods it has always been associated with the expression of social meanings, the experience, history, ideas and beliefs of a community."²⁶ Society is an essential part of the function and identity, both within its subject matter and outside as audience. Art historian Karal Ann Marling echoes this thought, saying, "The mural remained a painting, but it was a painting last; first, it was a depiction of

²⁴Marling, 31.

²⁵Euler, 89.

²⁶Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936) 32.

objects and scenes, a picture, a symbol, an event. The mural was an aesthetic entity last; first, it was a forum for discussion of national issues, a window on times past and times to come, a mirror of current anxieties and aspirations.”²⁷ These murals were considered integral parts of their communities, and thus the issues, ideals, and discussion they raised were central within the communities as well.

In Minnesota, these New Deal murals clearly were a well-known, important, and commonly respected part of their respective communities. The 1938 Federal Writers’ Project’s *WPA Guide to Minnesota* lists the St. Cloud, Milaca, Little Falls, and Gillette State Hospital murals, as well as several others, as parts of the community important enough to include in a summary travel guide listing only the most significant sites statewide.²⁸ In general, the people of these Minnesota communities had an interest and enthusiasm for the program as well. In the case of the Treasury Section’s Chisholm Post Office mural *Discovery of Ore* by Betty Carney, the postmaster wrote, “[The] true attestation of the popularity is the fact that the older persons of the community, who have seen the whole period [of mining] develop, come in repeatedly to admire the mural.”²⁹

In addition to murals’ role as a social art form integral to the community, the mural art form implies a sense of permanency, more so than a simple painting or sculpture would. The ideas and ideals presented in these murals would then be ones of great importance for the communities for them to want to imprint those ideas on the walls of their buildings for years to come. In theory and practice, the murals are a perfect artistic genre with which to study

²⁷Marling, 14.

²⁸Federal Writers’ Project of Works Progress Administration, *The WPA Guide to Minnesota* (1938; reprint, St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985) 260, 327, 435, and 225.

²⁹Marling, 190.

relationship between the history and art history of a period, the interaction between society and art, and the social ideals which connect the two.

For this study of the New Deal murals in Minnesota, discovering and analyzing these expressive social meanings in the iconography and ideology promoted in the mural art form is an essential part to truly understanding the mural projects and the time period itself. As we shall see, the meanings and representations in the murals evolved from a combination of the local history and character of the location, the controversial and encouraged ideals of the general Depression time period, and also the specific missions and intents of the individual and distinctive New Deal art projects.

A Successful Experiment: The Public Works of Art Project

Though the New Deal art projects stemmed from the same basic inspiration and thought process, over the decade of the 1930s four different New Deal-sponsored arts projects developed, each differing in sponsorship, organization and goals and thus affecting the artwork and murals produced through each. The first of these projects, the Public Works of Art Project, was founded in 1933, just a few months after Biddle's letter to Roosevelt, as an purposefully short-term, experimental program to test the viability of government art programs in the United States. Under the directorship of Edward Bruce, this program was housed under Treasury Department of the federal government, but funded by Civil Works Administration, one of the New Deal work relief programs. The government's dual goals with this original program were to create an effective work relief program for artists to find aid and for them to use their skills to the benefit of the nation with a "genuine embellishment of public property."³⁰ The dual nature of the program created a conflict for officials as to whether the program should be run as a work relief project reaching artists in need or as an art sponsorship program foremost seeking high quality

³⁰O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 19.

artwork. After the conclusion of the PWAP program, this conflict of interests eventually led to the creation of two separate government art programs, the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and the WPA's Federal Arts Project, each fulfilling a different mission for the arts and artists in the United States.

The PWAP program encouraged and funded art numerous different genres, styles, and subject matters all based around the guiding program theme "The American Scene." This theme, paralleling the contemporary "American Scene" mainstream art style, was left quite vague in definition and interpreted in a variety of ways by the artists of the program. As L.W. Roberts, Junior Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, stated in his final report after the projects end, "The theme provided abundant food for imagination, and set no stringent limits on the artist's choice of subject matter, since it allowed him to select from any phase of the life and setting of a vast country."³¹ However, artists were still not always sure what qualified as American enough for the project. As Minnesota PWAP painter Syd Fossum recalled, "To make sure that they were truly "American Scene," we included in our paintings, plenty of NRA [National Recovery Act, an early New Deal legislation] symbols with their blue eagles."³² Though vague, the "American Scene" theme did discourage all projects that were abstract, controversial or overly experimental or unconventional.³³ This theme, though only directly stated for this program, continued to shape the artwork created for the Treasury Department's two consecutive programs, the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and the Treasury Relief Art Project.

³¹Quoted in untitled report on Public Works of Art Project, *Clement B. Haupers and Clara Gardner Mairs Papers*. Minnesota Historical Society, 1933-1943 (Microfilm Reel #1, frame 0573).

³²Quoted in Thomas O'Sullivan, "Joint Venture or Testy Alliance?: The Public Works of Art Project in Minnesota, 1933-34," *Great Plans Quarterly* (vol. 9, no. 2, Spring 1989) 89.

³³O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 20.

Over the brief seven months of this program's existence, it employed 3500 artists nationwide who created 15,660 artworks, including 700 murals.³⁴ This program, though short, was monumental in the history of the arts in the United States, for it was the first nationwide, large-scale experiment of government sponsorship of the arts. Forbes Watson, technical director of the PWAP, stated that the program "quite easily may turn out to be the greatest step toward a finer civilization that the Government of the United States has ever previously taken."³⁵

When this successful short-term program came to an end, it was replaced in the Treasury Department by the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (referred to as the Treasury Section or just "The Section"), one of the two largest New Deal arts programs. The very next year, this program was joined in art sponsorship by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, or WPA. The WPA/FAP, as it is usually abbreviated, was the largest and still the most well known of the four programs. The other New Deal arts program, the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), was the smallest of the governmental art programs. Also begun in 1935, this program was housed under the Treasury Department, but funded with a WPA grant.

In my research of Minnesota murals, all but three New Deal murals that I have found record of belong to these two major programs. I have found record of 21 Treasury Section murals and 42 WPA/FAP murals across the state. The three mural exceptions I have found, two from the TRAP and one from the PWAP, are all painted by artist and Litchfield, Minnesota native David Granahan.³⁶ Because of the limited artwork available from the PWAP and TRAP,

³⁴Baigell, 46.

³⁵Baigell, 50.

³⁶At the end of the PWAP's span, Granahan painted a series of murals about the industrial, recreational and artistic history of Minneapolis for the Gateway Building of the Bureau of Information in Minneapolis: *Industry—Early Minneapolis*, *Street Scene—Early Minneapolis*, and *Opera—Early Minneapolis* (Image 23). Later, for the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), Granahan completed *Cultivation of Raspberries* in 1937 for the Hopkins Post Office (Image 24) and *Construction – St. Cloud* for the St. Cloud Post Office (Image 25). For information placing

in this thesis, I will be focusing mainly on the two largest projects, the Treasury Section and the WPA's Federal Arts Project. However, the three Treasury Programs share much in common in terms of style and content, so the PWAP and TRAP murals are still applicable to the discussion.

The Fundamental Difference: Goals of the New Deal Federal Art Projects

Though the New Deal art projects stemmed from the same basic inspiration and thought process, over the decade of the 1930s four different New Deal-sponsored arts projects developed: The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (Section), Treasury Relief Arts Project (TRAP), and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP). Each of these, particularly the two main programs of the Section and WPA/FAP, differed in sponsorship, organization and goals, thus significantly affecting the style and content of the artwork and murals produced through each.

The general purpose of the New Deal's federal art projects was to provide opportunities for artists nationwide to use their skills, produce artwork, and find some relief in the struggle against the economic hardships of the Depression. Each program, however, had a different take on how to best accomplish this, as well as on which part of that general purpose was the most important—the work relief or the artwork itself. The Treasury Section gave priority to producing the highest quality artwork within its program, even making artists compete for commissions. Participating artists needed to be somehow economically eligible for this government work, but talent and artistic qualifications were by far the more important factor. On the other end of the spectrum, the WPA/FAP was founded directly as a work relief program, wanting to put as many people to work as possible on a great variety of both high and low artistic

these murals in the TRAP and PWAP, see O'Sullivan, "Joint Ventures or Testy Alliance?: The Public Works of Art Project in Minnesota," 94 and unknown art journal at Minnesota Historical Society, p. 554.

projects. According to general WPA regulations, 90% of WPA/FAP participants needed to be on relief and thus aiding the artist was more important than the work produced.³⁷ This fundamental difference between the two programs inspired sharply contrasting missions and distinct specific objectives for the Section and the WPA/FAP. Just as the ideals and issues of the time period affected the content of the murals, this inherent difference between the programs shaped the artwork of the two programs as well.

A Careful Plan: Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture

In approaching their mission for the federal arts projects from the very beginning, the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture emphasized the quality of the art produced over the quantity or effectiveness of its work relief function. In the order establishing the Treasury Section, Secretary of the Treasury Morgenthau recorded central five objectives for the new program:

1. To secure **suitable art of the best quality** for the **embellishment of public buildings**;
2. To carry out this work in such a way as will assist in **stimulating, as far as practicable, development of art in this country** and reward what is regarded as the outstanding talent which develops;
3. So far as consistent with a high standard of art, to employ local talent;
4. To endeavor to secure the cooperation of people throughout the country interested in the arts and whose judgment in connection with art has the respect of the Section in selecting artists for the work to be done and criticism and advice as to their production;
5. In carrying out this work, to make every effort to **afford an opportunity to all artists on the sole test of their qualifications** as artists and, accordingly, **to encourage competitions** wherever practicable recognizing the fact, however, that certain artists in the country, because of their recognized talents are entitled to receive work without competition.³⁸ [emphasis added]

³⁷O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 25.

³⁸O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now*, 21-22. O'Connor quoted these objectives from *Bulletin No. 1*, Section of Painting and Sculpture, Public Works Branch, Procurement Division, Treasury Department, Washington, D.C. (March 1, 1935), p. 3-4.

For a large part, these objectives stemmed from the original organization of the Treasury art projects. When the first of the New Deal art projects were conceived by the national leaders, the government used existing federal art structures and channels to organize this program's work and sponsorship.³⁹ In the decades preceding the Depression, the government, under the auspices of the Treasury Department's Procurement Division, had commissioned a modest amount of art for decoration of the public buildings constructed by the Department. The Procurement Division was the part of the government responsible of the construction of federal buildings, and 1% of this funding was always reserved for artwork and decoration.⁴⁰ Without the employment crisis of the 1930s, the entire focus of this earlier sponsorship was on the artwork, not the artists. Thus, when the Public Works of Art Project was founded in 1933 and its successor, the Section of Painting and Sculpture, came about in 1934, the Treasury auspices were a logical choice of leadership for these programs in their creation of art for public buildings. Likewise, just as the same structures were used, the Treasury's prior focus on the artwork itself continued on into the New Deal programs. The Treasury's New Deal art programs were essentially large and elaborate extensions of existing public works programs.

This focus on the artwork and its high quality went much deeper into the program's operation than a mere surface assertion. Treasury Art Director Edward Bruce had a specific vision for which styles and subjects would make the most "suitable art of the best quality." He believed that the art most suited to the purpose of the program, to the federal buildings being decorated, and to the communities receiving the artwork was a realist, representational style,

³⁹O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now*, 17.

⁴⁰O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now*, 22.

similar to the work of the regionalist painters in mainstream art.⁴¹ Two excellent examples of this artistic style are the Treasury Section murals *Early Logging at Koochiching Falls* by Lucia Wiley, painted for the International Falls Post Office (Image 1) and *People of the Soil* by Seymour Fogel, painted for the Cambridge Post Office (Image 2). Experimental art work, such as abstractionism, cubism, and surrealism did not fit the profile and was discouraged. Negative murals were frowned upon,⁴² as were any radical themes that might bring embarrassment to the Treasury Department.⁴³ Because of this rigorous concern, it is clear that the murals were seen as products of the Section and government patron, rather than as creative artworks of the individual artists themselves.

In the field of mural painting, one way that the Section sought these “suitable,” high quality murals and subtly controlled its artwork was through art competitions for the mural commission. Thirteen times throughout the program’s existence, artists anonymously submitted sketches to compete for major government building and post office commissions.⁴⁴ Due to the competitive and prestigious nature of these competitions, if a sketch did not match the intended style or subject matter of the program, it was not accepted. Section Director Edward Bruce had an open preference for realistic and representational art, so few abstract or academic style painters tended to even apply for Section work.⁴⁵ By these competitions, styles were controlled without a specific directive of theme, subject matter, or style.

Though the intent of this control within the mural creation was to produce high quality federal art and to influence the development of the American art world, this often backfired,

⁴¹Two excellent examples of this artistic style are the Treasury Section murals *Early Logging at Koochiching Falls* by Lucia Wiley, painted for the International Falls Post Office (See Image 1) and *People of the Soil* by Seymour Fogel, painted for the Cambridge Post Office (See Image 2).

⁴²Park and Markowitz, 179.

⁴³Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*, 51.

⁴⁴O’Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now*, 23.

⁴⁵Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*, 18.

because the Section was “not open to permitting the artist the absolute artistic and ideological freedom he needed to realize that goal completely.”⁴⁶ Without that freedom, artists were caught in a single style, without the flexibility to grow or explore new styles and motifs. Artists learned how to “paint Section” to make their work acceptable for earning commissions.⁴⁷ For example, the Minnesota muralist Elsa Laubach Jemne’s mural painting style changed significantly from her 1921 “romanticized landscape” mural in the St. Cloud Courthouse to her rigid realist works for the Treasury Section such as her *Iron-Ore Mines* for the Ely Post Office (Get Courthouse Image!).⁴⁸ Thus, the artists were limited in contributing in a significant way to new movements and themes within the American art scene. The Section also watched subject matter closely, continuing to encourage the theme of the “American Scene,” a requirement of the earlier PWAP program.⁴⁹ In comparison to the sixteen different regional divisions of the PWAP, the centralization of the Section project under one, federal auspice only advanced a closer supervision of the government over the individual artists and their projects.⁵⁰ Even after the competitions, it was not uncommon for Section officials to require changes in murals while the artists were working in order that the murals better fit the Section intent.⁵¹ Standards were high and the murals lived up to them, but artistic freedom suffered. Many of the major muralists of the 1930s actually chose not to take part in the Treasury Section commissions because of this tight restriction. As Thomas Hart Benton, one of the foremost Regionalist painters and muralists of the early 1930s, objected,

⁴⁶O’Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now*, 24.

⁴⁷McKinzie, 55.

⁴⁸From a comparison of images from the Minnesota Historical Society’s Visual Resources Database (<http://collections.mnhs.org/visualresources>) and the Stearns History Center’s “Elsa Laubach Jemne” file under Arts. The quotation is taken from Christine Krueger’s article “Mural Master,” *Minnesota Monthly* (November 1997) 28.

⁴⁹Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*, 101.

⁵⁰Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*, 101-102.

⁵¹O’Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 24.

I am not myself a completely responsible part in the contract. You and others share responsibility with me – and to such an extent that you feel you have to watch me and pet me along to keep me from running you onto the brink of possible difficulty...If you can ever give me a contract in which all responsibility is mine, in which I am completely trusted to do a good job and over which no one but myself has effective rights of approval or disapproval I'll work. Otherwise, I can't be sure I'll do a real piece of work.⁵²

Because of this careful and well-intentioned control, the murals that resulted were a more traditional, constructed, and ideal version of life in America, lacking the spontaneity and diversity that would have resulted without the back and forth with administration. For these reasons, the murals of the Section in federal buildings and especially in post offices across America, and Minnesota in particular, have a relative uniformity of realist, regionalist styles and theoretical content that is possible to characterize, expressing a specific reflection of life within the nation and state.

An Ideal Minnesota: Minnesota's Treasury Section Murals

Scattered across the state of Minnesota, there were 22 painted post office murals sponsored by the Treasury Department during the New Deal.⁵³ These show up all over the state,

⁵²Letter from Thomas Hart Benton to Edward B. Rowan of the Treasury section administration, October 7, 1936, quoted in O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 24.

⁵³Of this complete list, I have a sample of 12 murals with images I have seen, from a combination of the slide collection at the MN Historical Society and images included in various secondary sources. I also have a list of titles for all Section murals, giving some indication as to their subject matter. The murals with images that the majority of this summary and critique is based upon are noted by symbols in the list in Appendix II: Treasury Section Murals in Minnesota. Also included in the list are two murals sponsored by the Treasury as part of the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), a more minor and shorter lived project not dealt with at length in this study. At this point, I am leaving out several sculptural post office decorations and the Litchfield post office painting, which is a painting rather than a mural, and does not follow either the style or subject matter of the Section murals.

from International Falls to Caledonia, and from Breckenridge to St. Paul (Map Image 2 ½).⁵⁴ Most are located in rural towns, the majority of which were between 1000-3500 people according to the 1930 census.⁵⁵ Of the twenty out-of-state Minnesota towns, fifteen are county seats, clearly centers for their surrounding areas. Only two of the Section murals are in the Twin Cities Metro area: St. Paul North Branch and St. Paul White Bear Lake Branch. I will refer to the towns in four distinct parts of Minnesota: North (from the state's northern border to just south of Duluth, with a total of five murals), Central (clustered across the state within a roughly 30 mile radius of Interstate Highway 94, with a total of 8 murals), South (in smaller East and West clusters, with 3 in the West and 2 in the East), and Metro area (with a total of 2 murals). Interestingly, there were no Section murals in the Northwest corner of the state. These regions will become significant in the discussion of the chosen subject of the murals' contents.

Due to the federal nature of the Treasury Section program, these Section murals were only housed in federal buildings which, in Minnesota and most other locations outside of Washington D.C., meant post offices in towns and cities across the state. In each community, post offices are central buildings, directed at no particular audience and tied to no specific theme. For this reason, the subjects of Section murals in Minnesota post offices were committed to no particular theme in what they would represent. Despite this, there are definite trends in common subjects and themes represented by Section muralists in post offices across the state. Due to Section Director Edward Bruce's support of a realist, representational artwork style, each and every mural in this sample also followed this style of mural painting, limiting the sphere of

⁵⁴See Image 2 ½ for a map of these locations.

⁵⁵United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Volume 1, Population—Number and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931) 571-576.

where the painting could go.⁵⁶ The Minnesota Section muralists, as well as those from the Treasury's PWAP and TRAP programs, used this representational, realist style to reflect elements of life within the communities. The subjects are local to appeal to the communities in which they were placed.

This subject matter of the murals is a common factor used for categorization of the murals. In the Treasury Section's final, retrospective report in 1943, the program's leaders in Washington, D.C. divided the national murals into thematic subject categories, including "the Post, Local History, Past or present, Local Industry, Pursuits or Landscape."⁵⁷ Art historian Karal Ann Marling also analyzes the national murals in thematic groups in her study of the Treasury Section, calling attention to the common subjects of history (subdivided into "American Stuff" and "American Genesis"), machine imagery, and transportation, among others.⁵⁸ In expressing life and communities of Minnesota, I have found that the subjects of Section murals in Minnesota fall into two general categories: Local History and Local Industry, with the subcategories of agriculture and rough industry.⁵⁹ These categories are inclusive of all the murals from this image sample and significantly reflect the individual characteristics of the different regions of Minnesota.⁶⁰

Murals in the Local History category, the more common of the two Section subject matter categories, picture scenes in the early history of Minnesota, the region, and the specific towns where the murals are located. Scenes of Native Americans communicating through smoke

⁵⁶From the indications of the list of titles, it can also be cautiously assumed that the murals without available images also follow this pattern of representational styles.

⁵⁷Marling, 211.

⁵⁸Marling, 20-21.

⁵⁹These are categories of my own creation which fit the subject matter of Minnesota, though elements of them are corroborated by authors such as Marling and Park and Markowitz in their discussions of subject matter and themes in national Section murals. See Appendix IV for a specific division of the Section murals into these subject categories.

⁶⁰Again, from the list of titles, agreement with the subject categories and regional differences can be inferred.

signals, the accidental discovery of iron ore on the Mesabi Range, and the making of the first street in pioneer Rochester are just a few of the images this mural category includes. Being history, these murals are depicted in the past, so in the specific events they show, they are not reflecting a modern, 1930s version of life within that community, but rather significant scenes that built up that community and made the area what it was. These murals showed a dedication to community and to the long-standing traditions of hard work and determination, inspiring images in the difficult times of the Depression. Of the twelve mural sample, exactly half the selected murals fall into this category, though of the entire list from Minnesota, it can be estimated that there are fifteen total historical murals. Murals within this category fall into three subcategories, portraying scenes of the founding of towns, scenes of pre-statehood exploration and Native American life, and those of pioneer and rural life.⁶¹ The first category of founding of towns, referred to by Marling as “American Genesis,” was the largest category of Treasury Section subject matter nationwide.⁶²

David Granahan’s *The Founding of Rochester*, a Treasury Section mural painted in 1937 for the Rochester Post Office, exemplifies the Local History murals and the “American Genesis” subcategory (Image 3). This mural shows a community of people intently watching a man drive two oxen pulling a large log. According to a newspaper article that published preliminary sketches of the mural, the “central theme of the mural is history’s account of the laying out of Rochester’s principal thoroughfare—by use of oxen who dragged a heavy log through the underbrush.”⁶³ Though there are many figures in the painting, the wilderness background and sole building clearly show that this was the beginning of the town which has grown so dramatically today. The figures in the painting represent a cross-section of ages and sexes, with

⁶¹See Appendix IV for distinctions of Local History murals into these subject categories.

⁶²Marling,

⁶³“Museums to Show Granahan Mural Sketch,” *Minneapolis Journal* (11 August 1936) 11.

the group in the foreground including an old couple, a middle aged couple, a young couple, and two children, a boy and a girl. Thus, this group, as well as the other characters in the background and wings, represents the entire community's presence and pride in their community at this momentous event. Together, the community accomplished this feat and from there founded a strong town. This is an image of pride for any citizen of Rochester, and this pride is an inherent part of the Local History murals.

Within the larger picture of the national Treasury Section program, mural subjects varied by wider, national areas to reflect regional experiences across the country. Subjects range from *Halibut Fishing in Anacortes, Washington* to *Maple Sugar in Northfield, Vermont* and *Settler Fighting Alligator from Rowboat in Lake Worth, Florida*.⁶⁴ In portraying regionalism in Minnesota, there are local regional differences of subject as well. These differences are not only based on the particulars of local history, but can be easily categorized in their portrayal of local industries.

The second of the two main subject categories for Treasury murals is Local Industry. Two excellent examples of industrial murals are *Early Logging at Koochiching Falls* by Lucia Wiley painted for the International Falls Post Office (Image 1), and *Iron-Ore Mining* by Elsa Jenne for the Ely Post Office (Image 4). Each portrays a strong image of the industrial life of the community and area in the different work scenes and occupations they portray.

Another way of showing local industry is in the murals of agricultural scenes. The mural *People of the Soil*, painted by Seymour Fogel for the Cambridge Post Office, shows a rural agricultural scene in its image of a farm family with their animals and farm buildings in the background (Image 2). Both the agriculture and rough industry murals focus on the major elements of local economy, as well as the individual occupations of the workers.

⁶⁴Park and Markowitz, 230, 231, & 206.

Within these Local Industry murals, there are significant regional patterns in the clear division of murals representing specific regions within the state. In the northern part of Minnesota, the rough industry activities of logging and mining made up the major economic activities of that area of the state. Accordingly, the industry murals shown in Ely and International Falls in northern Minnesota reflect these true local industries. For southern and central Minnesota, farming was the dominant way of life within these predominantly rural areas. Likewise, murals of work in these areas show scenes from the agricultural sphere, in reflection of life in these regions.

The WPA's Federal Arts Project

The other major New Deal Arts Program, by far the largest of the four in size and scope, is the WPA's Federal Arts Project. The WPA, or Works Progress Administration, was a massive work relief program founded in 1935, sponsoring work programs of all kinds from digging ditches to collecting records at county courthouses. With the formation of the Federal Arts Project, this work also included creating artwork. Because the FAP was part of the WPA, a work relief program, the primary focus of the program was on the quantity of work relief that could be provided for artists. Ninety percent of participants must be certified to receive relief, a stipulation not held by the Treasury Section.⁶⁵ Treasury Section Director Edward Bruce and Treasury Secretary Morgenthau were approached with this expansive idea of providing for the problem of unemployment for American artists, but they refused to sacrifice their quest for quality artwork to adapt their program to fit the work relief stance.⁶⁶ Thus, this program took place under the new WPA auspices. Artwork from the WPA project, made prolifically to

⁶⁵O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 25.

⁶⁶O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 25.

accommodate as many unemployed, struggling artists as possible, was placed in non-federal government buildings, including schools especially, hospitals, town halls, armories, and many other types of community structures.

In addition to work relief, the program's "primary objective," another of the central WPA/FAP goals was to "work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community, and an integration of the fine arts and practical arts."⁶⁷ Along with work relief, this sought for integration was one of the reasons that the WPA/FAP manifested itself in such a variety and scope of different art programs. Whereas the Treasury Section promoted merely fine art production, the WPA/FAP organized programs for painting, murals, sculpture, printmaking, community art centers and art education, federal art galleries, poster-making and practical arts, and art research for the Index of American Design. The program involved not only fine artists, but everyone from unskilled to skilled or white collar workers.

Because the emphasis in the WPA was on work and community participation and not on the quality of the artwork itself as specifically, there was less control over the artists within the WPA. WPA mural artists needed to get designs approved by the communities that requested them, but they still maintained more freedom to be innovative and experimental in style. Artists pursued different artistic styles and genres with a reasonable amount of room to experiment. In fact, several well-known modern artists such as Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb got their start in the WPA mural and easel painting projects which allowed them to explore different styles without having to worry about whether or not they would receive a

⁶⁷ *Federal Art Project Operating Manual*, October 1935, as quoted in O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 28.

commission.⁶⁸ Mural artists were logically slightly more restrained than sculptors or easel painters because their artwork was still publicly sponsored and displayed as a part of specific buildings, but the same principle applied. Contrary to the WPA/FAP, Treasury Section artists could be innovative and experimental in their mural proposals, but then probably would not receive the prestigious commissions. In this way, ironically, the WPA/FAP actually contributed more to the field and progression of American art than Treasury Section, despite that program's high emphasis on quality.

From the 42 murals I have found listings or images of from the WPA Arts Project, two present an excellent example of the breadth of diverse art styles in the WPA murals. The first, André Boratko's untitled WPA mural from the Milaca Village Hall, shows scenes from the logging industry (Images 5-11). These images are painted in the traditional regionalist, realist style, similar to that of the Treasury Section. Another mural by Boratko, painted for the Faribault School for the Deaf, is dramatically different in its more contemporary, surrealist style (Image 12). Rather than showing life in a representative manner, this mural shows a giant hand, rooted to the ground and being struck by lightning. Its partner mural shows a similar scene, though a rainbow replaces the lightning strike and the mood of the scene is considerably brighter as well. These murals are merely two extreme examples of the many differences allowed in the WPA murals, in direct contrast to the uniformity of the Treasury Section murals.

Another excellent example of the wide breadth of modern styles sponsored by the WPA's mural projects are the cubist abstraction murals painted by Gerome Kamrowski for the University of Minnesota's Northrup Auditorium (Image 26). Far from conforming to the realist

⁶⁸McKinzie 124, and Arshile Gorky, "My Murals for The Newark Airport: An Interpretation," *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project.*, ed. by Francis O'Connor (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973) 72-73.

or regionalist styles of the Section murals, this mural triptych moves even further from recognizable imagery than even Boratko's surrealist works. As a contemporary 1936 newspaper article reported,

The paintings called a development from 'cubism' are 'entirely unsentimental abstractions designed to fit the wall space and represent the function of the building,' according to Mr. Kamrowski. One of the murals shows conventionalized musical instruments, a scrap of movie film, and two measures from Beethoven's Eroica Symphony, done to form a pattern. The other depicts drama, architecture, and the graphic and plastic arts.⁶⁹

Certainly not all WPA patrons, who held the final approval, would have been willing to accept a mural so extreme in its contemporary style. However, Minnesota WPA/FAP Director Clement Haupers made a point of directing artists with more contemporary styles to willing recipients, like the University of Minnesota, in order to accommodate the artists' chosen styles as completely as possible.⁷⁰ With the individuality, artistic freedom, and diversity encouraged by the WPA art projects, artists felt freer to pursue their own artistic impulses, and this is visible in the artwork produced.

As far as subject matter goes, there is also a great variety among WPA murals, making it difficult to classify. Rather than having distinct subject categories and reflecting differences according to state region, the WPA murals tend more to reflect subject differences according to the function of the building in which they are located. For example, in a mural painted for the Waconia elementary school, the pictures of children playing in the background directly echo the

⁶⁹"Local WPA Artist Wins Recognition," *St. Cloud Daily Times* (May 14, 1936) 9.

⁷⁰Jane H. Hancock, *Clement Haupers: Six Decades of Art in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979) 17, found in *Clement Haupers and Clara Gardner Mairs Papers*, Minnesota Historical Society, 1933-1943, Microfilm Reel #1, frame 0037.

images of real children playing right there in the foreground (Images 13-14). The similarity is so striking that these real children could almost have been used as artists' models. The mural from the Children's Wing of Lymanhurst Hospital in Minneapolis presents a similar reflection of its building's function (Image 15). The subject of *Alice in Wonderland* that Miriam Ibling is in the process of painting is quite different from the murals of the Treasury, but very suitable for a children's wing. Likewise, the murals for the Jordan Junior High School music room represent the *History of Music*, suitable for that educational, subject-specific setting (Image 27). This subject matter, directly related to what is going on in these locations, is involved actively in the function of the building and life of the community. This is consistent with the WPA's goal of integrating art with the life with the community.

Within the murals of the WPA, there was certainly much more liberty as far as subject matter is concerned. There were still restrictions upon the artists, however. Local sponsors gave their final approval to the projects, authorized to accept or reject the artists' sketches. The WPA/FAP program itself, though it encouraged creativity, still hoped to avoid controversy with its murals. For this reason, nudity was one thing that was strictly prohibited by Clement Haupers and the WPA/FAP in Minnesota.⁷¹

The WPA/FAP murals in Minnesota are spread throughout the state (Image 2 ½), though particularly clustered in the Minneapolis and St. Paul area. Of the 42 WPA/FAP murals in Minnesota, sixteen are from the urban areas of Minneapolis of St. Paul, a much heavier percentage than the Treasury Section murals. Despite this heavy concentration in the Twin Cities area, WPA/FAP Director Clement Haupers made a distinct goal to place an art project, if

⁷¹Jane H. Hancock, *Clement Haupers: Six Decades of Art in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1979) 17, found in *Clement Haupers and Clara Gardner Mairs Papers*, Minnesota Historical Society, 1933-1943, Microfilm Reel #1, frame 0037.

not a mural, in each of the state's nine congressional districts. He traveled extensively throughout the state to campaign for this project to convince local patrons to sponsor murals and other art projects, for the WPA/FAP only funded the artist's salary and local authorities were responsible for all other artistic expenses.⁷² The WPA's goal was to involve as many people as possible in the art process, spreading murals throughout the state from Moorhead to Two Harbors, to New Ulm and Winona.

The Theme of Time and Time Period

The Treasury art programs, particularly the Treasury Section, and the WPA/FAP clearly differ greatly in their central goals, procedures, and thus in their artwork. These differences have an obvious effect on the location and general content of the programs' murals. However, the differences are present in more subtle, underlying themes and attitudes within the art as well. Two main themes, the treatment of time and representation and definition of community, again show the distinguishing factors and influences of the two programs as well, as significant historical and cultural influences of the period.

Within Minnesota's New Deal murals, time setting, a secondary element in most of these artworks, becomes a noteworthy factor in a closer examination of the images. The distinction between representing scenes of past times settings versus scenes in the present is significant, both in appreciating the cultural mood of the time period and particularly when viewing the murals of the two programs in comparison. Though the murals of both projects were produced in the 1930s in the atmosphere of the Depression, relatively few of the murals actually show that contemporary period. In the Treasury Department art programs, the majority of murals show

⁷²*Biographical Sketches: Clement Haupers*, Clement B. Haupers and Clara Gardner Mairs Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (1933-1943).

scenes set in the past. The smaller number murals that do show the present day illustrate a generic and positive present, without any aspects of the negative, troubled environment of the Depression. Some WPA/FAP murals do depict the past, but there is much more variety in the treatment of time across the program. More commonly, WPA murals are set in the present or do not use a time setting at all. In addition to relating to the cultural atmosphere at the time, the different treatment of time in these murals speak directly to the differences in goals between the programs. The Treasury Section murals commonly set in the past fulfill the Section goal of making itself “socially useful” by expressing a sense of stability, perseverance and pride in one’s roots and of attempting to create long-lasting, great works of art. The variety and even independence from treatment of time in the WPA/FAP murals expresses that program’s goal to integrate the arts into the daily lives of the people.

In Minnesota’s New Deal murals, the great number set in the past becomes a major trend, especially in the Treasury Section program. Of the fourteen Section murals with available images, nine of these are set in the past with four presumably in the present and one whose time setting is unknown.⁷³ The single available example of PWAP murals, David Granahan’s Gateway Building mural series *Street Scene—Early Minneapolis*, *Opera—Early Minneapolis*, and *Industry—Modern Minneapolis*, is also set primarily in an earlier historical period. Within the WPA/FAP there are nine murals set in the past, though this is a much smaller percentage of the whole than in the Treasury Section. Logically, these murals in the past tense encompass the entire Local History category. Two representative historical murals are David Granahan’s *The Founding of Rochester* (Image 3), a scene from the very beginnings of that community, and Margaret Martin’s *Indian Hunters and Rice Gatherers* in St. James (Image 29), which shows the

⁷³See Appendix V for a delineated list of Treasury murals by time setting. After making inferences strictly from the titles about the images not available, the number of past murals increases to twelve, with four in the present, one portraying both past and present, and four unknown.

traditional activities of the Native Americans. The murals in the past also integrate Local Industry themed murals, like Lucia Wiley's *Early Logging at Koochiching Falls* in International Falls (Image 1) or André Boratko's series of logging murals in the Milaca Town Hall (Images 5-11). Both of these murals show the prevalent local industry of logging in its early years, rather than its present state. Distinctions of the past time period are visually apparent in details such as style of dress (exhibited in *Life in Grand Rapids and the Upper Mississippi*, Image 19), differences in lifestyle (seen in images of Native Americans, Images 29 and 30), and outdated industrial practices (seen in the log drive of the "river pigs" in Boratko's logging series, Image 9) or transportation (seen in Image 32), as well as specifically named past events (seen in *Discovery of Ore*, Image 20, and *The Founding of Rochester*, Image 3).⁷⁴ These past settings are important vehicles for showing the significant events, history and heritage of the related communities, but at a deeper level, the past also plays a significant role in the idealistic meaning of the murals.

In these murals, the past tense of the scenes gives indications of stability, inspiration and strength. As Karal Ann Marling states in her discussion of historical murals as a national Treasury Section trend, the murals' creators were "choosing a stable, immutable image of home, insulated by time from the accidents of the present."⁷⁵ In other words, by picturing the past, mural artists were not only glorifying great moments in the individual community or region's history, but they were also giving people a view of a better time to give hope in economic and social crisis of the present Great Depression.

An excellent illustration from Minnesota's New Deal murals is James S. Watrous' Grand Rapids Post Office mural *Life in Grand Rapids and the Upper Mississippi*. This painting shows

⁷⁴Images of the present, on the other hand, are most often identified by either modern machinery (Image 4) or a lack of signs of the past (Image 2).

⁷⁵Marling, 19.

an energetic scene of hard work, celebration, and growth (Image 19). On the left side of the mural, men are busily engaged in building new town structures, visibly improving their community with their efforts and indicating both prosperity and growth within the town. In the center of the mural, the townspeople dance and rejoice with each other at the coming of the steamboat and at the prosperity and success of their community. This positive, affirming mural, set in the past, shows what the community once was and the strong, motivated basis from which it began. Arguably, in the socially and economically troubled Depression, it would seem that this mural would portray a sense of inspiration in determination and effort from looking at the challenges of the present in light of the successes of the past.

In a discussion of a similar trend in literary circles and many aspects of the general American culture of the 1930s, Alfred Haworth Jones of the University of Minnesota stresses the popular Depression concept of a “usable American past,” describing it as “a tradition that could provide guidance and justification for present programs and projects.”⁷⁶ Just as writers did in literature, these murals made active use of the “usable past” to encourage communities by the successes, prosperity, and heroism that were a part of their heritage. As American novelist John Dos Passos agreed at that time, “Driven by a pressing need to find answers to the riddles of today...we need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on.”⁷⁷ As the murals visually represent, the past, in image and actuality, could provide this knowledge and inspiration to overcome present and future obstacles.

In addition to being potential sources of strength, stability, and encouragement, these murals set in the past are also images of perseverance and pride in one’s roots. Significantly, the

⁷⁶Alfred Haworth Jones, “The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era,” *American Quarterly* (Dec. 1971, Vol. 23, No. 5) 718 .

⁷⁷John Dos Passos, *The Ground We Stand On: Some Examples from the History of a Political Creed* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941) 3, as quoted by Alfred Haworth Jones, p. 715.

Minnesota murals do not simply show scenes of the American past or history in general, but of the more specific local past. Images of the founding of towns (Image 3), industries crucial to community building (Images 1 & 9), and historical events leading to the settling of the state and its regions (Images 20 & 28) fill walls all over the state, but there are no murals of broad historical events from beyond Minnesota's regions. Rather than looking outside for that sense of historical stability, the murals tie the communities to their own histories and to the successes within their local heritage. As Karal Ann Marling states, "the choice of history bespoke a commitment to one's roots, to coping with the problems of the thirties on one's home ground, rather than fleeing toward some chimerical new frontier."⁷⁸ Rather than getting caught up in a idealistic notion of escaping from current problems, which Marling identifies in the major national mural theme of transportation in murals, the rooted stability of the past takes its place in these Minnesota examples.⁷⁹ This transportation theme is essentially absent in Minnesota's New Deal murals, whereas the emphasis on historical roots runs deep. Attention focuses on strong, rooted communities in the past at a very local level and on those communities coming together in their efforts to succeed. Alfred Haworth Jones concurs with this sense of local stability and perseverance, writing "The pioneer farmer much more than the merchant trader represented the American character for these 20th century citizens. They cherished his frontier penchant for tackling problems head-on. And like him, they believed that the solutions lay close at hand."⁸⁰ These murals express the successes and identity of the communities in the past, and it seems that they would inspire local confidence and hope for similar success in the present and future.

⁷⁸Marling, 19.

⁷⁹Marling, 18.

⁸⁰Alfred Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* (Dec. 1971, Vol. 23, No. 5) 718 .

Additionally, in showing the past, these murals in Minnesota are full of everyday town members—farmers, laborers, and the supporting community—not important historical individuals as in many other national New Deal murals. For example, in *The Founding of Rochester*, the representative community unites to support the creation of their first road (Image 3). In another example, the St. Paul White Bear Lake Branch Post Office mural *Early Voyagers at Portage* of the early history of Minnesota does not show a sole discoverer or famous leader. Rather, it portrays a group of ordinary, yet courageous men who created the foundation and network for the white settlements within the area (Image Not Available). The murals show that it was these ordinary people, not single major figures, who built up each community. In showing this, the murals imply that the maintenance of these strong communities rests with the common people as well.

This expression of the Treasury Section program is obvious too in its murals' treatment of the present, particularly in comparison with some of the mainstream art movements of the general period in American art. In showing murals with a contemporary 1930s setting, it is still a generic present that appears with few specific details to pin down a specific year or time period. There is little in the murals—from contemporary fashions to specific machinery or events—that indicates exactly where in the “present” these murals fit. In Seymour Fogel's *People of the Soil*, the scene most likely represents a contemporary farming situation, but there is no way to determine what period it is set in for sure (Image 2). The man and woman's dress is very plain and unrecognizable and the farm structures and tools are traditional, not specific or modern. In other cases, such as Elsa Jemne's *Iron-Ore Mines*, there is machinery involved in the scene, but the details are still not specific enough to be able to place the murals with much confidence as to the date (Image 4). In several cases, the murals end up in the present category simply because

there are no indications that they are set in the past, not because of any positive signs that they are in the present 1930s period.

In a comparison, Minnesota's New Deal murals lack the specifically contemporary qualities of much of the adjacent and overlapping early twentieth century mainstream American art movements. Beginning at the turn of the century and continuing on into the 1910s, painters of the so-called "Ash-Can School" in New York portrayed communities and city streets with an honest reality rarely seen before in American or European art. With accuracy and notable visual frankness, the details showed the present period with a great degree of specificity and identification, as illustrated in the cityscape and industrial details of George Bellows' *Men of the Docks* (Image) or the fashions and decorations of William Glackens' *Family Group* (Image 34). Likewise, the Precisionism movement of the 1920s and 1930s, much of it contemporary with New Deal art, portrayed the modern industrial landscape of America with great clarity of mechanical and architectural detail, as in Charles Sheeler's 1939 *Suspended Power* (Image 35), and commercial detail, as in Charles Demuth's 1930 *Buildings, Lancaster* (Image 36).

In an even more closely related movement, Thomas Hart Benton, the most well-known mainstream American art Regionalist painter in the 1930s, proves an excellent comparison of time detail to the New Deal murals. In both paintings and non-New Deal wall murals, Benton painted scenes of Midwestern regional daily life with such "temporal specificity" that his "contemporary minutia of the bootleg still, the current fashion, and the brand-new tractor" often made his pictures practically outdated shortly after they were completed.⁸¹ An excellent mural example, which more directly compares to the New Deal murals in artistic genre than the paintings of the Ash-Can School and the Precisionists, is Benton's *City Activities I with Subway* from his 1930 *America Today* murals for the New School of Social Research in New York City

⁸¹Marling, 42-43.

(Image 37). This scene is bursting with detail of popular culture, events, and trends, making a striking contrast to the simpler, generic representations of present and even some similar generic representations of past time periods in the New Deal murals.

Clearly, the Treasury Section's murals are distinctive in their representation of time setting, both for the expressed message of stability, perseverance and pride in one's roots and for the distinct comparison with other mainstream artwork in America. These reflect the historical and cultural atmosphere of the time, but more specifically connect to the goals and mission of the Treasury Section itself, thus causing that difference from the mainstream art movements.

The strong themes of stability, perseverance, and pride in one's roots appear in the murals set in the past with the potential to be motivational and beneficial to the lives and morale of each community. This beneficial quality connects to the Section's intention for these pictures to be not only for the decoration of public buildings, but also for the public as "socially useful forms."⁸² According to Director Edward Bruce, these murals were not intended as direct propaganda, but the striking similarity among the murals selected and commissioned through the controlled competition system illustrates that there was some aspect of a consistent intent for these murals across the state, whether obviously stated or not. In this case, this "social usefulness" appears to be not only in the murals' decorative qualities, but also in the motivational message and ideals they express through the decisions in portraying the past subject matter of the murals.

In answer to the second distinction of the Section's treatment of time—a generic present, even in light of the timely detailed current national art movements—this speaks to another goal of the Treasury Section. For the Treasury Section and its director Edward Bruce, there was tremendous emphasis in creating long-lasting, great works of art. This was the reason that

⁸²Contreras, 19.

competitions were held to find the most skilled artists and the most appropriate designs for murals across the nation. However, in attempting to attain a sense of timelessness for an artistic and mural masterpiece that would presumably weather the sands of time to remain great art, the program may have sacrificed the detail that would have separated it from past and future time periods. In the opinion of many, this generic approach backfired for the Treasury Section, for many of the murals became so general that they were bland, uninteresting, and not in the category lasting art of any consequence.⁸³

Another indicator that there is a definite influence of the New Deal art programs themselves upon the portrayal of time in the murals comes to light with a comparison between the Treasury Section and WPA/FAP murals' treatments of time setting. Though both programs operated in the same historical and cultural atmosphere, there are definite differences in the frequency with which the past appears in the murals of each program. This indicates that the programs, their operation, and their goals must have some influence upon the murals that resulted. As previously discussed, murals from the Treasury Section show the majority of their subjects within a past setting.⁸⁴ The WPA/FAP murals, on the other hand, show much more variety in their treatment of time. In comparison to the 60% of Section murals that are set in the past, of the WPA/FAP mural images available only nine, or 33%, show scenes of the past. The majority fall into the other categories of present (four murals), murals that are independent of any time setting (eleven murals), and those where the time period is unknown (four murals).⁸⁵ When the past does appear in WPA/FAP murals, many of the same trends as the Treasury Section

⁸³Rose, 105.

⁸⁴Of the available 15-mural Treasury Section sample, 60% of murals show the past, 27% show the present, 7% show both, and 7% have unknown time settings.

⁸⁵See Appendix VI for a list of the WPA/FAP murals categorized into time settings. In this available 27-mural WPA sample, 33% of murals show the past, 15% show the present, 41% are independent of time periods, and 11% have unknown time periods.

generally apply. However, the frequency of past vs. present or time-independent murals is most significant in this comparison.

In the murals independent of time, the largest category within WPA/FAP murals, the subject matter is more important than the time period or lack thereof. This subject matter most often directly relates to expressing the location of the mural. For example, the WPA/FAP's jungle plant designs complement the Duluth Zoo and the mural of *Alice in Wonderland* brightens Lymanhurst Hospital Children's Wing, but neither requires a time setting (Images 31 and 15). This accurately reflects the WPA's goal to integrate the arts with the daily lives of the people. In representing these subjects, the goal was to involve the murals with their surroundings in an active way. For certain subject matters, such as the examples above, a time setting was unimportant to meet this goal.

For other WPA/FAP subjects, a present time setting best expresses a direct connection with the daily lives of the people. In the examples of the Pratt School in Minneapolis and Waconia Elementary School, the wall scenes of contemporary children playing directly mirror the children who occupy those spaces (Images 21, 13 and 14). At a very obvious level, these murals involve themselves with the lives of the people. History and local heritage certainly affect people's lives and attitudes, but in a much less direct and obvious way, so they are less important within the WPA/FAP mural schemes. Rather than the social usefulness of the quasi-propaganda of the Treasury Section, the murals of the WPA/FAP show a sense of social involvement. In addition, the WPA encouraged a variety of artistic styles, including abstract, surrealism and cubism, none of which involve a time scheme directly (Images 12 and 26).

Across all of the New Deal art project murals, it is of great interest to note that, in all of the depictions of past and present, there are no indications of anything negative within these

communities. The murals show prospering communities, without including any of the struggles faced by people either in the founding stages of the area or in the Depression-stricken present day. In the New Deal art projects, this exclusion is unique to the mural projects. IN addition to showing the positive side of life, numerous easel paintings, prints, and other artworks sponsored by the various New Deal arts projects also show the negative side of the Depression, both economically and socially.

Three examples created by three different artists from the Minnesota WPA/FAP Printmaking Department prominently illustrate this contrast with the murals. Mac LeSueuer's lithograph *Old Mine*, expresses a barren, desolate mood intensified by the fallen, neglected barbed wire in the bottom left corner, the dark and hovering birds, and the three striking scrap wood crosses, connotative of both a graveyard and the mount of Calvary (Image 38). This image clearly shows abandonment and ending, a striking contrast to the vision of active, productive mining represented by muralist Elsa Jemne in Ely's mural *Iron-Ore Mines* (Image 4). In another example, John Martin Socha's print *Wreckage* shows a Minnesota farm in a very negative, dejected and defeated manner with its destroyed farm structures and dark, stormy surroundings (Image 39). Not every farm in Minnesota's Depression could maintain the calm, comfortable and productive family farm image that Seymour Fogel's *People of the Soil* presents (Image 2). *Wreckage* is the antithesis of that mural image. In a final example, the slanted building angles, twisted roads and dark clouds in William Norman's *Back Street #1* (Image 40) show a community in a much more negative sense than the Section or WPA's images of hard-working people and smiling children (Images 19 and 21). These print images show a dramatically different mood than that portrayed in the New Deal murals. From this comparison, it certainly seems that the murals were created to inspire and motivate, rather than to accurately portray the

surroundings or to exaggerate to express the suffering of the period. Both of the latter options would serve only to further depress Minnesota communities in that time period.

The Theme and Definition of Community

In addition to the use of time within the murals, another significant element to defining how the murals represent their subjects is in the value and definition they give to community. These New Deal murals were intended for the entire community in which they were placed. Thus, they appear in common, shared places such as post offices, hospitals, schools and town halls. From this perspective, it makes sense, then, that the element of community, that is, of people mutually and peacefully coming to live and work together, should be one of key discussion in the New Deal murals.

In analyzing the murals' representation and importance of community, a significant first observation is simply that the majority of the murals focus on people. This seems almost too obvious to state, but the murals could have represented landscape, wildlife, the buildings of the towns, or simply colors and designs for decoration. A few of the murals show animals, such as one panel of Boratko's Milaca Town Hall mural sequence, but they are never the main focus (Image 6). By specifically showing people as the focus, the murals immediately place an importance on them as the most significant part of the town and community. Within the representations of these people, the murals rarely ever spotlight just one individual alone, but rather show an entire group of people living or working together. Betty Carney's *The Discovery of Ore* is the only example of a mural representing a single person, in this case significant because he discovered the first iron ore near that town of Chisholm, leading to their great mining

history (Image 20). Otherwise, the murals show townspeople working (Image 4), rejoicing (Image 19), and setting down roots together (Image 3).

One of the most striking examples of community is in the Rochester Post Office mural from the Treasury Section. This image, *The Founding of Rochester*, shows the entire community gathered to watch and support the creation of that town's first road. To give a sense that this is the entire community giving its support, the mural includes a variety of different ages and sexes in the image—an old couple, a middle aged couple, young couple, and two young children represent each different life stage and age group. In this case community means more than just any group of people, but specifically is organized to include all people of the town.

A sense of community and working together is particularly evident in the past murals, and it is always coupled with a sense of prosperity and content. Each person in the group fulfills his or her own role, but there is always a central focus that will benefit the group as a whole. For example, in the mural *Early Logging at Koochiching Falls*, each of the men fulfills his own duties, which in turn all add to the general accomplishments (Image 1). In a different type of example, the children play peacefully and without conflict in Elaine Dill's *Favorite Recreations* for the Pratt School in Minneapolis (Image 21). Because the students each fulfill their own duties to follow the rules and to amuse themselves in positive ways, they can all find a sense of unimpeded mutual enjoyment.

Though the value and sense of community is clearly important within these murals, another necessary question for fully understanding this concept is who and what makes up these communities. How do the murals define these communities in their visual portrayals? Looking at the separate categories of gender, age and health, class, race, and physical setting shows that these murals generally show an incomplete vision of these communities in their actual

composition. Arguably, this vision of community is simpler and portrayed as more ideal. These murals could easily reach white, working-class males, yet a large part of the rest of their audiences would have been unable to fully identify with the murals, leaving out an entire segment of each community.

The first noticeable category of community definition by individuals is that of gender. After looking at a sample of murals, it is clear that there are significantly fewer women depicted in these murals than men. Of the combined 41 available Minnesota mural images from the Treasury Department and WPA art programs, seventeen show female characters and twenty-four do not. Of these twenty-four, six murals do not show human characters at all, leaving eighteen solely male-represented murals. An analysis of the number of male and female characters in each mural shows the difference even more dramatically. Within the murals of the Treasury Section, there are 82 identifiable male characters and only 15 female characters.⁸⁶ According to the 1930 census, there were slightly more men in the Minnesota than women, with 51.349% male versus 48.651% female.⁸⁷ However, that difference is not nearly dramatic enough to warrant the vast difference in mural portrayal frequency for the two genders.

The difference between the genders is also evident in the treatment of the women characters as much as in their presence. In the murals that do show female characters, only one—a mural of fashion costumes through the ages from Minneapolis' West Junior High School sewing room—has women as the central characters (Image 47). Women share in the action, but rarely have the spotlight entirely for themselves, as the men do in several occasions, such as

⁸⁶See Appendix VII for a list with the numbers of male and female characters in the Treasury Section murals. The Hopkins, Wabasha, and Windom murals do not have an identifiable number of characters, due to image availability. Appendix VIII contains similar information for the WPA programs.

⁸⁷United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States--1940: Population Volume II—Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1942) 14.

André Boratko's logging mural sequence and Edmund D. Lewandowski's *Hog Raising*. In most cases, women only appear with men, often serve as the helpmate and complementary part to the men involved. For example, in the left panel of the Hutchinson Post Office mural, three women assist the men who are fighting in the Dakota War by nursing the wounded, providing food, and caring for the children (Image 48). Women are seen as productive, useful, and essential in these helpmate scenes, but the women lack a sense of independence. These murals reinforced traditional gender roles, a common theme in the Depression era.⁸⁸ Much of this difference also relates to the work roles of men and women and to near absence of the woman worker within the murals, an idea discussed at length in the next section on Work.

In looking at the portrayals of women within these murals, an interesting context too keep in mind is the relative abundance of female muralists who created these images. Of the 21 murals of the Treasury Section, one-third were painted by women. For the WPA/FAP, only twenty of the murals have artist information and, of these, twelve were painted by women. Despite the fact that women were the ones creating many of these murals, the images they painted did not improve or increase the vision of women. Arguably, this could indicate that the decision of whether to include female subjects relates more to the societal atmosphere and the goals of the programs for these murals than to personal preference.

Another category that shows the murals' narrow population representation is race and, less obviously, ethnicity. In all of the murals of all four programs set in the present day and the vast majority of scenes in the past, the characters are white people. African Americans, Asian Americans, and even darkly skinned Europeans do not enter into the murals' definition of Minnesota communities. The sole exception to this portrayal of race are the images of Native Americans in historical murals, such as Margaret Martin's *Indians Hunters and Rice Gatherers*

⁸⁸Bondi, 311.

from St. James, MN (Image 29) or Richard Haines' series from the Round Tower of Fort Snelling (Image 45). These people are obviously set apart outside of the mainstream, modern-day community by their differences in culture, dress, lifestyle and activity within the scenes represented. Furthermore, these Native Americans only appear in the past. In the murals set in the present, Native Americans do not appear at all. In the present day murals, the only characters are quite obviously Caucasian ones.⁸⁹

In the modern twenty-first century mindset of political correctness, a diverse Minnesota, and racial and cultural awareness awareness, this omission of diverse racial groups seems inexcusable and skewed. However, in the 1930s period in which these murals were born, these portrayals were actually a fairly accurate portrayal of society for the simple reason of the very small number of minority racial groups in Minnesota at the time. Of the overall 1930 statewide population of 2,563,953, only 11,077 were Native American (.4%), 9,445 people were black (.4%), and 832 were of other races (.0003%). Ten years later in 1940, these percentages of the overall population were still essentially the same.⁹⁰ With population groups of less than 1%, it cannot be entirely surprising that the muralists did not include these racial groups in the mural images of the state. The racial minority group that does appear, the Native Americans, shows only the period in which Native Americans were a large population factor in the state, before and

⁸⁹The available black and white images make a determination of race difficult in a few cases, particularly the WPA/FAP's Moorhead High School mural *Making Camp on the Red River Trail* by Lucia Wiley (Image 46) and the Treasury Section's North St. Paul Post Office mural *Production* by Donald Humphrey (Image 16). I could not go to see the murals in person, but in each case I spoke directly with people who have seen the murals, and they reinforced my conclusions. Fargo native and College of St. Benedict senior Susan Matthees visited the Moorhead mural and interviewed employees in the old high school building, now an office building. For the other mural, I spoke with an African-American employee of the North St. Paul post office over the phone. In both cases, without any suggestions on my part, they attested that the characters of the mural are white.

⁹⁰United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States--1940: Population Volume II—Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1942) 14.

during the mass settlements of whites. The murals show a narrow and simple representation of the races in Minnesota, but it cannot be criticized for great inaccuracy.

One element of community members that is clearly idealized in the majority of Minnesota's New Deal murals are the combined factors of age and health. The great majority of the characters within the murals of both programs fall into an idealized age range of young adulthood, appearing to be in their late twenties to early forties. This age group catches people at the peak of their physical strength and prowess, thus making them able to accomplish much in the way of industry and community achievement. In order to show a strong community giving a great effort, the murals use this age group to express that. There are exceptions to this rule, but they are few. There are a few scattered figures who are older, indicated by white hair, as in Wiley's *Early Logging at Koochiching Falls* (Image 1), or gray facial hair, as in the older man in André Boratko's logging scene (Image 5). Younger mural characters appear much more often, particularly in the WPA where there are entire murals dedicated to children (Images 13 & 14 and 21). The most complete picture of different ages comes in the Rochester Post Office mural. An old couple, a middle aged couple, a young couple, and a pair of children all gather around the pulling of a new road, symbolically representing with their different ages the entire community's support for this event (Image 3).

Closely related to age is the factor of health, another greatly idealized element in these murals. In addition to being of ideal ages, people within these murals are also all of ideal health and physical strength. The workers in the mining and logging images all have rippling muscles and emanate strength and power (Image 4 and 5). There are no injuries, disabilities, illnesses, or even fatigue visible. The people are very uniform in their idealness.

Another way of viewing the composition of a community is in class. Within the New Deal murals, there is only one obvious class—the working class. In the murals of industry, these workers are the most obvious, but even in the other murals, there is nothing that sets anyone apart as members of different classes. There are no indicators of the very wealthy, nor of the very poor. Each person seems to be well-off enough to have his or her needs met, yet there is no sense of luxury in any of the murals. Alfred Haworth Jones explains this trend by saying, “The leveling influence of the Depression encouraged an emphasis upon the classless, inclusive character of the national experience. In a time of common crisis, the revived past must serve all the people.”⁹¹ The single class of the murals breeds a sense of unity among the people, a value that many would want carried out into the real-life community itself.

Another element to consider is what type of community the murals portray. In looking at the community settings for the murals, there are no urban settings and rarely even any buildings in the backdrops. Rural scenes in agriculture and community settings, as well as scenes of wilderness, are most common. In most cases, the landscape seems to fit the part of Minnesota that they murals represent. However, the emphasis on rural over urban is evident even in the murals in St. Paul and Minneapolis. For example, the two Treasury Section murals with urban locations, North St. Paul and St. Paul White Bear Lake, show an agricultural scene (Image 16) and a wilderness scene (Image Not Available), respectively, not any indications of their urban setting. For the Treasury Section, rural was certainly the emphasis. In fact, in the *Life* magazine article introducing the winners of the major 48 States mural competition, the headline reads, “This is Mural America for Rural Americans.”⁹² The WPA, on the other hand, shows less of an impact of this rural idea. There are some rural scenes, but there is a greater sense of variety and

⁹¹Jones, “The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era,” 718.

⁹²*Life* magazine (Dec. 4, 1939) 12-13, as pictured in Marling, 83.

unique settings, such as playgrounds (Image 21) and even cliffs near water (Image 12). Agriculture scenes are also less frequent.

The Theme of Work in the Murals

Despite numerous differences in organization and mural content between the two main New Deal art programs, the Treasury Section and the WPA/FAP, there are still numerous common and important themes that unite the programs and the art of the New Deal. The theme of work and work ethic, one of the strongest common threads, reveals itself as a significant defining theme of these Minnesota New Deal murals. In both obvious and understated subject matter and even in more subtle themes and attitudes, the ideas of work and work ethic dominate the majority of New Deal mural artwork across the state.

This dominance is fascinating in light of the historical atmosphere in which these murals were produced. When artists conceived of and created these work-related murals across the state, Minnesota was immersed in the economic crisis and unemployment of the Great Depression. Work and the lack thereof became debated and controversial issues, yet the government, communities, and artists still chose this theme to decorate their public buildings. Just as work was central in people's minds during that period of great unemployment and economic struggle, work became one of the key issues visually portrayed in these public artworks. However, Minnesota's New Deal murals do not use images of work as a factual, documentary reflection of the real working world of Depression Minnesota. The troubles, unemployment, and crisis of the Depression is conspicuously absent from all the murals, work related or not. Rather, these work images reveal important insights into the attitudes toward work and work ethic in real life and ideals at the time. As we shall see, these murals express ideal work and work-related virtues

such as determination, strength, individualism and community as things of value through these portrayals reflecting life and work in Minnesota. The murals show these values leading to prosperity and productivity within each community—certainly greatly desired ideas within every area of the nation at this time. In promoting these ideal virtues, qualities, and situations, the murals’ work portrayals end up showing incomplete pictures of the work world, putting value on only certain types of work and occupation.

The theme of work is most obvious in murals that clearly show work as their main subject matter, particularly in the six Local Industry murals of the Treasury Section and the corresponding murals of the WPA/FAP.⁹³ Within the WPA murals presently analyzed, only three specifically show representations of work in industry, as the work theme more commonly enters WPA artwork in a subtler manner. In the art of both programs, as well as in the Treasury Relief Art Program’s (TRAP) murals, industry murals show obvious images of logging, mining, and agriculture, with all mural figures busily involved in the activities of work.

The painted scenes of logging in Treasury and WPA murals are excellent, representative examples of work in industry murals, as they show the process of this type of work very clearly. In the Treasury Section mural *Early Logging at Koochiching Falls*, artist Lucia Wiley paints logging scenes in this work commissioned for the International Falls Post Office on the very northern border of Minnesota (Image 1).⁹⁴ In this single-scene mural, six men are busily engaged in chopping trees and moving the logs, different tasks of the logging and lumbering industry. Within the WPA, André Boratko’s mural series decorating the perimeter of the Milaca Village Hall shows a parallel example of work scenes from the logging industry (Image 5-11). These Milaca murals show the occupation of logging with even greater depth. Whereas the

⁹³See Appendix IV for specific Treasury Section subject categorizations.

⁹⁴This mural was described in detail previously in the discussion of the Local Industry murals of the Treasury Section.

International Falls mural shows only the outdoor scenes of lumberjacks cutting and moving trees, the Milaca mural also includes men using machinery to square the logs and turn them into usable lumber. The logging and lumbering process appears here from beginning to end. The first wall shows scenes of wilderness and wildlife prior to logging, and the next portrays several lumberjacks beginning to chop and saw down trees (Images 6-7). Transportation is the next step, as a man with two horses drags chained logs, moving the lumber out of the woods, and then men roll the logs down the river by standing on them and poling alongside (Images 8-9). The next scenes show men together pushing the logs through large machines that square them off and eventually turn them into boards (Images 5 and 10). The entrance to the Milaca meeting hall room is framed with the culmination of this logging process: nearly a dozen large, neatly stacked piles of lumber, ready to sell or use (Image 11). This one building's murals represent nearly the entire logging industry. Both the Milaca and International Falls murals show work as a definite process, with a beginning and a productive conclusion.

Logging is by no means the only type of work that the New Deal murals represent. Industry murals and others showing the direct subject matter of work also show mining, granite quarrying, and agriculture. The only scene of mining occurs in Elsa Jemne's *Iron-Ore Mines*, a Treasury Section mural for the Ely post office (Image 4). In this image of underground mining at least eight men, complete with helmets and work boots, use both shovels and heavy machinery to retrieve the valuable minerals from the earth. David Granahan's St. Cloud TRAP mural *Construction – St. Cloud* gives a picture of the local granite industry, showing three different stages in this production: "the work in the quarries, work by machine in the shop, and handiwork in the shop," as Granahan stated in a 1965 letter (Image 25).⁹⁵ The one part of the three-paneled

⁹⁵David M. Granahan to Roger A. Lohmann, *Letter*, January 5, 1965 (Granahan Papers, Stearns History Center) 1.

mural in John Clark School in nearby Rockville, *Granite Industry* by Gerome Kamrowski, also visually shows local granite production, though with far less depth and detail than Granahan's representation (Image 44).

In portraying agriculture, murals show images of farms of different sizes, from small family farms, as in Seymour Fogel's *People of the Soil* painted for the Cambridge Post Office (Image 2), as well as larger farms with many hands, as in Donald Humphrey's *Production* in the North St. Paul Branch Post Office (Image 16). Different crops and livestock on these farms include primarily corn and dairy, which replaced wheat at the end of the nineteenth century as the two major agricultural activities in the state, as well as hogs, chickens, and horses.⁹⁶ Farms look productive and relatively well off, due to the generous number of livestock in the murals and the good repair of farm buildings. This productivity and prosperity are apparent in Edmund D. Lewandowski's Caledonia Post Office mural *Hog Raising*, a mural that shows three farmers feeding the animals from the back of a truck (Image Not Available).⁹⁷ A total of eleven hogs are visible, and there appear to be more in other parts of the pen. In the background, barns and houses stand in fine repair.

The industrial scenes in these murals relate to the real work of these communities, both in general subject matter and in accuracy of details. As discussed in the Treasury Section's Local Industry segment earlier, the scenes of industry located within communities represented specific industries that were a major part of the local and regional economy, giving one reflection of life within that community. Mining and logging are found in murals in Northern Minnesota, whereas

⁹⁶“Minnesota,” Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2003 (<<http://encarta.msn.com>>, 13 December 2003). Corn is evident in Fogel's *Production*, at the North St. Paul Post Office and Edmund Lewandowski's *Hog Raising* in the Caledonia Post Office, dairy in Humphrey's *Production*, Fogel's *People of the Soil*, and Charles W. Thwaite's untitled agricultural theme mural in Windom, hogs in *Hog Raising*, and horses and chickens in Thwaite's agricultural themed mural.

⁹⁷There is a slide mural image of this painting at the Minnesota Historical Society, but I do not currently have access to the image to include within this text.

agricultural murals dominate the farming communities of Central and Southern Minnesota.

These industries are fairly accurately represented, as evidenced by the realistic details within the murals. Both logging murals show winter scenes, the season in which all Minnesota lumberjacks cut their logs because the frozen ground and snow made dragging the logs to river transportation easier.⁹⁸ As soon as the ice melted, the logs were then floated down the rivers by teams of workers called “river pigs,” men who rode the floating logs to free them from log jams shown in a circa 1870 photograph (Image 17).⁹⁹ Wiley and Boratko’s murals even echo the arrangement and activity of photographs of actual scenes from the early days of logging in Northern Minnesota, like this 1916 photograph from southern Koochiching County, the county where the International Falls mural is located (Image 18).¹⁰⁰ In addition to this type of industry, it is not surprising that agricultural scenes are commonly represented, as the agriculture was a significant factor within the mostly rural state of Minnesota. One third of Minnesotans lived on farms or in villages dependent on farming revenue and thus “the well-being of farmers was a critical factor in the health of the economy.”¹⁰¹ The Minnesotan agricultural murals focused on this sense of well-being.

Though these work murals show apparently true to life scenes of work in Minnesotan industries, they are idealized in certain ways, particularly in the characters, their qualities, and their approach to work. As briefly discussed within the prior Community section, worker figures are shown as characteristic and ideal heroic workers – physically strong, determined, and focused solely on their work tasks. These workers, whether in scenes of logging, mining or farming, all have perfect and uniform health, physical strength, and an ideal age. The workers go

⁹⁸William E. Lass, *Minnesota: A History, Second Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998) 178.

⁹⁹Lass, 178.

¹⁰⁰Lass, 172.

¹⁰¹Tweton, 13.

about their work, without any health-related hindrances, such as disabilities, injuries, or even fatigue. Their excellent physique appears in strong, rippling muscles and solid bodies, and there are no men present who are noticeably either old or young. In a true to life situation, there would be a realistic variation and span of these factors. In a comparison between a real-life 1941 Farm Security Administration photograph of a group of miners from Bovey, Minnesota (Image 43) and an idealized mining scene by Elsa Jemne for the Ely Post Office (Image 4), there is a clear difference. The real miners have both small and large builds, are a variety of ages, and are not all at a peak age or physical condition. The real-life photograph shows these people as the everyday individuals they are, including a variety missing in the workers within the murals. Instead, in the murals the workers' ideal physical qualities lend an additional strength and power to the work these men are doing and, in this mural context, also infer strength of character.

In the artwork, the figures are embodiments of strength, fortitude, and work itself. Through these characters, the attitude and mood of the pieces convey a sense of determination in the work they are doing. The serious, unwavering facial expressions visually communicate this. The figures' body language, too, expresses this sense of the importance of work. Though this concept applies in each case, take for example the scene of three men at the logging machine in the Milaca mural (Image 5). The figures lean into their work, putting their entire bodies into the tasks at hand. There is no part of them that does not respond to the work they undertake. They personify dedication to work, as their eyes do not even glance away from the tasks at hand. All figures are focused and diligent in the work at hand, and they stop for nothing. Thus, the murals include not only subjects of work, but a visual sense of a strong work ethic as well. Moreover, there are no problems or flaws in the work the figures are accomplishing. The work goes as planned, and, through this, the work ethic and determined attitude with which these figures

approach their work is shown to be successful. This bold, dedicated portrayal of workers also applies to the portrayal of Native Americans working in their historical context. In the Margaret Martin's Treasury Section mural *Indian Hunters and Rice Gatherers* in the St. James Post Office, the Native Americans in the scene each work with a dedication and complete concentration of facial expression and body posture, similar to that in the logging murals (Image 29).

In these industrial murals, the images show men doing individual tasks, yet they still emphasize a collective, community effort. In Wiley's International Falls mural, each lumberjack does his own job, his own individual task. In fact, each of these six figures is so absorbed in his own task that he appears completely oblivious to the others working around him, even if they are right next to him. None of the men look at each other or the other work going on, nor do they even look out at the viewer. The same holds for Boratko's Milaca mural sequence, as well as each of the other industry murals. The worker figures look in completely different directions and never at each other. This emphasizes the individual. However, in looking at the overall picture, none of the individuals' tasks would be meaningful or complete without the other workers and their individual projects. Cutting down the tree would mean nothing if there was no one to move it from the woods to a place where it could be used. Rather, with the combined efforts of several loggers, that tree is cut, moved, and turned into usable and salable lumber. The workers share certain tasks, but the same theory applies. In the specific example of the three men who together can drive the log through the cutting machine in the Milaca mural, each man silently works with the same sense of individual focus, calling attention to each person's role (Image 5). However, each man's work is dependent on the others, showing a combined effort. To complete the logging project in Boratko's mural sequence, no fewer than thirty-one lumberjacks cooperatively contribute to the overall effort. Ultimately, the work accomplished is a cumulative, community

effort, though it still respects the contributions of the individual worker. Just as showing scenes from local history glorifies physical communities, these work images value the community spirit.

The theme and presence of work are a significant element even in the non-industrial New Deal murals that show work being done, though not as their main subject matter. For example, in the Treasury Section local history mural *The Founding of Rochester* by David Granahan, the work of making the first road is chosen as a pivotal point in the community's history (Image 3). The entire community gathers to watch and support this moment of work. It takes effort to accomplish this group goal, and, without this work, the community and town would not have become what they did. In essence, these murals show work as the foundation and backbone of the community. Another excellent example is the Treasury Section's *Life in Grand Rapids and the Upper Mississippi* by James S. Watrous (Image 19). Though the main scene in this painting is the men and women of the town dancing to celebrate the arrival of a steamship to town, at the very same moment on the left, part of the community is involved in doing the actual work of constructing the new town. In this scene of "the growth of the town during the lumbering and river trade period," the joy cannot exist without the work to get to that point.¹⁰² Work here is an essential element of the community, just as it is in the Rochester mural.

The commonness of the work theme within community murals seems to indicate a strong value placed on work and work ethic in the greater community of Minnesota at the time. There were numerous options of what to portray in these murals, but again and again, work is the chosen subject matter. These scenes of work were important enough to be chosen to permanently decorate community building walls, indicating a community value placed on work. Because most of these work murals were created for public buildings serving the entire

¹⁰²Marling, 139. Marling quotes this phrase from an April 3, 1939 letter from the artist James Watrous to Edward Rowan, the operational deputy of the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture.

community, such as post offices and town halls, the murals were meant to reflect and represent the entire community in some distinctive way. In choosing work as representative, these artists and citizens are defining the communities by the work that they do. This puts work in a place of high value within the community.

Even implications promoting work, rather than actual representations of work, play a significant role in the expression of the murals. Betty Carney's *Discovery of Ore* from the Chisholm Post Office is an excellent example of the implied importance of work in communities (Image 20). This mural portrays a man leaning over a tree that has been struck by lightning and holding handfuls of rich, red earth, the iron ore that soon developed and defined the Mesabi Range region of Minnesota. In this Chisholm mural, iron ore was found by accident, not through work. However, even the portrayal of an accident shows the community's underlying dependence upon industry. In choosing this moment, the discovery of iron ore, as the pivotal moment in the foundation of the community, the area defines itself in terms of industry and work. Even when work is not directly represented, the community is defined by industry and thus by work even in its genesis.

Even in murals that seem to have nothing to do with the subject matter or theme of work, there is often still a subtle presence of this theme of work ethic. Since obvious industry and work subject matter is less common in WPA murals, this subtlety appears most often there than in Section murals, as seen in this mural showing a playground scene painted for the Waconia Elementary School (Image 13-14).¹⁰³ Even in play, the children are industrious and busy. The WPA/FAP mural from the Waconia elementary school shows at least twenty young children, each busily engaged with different playtime activities. Students jump rope, fly kites, cradle dolls, and play ring-around-the-rosy or on the teeter-totter, but not one child is sitting idly. Like the

¹⁰³Title and artist were not listed with this mural image, merely location.

men in the industry murals, these children are intent and focused upon the activities they are enrolled in, both alone and cooperatively with others. The same observations can be made about Elaine Dill's *Favorite Recreations*, a similar WPA/FAP mural at the Sidney Pratt School in Minneapolis (Image 21). The fifteen students in this painting, though slightly older, occupy themselves playing tennis, baseball, or marbles, jumping rope, roller skating, flying kites, spinning hoops, riding on the teeter totter, or riding bicycles.¹⁰⁴ In both of these murals, the students are noticeably self-motivated, creating their own amusement rather than needing someone to look after them or continually entertain them. Self-motivation, activity, and industriousness are important elements of the work ethic contained in the other work and industry murals. These murals were placed in schools where they were seen daily by the youth of the communities and, through their portrayals, these murals commend and endorse activity and industriousness to their young audiences. Industrious children will grow up to be industrious citizens and workers.

This emphasis on work in defining communities and even everyday behavior, however, appears ironic in terms of the economic circumstances in which these murals were created. These murals highly emphasized work at the very same time that members of these Minnesota communities, as well as much of the nation, were struggling with unemployment and a lack of work. Why, then, did work appear so often and figure so importantly in these murals? This continued emphasis of work, even amidst its actual scarcity, could have intended to serve as a source of motivation for Minnesotans struggling with this depressed economy and social situation. These murals show dedicated, determined work as a successful thing, leading to productivity and prosperity. Both the finished lumber in the Milaca logging sequence (Image 11)

¹⁰⁴There is another similar WPA/FAP mural painted by Elaine Dill for the Children's Room of the St. Cloud library that also shows industriousness and through children playing. The same observations are true for all three mural examples.

and the founding of the town in the Rochester local history mural indicate this successful productivity (Image 3). Prosperity, too, is a result of work, seen in the well-kept farms and livestock of the agricultural murals *People of the Soil* and *Hog Farming* (Image 2). By showing dedication to work as something productive, successful and worthwhile, the murals attempt to create a sense of motivation and dedication to work, even for those without work. As Karal Ann Marling states, the murals “gave tangible form to hopes for a future in which going to work would be the most routine of human activities.”¹⁰⁵ Work benefits the community in general more so than the individual by supporting the local industries and founding the community itself. Therefore, work is not merely an individual thing but can be productive in a greater sense as well. These murals involve not just work in their subject matter, but an attempt to impart a strong, successful work ethic to their audiences.

Another factor to consider when examining the muralists’ possible motivations to include images and ideals of work so significantly is that these murals were created through government sponsored work relief or at least work sponsoring programs. Sponsorship from these programs may have given the artists unique perspective for that work theme. As explained earlier, the WPA arts programs were organized primarily as a form of useful work relief, providing an obvious connection with work. The Treasury Section focused rather on quality of art and its function for decorating public buildings. Even without a principal focus on work, the Treasury Section still provided jobs for its artists, many of whom struggled to survive as artists otherwise.

In looking at the results of work showing in each programs’ murals, the outcome is contrary to what one might expect. Work is a major factor, in action or ideal, in nearly all of Treasury murals. However, the WPA/FAP murals, actually sponsored by a work program, split nearly half and half regarding emphasis on work. One simple reason for this is again the variety

¹⁰⁵Marling, 19.

of subjects and styles within the WPA/FAP, many of which do not have a direct outlet for expressing ideas of work. Additionally, it appears that the cultural atmosphere emphasizing the importance and crucialness of work is the more important factor in the frequency of work themes within Minnesota's New Deal murals, not the role of the programs as work sponsoring agencies and the position of the muralists as recipients of this work.

Minnesota murals of the Treasury Section and WPA/FAP are notable for the elements and images of work that they include, but the types of work **not** included are nearly as crucial to the definition of work in Minnesota during the 1930s.¹⁰⁶ The murals that show work actually being done focus solely on manual labor: cutting down trees, digging, running machinery, driving animals, and cultivating fields. Emphasizing this subject matter in a positive, inspiring manner makes these occupations appear perfectly respectable. However, manual labor is the only kind of work that these murals show. The white-collar world, including intellectual, business, governmental, financial and creative types of work, is not included in the muralists' representations. Though work represents and defines communities, the narrow focus on manual labor leaves out an entire economic sector of people within the communities.

The sole exception to the murals' exclusion of white-collar workers in the murals images I have seen is in the Hutchinson post office mural *The Hutchinson Singers* painted by Elsa Jemne (Image 28). This center panel of this local history mural shows the three Hutchinson brothers, playing their respective instruments, the violin, cello and piano. These three brothers Asa, Judson, and John, known as the "Hutchinson Singers" founded the town in 1855 and traveled throughout the nation giving concerts of popular and abolitionist songs from 1841 through the

¹⁰⁶This classification of themes absent in these murals are based upon the mural image samples I have been able to access. These murals are noted in Appendix II and Appendix III. It is possible that the subject matter of the other murals may change these findings, but my image sample is large enough to carefully make these assertions.

end of the Civil War.¹⁰⁷ Though the brothers are shown playing their instruments, the mural depicts them in a household, not professional, setting. To emphasize the historical content of this mural, flanked by two other panels showing local scenes from the 1862 Dakota Indian War, it can be argued that the artist includes these instruments more as an identification factor of the founding Hutchinson brothers than an emphasized means of earning a living from white-collar positions.

This omission of the white-collar economic sector is even more notable in historical context of these murals' creation. The New Deal murals in Minnesota were produced by government art programs, beginning with the Public Works of Art Program in 1933, founded as a unique means of work relief for skilled, white-collar workers.¹⁰⁸ The artists painting the murals, the supervisors running the program, and the government officials overseeing the funding all belong in the white-collar worker category. However, in painting the life of America, these New Deal artists and bureaucrats leave themselves completely out of the picture. Despite the work that they were being paid to do, the definition of work they portrayed visually was dramatically different.

Even within the representations of manual labor, the depictions are not complete. Rural or wilderness based manual labor—mining, logging and agriculture—are the only thing shown. More urban or manmade industries, such as manufacturing or factories, are left out. Workers use some machinery in the logging and mining scenes, but the industries themselves still relate more to nature, to the specific landscape of Minnesota, and to the roots of the people living in the state. The railroad, an incredibly significant element of the settling and economy of Minnesota, is also

¹⁰⁷*WPA Guide to Minnesota*, 384.

¹⁰⁸Hendrickson, 170.

noticeably absent from the murals, though it was intimately involved in the logging, mining and agriculture economies.

In addition to economic class omissions, working women are another significantly missing element in the portrayals of work in these New Deal murals. In these work scenes, there is a very unequal gender balance, as women are rarely shown in the work that is being done and men are given greater significance even in the few scenes where women appear. In all of the murals that actually show work being done, only two murals show white women involved at all. In the first example, Fogel's Cambridge mural *People of the Soil* (Image 2), though the woman and her child occupy the center of the mural, the man in the right foreground is the one doing the tasks usually associated with agricultural work. As Barbara Melosh, author of the most in-depth study on gender portrayals in New Deal art and theater, writes, "Though she is taking care of a child, her reclining position conveys rest...most spectators did not read child care as work."¹⁰⁹ The woman was doing work, but the portrayal of that work did not show an equal respect for it and this difference in work "excludes her from the work of the farm."¹¹⁰ In the second example, Humphrey's *Production* mural from the North St. Paul Post Branch Office (Image 16), a woman and child actually assist with agricultural work of feeding the cows, but they are still in a position where their work is of less importance. As Melosh analyzes, "Donald Humphrey's *Production*, in St. Paul, Minnesota...was exceptional for its strong pictorial hierarchy of age and sex. Male figures loom large; subordinate in posture and size, a woman and child assist with the milking."¹¹¹ Both these examples are from the agricultural murals, which have more of a

¹⁰⁹Melosh, 61.

¹¹⁰Melosh, 61.

¹¹¹Melosh, 60.

tendency to include family labor.¹¹² The rough industry murals of logging and mining show exclusively male worlds, as do the murals of other subjects that show work (Images 3, 4 and 8).

The only sphere of murals where women are regularly shown working side by side with men are the Native American murals, separated from the other murals and 1930s Minnesota by both culture and time. In Margaret Martin's St. James Post Office mural *Indian Hunters and Rice Gatherers*, while the men hunt and fish, a woman in the left foreground is busily occupied gathering wild rice in a canoe (Image 29). She is involved in a different occupation, similar to the other murals showing women, but the difference in status between the two levels of occupation is less evident. A second Native American mural, Lucia Wiley's *Indians Gathering Wild Rice* for the Long Prairie Post Office, also shows Native American women at work beating off and collecting grains of wild rice (Image 30). A man in the background accompanies the women and assists them by poling their boat forward through the rice plants, yet he clearly does not help with the gathering itself. Although women are more readily shown at work in these Native American images, the male and female tasks are still rigidly delineated.

This obvious omission of women in the world of the New Deal murals does not reflect the amount of work women actually did in the 1930s Depression economy. In 1930 census, almost eleven million women, 24.3% of women in the nation, were listed as "gainfully employed," most as domestic or personal service or as teachers and nurses.¹¹³ None of these professions appear in these New Deal murals. Though women were less likely to go out and obtain hired, paying positions as men did, women's work in the home was one of the main sources of subsistence for families struggling through the Great Depression. According to studies of social trends in the 1930s, "The collective contributions of women were critical during

¹¹²Melosh, 60.

¹¹³Bondi, 323.

the 1930s. With Americans turning inward and relying on their families for survival, woman's role at the center of the family gained in significance."¹¹⁴ In the 1930s, society was conscious of this importance of women to the survival of the family. As First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her 1933 book *It's Up to the Women*, "The women know that life must go on and that the needs of life must be met and it is their courage and determination which, time and again, have pulled us through worse crises than the present one."¹¹⁵ Men and women in the 1930s clearly had different work roles, though they were equally important. However, the New Deal murals in Minnesota show only one vision and definition of significant work: the male work world. Why is this?

Part of the answer may lie in the crisis of gender roles brought about by the Great Depression's work crisis. Women's work in the home, still every bit as difficult, was relatively unchanged with the mass unemployment and economic crisis. If anything, women were made to work harder to save money and creatively meet the needs of their families. Men's work worlds, however, were disrupted greatly by unemployment. These both greatly affected their self-esteem and challenged their gender role. As sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd presented in a 1937 gender roles study, "The men, cut adrift from their usual routine, lost much of their sense of time and dawdled helplessly and dully about the streets; while in the homes, the women's world remained largely intact and the round of cooking, housecleaning, and mending became if anything more absorbing."¹¹⁶ Work was an essential part of men's self-definition, and, without that opportunity, many men felt adrift and powerless.

Within the mural artwork of the New Deal, work as a theme was also tied to the male world and identity. As Barbara Melosh writes in her discussion of gender and work:

¹¹⁴Bondi, 311.

¹¹⁵Bondi, 311.

¹¹⁶Quoted in Bondi, 311.

In Section art, work represented an essential characteristic of manhood: it stood for mastery, the ability to reshape the materials of the world and to make one's own destiny. By associating paid work with manhood, the manly ideal tacitly validated men's mastery over women: in a market economy, men's greater access to paid work ensured their dominance in the family and social life. Significantly, though, men seldom were represented as breadwinners in public art. Work and family were worlds apart, and men were usually shown alone or with other men as they labored.¹¹⁷

The absence of plentiful work in society made these stereotypical, idealistic male roles difficult or impossible to maintain. However, as historians claim, "In general these role reversals were not desired by either men or women, and most couples tried to maintain traditional, patriarchal gender roles through the dislocations of the Depression."¹¹⁸ One way to reinforce traditional gender roles in work is simply to emphasize them within the artwork seen by the entire community. The prevalent emphasis upon men's work in these murals may be an attempt to reinforce men's importance, while overshadowing and excluding the already appreciated contributions of women. In manipulating what to show and what not to show, this mural artwork presents a constructed vision of life and work, showing roughly accurate scenes but controlling which scenes to include. This biased emphasis reinforces traditional gender roles in the work world in this period of both social and economic crisis.

In addition to supporting the traditional importance of males in the workplace, it is also possible that these murals may have been a subtle reaction against women in the workplace. In addition to women's significant roles working within the household, nearly a quarter of women, both single and married, worked outside of the home as well. In these positions, they earned much less than men did. On average in a year, women earned only \$525 for a full-time position, whereas men earned around \$1027. However, because of employers could hire them at reduced

¹¹⁷Melosh, 84.

¹¹⁸Bondi, 311.

wages, women joined the working ranks at twice the rate of men in the 1930s.¹¹⁹ Amidst the great shortage of jobs in the 1930s, there was a great reaction against women in the workplace, particularly married women, for the reason that they were taking jobs that should belong to men, the traditional breadwinners and heads of households, and that women's natural place was in the home with the children. According to a 1936 *Fortune* magazine poll, 48% of responding Americans disapproved of married women having full-time jobs outside of the home and 37% gave it only conditional approval. Even the government weighed in on the issue with Section 213 of the 1932 Federal Economy Act, prohibiting more than one person from each family from working for the government, a law seen as a step backwards in the women's rights movement.¹²⁰ Even for jobs within the WPA, women had to be certified as the head of their household to obtain a position. Those with able-bodied husbands could not qualify for project work, for their husbands were still seen as heads of the household, whether they could find work or not.¹²¹ Many women still worked out of economic necessity, but it was certainly a controversial issue. In the idealized portrayals of work within these murals, this controversial issue might have been too contested to want to display publicly and centrally in these communities, potentially inciting comments and reactions from the entire community.

Because these murals focus on a narrow concept of the "ideal" worker, extremes in age in work are also left out of the picture. The first of these extremes is children workers, a significant part of the economy and day-to-day family survival in the 1930s. Across the nation, children were an "integral source of labor" on farms, in coal mines, and in textile mills.¹²² Despite the negative connotations that associate with extreme child labor, the everyday contributions of

¹¹⁹Bondi, 323.

¹²⁰Bondi, 323.

¹²¹Bondi, 325.

¹²²Jacqueline Jones, *A Social History of the Laboring Classes: From Colonial Times to the Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) 175.

children were often a crucial contribution to their family's well-being was simply in the day-to-day family effort that it often took for survival in those days when every effort and every penny counted. *Citation or other source* Though child labor in factories was nationally outlawed in 1938, children continued to be a vital part of what made family farms and other family businesses function both during and after the Depression. In these murals, however, that role is completely overlooked. In the farming mural images, such as Fogel's *People of the Soil* (Image 2) or Humphrey's *Production* (Image 16), adults are the only ones responsible for the efforts and product. In fact, with the exception of a baby in *People of the Soil*, children do not even enter the scene of the industrial murals.

Likewise, older workers also do not appear in the murals of work in Minnesota. The workers that the artists portray neatly fall into the approximate 25-35 year old age group, at the peak of physical abilities. Elderly workers, consistently the first to be laid off in cities across the nation, quite often found it difficult to make a living in these Depression years.¹²³ By not showing elderly workers, the murals simply avoid representing this social problem.

Another noticeable absence in the murals' representation of the working and economic environments is any visual sense of the current unemployment or agricultural crisis of the period. In the example of Seymour Fogel's *People of the Soil*, the farm scene is idyllic, showing a peaceful scene of a farm family at work (Image 2). There is no stress in the calm scene, nor any indication of the years of drought and poor agricultural prices that farms experienced throughout the state in the 1930s. The animals on the left indicate a certain degree of prosperity, as do the farm buildings in good repair. In the mining and logging murals too, simply the fact that all the characters are shown at work denies the existence of a major unemployment problem within the iconographic portrayal.

¹²³Jones, 185.

This absence of economic negativity in the murals is particularly noticeable in comparison to the photographs of the Farm Security Administration, also sponsored by the government during the Depression. The purpose of these documentary photographs, many of which have now become great works of photographic art, was to accurately depict life across the nation at the time of the Depression. Life is captured as it is—for the good and the bad. The project focused particularly on rural life and many of the mundane and negative elements of the Depression and Dust Bowl, in order to propose and enact appropriate governmental relief measures.¹²⁴ For example, Russell Lee's interior and exterior photographs of a sugar beet worker's shack near Chaska, Minnesota (Images 41 and 42) gives a much different sense of the prosperity of farms in Minnesota than Fogel's idealized *People of the Soil* does (Image 2). The murals obviously did not attempt this documentary sense within their portrayals of life within the Depression, but rather showed an ideal version of the economic life of 1930s Minnesota.

Conclusion

These murals are reflections of life in Minnesota, but carefully constructed ones. The scenes are realistic, yet idealized enough to emphasize the themes of determination, prosperity gained through dedicated work, the value placed in a strong work ethic, the importance of community and individual, and the importance of pride in one's roots. The images avoid the current, difficult social and economic crisis within their direct iconography, but they still show important themes and indications of social attitudes that would motivate a community in a time

¹²⁴“America From the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-45,” *Library of Congress--American Memory* (15 December 1998) <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>> (15 March 2004).

of struggle like the Great Depression. Within these murals, the influences of both the social and historical atmosphere and of the shaping forces of the separate missions and goals of the New Deal arts programs are evident.

What the murals show is important, even more so in light of the decisions the muralists, government and communities made on what they did not show. The murals show America, not overseas present or past. More specifically, the murals show a local picture of the American Scene, only focusing on Minnesota and her regions, not on anything at a national scale. Rather than showing famous individuals, the murals concentrate on images of community and the daily lives of the common people. They avoid depicting the negatives of the Depression era, but rather show scenes of determination and motivation. Education and religion, though displayed in several Mexican murals, do not enter into the picture created by the Minnesota New Deal murals. Only one mural actually shows an image of the U.S. postal system, despite the fact that there are 21 murals housed within post offices. Rural and wilderness scenes abound, yet urban backdrops and even indoor scenes are rare. Each element and theme in these murals was a conscious decision, making the meaning all the more meaningful.

Today, nearly seventy years after the New Deal mural projects, many of the murals still exist in the space for which they were intended. Some have been destroyed, such as the Lucia Wiley's Miller Vocational School murals in Minneapolis, painted over in 1953.¹²⁵ Others were salvaged, even at the last minute like David Granahan's St. Cloud post office mural, and moved to historical societies where they could be stored and preserved. However, many post offices and schools across the state still proudly display these murals, though most people have no idea where the mural came from or why it was painted in the first place. Wherever these murals

¹²⁵Lucia Wiley, "Who Owns a Work of Art?," *Artists Equity Association's Oregon Chapter Newsletter* (No.1; May 19, 1953), reprinted on www.muralist.org.

appear, they bear with them a fascinating heritage. These murals stemmed from both a unique political, social and economic atmosphere within this nation's history and the imprints of a distinguished and diverse set of government-sponsored art programs that have never been duplicated. Without either crucial influence, the murals would not have developed the way that they did. The New Deal murals in Minnesota excellently show the combined influences of history, art history, society, and politics upon artwork, creating a distinctive and expressive art for a people.