Labor’s Canvas
Labor’s Canvas:
American Working-Class History
and the WPA Art of the 1930s

by

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing
In memory of my father, Daniel Harris

(1907-1989), and his 1930s labors
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In the final chapter, Moses Soyer, *Artists on the WPA* [or *Artists on WPA*], Smithsonian Institution of Art; Peppino Mangravite, *American Artists Congress and In Defense of Culture!* New York Public Library; *Art Front* masthead, New York Public Library; Hugo Gellert, [artist on ladder], New York Public Library.
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CHAPTER ONE

MARKING THE BODY:
NEW DEAL ART AND 1930S LABOR

At an unprecedented and probably unique American moment, laboring people were indivisible from the art of the 1930s. By far the most recognizable New Deal art employed an endless frieze of white or racially ambiguous machine proletarians, from solo drillers to identical assembly-line toilers. Even today, such paintings produced by the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), particularly those with work themes, are almost instantly recognizable. Happening on a Depression-era picture, one can see from a distance the often simplified figures, the intense or bold colors, the frozen motion or flattened perspective, and the uniformity of laboring bodies within an often naive realism or naturalism of treatment. In a Social Realist dance, the FAP’s imagined drillers, haulers, construction workers, welders, miners, and steel-mill workers make up an industrial army.

This book studies how FAP labor iconography both chronicles and reframes working-class history. Such visual narrative is far more than myriad responses by prolabor artists. Artistically rendered, working-class history reveals the cultural contradictions about labor evident even in the depths of the Great Depression, not the least in the imaginations of the artists themselves.

The eminent art historian Irwin Panofsky defined iconography as comprising factual, conventional, and intrinsic meanings. Applying this definition to the laborers populating the artistic production of the FAP, we see that representative canvases, drawings, and prints contained dual and even multiple meanings. Superficially following WPA guidelines, they also contained what Helen Langa in her important book on 1930s art defined as “politically coded subtexts.” Imagined welders atop a skyscraper are icons of independence, yet despite the heroic image they are subject to the will of their employers. Images of starved seamstresses incur New Deal sympathy, yet the same figures spur protest for anti-capitalist change.
A labor-historical reading of such artwork layers the WPA message with still other visual meanings. Such art was, after all, the response of the government-sponsored art professional to the blue-collar subject. To that end, this study goes beyond specific labor events and leaders, though these were common visual tropes. *Labor’s Canvas* cannot only address the FAP rendering of “top-down” union negotiations, strikes, and agreements with government or management. Of crucial importance is the “bottom-up” story of the common experience of company towns, family and community hardship, industrial speedups, grassroots activism, government relief jobs, and breadline joblessness.

FAP artists recognized that the American labor force was not monolithic, even though they conventionally marked the working body with labor. Their responses involved them in more than an iconography of 1930s toil, however subtle or varied. The FAP narrative, I argue, also illuminated the ideological struggle between native-born skilled craftsmen and a new polyethnic rank and file. Consciously or not, Project artists drew on a volatile new labor force.

The Depression’s manual labor experiences were to an important extent shaped by the period struggle between the American Federation of Labor’s (“AFL”) “male and pale” membership and the new Congress of Industrial Organization (“CIO”). The latter organized the semi- or low-skilled, as well as ethnic, gender, and racial minorities. Since many FAP artists were CIO supporters—at least on the metropolitan projects that claimed an artistic majority—the dialectic between the 1930s labor establishment and its breakaway insurgents informed a wide spectrum of canvases, drawings, and prints.

In the search of a grammar of the working class, artists encoded their canvases, drawings, and prints with other meanings as well. Yet their messages revealed the complexity of the Roosevelt era’s effort to stand behind the worker in the face of an unruly labor movement, internecine union conflict, and widespread fears of rebellion. Given such issues, nowhere was this complexity better illustrated than in treatments of work. Were they the backbone of the New Deal or a potential army of disgruntled jobless? WPA artists thus struggled with the dialectic between the New Deal’s iconic “Big Body” and the complexity and threats posed by a labor force in turmoil.

However simplified the golden age of worker art appears from our modern perspective, FAP art production revealed other equally important tensions. Artists saw themselves as cultural workers who had much in common with the blue-collar workforce. Yet artistically, they struggled to reconcile social protest and aesthetic distance. Ideologically, their
canvases, prints, and drawings registered the attitudes toward laborers as bodies without minds often shared by the wider culture. In choosing a visual language to reconnect workers to the larger society, they tried to tell the worker from the work, with varying success.

The rules under which FAP artists worked were similar in some respects to those for other WPA jobs. Salaries ranged from about $26 for studio and print workshop artistry to the mural section high of around $42 for a thirty-hour week. In return for being supplied with materials and tools, artists were expected to reconcile themselves to what might be called factory time. This time-clock approach, however, varied greatly with the personality of the local or neighborhood Project director, particularly outside of big cities. Artists did not always have to work under the eye of supervisors or visiting New Deal bureaucrats. But whether onsite or roving the streets with a sketchbook, productivity was paramount. The FAP’s Easel Division had a production schedule of one canvas per month. The print workshop artists kept for themselves three prints of an edition of 25 or 50. The rest were stamped “WPA.”

If the tools were not their own, neither were the 340,000 artworks they produced—all were the property of the government. Those works not allocated to the storeroom were placed at the discretion of the WPA in schools, colleges, libraries, and government offices. Artists could certainly work after-hours on their own drawings and canvases. This liberty was provided they did not “obtain enough recompense to disqualify [them] for relief work.”

It was only within the job relief megalith that the FAP became synonymous with the cultural arm of the WPA. Program artists earned their own livelihoods in the Easel, Graphic Arts, and Mural Divisions of this New Deal program. Emanating from the Treasury Department was the Section of Painting and Sculpture—later the Fine Arts Section, or Treasury Relief Art Project [TRAP]. These programs, though, were commissioned, not based on joblessness. However stylized or idealized in service to the “back-to-work” program of the FDR administration, FAP art reflected a newly emergent labor importance in the cultural and political life of the country.

At its height in 1936, the FAP employed 5,000 artists, and 10,000 were on the rolls during its lifetime. Yet more than numbers powered the FAP’s mission to create a truly democratic art. In service to that goal was an agenda to resurrect the flagging spirits of a workforce construed as masculine. Indeed, this was a crisis of masculinity that visual artists needed to help resolve. Frequently pictured was a return to work,
optimistic labor force, and national support for men repairing the country’s infrastructure.11

Citizens who had little identification with blue-collar occupations and had never heard the phrase “proletarian art”—much less “agitprop” or “proletkult,” those mainstays of Communist Party cultural dicta—saw working-class manhood everywhere. So many portraits, drawings, and other graphic arts placed workers at the center that by the end of the 1930s there were forty exhibitions alone at New York’s Federal Art Gallery. Viewers were heterogeneous. The shows attracted office workers, businessmen, clerks, shoppers, and a variety of workers from the nearby clothing factories.11 The artworks were diverse as well. Here were still lifes, academic studio work, portraits, and industrial landscapes. In contrast, laborers themselves were a homogeneous workforce of faceless bodies and iconic muscularity. These were the imagined workers who peopled the walls of schools, post offices, municipal, state, and federal buildings, community centers, apartment house lobbies, and, of course, museums and galleries.

Before its demise in 1943, the FAP had generated 100,000 paintings and 240,000 prints from 12,500 original designs.13 At art relief’s peak, almost 2,500 artists were employed in New York City alone. The city was a mecca for WPA art programs and boasted nearly half the national figure for artists employed.14 Outside New York, in addition to 200 murals in schools, libraries, and hospitals, more than 12,000 easel paintings and more than 750,000 prints were produced. All were the stuff of WPA exhibitions at the New York World’s Fair, art galleries, and museums from Harlem to Portland, Oregon, to Sante Fe.15 Nor does this tally count work by artists who were only loosely linked or unaffiliated with WPA. But they too were dedicated to art for the people.

Yet from the New Deal era to our own, well-heeled art critics have often sneered at the simplified or brutally expressionistic figures who man concrete mixers, build bridges, chafe on or mournfully occupy breadlines, crowd factory gates, or swarm into mega-factories. They save their particular ire for the message-laden productions of Social Realist labor pictures. Depicting scenes of workers and the workless, this subgenre of Social Realism, while often grim enough, could also conform to “social content” or “social viewpoint” artistry.16 Some argue that the form and its emphasis on exploited workers grew out of cartoons of robust revolutionaries and violent strikes in early left journals like the Masses.17 Certainly the New Masses and Daily Worker carried on the tradition of the fighting proletarian. He or, less often, she, is a cornerstone of much Social Realist art. Others rightly question whether the very term “Social Realism”
is accurate. As Karal Ann Marling observes, “it fails to describe the variety of formal strategies [including expressionism and cubist abstraction] employed by New Deal artists.” Yet in most prolabor Social Realism, content and form merge. In any case, this debate about definitions should not obscure the central importance of the FAP’s development of a body language of class.

Paul Buhle has aptly remarked that the era’s radical artists followed their own rules rather than meticulously balancing politics and aesthetics. However stylized, distorted, or idealized in service to the “back-to-work” program of the FDR administration, such art reflected a newly emergent labor presence. It portraitized the era’s front-page labor tribunes. It catalogued the many workers whose backs bent or reached to repair the nation’s infrastructure. WPA painters, draftsmen, and printmakers (sometimes one and the same) preached—or in the case of key black artists, doubted or satirized—a proactive solidarity among whites, blacks, and ethnics.

The same FAP artists who created the labor Atlas also produced work (not always submitted to Project directors) that addressed directly or obliquely the era’s watershed labor protests or defeats. Not surprisingly this outpouring of artistry was liable to be suspect by “patriotic” WPA administrators. Artists also incorporated body language from the visual rhetoric of the CP press and its art-as-propaganda proletkult philosophers. In such avowedly radical drawings and graphics, radicalized workingmen shake fists at the factory or grapple with the authorities. The protest cadres are often interracial rather than lily-white. In counternarratives by African American artists, some with clear Party affiliations, the black worker is defeated by his solitary status and embittered by his exclusion from the blue-collar, white, male labor movement. His menial position is at odds with his essential dignity.

**Visual Grammar and Workers’ Bodies**

By 1938, Congress stiffened its resistance to government art and the leftist sympathies of many artists. A loyalty oath had been put in place. Yet to key modern observers such as Jonathan Harris, federal art, and certainly federal labor art, was a contradiction in terms. It could not effectively present mass unionism or revolutionary fervor, since the FAP was completely controlled by a cultural hegemony. This was nothing less than a “social process through which a political and ideological consensus is constructed and maintained by an alliance of forces organized around a participating class.” The implication is that the portrayal of manual labor
is a unitary or monolithic vision in which the toiling body is at the service of the state. In contrast, other recent scholarship has addressed these labor artworks, among others, as those in which empowered or economically recoverable laborers embody the conflict between democratic and more radical impulses. Barbara Melosh cites “conflicting demands—how to advocate revolution within a defense of democracy.” Helen Langa, studies how left artists on WPA invested the Big Body with a deeper significance. She looks beneath the dominant metaphors of strength, recovery, and cooperation in building the infrastructure.

Many representative WPA worker canvases, drawings, illustrations, and murals hide “red” symbols, including the hammer and sickle, or employ a version of the Soviets’ huge-handed worker figure. This conveyed to those who understood such symbols a view of revolution that questioned the surface support for the early New Deal Boundaries blurred as well when artists Americanized the Russian foundry worker. He is both a patriot in the service of Americanism and, in another reading, a stalwart advocating a workers’ state.

Applying their versions of Party thinking to their representation of vital industries, crowds, jobless lines, faces of derelicts, miners, union leaders, or workers sidelined by racial and gender segregation, these artworks registered dissatisfactions with the inability of organized labor prior to the rise of the CIO, especially given the scathing articles about the organization that appeared in left art journals and newspapers. Yet the AFL inheritance was not so easily denied. The early 1930s saw a still-powerful Anglo-European labor movement. These descendants of the old English-speaking Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AAISW) and the mine unions were wary of strikes and CP radicalism. They were, furthermore, at odds with a vast number of politically unaffiliated working people.

As supporters of the emergent unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (which had its share of organizers before they were expelled in the late 1930s and 1940s), FAP artists were well aware that the heroic, pro–New Deal, and usually white industrial laborer of immense strength had little in common with the ethno-racial, unskilled, and unorganized cadres of working men and, to a lesser extent, women. Many of their imagined workers fell short of both the high skills and Anglo-German whiteness of the “male and pale” unions of the old American Federation of Labor. It was the most powerful labor body of its time prior to the rise of the CIO.

Nevertheless, a common visual grammar of working men’s bodies did develop in Social Realists and social viewpoint artists from a
geographical, class, ethno-racial, and political spectrum. Some were of enduring reputation—such as Raphael, Isaac, and Moses Soyer, Ben Shahn, Isabel Bishop, Reginald Marsh, Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, and Alice Neel—and some of their names are more obscure today (Maurice Kish, Elizabeth Olds, Harry Gottlieb, Dox Thrash, Kyra Markham, William Gropper, and Hugo Gellert). Consciously or not, this visual grammar reflected ambivalence about working people. Whether Party stalwart or severe critic, pronion or prolabor, tolerant of the AFL or not, artists on the FAP were not unconflictedly proworker. Although advocacy of a proliferating solidarity through an organizing model of unionism appeared in the forefront of WPA artists’ work, the risk was that workers themselves would not be at the center of these canvases and drawings.

Many artists did fear creating an idealized figure or disengaging themselves from the lived experience of class. Reading WPA art through the prism of such warnings, we see that artists were not immune from this division of attitude and distrust of muscle and that there remained a crucial distinction between mental and manual labor. Even the artisan “mechanic” was depicted in classical terms or as inspiration for middle-class men to pursue a more strenuous life. In visualizing labor, late-nineteenth-century artists (see chapter 2) signified the primacy of the body rather than the intellect. Rebutting such a view, labor newspapers lauded white, skilled labor as “nature’s noblemen.” Yet by extolling the nobility rather than the unceasing struggle of laborers, iconography, like union journalism, separated itself from the sweating masses.

For the less-skilled, excluded from the AFL brotherhoods, an alternative tradition rendered people invisible behind their labor. Artists responded to the worker’s face as an emotive puzzle, what Nicholas Bromell calls the “inscrutability of manual labor.” It is as if the laborer, concentrating his energies on the task at hand, hides the feelings it arouses in him. If one takes this merging with the task, whether willed or not, to an extreme, the laborer becomes a kind of “statistical person.” Management saw him as fodder for factory reports: numbers hired, numbers fired or let go in hard times. Constructions of labor, from visual narrative to management report, reduce workers to “hands.” Implicit in this view is the workman’s diminished capacity to reason or to be in any way a mind at work.

Such were the dominant cultural assumptions about working people, including the conflation of stereotyped masculinity and working-class manhood. Eric Hobsbawm suggests that the “intelligent body” is a repressed category in European labor art. The FAP faced a similar
problem in pictorial fidelity to a more nuanced experience of labor. A minority of Project artists saw workers as agents in their own lives rather than ciphers dwarfed by technology or as anachronisms of an artisanal time. However, many others inscribed on the body the public’s stereotyped thinking about independent steel workers in contrast to cowed coal miners. Artists figurally registered labor movement discontent and the fears of a proletariat enraged by evictions and widespread unemployment. They drew and painted labor’s fears of displacement by less-skilled machine workers or by a reduction in wage rates on a non-union “relief” job. Conversely, those supporters of the new movements personified by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) and other CIO umbrella organizations struggled to avoid, and in some cases protested, a robotic adherence to factory regimens. They deplored the loss of identity among what Mary Heaton Vorse termed labor’s new millions.

Labor’s body was not, in sum, the representation of what some critics exasperated with the subject saw as those “damned machine Hercules.” Through artistically rendered working-class history, we can study the cultural contradictions about laboring people evident even in the depths of the Great Depression. Crucial in this regard are the dominant forms of artistic decisions about depicting labor’s body. We can observe the labor inclusions in and exclusions of FAP canvases and drawings, the types of jobs artistically chosen, the relation of the body to the particular industrial landscape.

As the labor movement became more receptive to unorganized workers, at issue was how artists individuated trades and members, in a newly unionized rank and file in the maritime trades, coal, and steel. Industrial selectivity inevitably operated as well in the favored poses, postures, revelations of faces, and racial and gender alignments at work, at leisure, and on the breadline. Finally, given the interest among more radical Project artists in securing a permanent FAP with an Artists’ Union (AU) bargaining agent, their artworks suggest their identification with and divergences from the very blue-collar workers who people their art.

**The Structure of the Book**

To study a WPA artistry both responsive to and ambivalent about labor, part 1, “Male and Pale: Unionism and Art,” begins with two artists, one nineteenth-century and the other twentieth-century, who, taken together, represent two crucial iconographic precedents. Rare among pre-WPA painters, they visually asserted labor’s “right” to a face as well as a body in industrial art. Both Thomas Anshutz’s yeomen iron moulders of
the 1880s and, two and a half decades later, Joseph Stella’s swarthy East European steeltown immigrants would leave a legacy to inflect the heroic and exploited proletarians of 1930s labor art. Taken together, these two artists charted the transit from the model of artisanal manhood espoused by the old craft brotherhoods of the AAISW to the virility of the unskilled or semiskilled ethnic masses denied membership in “white” unions in the decades before the CIO.

As labor commentators illuminating labor’s own conflicts and debates, they paved the way for FAP questions about what happens to the self in industrial work, what a true laboring man is, what is inscribed in their figural portraits, and who “owns” the worker’s body. The discontent of *The Ironworkers’ Noontime* prefigures the process whereby steel replaces iron. Read through this change, it is the “swarthy” men who did the “hot work” that the old craft brotherhoods of the AAISW despised. Stella bridged the 1930s generations and provided templates for industrial oppression. To an extent he revealed organized labor’s prejudice against the “human slag” of the steel mills, a bias that 1930s artists would question. Anshutz retained a hold on certain FAP artists as well: he projected tensions between management and workmen onto his pent-up figures.

With the proliferation of 1930s labor canvases, WPA artists’ visual strategies would further explore Anshutz’s and Stella’s dialectic of resistant and compliant bodies. Their visual rhetoric of co-optation and resistance would pervade WPA artistry. But for many, including Communists, that rhetoric would distance their artworks from working-class worlds. Despite what so many 1930s artists preached about proletarian art, their canvases, particularly under the New Deal aegis, also reflect the class threat posed by workers.

Labor’s self-construction in the 1930s intersected at key points with the New Deal emphasis on the monumental labor body. Chapter 3 studies the organizing image of the laboring man (and less often woman) as building material for the economic recovery. Conversely, if denied a part in that recovery, it is a site of deterioration. Whether the worker’s legs are pillars or matchsticks, the body anchors FAP artistry. Sternberg, Gottlieb, and others transform monumentality and debility into trade-specific canvases, prints, and drawings.

Labor itself knew that the Big Body invoked antithetical images, especially in coal and in the woman-dominated garment trades. The strength/weakness axis (the energy/depletion axis too) informed key portrayals of laboring bodies as artists played with the dialectic between oxlike muscularity and the marginalized worker, monumental energy and
Chapter One

sweated labor. Each artist layered the indomitable worker theme by drawing on his own life circumstances. Also key were the artist’s researches into the world of the worker, cultural and economic perceptions of a given industry, awareness of widespread poverty, and his or her own critical response to America’s individualist ethic. Artists did not, in seeing the interplay between power and weakness, reconcile the contradictions between a workforce in the economic doldrums and the workers’ personal strength. But they did appropriate the CIO’s emphasis on the invincible unionist.

Part 2, “Catching the CIO Spirit: The FAP and Multicultural Workers,” examines how artists bridge divisions of ethnicity, race, gender, and skill levels, including the question of their own craftsmanship as cultural workers. As I investigate in chapter 4, asserting cross-trade solidarity involved key artists in an attempt to create the CIO face. Full-face portraiture at first seems an unlikely contribution to the CIO organizing drives, except as a reminder that the working body has a face as well. I thus examine how a small FAP minority grappled with a longing to reinstate individuation, but balanced by a new enthusiasm for the undifferentiated multiculturalism of the CIO. Looking at everyone from a derelict-model who conjured up the old Wobblies to a powerful CIO dock leader, these artists signaled that darker hues invoked working-class solidarity across ethnic and racial lines. (Exceptions were created primarily by black artists, who individuated the bodies and faces of minority workers while indicting the federal programs that permitted discriminatory hiring practices and wage differentials.) These FAP artists refigured the dialectic between energetic and weakened labor bodies by endowing the white labor face, in isolation from faces of color, with a waning power.

Chapter 5 further addresses artistic strategies and ambiguities about the 1930s white everyman. This time it is the iconography of the crowd in the era of mass unemployment and labor dissatisfaction. As the AFL either refused to support strikes or gave them only sporadic support, workers in other industries, excluded from the prerogatives of (largely white) labor, rose up. In the docks and the steel mills, they split from the AFL. The labor context now extended to the jobless, seeking work through the fraternity of their kind.

One group of artists—some loosely allied, others with no ties to each other—mediated uniformity and disorder in paintings and drawings of those protesting or enduring job scarcity. Yet the same artists expressed and muted this newly incensed crowd in their canvases and drawings. In these ambiguous renderings, duplication or cloning “solves” the
artistic/aesthetic problem of embodying the desperate crowd. Dejected
crowds call out to awakened ones, the martyred to the triumphant. A
newly constituted labor cadre awakens, and allegiances in some key trades
shift to the CIO. However, those who transform that shift into art are still
called between respect for worker solidarity and fear of the mob.

Other alternative proletarians were similarly supportive of the
multiracial, bi-gendered CIO. Yet, as chapters 6 and 7 argue, the black and
female working-class history inscribed in these paintings and drawings
pushes against averageness or proletarian sameness. As particularizing
tendencies highlighted the marginal status of women and people of color,
visual texts on the labor-intensive, unskilled trades by Elton Fax, James
Lesesne Wells, and Ellis Wilson might have seemed peaceful enough.
Nevertheless, the subtexts reflected labor turmoil: with management,
within the shifting leadership of some former AFL unions, and among
those trades that were refusing to reject a “male and pale” ideology.
Chapter 5 thus discusses white workingmen’s enduring reluctance to
abolish the “black men’s jobs” that continued to characterize African
American labor.

Black artists were not as uniform as their white colleagues in defining
the political choices between the new CIO inclusiveness and the old craft
ethic. Key black artists often doubted or satirized a proactive unionist
solidarity. Some, like Dox Thrash, infused their figures with an artisan
ethnic. Others, like Charles White, turned to leftist protest influenced by the
Mexican muralists. Supporting the National Negro Congress (NNC) rather
than the CIO directly, African American artists could identify with a
workplace heroism of an alternative order. All of them, however, invoked
the body of the black servant.

Responding to their own painful work histories and to exclusion by
whites, such artists shifted the discourses of strength/weakness,
pluralistic/individualistic, white/black, man/woman. Focusing on an
interplay between race, class, and industrial work, these artists
complicated the pictorial conventions of the normatively white body.
African American artists also mined black folklore to recast white pictorial
conventions. The UMW powerhouse John L. Lewis becomes the railroad
legend John Henry.

If black artists recreated heroism in an African American proletarian
image, they had as much difficulty as their white colleagues did extending
it to working women, even within the CIO. Few figures of working
women appeared in 1930s art. Artists were particularly reluctant to turn
white women workers into manly, if oppressed, examples of strength, or
even chief family supporters. As in the society of the time, it was a limited
workspace that working women occupied on canvases and in drawings. There were few painter-printers who imagined working women apart from such social constraints.

This comparative absence requires further explanation. The female laboring body is the site of conflicting attitudes about “unseemly” behavior and labor solidarity from observers as diverse as the anticommunist WPA painter-muralists Thomas Hart Benton and Joseph Vavak, the Communist Party devotee Fred Ellis, and those with one foot in each camp, such as Jacob Burck. The exception was an artist like Jacob Lawrence. The son of a domestic, he returned to myth to imagine the heroic proletarianism of the black laundress. Even Lawrence, however, found it necessary to masculinize his Harlem laundress-ironers to convey their survival qualities. Of course, any powerful, large, or strong female figure of 1930s iconography had a “masculine” element, as the prolific WPA leftist Hugo Gellert’s figures of “Liberty” attest (see chapter 8). Yet Lawrence’s earth mothers deliberately convey heavy domestic work—“black women’s work”—as desexed.

Women painters, illustrators, and printmakers did not try to overturn cultural prejudices. What they concentrated on instead was redefining women’s job segregation. In Isabel Bishop and Kyra Markham, women choose to be separate or aloof so as to retain their dignity, battle sexual objectification, and even engage in their own work. Yet segregation remains the lodestone of this gendered representation of women’s labor, as well as in the gendered politics of labor representation. Women workers are the strikers, the jobless, domestic and commercial cleaners, office girls, and entertainers. They are visually prevented from making common cause with the men’s labor movement. Ironically, in more radical imaginings outside the WPA, Communist Party illustrators subtly removed women from the labor fray that should have welcomed them as comrades.

In chapter 8, which studies artists’ own visual rhetoric about themselves, I describe the degree to which the left-leaning Artists’ Union imitated and appropriated worker solidarity. I also examine how Party members and fellow travelers dedicated to a worker art joined the Artists’ Union to bargain—first, by default—with the AFL and later the CIO to be admitted as full-fledged union members. WPA artists, including women, were seeking to tear down barriers between their own work and that of manual labor. In that effort they were aided by government art projects, which used a broad sense of the artist as a worker like any other. The allied goal was to inspire thinking about class struggle and aid solidarity between artists and workers. Artists’ attempts at unionism—especially in the Artists’ Union, the journal Art Front, and the American Artists’
Congress, as well as demonstrations in support of trade union and workers’ causes—have been much discussed.

Painting and drawing workers engaged artists in visual responses to the problem of who best represented labor’s body. In their political lives, artists, particularly those of a leftist persuasion, identified themselves as mental mass cultural workers. They demonstrated for worker causes and even formed their own union locals. Yet when it came to their self-representations as workers, what came to the surface were versions of the very arguments that labor had with itself throughout the 1930s. That is, old craft allegiances, reminiscent of the AFL, reasserted themselves as artists tried to insert their bodies into the skin of the burly hero. AU’s motto was the raised fist clasping paintbrushes.

Yet creative or cultural workers were all too aware of their own FAP bodies, to judge by self-portraits and studio portraits of each other. As Moses Soyer, Peppino Mangravite, and Hugo Gellert engaged in self-fashioning as workmen, they refigured the WPA’s frequent insistence that artists were no different from plumbers. At the same time that they inscribed their own sense of the WPA work experience, with its vocational rhetoric and many work rules, they were ejected by an AFL union. And they found only a transient home in the CIO local. As self-styled workmen, they were the CIO’s most maverick bodies of all.

**Labor’s Canvas: The Artwork**

Although I have looked at hundreds of pieces of visual material, I can of course make no claim that my choice of works to examine here is scientific, if such a term can apply to labor themes in 1930s government art. My selections are not as problematic as the vast FAP output would suggest. But the intersection between the sheer volume of works (works I have either seen or read about) and the reiterated industrial, urban, and rural folk theme suggests repeated patterns, as capable art, social, and political historians have often observed. Given the enormity of artistic production on the WPA, there can be no catalogue raisonné of 1930s art. Any study, particularly one conceived of as a subfield of cultural criticism—i.e., working-class studies—must often choose depth over breadth.29 I have chosen a sizable spectrum of well-known artists, such as Moses, Raphael, and Isaac Soyer, Philip Levine, Jacob Lawrence, Reginald Marsh, and Isabel Bishop. Balancing these painter-printers are practitioners better known to New Deal art and cultural studies scholars—Peppino Mangravite, Louis Ribak, Palmer Hayden, and Hugo Gellert. And rescued from relative obscurity are Maurice Kish and Stanley Wood.
Together, they and others discussed here contribute to a labor art tapestry of the FAP’s achievements and limitations.

In addition to factories, southern tenant farms, and other work sites, I found it important to consider subways, sweatshops, and after-hours venues as well. Many artists, for instance, devoted their considerable talents to satirizing the Wall Streeters who had helped bring on and or suffered from the economic disaster of the Great Depression. Those whose power controlled the workers, even when counterposed with that of laboring people, should rightly be studied in a sequel to this book. Also deserving of in-depth study are the creators of wartime imagery whose purpose was unrelated to trade unions (unlike, for instance, Ben Shahn’s graphics for the CIO’s Political Action Committee in the early to mid-1940s).

Not within the scope of this study are murals. The populism of murals undoubtedly initiated a public conversation between painters and viewers from all walks of life. Certainly labor’s presence was denoted by everyone from John L. Lewis to unknown Detroit River Rouge auto workers and New York City garment trades cutters in a “romantic nationalist social history of American life.” The very lack of experimentation with which murals approached the American scene may have been, as Karal Ann Marling has argued, “a useful corrective to the isolated experimentation fostered by easel painting.” But the many exhortations to the era’s easel artists to paint the proletariat cannot be discounted either. Furthermore, murals told a preordained story in which labor tropes appeared far less than those of American enterprise, rural origins, and the import of technology. As cultural workers forming part of a larger workforce, moreover, muralists were routinely denied sought-after commissions, or their murals were painted out or painted over if they did not conform to that story. At the very least, workers in murals were at the service of a power structure and an infrastructure that harnessed their power rather than allowed them “to stand forth in their own right.” FAP artists, moreover, were not beholden to historical, allegorical, or patriotic art. There were some exceptions. Paul Buhle points to Rockwell Kent’s post office murals and the California muralists like Anton Refregier and the Coit Tower artists (discussed in chapter 4). Even though some of the painters in this study also doubled as muralists, they could be more forthright about the American scene, and certainly about workers’ role in it, on a smaller scale.

Also omitted are abstract artists or those with a philosophy about the worker’s body as a series of geometric planes. Such abstraction—the “disarticulated…working-class forms” of modernism—was a new
minority tactic in FAP aesthetic representation. Cropped, fragmented figures, compressed spaces, and elusive, ambiguous visual narratives were indeed executed under the WPA and contributed to modernist representations of 1930s economic anxieties, not least of all the artists’ own anxieties. Futurism, with its reduction or elimination of workers in favor of a fascination with geometric design, had one foot in cubism and another in expressionism. This study includes them to the extent that they provided recognizable picturings of the labor experience. Artistic experimentation about labor was not restricted to futurists. Nor was it limited to others who blurred the line between abstraction and representation (even if their designs and patterns suggested worker subjects). But it seems reasonable to exclude artists who even before the onrush of abstract expressionism put a distance between themselves and figural art. By 1938, a group of expressionist painters with FAP vitas known as “The Ten” picketed the Whitney and accused it of a “bias toward representational art.” Ultimately successful in their effort to be represented in future shows, they flowered after the New Deal. When in the 1970s Raphael Soyer ruefully published “Résumé of an Aged Artist,” he had lived to see his art become an outmoded tribute to social compassion.

Among the artists who adopted repetitive views and treatments of workers, FAP cultural production did not result in greater formal experimentation. Instead it represented shifting alliances between government and labor. This figural art thus illuminated contradictions between labor’s importance to the nation and America’s belief in an officially classless society. This view, termed American exceptionalism, was espoused by many members of Congress who were critical of government art “relief” and by those in the still-powerful craft brotherhoods of the AFL.

Valorizing working people was clearly a goal. Many FAP artists reasserted the impulse to place “community progress over individual achievement.” This belief, as American studies scholars have recently pointed out, was labeled “un-American” in the new political climate that developed soon after World War II. But the works themselves demonstrate the difficulties of an indigenously American art of labor.

A word on the dual focus of the book. Labor’s Canvas is of necessity a balancing act. Throughout the 1930s, the direct connection between FAP art and workers’ worlds was largely one packed into an “art for the people” rubric by federal, state, and local arts agencies. Quite separate from government sponsorship for artists, the myriad groups of organized and unorganized working people played out struggles, both inside and
outside the AFL and the CIO, to empower them to feed the body rather
than the soul. Artists’ unions reached out to support prostrike events,
actions addressed in some detail in chapters 4, 5, and 8. This activism,
however, was auxiliary rather than central to the key walkouts and protests
of the day.

Nevertheless, the following chapters do form a kind of worker history.
Not only did many radical organizations with artist members try to
organize workers. Artists themselves, whether on the FAP roles or those of
the Communist Party (or both), pictured unfolding labor events. Of
perhaps equal importance, these artists saw themselves as a cultural arm of
workers’ organizations as well as workers themselves. To better articulate
labor occurrences and artistic ideologies, the endnotes are therefore rather
full in their documentation of art-labor connections (and disjunctions).

The labor canvases and graphics analyzed in this book provide a timely
reminder that if the Roosevelt era could not make workers enduringly
strong, it could create a place for them in an art accessible to the average
person. At the same time, no analysis can ignore the tension between FAP
cultural production and the labor movement itself. The artists under
scrutiny here ably imagined workers who represented labor’s difficult
history. But in so doing, they inscribed prevailing class divisions from
which their own artistry was not exempt.

Notes

1 Marla Hughes, “‘I Paint What I Know’: The Work of Former Miner Thomas
Elmo Williams,” Labor’s Heritage 9, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 35.
2 Qtd. Elizabeth Faue, Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and
the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North
3 Helen Langa, Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in the 1930s (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 2004); see also Helen Langa, “Strength, Stress, and
Solidarity: Imag(in)ing American Labor in the Depression Era,” Southeastern
4 Helen Langa, “Deep Tunnels and Burning Flues: The Unexpected Political
Drama in 1930s Industrial Production Prints,” Industrial Archaeology 28, no. 1
5 Edward B. Rowan, “Will Plumber’s Wages Turn the Trick?” American
Magazine of Art (February 1934): 80; Florence Loeb Kellogg, “Art Becomes
Public Works,” Survey Graphic 23, no. 6 (1934): 279.
6 See Donald S. Howard, The WPA and Federal Relief Policy (New York: Russell
Sage Foundation, 1943).
7 For discussion of these WPA strictures, especially in the early years, see Riva
9 McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists, 118–19. The FAP also missed the opportunity to sell some of the 240,000 prints to the public or to lend them out or to help Alice Neel and some fellow artists who had unused and unallocated canvases in the stockrooms of the New York City easel projects.  
13 Cindy Medley Buckner, Art in a Day’s Work: Prints from the WPA (Baltimore: [Baltimore Museum of Art, 2000). In addition there were 2,250 murals and 13,000 sculptures in additional programs administered by the Treasury Department, but the FAP was more ambitious in scope and mission.  
15 While statistics differ, a reliable account is in Buckner, Art in a Day’s Work.  
16 Hemingway, in Artists on the Left, uses the term “Social Art” (4–5). Langa employs the term “social viewpoint” in Radical Art, 4–8.  
19 Given the many articles in the left press and debates at left art gatherings, meetings, and congresses, definitions of the era’s Social Realism invoke those of Socialist Realism as well. Socialist Realism is derived from Russian revolutionary models in which the revolt of the masses is predictable and inevitably successful. Included are phases of the daily struggle or happy workers and families under socialism.  
20 See David Shapiro, “Social Realism Reconsidered,” in Social Realism: Art as a Weapon, ed. David Shapiro (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), for a still-timely introduction; see also p. 32, n. 34. To the extent that socialist art could be embedded in less overtly social content art, there is often little distinction between the two forms.  
writer goes on to say that Project directors’ “subtle innuendo … on the American scene” gave “direction” to the Easel Division. Other observers have pointed to the institutional constraints and their underlying subtexts. According to Andrew Hemingway (Artists on the Left, 86), FAP art “could not resolve the central contradiction that the unitary culture projected by the ideology was belied by the massive and irreconcilable [class] divisions in American society.”

22 Of those who place WPA and allied art under the umbrella of the critique of capitalism, the most prominent are: Patricia Hills, Urban Concern and Social Realism (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1983); Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Melosh, Engendering Culture; Langa, Radical Art; and Hemingway, Artists on the Left.

24 It is also interesting to observe that Soviet sculptures of worker activists routinely placed an artist’s mallet in one hand and a weapon in the other.


29 Wherever possible, I try to amplify in-text references to titles with endnotes citing similar titles by the same or other artists.


31 Studies for murals with controversial ethnic figures or cross-racial alliances never made it past the competition phase. See, for instance, Kindred McLeary’s “Lower East Side Mural,” a study for the Madison Square post office in New York.