

# WPA Murals and American Abstract Artists

## WPA/FAP Mural Division of New York City

During the Depression era, New Deal art projects of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Administration (1933-1943) employed artists to create murals, paintings and sculpture for public buildings including federal buildings, post offices, and courthouses. New Deal artists were also hired to create thousands of portable works of art that were loaned or allocated to museums and other public agencies.

Artwork created under the New Deal is often thought of as WPA art. There were four New Deal art projects. Three were administered by the Department of the Treasury: Public Works of Art Project (PWAP); Section of Fine Arts (SECTION), previously called the Section of Painting and Sculpture; and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). The fourth was the Works Progress Administration's Federal Arts Project (WPA/FAP). The WPA was the largest of the four and was active from August 1935 to July 1943. [1]

In 1935 Audrey McMahon was appointed one of five Regional Directors of the WPA Federal Art Project. McMahon was in charge of the New York region which included New York City (administered as a separate state), New York State, New Jersey and briefly Philadelphia. [2]

That same year Audrey McMahon appointed Burgoyne Diller as Project Supervisor of the New York City WPA/FAP Mural Division. In 1935 Harry Holtzman became Diller's assistant in charge of abstract painters in the New York City Mural Division. [3]

Both Diller and Holtzman would become founding members of American Abstract Artists. Diller encouraged and expedited transfer of abstract artists from other divisions to the Mural Division. WPA/FAP created an immediate and valuable audience of peers for abstract artists. [4] Holtzman met abstract artists through his position and invited them to meetings when AAA was being formed. In addition to Burgoyne Diller and Harry Holtzman, early AAA members involved in the WPA include Rosalind Bengelsdorf, Ilya Bolotowsky, Harry Bowden, James Brooks, Byron Browne, Georgio Cavallon, Jose de Rivera, Werner Drewes, Balcomb Greene, Paul Kelp, Lee Krasner, Ibram Lassaw, Michael Loew, George McNeil,

Irene Rice Pereira, Ad Reinhardt, Louis Schanker, David Smith, Albert Swinden, John von Wicht, [5] Karl Knaths [6], Esphyr Slobodkina, and Hananiah Harari.

## WPA/FAP Mural Projects

Mural Project assignments consist of designing and executing murals and portable panels for public schools, high schools, colleges, hospitals, public and municipal buildings.

The project first surveys the public buildings, and then assigns artists to make preliminary sketches suitable to the nature of the building and consistent with the architectural scheme of the location. After these preliminary sketches have been approved by the Municipal Art Commission, the actual work on the walls is begun. The work is carried out under the constant supervision of the project heads until it is completed and given final approval by the Municipal Art Commission.

—Holger Cahill, National Director of the Federal Art Project of the WPA [7]

Participants in many WPA Federal Arts Projects were routinely required to submit sketches for the approval of WPA committees. The WPA committees evaluated the sketches for their aesthetic merit and suitability of proposed artwork, including sketches that were part of mural project proposals. [8] The murals approved usually contained historical narratives and portraits, depicted the American scene, or portrayed the worker. An exception to this was in the WPA/FAP Region that included New York City, New York State and New Jersey. In that region abstract murals were approved.

Burgoyne Diller persuaded the New York City Art Commission, WPA/FAP administrators, and many sponsors to accept abstract and semi-abstract murals for buildings. He enlisted the help of modern architects William Lescaze and Ian Woodner to accept abstract murals: Lescaze at the Williamsburg Housing Project and Woodner at the Health Building for the 1939 World's Fair. [9]

Architects were required to approve proposed murals if the mural was to be installed in a new building. Institutions receiving the murals also sponsored them. Sponsorship included a signed agreement and money contributed toward the cost of materials. The government paid

the artists' wages, and the sponsor's financial contribution guaranteed an interest in the artwork. [10]

Some of the murals created under the WPA/FAP have been preserved while others were painted over, destroyed or have disappeared. AAA founding members painted abstract WPA murals at two locations in New York City that were thought to be lost. These important historical works of art have been restored.

## Williamsburg Houses

Murals by Ilya Bolotowsky, Balcomb Greene, Paul Kelpé, and Albert Swinden were part of a group of works assigned by the New York City Mural Division of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project in 1936 for installation in the public areas of Brooklyn's Williamsburg Houses, a public housing development designed by William Lescaze.

The Williamsburg Housing Project consists of twenty buildings which are being erected under the supervision of the PWA and the New York Housing Authority. The architectural design is functional. These buildings contain social rooms which were open to the WPA/FAP for decoration. The decision to place abstract murals in these rooms was made because these areas were intended to provide a place of relaxation and entertainment for the tenants. The more arbitrary color, possible when not determined by the description of objects, enables the artist to place an emphasis on its psychological potential to stimulate relaxation. The arbitrary use of shapes provides an opportunity to create color patterns clearly related to the interior architecture and complementing the architect's intentions.

—Burgoyne Diller, Project Supervisor of the New York City Mural Division [11]

The group of paintings are thought to be the first and among the most important abstract murals in the United States. For decades, art historians and the artists who painted them came to believe that the murals had been lost or destroyed. [12]



Courtesy of Shamil Salah / Hudson and Salah Art Conservation Studios

This mural is shown as it was found in an abandoned recreation room in the Williamsburg Housing Project. Some of the pictorial elements are visible in the background behind and above the graffiti and to the right of *The Ya Ya*. There is also a faint triangle to the left of the window on the right.

The mural, pictured below, and the other murals were found and restored. Their canvas backings were sliced from the walls with pneumatic chisels. Layers of over-painting and grime were removed from the murals with chemical solvents and the application of heat and dry ice. Some had been covered by as many as eight coats of wall paint and, in two instances, painted with rubber cement so they could be used as self-adhesive bulletin boards. [13] The murals have been placed on long-term loan to the Brooklyn Museum by the New York City Housing Authority and have been on display since 1990 in the continuing exhibition *Williamsburg Murals: A Rediscovery*.



Ilya Bolowtowsky, *Untitled* 1936. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum. Digital Collections and Services (DIG\_E\_2009\_Williamsburg)

These murals, as well as many others, symbolize the effort that is being made by the WPA/FAP to stimulate rather than to restrict the direction of painting, which, in the last analysis, should be the artists' prerogative.

— Burgoyne Diller, Project Supervisor of the New York City Mural Division [14]



Balcomb Greene, *Untitled* 1936. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum. Digital Collections and Services (DIG\_E\_2009\_Williamsburg)



Paul Kelpe, *Untitled* 1938 (2 panels). Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum. Digital Collections and Services (DIG\_E\_2009\_Williamsburg)

## Williamsburg Murals on Display at the Brooklyn Museum

Ilya Bolotowsky, *Untitled* 1936, oil on canvas, 85 x 211 inches

Balcomb Greene, *Untitled* 1936, oil on canvas, 91 1/2 x 129 1/4 inches

Paul Kelpe, *Untitled* (left panel of two) 1938, oil on canvas, 98 1/4 x 89 1/2 inches and  
*Untitled* (right panel of two) 1938, oil on canvas, 98 1/4 x 95 7/8 inches

Albert Swinden, *Untitled* 1939, oil on canvas, 111 1/2 x 168 inches

## Hospital for Chronic Diseases on Welfare Island

The WPA/FAP hired Ilya Bolotowsky to create a mural, *Abstraction* 1941, for the Day Room of the Hospital for Chronic Diseases on Welfare Island in New York City. The hospital was later renamed Goldwater Memorial Hospital, and is now called Coler-Goldwater Specialty Hospital and Nursing Facility, on what is now Roosevelt Island. Ilya Bolotowsky's mural fell victim to neglect and was painted over in the 1950s.



The Day Room as it appeared in 1941. Courtesy of the Municipal Art Society of New York

In Ilya Bolotowsky's statement that accompanied his preliminary sketch for the mural submitted to the New York City WPA/FAP Mural Division, he wrote:

The Day Room of the hospital is circular in shape. It is a very unusually beautiful room. However, its roundness might give some patients a feeling of being walled-in and fenced off from the rest of the world. Therefore, in the mural I have sought to create a feeling of a free, open space... The shapes of the doors and windows all around the day room have been woven into the design... Since straight lines are the most restful things to contemplate, this mural is of straight lines and geometric shapes. The day room, its architecture, and its mural form one plastic unit...

Ilya Bolotowsky began to recreate the lost mural in acrylic in 1981. Decades before this, Jackson Pollock had found Bolotowsky's mural maquette in gouache with some discarded WPA material. Lee Krasner later donated it to the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. Ilya Bolotowsky obtained a photograph of his mural maquette from the Guggenheim Museum, squared off for reference purposes at one inch to the foot to use in recreating the mural. He died before finishing it in 1981. [15]



Courtesy of the Municipal Art Society of New York and conservator Luca Bonetti

In 1991 the Municipal Art Society of New York created the Adopt-a-Mural program in partnership with the Art Commission of the City of New York. The Adopt-a-Mural program raises money from corporate and private donors to restore New York City's most threatened and neglected murals. Seventeen murals were selected to launch the program, including Ilya Bolotowsky's *Abstraction*, 1941. [16]

It took the Municipal Art Society a decade to raise the necessary funding for the conservation so that the Adopt-a-Mural program could restore Bolowtowsky's WPA mural. Andrew Bolotowsky, the artist's son, guided the conservator and his staff in throughout the restoration. Having the photograph of the mural maquette was fortunate for the conservation because it could be used in feasibility tests for the removal of the over-painting and in the restoration, enabling Luca Bonetti to restore the mural exactly as it was created.

[17]





Courtesy of the Municipal Art Society of New York and conservator Luca Bonetti

For decades Ilya Blotowsky's mural was hidden under seven coats of paint including speckled white, yellow, green, pink, and an institutional brown. To restore the mural the conservator and his assistants had to painstakingly chip off the first three paint layers with chisels. The next four layers required a paint removing solvent paste and were then peeled off with a special paper. Adhesive was then injected into the canvas base where detachment was occurring. Any missing areas were carefully in-painted. [18]



Courtesy of Gail Gregg / American Abstract Artists

Before long I was combining the biomorphic forms with the rectilinear...My Williamsburg Housing Project Mural of 1937...and the mural for the Hall of Medical Science, New York World's Fair, 1938-39, are examples. By the time I was designing the fifty foot mural for the Hospital for Chronic Diseases [Coler-Goldwater Hospital] ...the biomorphic elements were completely excluded from my work. This last mural was close to the Suprematist style.

—Ilya Bolotowsky [19]



Ilya Bolotowsky , *Abstraction* 1941, oil on canvas, 85 x 600 inches.

Courtesy of the Municipal Art Society of New York and conservator Luca Bonetti

## Notes

1. O'Connor, Francis V. *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*. Washington : Smithsonian Institution, 1972, p. 12.
2. O'Connor, Francis V. *The New Deal Art Projects*, p. 50, 54. Late in 1939 Audrey McMahon's title was changed from *Regional Director* to *Assistant to the National Director*. (p. 63)
3. Lane, John R. and Susan C. Larsen. *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America 1927-1944*. Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute: Pittsburgh. 1983, p. 23-29.
4. O'Connor, Francis V. *The New Deal Art Projects*, p. 227.
5. Lane, Larsen, p. 22-36 James Brooks is not listed in this reference. His WPA mural, *Flight* 1942, is on view at the Marine Air Terminal, LaGuardia Airport, New York City.
6. O'Connor, Francis V. *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, p. 68.
7. Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993 bulk 1910-1960, Series 3: Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project: Administration of the State WPA/FAP. New York, *Art Work in Non-Federal Buildings and the Federal Art Project of the City of New York*, circa 1939. (Archives of American Art, Reel 5289, Frame 1462). This also lists the Project Supervisors of the New York City Mural Division and how the supervisory work was divided: Burgoyne Diller, Project Supervisor, was in charge of the work in public schools, high schools, colleges, libraries, public and municipal buildings; and Lou Block, Project Supervisor, was in charge of the work in hospitals.
8. Lane, Larsen, p. 22.
9. O'Connor, Francis V. *The New Deal Art Projects*, p. 227.

10. O'Connor, Francis V. *The New Deal Art Projects*, p. 232.
11. O'Connor, Francis V. *Art for the Millions*, p. 69.
12. Honan, William H. "Long-Lost Brooklyn Murals Are Being Restored" , *The New York Times*, 20 July 1988.
13. Honan.
14. O'Connor, Francis V. *The New Deal Art Projects*, p. 71.
15. Phyllis Samitz Cohen, Director of the Adopt-a-Monument/Mural Program, Municipal Art Society of New York, Letter to AAA Web Designer, 19 Feb. 2010 and an email, 25 Feb. 2010. Information about the restoration can be found in Wakin, Daniel J. "Shedding 7 Coats, A Beauty Emerges On a Hospital Wall; Years and Paint Stripped Away From a Noted Abstract Mural," *The New York Times*, 27 June 2001.
16. *Adopt-a-Mural*, catalog, The Municipal Art Society of New York and The Art Commission of the City of New York, 1991. Editor/Author Phyllis Samitz Cohen. p. 5.
17. Cohen.
18. Cohen.
19. *Adopt-a-Mural*, catalog, p. 24.