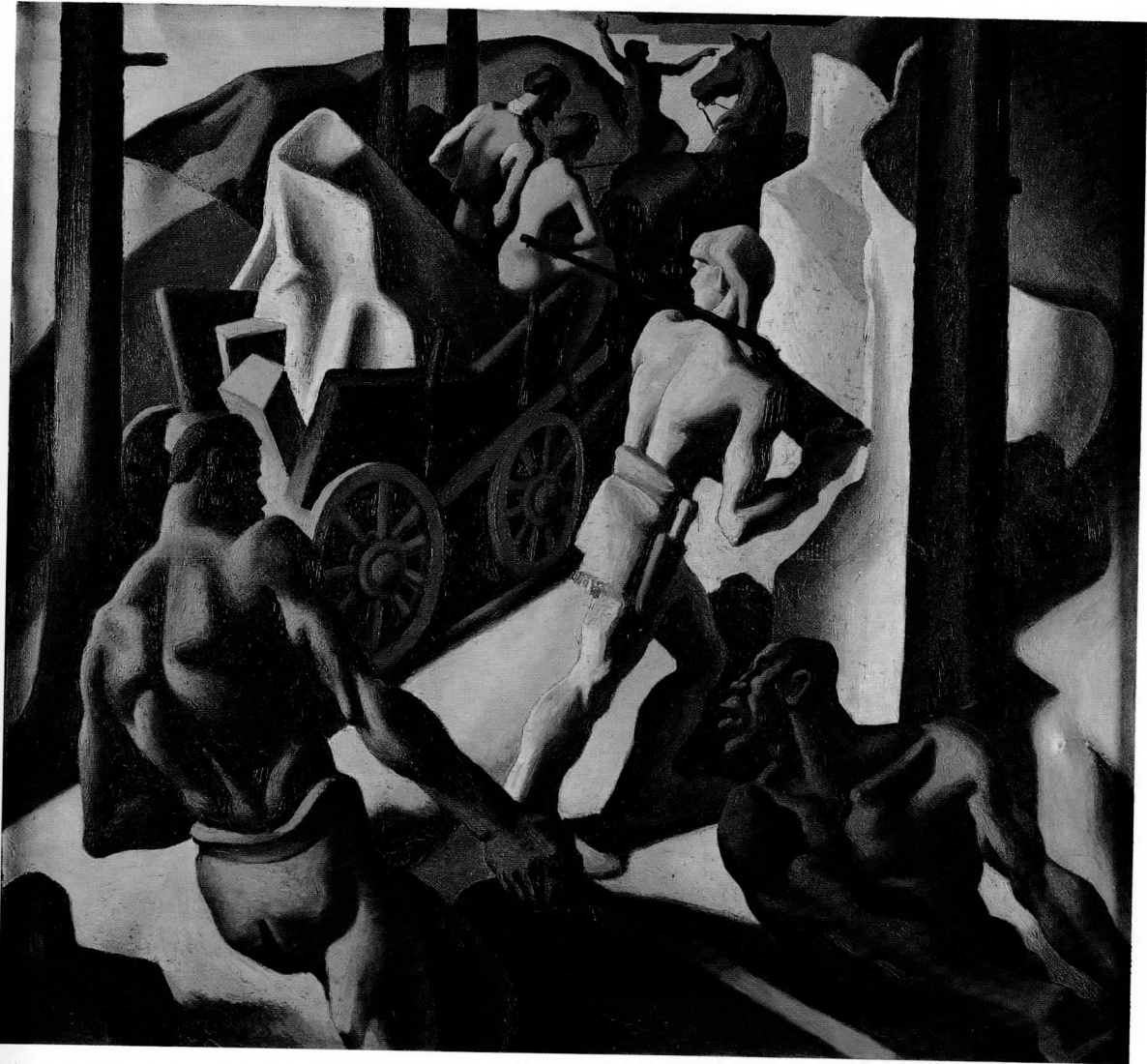


The New Deal government under Roosevelt established huge welfare programmes and work-relief schemes during 1933, which were designed both to regenerate the capitalist economy and to enable people to maintain themselves above the breadline. Included within the work-relief programmes was a series of projects intended to enable artists to work, in return for a standard weekly wage of about twenty-one dollars. On the largest of these schemes, the Federal Art Project (1935–1943), artists found themselves engaged collectively – employed by the state – as producers for public clients (schools, hospitals, prisons and other institutions that wished to receive art works for display). ‘Naturalistic’ or ‘realist’ representational styles were generally encouraged and were predominant, and most artists worked on projects for public buildings and sites other than art galleries or museums. An important exception to this was the Easel Section of the Federal Art Project, which was based in New York. Administered by the abstract painter Burgoyne Diller, this part of the project tolerated and encouraged the increasingly abstract work produced by Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning and other contemporary painters. Consider, for example, Pollock’s *Going West* (1934–35) and Rothko’s *Subway* (1930s). In most accounts, these paintings merely figure as ‘early works’ in the careers of artists who only became ‘mature’ after 1945, as Abstract Expressionists. *Going West*, from the standpoint of artists active in the 1930s, is related to the work by Hogue discussed earlier, and to that of Pollock’s teacher during the period, Thomas Hart Benton (Plates 6, 1 and 7). A comparatively small painting, *Going West* also mobilizes the expressionistic contours that feature, in a more restrained way, in *Drouth-stricken Area*. Reference to the crises of US



**Plate 6** Jackson Pollock, *Going West*, 1934–35, oil on fibre board, 38 x 53 cm. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington; gift of Thomas Hart Benton, 1973, 149.1. © 1992 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/ARS, New York.

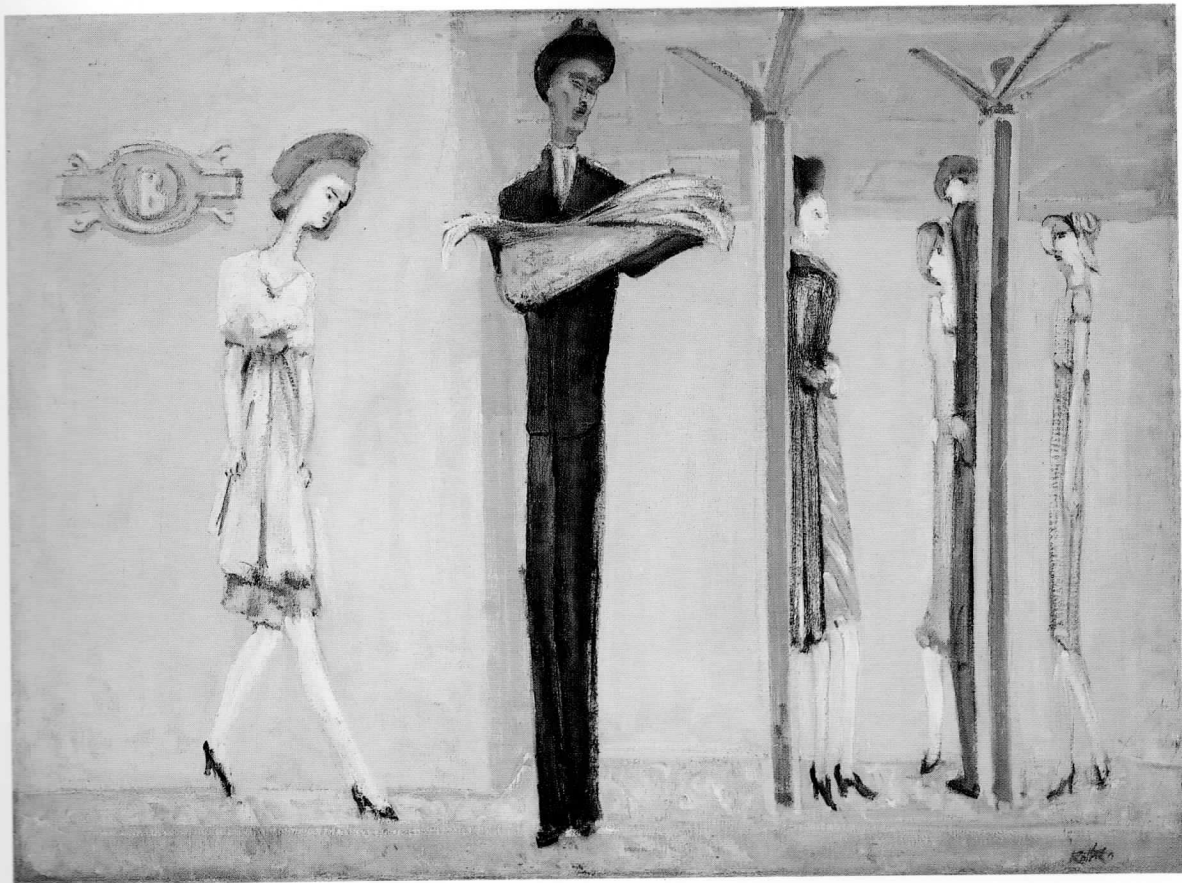


**Plate 7** Thomas Hart Benton, *Over the Mountains (American Historical Epic)*, 1924–26, oil on linen on aluminium honeycomb panel, 167 x 183 cm. Collection, the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; bequest of the Artist F75.21/7. © Thomas Hart Benton, DACS, London and VAGA, New York, 1993.

economic life, both in terms of the effects of drought on the land and unemployment forcing migration within the country, are evident in the painting and title. Stylistic and thematic links can be made between this painting and Benton's *Over the Mountains*, from the *American Historical Epic* series produced in 1924–26 (Plate 7). Pollock had studied with Benton for three years, between 1930 and 1933, at the Art Students' League in New York. According to Benton, Pollock was:

... treated as one of the family and encouraged to participate in all gatherings of people at our house. These were always highly talkative and were mostly directed, as the major interests of the time dictated, to the social and political problems of America or, because of a number of teachers in our set, to the questions of American education, which was then much affected by the struggles between John Deweyites, Marxist radicals, and extreme conservatives.

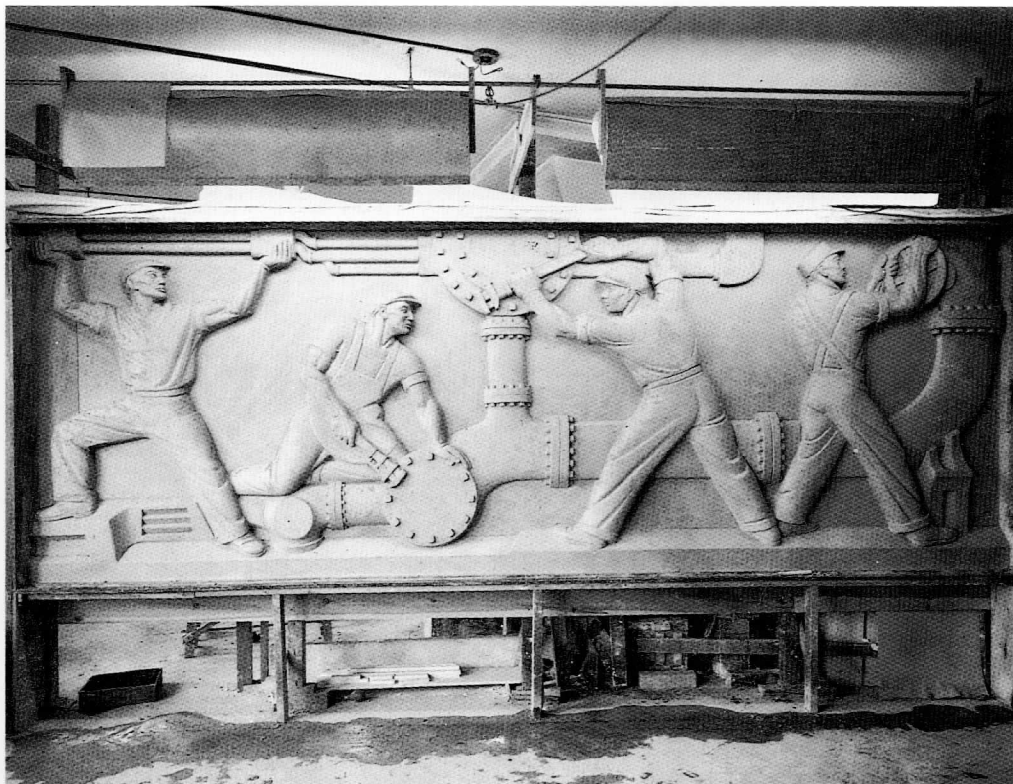
(T.H. Benton, 'And still after', quoted in E. Doss, *Benton, Pollock and the Politics of Modernism*, pp.321–2)



**Plate 8** Mark Rothko, *Subway*, 1936–39, oil on canvas, 87 x 118 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Rothko no.3261.30, gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation. © 1992 Kate Rothko-Prizel and Christopher Rothko/ARS, New York.

Rothko's *Subway* (Plate 8), although roughly four times the size of *Going West*, is another 'easel' painting, small and unassuming when set beside his *Number 7* from 1951. The theme of New York's underground railway is common within 1930s painting, though Rothko's concentration on people on a platform, depicted in a 'stretched' expressionistic mode, is unlike most paintings within the genre. He also concentrates on the sense of separateness of figures within this pictorial *and* depicted physical space. The theme of social alienation within urban-industrial capitalist society recurs throughout Depression paintings, and to this extent Rothko's painting may be identified as 'socially critical'. Accounts that discuss Pollock's and Rothko's works from the 1930s simply in relation to their work as Abstract Expressionists are not 'wrong' in any absolute sense, but their emphasis tends (and, in some cases, intends) to obscure the relation of those works to the 1930s and the place of the artists within those social and political circumstances.

The Easel Section in New York was in most respects unlike the other programmes run by the Federal Art Project, and it would be a misrepresentation to say that works produced on it by Pollock, Rothko and others were 'typical' of Federal Art. It certainly *is* true to say, however, that later Modernist histories of the period have claimed, and continue to claim, that it is only (or primarily) the works produced by those who came to be known as Abstract Expressionists that have any aesthetic value, as opposed to any historical or social significance. Any exemplification will be partial, but it may be useful to say that Cesare Stea's *Sculptural Relief for the Bowery Bay Sewage Disposal Plant*, produced



**Plate 9** Cesare Stea, *Sculptural Relief for the Bowery Bay Sewage Disposal Plant*, 1936, approx. 20 sq. m. Photograph: Archives of American Art, reproduced from F.V. O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, Boston, New York Graphic Society, 1975 by permission of F.V. O'Connor.

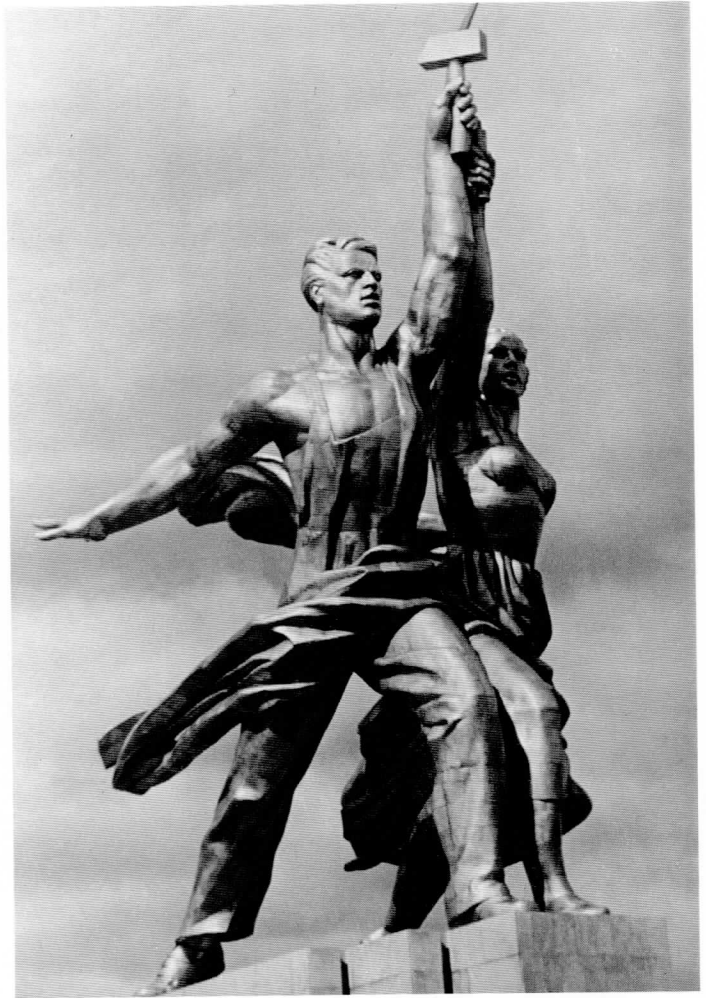
on the Federal Art Project in 1936, is indicative of the kind of 'social-realist' conventions encouraged on the public projects. It shares elements of style and iconography with contemporary Soviet Socialist-Realist sculpture, such as Vera Mukhina's *The Worker and the Collective Farm Woman* of 1937 (Plates 9 and 10). Although on a considerably smaller scale, Stea's relief uses the conventions of 'monumentality' to signify the grandeur of the 'state worker' as symbolic of the nation's mission to rebuild itself. This symbolic abstraction, the personified 'worker', was a key ideological emblem in the USSR and USA during the 1930s. Both putatively Communist (USSR) and Democratic (USA) states mobilized the rhetoric of economic and social transformation within their official ideological missions – the supposed creation of Socialism in the USSR, and the reorganization of capitalism into a managed, morally defensible democratic system in the USA.

This brief review of the variety of works from the Depression period in the USA, along with the conditions of economic and ideological production, indicates the difficulty in trying to reduce the practices and debates to a single dominant theme or style. By turns 'expressionistic', 'stylized' or even 'cartoon-like', these works all nevertheless contained narrative, socially symbolic meanings and a concern to represent their visions of contemporary Depression America – be it the alienated metropolitan life in New York, or the crisis on the land, or the Federal Art Project's 'capitalist-democratic realism' representing the US proletarian-citizen set to work by Roosevelt's New Deal.

It's noticeable that Modernist art historians writing after the Second World War are very critical of 1930s realism (of whatever kind). Typical of the comments is Rose's judgement that most of the state-funded art works were 'mediocre compromises with academicism in a heavy-handed, dull illustrational style that had neither the authority of



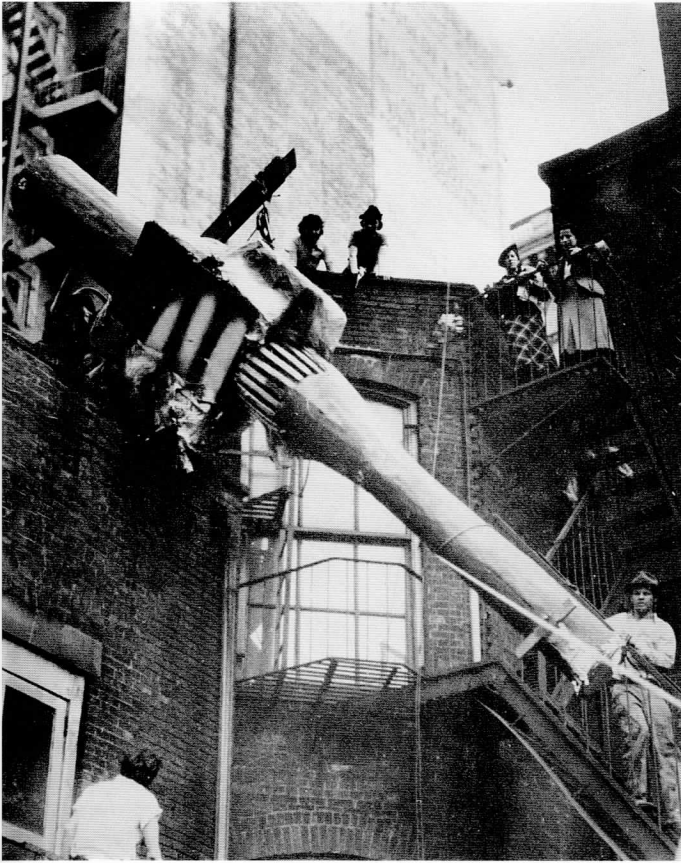
**Plate 10** Vera Mukhina, *The Worker and the Collective Farm Woman*, 1937, bronze, height c.12m, for the USSR pavilion, Universal Exhibition, Paris, 1937. Photograph: Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies, London.



academic art nor the unpretentious charm of the illustration' (*American Painting*, p.36). In some cases the history and significance of the Federal Art Project are written out of Modernist accounts altogether. Is it possible to see this as a repression, both of the general questions and issues relating to culture and democracy in the 1930s, and of the earlier history of many artists who later became famous as Abstract Expressionists? Perhaps it is best understood as an attempt to forget a social, political and ideological conjuncture that by the 1950s, because of the Cold War and anti-Communism in the US, had come to be seen as a 'proto-socialist' or even actual socialist aberration in US history.<sup>2</sup>

Plate 11 shows Pollock preparing for May Day celebrations in 1936. Along with Rothko, Robert Motherwell and other Abstract Expressionists, he became involved with left-wing politics as a member of the Artists' Union, which was set up in 1934 to enable artists employed by the state to bargain for better conditions and to press for extended periods of work on state projects (see Plate 12). In addition, artists and critics on the left became involved in both national and international political issues and debates, such as the Popular Front against Fascism established in 1935, and against the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, completed in 1937 (Plate 13), became both a symbol of opposition to the Fascist bombing of the Spanish town, and a symbol of an attempt to make a politically cogent artistic intervention that did not rely on the conventions of

<sup>2</sup> But see B.J. Bernstein, 'The conservative achievements of liberal reform'.



**Plate 11** Jackson Pollock (lower right) helps carry a section of a 1936 May Day float down a fire-escape from David Siqueiros's workshop, Union Square, New York. Photograph in the Siqueiros Archive, Mexico City.



**Plate 12** Artists in a picket line. Photograph by Irving Marantz, reproduced from F.V. O'Connor (ed.), *Art for the Millions*, Boston, New York Graphic Society, 1975 by permission of F.V. O'Connor.



**Plate 13** Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 349 x 777 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid. © DACS, London, 1993.

'naturalism' or 'social realism' then predominant in the USA. The formal qualities of *Guernica* – which was painted as part of what was regarded as a continuance of the Cubist idiom established by Picasso and Georges Braque before the First World War – became the subject of an intense debate within magazines based in New York, such as *Art Front*, *Art Digest* and the *Magazine of Art*. The organization of left-wing and liberal artists opposed to Fascism and the war in Spain reached a formal state in the setting up of the American Artists' Congress in 1936. The following year Picasso sent his regards and best wishes, via a transatlantic telephone link. Opinion was divided, however, over how appropriate abstract art was for communicating to a mass public not familiar with it. Further, was it suitable for the needs of political activism? Pollock's response to *Guernica*, and to the range of issues it raised about politics and representation, is part of the history of the transformation that takes place within his work between the late 1930s and the late 1940s. It was also a situation that faced Rothko, and to which I shall return. This conjuncture – in which art and politics, and what were often called the 'social responsibilities' of artists to society and culture as a whole, seemed unavoidably interlinked – stands in sharp contrast (as an antithesis, perhaps) to the situation after the Second World War, in which Modernist accounts and values were dominant.

The director of the Federal Art Project, Holger Cahill, made explicit the relationship between culture and democracy in the USA during the 1930s. Their interconnection was a key element within the project's organizational philosophy, and in a speech given at the opening of a show of government-sponsored art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936, he argued that the project partly aimed to undermine both imported nineteenth-century European academic traditions *and* the newly arrived conventions of Modernist art. In this sense the project's agenda, based on domestic cultural and political issues, differed from the agenda of left-wing artists who, although wishing to see a socialist revolution in the USA, also had an internationalist perspective. According to Cahill, the Federal Art Project offered

the upsetting spirit of frontier democracy ... one might say that American art was renewing itself through new contacts with the American art and the American people ... If their taste was not always of the best, it was an honest taste, a genuine reflection of community interests and of community experience.

(H. Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art*, p.11)



**Plate 14** Orville A. Carroll, *Shakertown Bonnet (Kentucky Project)*, 1935–42, watercolour, graphite and gouache on paperboard, 46 x 34 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Index of American Design I-16810.

Cahill's rhetoric may seem similar to Craven's discussed earlier, though Cahill saw himself as a 'New Dealer' through and through, committed to creating a 'managed capitalism' within which social democracy might flourish, offsetting the exploitative structures of a capitalist economy. Yet his language and sentiment included the bucolic vision characteristic of Craven's prose. Cahill spoke of a 'fresh poetry of the soil' (p.35), and the recurrence of rural metaphors in his arguments betrays exactly the sense in which the New Deal's concepts of culture and community invested hopes in a return to a mythical pre-industrial, pre-urban and pre-capitalist past. The Federal Art Project set up what was called the Index of American Design, a programme devoted to producing a drawn and photographic record of American folk-cultural objects. This was intended to document and celebrate the cultural remnants of such a mythic past (Plate 14). Shaker community and cultural artefacts, for instance, were seen as representing the 'organic' and authentic culture and society before the effects of industrialism, which brought with it an alienating division of labour and the regimes of mass production. 'American art', Cahill said, 'is declaring a moratorium on its debts to Europe and returning to cultivate its own garden' (quoted in Rose, *Readings in American Art since 1900*, p.47). The federal nature of the art projects, which covered the whole country, was intended to enable artists to remain in their home towns; it was thus aimed at retarding what was seen as the destructive emigration of artists to the metropolitan centres on the east coast. In this and other respects, the philosophy of the Federal Art Project was explicitly anti-Modernist.

Cahill attacked avant-garde Modernism *and* traditional academic art because he saw both as essentially 'alien' imports from a still semi-feudal European civilization that was about to embroil itself and the rest of the world in another war. Returning a 'social role' to the artists in US society in the 1930s was thus seen as the urgent task of the Federal Art Project, and in so doing the project would remove both the reactionary power of the nineteenth-century academic art establishment and halt the further inroads of what was perceived as an élitist Modernism. Many critics during the 1920s and 1930s, in addition to