

Plate 25 Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads*, 1933–34, fresco (now destroyed), 582 x 1246 cm. Photograph: Lucienne Bloch.

Detroit Industry series (another corporate commission) in the Inner Garden Court of the Detroit Institute of Arts, based on drawings and photographs of the Ford Rouge Plant (Plate 26). As with Stea's *Sculptural Relief for the Bowery Bay Sewage Disposal Plant* (Plate 9), the theme of work and technological dynamism is central – although, unlike *Man at the Crossroads*, the Detroit panels are not obviously critical of capitalist economic and technological transformations.

Whatever the politics in the work of the Mexican muralists in either Mexico or the USA, the appropriation of their skills and monumentalist conventions by the US government involved an effective draining out of any specific ideological convictions. George Biddle wrote to Roosevelt, praising the example of the Mexican muralists and calling for a government scheme to employ artists in the USA:

The young artists of America are conscious as they have never been before of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through, and they would be very eager indeed to express their ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government's co-operation ... I am convinced that our mural art, with a little impetus can soon result, for the first time, in a vital national expression.

(Biddle, letter to Roosevelt in May 1933, quoted in K.A. Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America*, p.31)

Three murals produced by US artists on the Federal Art Project may be seen as representative of the work that Biddle envisaged. These are: Lucienne Bloch's mural *Childhood*, painted in a women's prison in Manhattan in 1936; Marion Greenwood's *Blueprint for Living*, painted at the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn in 1939–40; and Philip Guston's *Work and Play*, painted in the lobby of the community centre at



Plate 26 Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry*, 1932–33, fresco; North Wall and (below) detail of the centre of the North Wall. The Detroit Institute of Arts; Founders' Society Purchase, Edsel B. Ford Fund and gift of Edsel B. Ford.

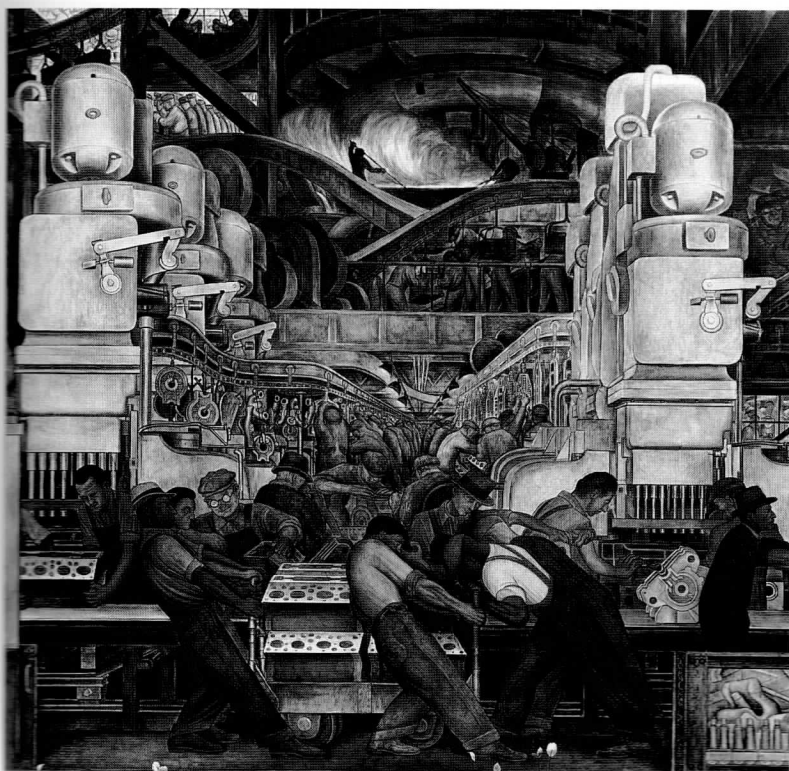




Plate 27 Lucienne Bloch, *Childhood*, 1936, fresco (now destroyed), approx. 22.3 sq. m, in the recreation room of the Women's House of Detention, Manhattan, New York. Photograph: Lucienne Bloch.

Queensbridge Housing Project, Queens, in 1940–41 (Plates 27–29). All three were intended for public sites, within institutions inherited by the New Deal government or created by it as part of their social welfare programmes inaugurated in 1933. Consciously associated by the artists with the examples of Mexican muralist art, the panels were intended to revive Italian Renaissance traditions of fresco painting in spaces where people congregated, away from the art gallery and the 'art-for-art's-sake' ethos of European Modernism.

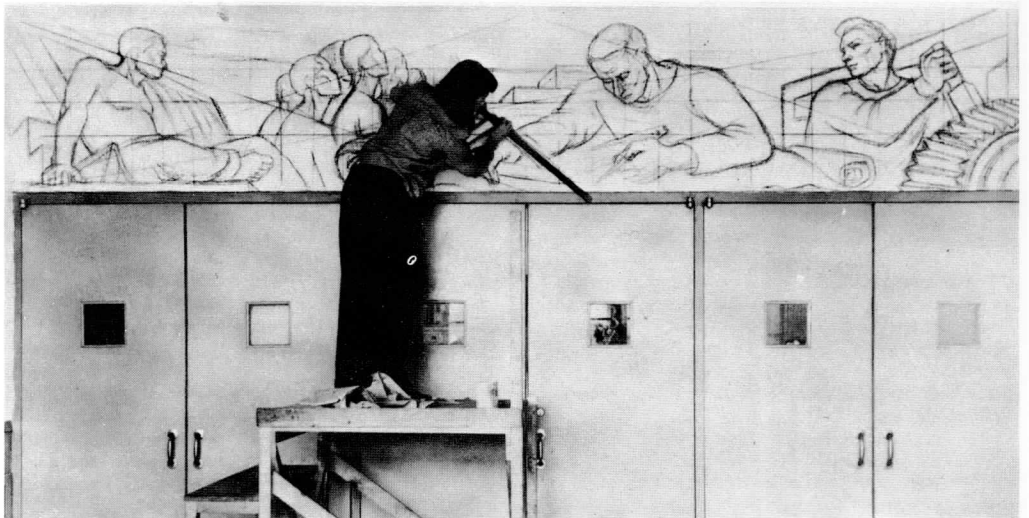


Plate 28 Marion Greenwood at work on *Blueprint for Living*, 1939–40, fresco (now painted over) in the lobby of the community centre, Red Hook Housing Project, Brooklyn, New York. Photograph: WPA/FAP Photograph Collection, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, courtesy of Robert Plate.

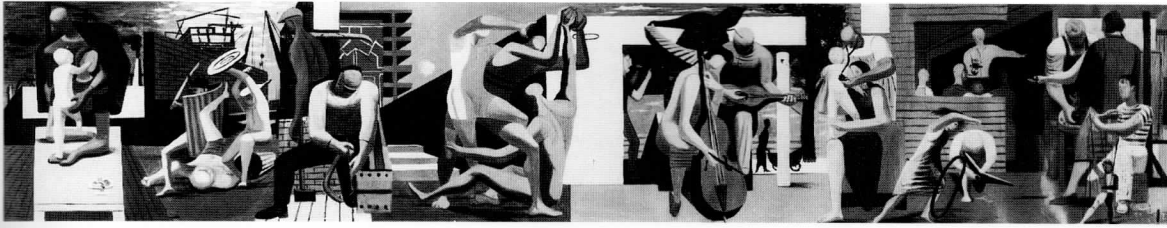


Plate 29 Philip Guston, *Work and Play*, 1940–41, casein-resin emulsion on gesso, approx. 1.8 x 27.4 m, in the lobby of the community centre, Queensbridge Housing Project, Queens, New York City (disavowed by the artist after the work was extensively restored by unknown hand). Photograph: WPA Photograph Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

Bloch's panel was part of an unfinished series. This was to have been called *Cycle of a Woman's Life*, aiming to represent to women prisoners the possibility of a harmonious communal life outside the prison. It presented a vision of a society in which women, suitably improved by their period of incarceration, could rejoin the community. The mural itself was intended to function as a 'corrective' visual diatribe – although rehabilitation, rather than punishment for its own sake, informed the discussions between artist and prison authorities when they negotiated the mural.⁴ Whatever the reformist zeal invested in the representation, the opportunities for women outside the prison were shown as highly limited and traditional – mothering (conceived as a form of 'natural' self-fulfilment, or as teaching children for their own entry into the adult social realm).

Greenwood's *Blueprint for Living* also offered a series of narratives for the proper social activity of Americans within the new corporate state. 'Planning' became a central theme in New Deal political and managerial discourse, opposed to the apparent chaos of the free market that had led, in the early 1930s, to a near economic and social collapse. *Blueprint for Living* consisted of three panels on three walls of the entrance hall to the housing centre auditorium. The right-hand panel showed labourers at work on a housing project while a small family group stood by and watched its new house being built. The left-hand panel showed a group of youths studying, playing ball and in general profiting from 'clean living', according to the artist's own statement. The third panel, a thin strip over the doors (see plate), presented an image of the future planned for the youth of the USA and included a man holding blueprints and another operating a machine, while others stood by and looked hopefully into the distance. The New Deal government once again appeared, symbolically portrayed as workers, as the beneficent arbiter of the lives of the people of the USA, empowered to reconcile the 'various needs of the individual' with 'accepted social needs'.⁵ The state's task was seen in terms of harnessing economic production to social ends and thereby abolishing the anarchy of the market and replacing it with a state-defined moral economy of needs and 'rightful desires'. Red Hook Housing Project, along with the murals within it, may be seen as a material encapsulation of the New Deal's vision of the future US society. The buildings and murals functioned as signs of the state's fidelity to the concept of a planned, ordered and regulated nation.

Guston's *Work and Play* also had as its theme the family group, claimed as 'symbolic of the basis on which any community must build'. The Federal Art Project produced a commemorative statement explaining the significance of the Guston panels and of works by other artists, both painters and sculptors. Queensbridge Housing Project included a community centre, a children's centre, stores, a playground, spacious interior courts and garden walks, along with the fifteen-acre park. The actual houses provided homes for 3,149 families. Guston's mural, of which only parts survive, narrated the story of Queensbridge. The symbolic family anchors a side panel representing a group of young

⁴ See J. Harris, 'State power and cultural discourse', pp.37–8.

⁵ See G.E. Markowitz and M. Park, *New Deal for Art*, p.54.

children playing near slum buildings in the process of demolition. Workmen appear in the foreground, again symbolic of physical and social rebuilding. Represented alongside them are three basketball players over the left doorway of the lobby who, according to the statement, represent 'one phase of community recreation', while a 'related trio of musicians and dancers' is shown above the right doorway. As a whole, therefore, the mural articulated scenes of recreation, reproduction, labour and learning. The statement continued:

The figure of the doctor and child at the right of this scene indicates the importance of public health, and at the far right are shown a group of youngsters engaged in various activities typical of community life – painting, reading, building model aeroplanes and learning carpentry.

(Federal Art Project statement, Archives of American Art (FVO/C 1089))

All three murals were painted in what may be called 'realist' styles (following my earlier definition), although Greenwood's and Guston's forms owed more to the conventions of monumentalism they found in Mexican mural painting: figures were inflated, made massive and bulging, though they were also located in perspectival schemes *and* narrative episodes. Such formal and narrative devices held the depicted figures in place as symbolic abstractions, personifications of state power and energy, directed towards reconstructive ends in accordance with New Deal ideology.

In one sense these murals embodied the version of technocratic modernity espoused by the professional and managerial élites that allied themselves with Roosevelt's political mission during the 1930s: scientists, engineers, educators and specialists of all kinds were presented as a key to the properly managed development of US society following the failure of an anarchic, capitalist, free market. Yet in terms of style, or the deployment of



Plate 30 Charles Demuth,
Buildings, Lancaster, 1930,
oil on composition board, 61 x 51 cm.
Collection of the Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York; gift of
an anonymous donor 58.63.
Photograph: Geoffrey Clements.



Plate 31 Charles Sheeler, *Classic Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas, 64 x 83 cm. From the collection of Mr and Mrs Barney A. Ebsworth Foundation.

formal conventions, the murals recapitulated the varying forms of vernacular depiction inherited from the nineteenth century and artists such as Benton and the Mexican muralists. They may be described as 'modern' in terms of subject-matter, but very 'unmodern' in the sense of owing little to the conventions of European Modernist art. In the 1930s, however, this was generally a cause for approbation (remember Whitman, Henri and Cahill) rather than the castigation that became the critical norm after the Second World War.

Artists concerned with vernacular subject-matter, though also with mobilizing a neo- or pseudo- 'Modernist' mode of representation, included Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler, members of the 'Precisionist' group. Works such as Demuth's *Buildings, Lancaster* or Sheeler's *Classic Landscape* (Plates 30 and 31) exhibit a kind of attention to the flatness of the canvas, and a lack of modelling depth associated with authentic Modernist art. An emphasis on abstract forms, such as the cylinders in Sheeler's painting, has also led some critics and historians to see these works as related, if only very tenuously, to the European Modernist tradition. Similarly a work such as Morgan Russell's *Synchromy in Orange* (Plate 32), composed of a flat pattern of interlocking colours, depicting no objects from the world, has been taken to have attenuated and derivative links with European artists

Plate 32 Morgan Russell, *Synchromy in Orange: to form*, 1913–14, oil on canvas, 312 x 309 cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1958.



associated with so-called Orphic Cubism. Charles Demuth's *My Egypt* (Plate 33) has also been seen, by Modernist historians writing since the Second World War, as really only an 'illustration', although there is the suggestion of a reference to authentic Cubist linear form and compositional construction based not on perspectival conventions but on the painting's internal formal structure.

In historical accounts of twentieth-century art in the USA, constructed during the 1960s and 1970s from a Modernist perspective, the period before the Second World War and the period afterwards appear to be 'two different countries'. One, that of the '1930s USA', is a society and culture rooted in an inward-looking, 'domestic' self-regard, with forms of artistic production based on, and derivative of, 'realist' concerns and perspectives. These may be diverse, both stylistically and politically, but they share an attachment to a specific sense of art's function as an element in a society's self-definition and introspection. On the other hand, the '1950s USA' (which will be discussed in detail in Part 2) is a society and culture turned outward, 'international' and shunning the 'parochial' (a key Modernist term of abuse aimed at works that appear to be *merely* 'local' or 'regional'). Art of the '1950s USA' is resolutely 'abstract', tending towards the 'universal', and is not tied down (a negative sense of 'rootedness') to the preoccupations of the society as a whole. This, at least, is the Modernist account of the disjunction between '1930s USA' and '1950s USA'.

Rothko, Davis and the politics of Modernism

Before 1945, most US art institutions showed comparatively little interest in modern American art (the Federal Art Project and other programmes, and the Whitney Museum, being the most important exceptions). The vernacular tradition in any of its variants – 'illustrational', 'anti-Modernist', 'pseudo-Modernist', etc. – was held as secondary to European Modernist artists and movements. The 'circles' of art appreciation established by Arthur Steiglitz and Walter Arensberg in New York had provided a small but wealthy