

ABOUT

During the Great Depression (1929-1941) unemployment rose to an unprecedented high of nearly 25%. As a result, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established a series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations known as the New Deal. The goal was to get people back into the workforce.

Harry Hopkins of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration recognized that artists were suffering financially just like most other workers and played a role in keeping federal art projects available under Roosevelt's presidency. Additionally, Edward Bruce directed the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) of 1933, the first federal program to value artistic creation as part of social and economic recovery.

The PWAP successfully hired almost 4,000 artists and produced over 15,000 pieces of art for government buildings all over the United States. Just like skilled laborers in other fields, artists had to show financial hardship and prove their skills by submitting work samples to qualify for work through the PWAP.

DEPRESSION ERA SOUTH CITY PAINTINGS: THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION



The PWAP was succeeded in 1934 by the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which continued paying artists to capture “the American scene” emphasizing themes of industry, agriculture, natural beauty, skilled labor, perseverance, and diversity. This program ran until the start of World War II in 1939 when artists' duties transitioned to serve the war effort: producing camouflage, designing training manuals, and teaching art appreciation classes on military bases. The program officially disbanded about a year into the war.

Over the years, much of the artwork produced under these federal projects were auctioned off or lost. The surviving paintings, murals, and other works of art “stand as a reminder of a time in our country's history when dreams were not allowed to be destroyed by economic disaster” (wparamurals.org)

We invite you to take a self-guided tour of the WPA artwork at the South San Francisco Grand Avenue Library.

FEATURED ARTISTS

SOPHIE MARSTON BRANNAN

Brannan was born in Mountain View, California in 1877. She grew up in San Francisco and, coming from an affluent background, was able to begin her formal artist training early in life. She studied at the California School of Design at just seven years old, followed by fourteen months of art study in Paris. After some time as a growing artist in New York, Brannan returned to the Bay Area around the outbreak of World War II. Like many Depression Era artists, Brannan's career path as an independent creator was heavily impacted by economic decline and warfare. She took a job as an artist at the Alameda Air Base and continued to produce independent work around the Bay Area. She passed away in 1960.

Brannan's paintings are in the Adult Room:

- *Park in San Francisco* -- 39 ½ x 33 in. oil on canvas – 1935-42
- *Unknown title (landscape)* – 39 x 33 in. oil on canvas – 1935-42

GEORGE MICHAEL GAETHKE

Gaethke, originally born in 1898 North Dakota, settled in San Francisco following his college experiences around the country. He continued his studies at the California School of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, and studied lithography upon his final return to San Francisco. In 1934, Gaethke took the opportunity to work as an assistant to muralist Maxine Albro during her completion of her mural in Coit Tower. Gaethke also completed lithographs under the WPA and completed his own mural project for Baywood School in San Mateo in 1940. Like other artists at the time, Gaethke pursued a wartime career not specific to art: he worked as a shipyard engineer and draftsman. He passed away in 1982.

Located in the Children & Teen Room:

Running Deer – 12 x 9 in. color lithograph – 1938

Monkeys – 9 x 12 in. lithograph – 1937

Young Tiger – 9 x 12 in. lithograph – 1935-42

Elephants – 9 7/8 x 12 ¾ in. lithograph – 1938

Raccoons – 9 x 12 in. lithograph – 1938

Jungle – lithograph – 1938

Frolic – color lithograph – 1938

Jumping Frog – lithograph – 1938

Located in the Adult Room: *Young Pan* – color lithograph – 1937

ANN SONIA MEDALIE

Born in Latvia around 1896, Medalie came to Chicago in the 1920s and studied for a time at the Art Institute and worked as a furniture decorator. She moved to Los Angeles and later San Francisco in 1932 where she traded her decorator work for the opportunity to assist Hilaire Hiler on the Maritime Museum murals under the WPA. Medalie also assisted Diego Rivera on his mural at the 1939 World Fair in San Francisco. Medalie lived and showed her own artwork all over the world during her lifetime. She migrated to Israel in 1951 where she stayed permanently until her passing in either 1991 or 1992.

Medalie's painting is in the Adult Room:

- Unknown title (base of Golden Gate Bridge) – 26 ¾ x 21 in. oil on canvas – 1935-42

FEATURED ARTISTS

MAURICE AUGUSTE DEL MUE

Born in Paris in 1875, Del Mue moved with his family to San Francisco around 1880 where he studied art at the Mark Hopkins Institute. In the Bay Area, Del Mue became staff artist for the San Francisco Chronicle in the 1920s and later worked for Foster & Kleiser billboards. Some of Del Mue's commercial art is still recognizable today, such as the logos for the Southern Pacific Railway, Schillings Coffee, and Hills Brothers Coffee. The artist joined with a group of others to form the California Society of Artists in competition with the conservative attitudes of the San Francisco Art Museum. Del Mue spent his retirement in nearby Marin County and passed away in 1955. He is best remembered for his colorful landscapes that are most consistent with post-impressionism style.

Del Mue's painting is in the Meeting Room:

- *Old Quarry* – 33 ¼ x 25 ¼ in. oil on canvas – 1938

FEATURED ARTISTS

SUZANNE SCHEUER

Born in 1898, Scheuer moved from her birthplace of San Jose to San Francisco as a young adult, where she studied at California College of Arts and Crafts for both fine arts and her teaching credentials. She later attended California School of Fine Arts to specialize in mural painting. Scheuer's extensive time spent touring Europe expanded her love for murals after a short career in teaching in Los Banos and Salinas public schools. The artist is well known for her Newsgathering mural in Coit Tower, which was completed in 1933 under Ralph Stackpole. Scheuer was also commissioned by the US Treasury in 1937 to produce murals located within three post offices around the country, one of them located across the Bay in Berkeley. Scheuer dedicated her life's work to her artistic passion, later passing away in 1984.

Scheuer's paintings are in the Meeting Room:

- *Lodge Pole Pines* – 10 ½ x 14 ½ in. watercolor – 1937
- *Jeffrey Pine-High Sierras* – watercolor -- 1937

YOSHIDA SEKIDO

Sekido was born in 1894 in Tokyo, Japan. He developed his artistic career extensively in Canada and exhibited artwork in many shows before later moving to California and Oregon. His works, including those commissioned under the WPA, use silk sheet canvases and watercolors to feature mainly still life shots of birds, trees, flowers, and other studies of nature. Sekido passed away around 1965.

Sekido's painting is in the Meeting Room:

- *Still Life* – 25 x 22 in. watercolor on silk -- 1936

SSF POST OFFICE, LINDEN AVE

Another piece of art produced during the New Deal can be found in the lobby of the South City Post Office on Linden Ave. The three-panel mural, titled South San Francisco in Past and Present, references the city's early agricultural and industrial histories and captures the look of modern downtown. It was painted in 1940 by **Victor Arnautoff**.