Audio Guide Transcript

THE WORK OF ART
THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT
1935–1943

August 2, 2024–April 13, 2025
Gallery 235 and the Sidney S. and Sadie M. Cohen
Gallery 234

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM
STOP 1
Gallery 235 and the Sidney S. and Sadie M. Cohen Gallery 234

Introduction

Speakers

Amy Torbert
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Associate Curator of American Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Clare Kobasa
Associate Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
Saint Louis Art Museum

[Amy]
Hello, my name is Amy Torbert, and I am the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Associate Curator of American Art.

[Clare]
Hello, my name is Clare Kobasa, and I am the associate curator of prints, drawings, and photographs.

We are delighted to welcome you to *The Work of Art: The Federal Art Project, 1935–1943*. This exhibition presents a selection of prints, drawings, and paintings produced under the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Art Project (FAP). Organized geographically, the works reveal the use of the arts as a bridge between communities near and far. We invite viewers to appreciate this ambition to circulate artists’ work widely as both inspiration and models for audiences and students.

[Amy]
This exhibition explores how artists working in this moment experimented in all kinds of exciting ways. We are grateful for the support of colleagues in conservation who researched and revealed these processes, especially associate paper conservator Sophie Barbisan, from whom you will also hear on this audio guide.

[Clare]
Art and learning feel inextricably linked in many vibrant and generative ways in this exhibition. These connections emerged in large part thanks to the crucial contributions of educators Kira Hegeman and Latausha Cox from Learning and Engagement, who are
also featured on this audio guide.

We came to this project from different directions but united by a desire to share stories of art making that expanded the definitions of who can be an artist. I was particularly fascinated by the spaces of the print workshop and the visible traces of learning from each other that appeared across various artists’ work.

[Amy]
I came upon our unusual group of drawings by children and explored the idea that art can inform the lives and careers even of those who do not become professional artists.

As much as this exhibition is about the many stories of individual artists, it is even more about the possibilities that emerge when their work is shared. We invite you to become another link in that chain as we contemplate how art and community enrich one another.
The All Nations Pentecostal Church held an important place in the religious and social communities of Chicago’s South Side. It was founded in 1916 by Elder Lucy Smith, the first Black woman to lead a major congregation in Chicago. Born in rural Georgia in 1870, Smith began her ministry out of a small tent. By 1939, when Fred Hollingsworth painted this watercolor, Smith’s congregation had grown to around 5,000 members. The same year, Smith raised $50,000 (equivalent to nearly $6 million dollars today) to build a new, large church, constructed out of bricks and stained-glass windows in a modernist style.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Great Migration brought settlers to Chicago who incorporated elements of Black southern culture to establish new types of churches and sacred music. The lyrics that play from the loudspeaker at the watercolor’s center perhaps recall Smith’s informal, vernacular preaching style. The words “sanketfide” (sanctified) and “holleyness” (holiness) reference two core tenets of Pentecostalism, a form of Christianity that emphasizes direct experience of divine presence, often through acts of faith healing.

This image of a loudspeaker emitting sound also evokes Smith’s pioneering achievements in religious radio. She hosted the first live weekly radio program ever to be broadcast from a Black church. Called Glorious Church of the Air, the program ran from 1933 to 1955 and spread gospel music to audiences as far away as Mexico. With a choir of one hundred voices and invited soloists, such as premier gospel artists Mahalia Jackson and Thomas A. Dorsey, All Nations became renowned for music that, as Smith said, had “a swing to it.”
The eye-catching colors and abstracted forms of Miné Okubo’s screenprint represent just one chapter in her incredibly rich artistic life. Born in California in 1912, Okubo studied art at Riverside Junior College and the University of California, Berkeley, which awarded her the Bertha Taussig Traveling Art Fellowship to study in Europe. She arrived there in 1938, learning from Fernand Léger among others, but had to cut her time short and return to the United States with the outbreak of World War II in 1939, at which point she began working for the Federal Art Project.

Her life and work were subjected to a significant rupture in 1942 when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the executive order that imprisoned Japanese Americans living on the West Coast in so-called internment camps. Okubo’s family was split up; she was sent first to Tanforan in California and then to Topaz in Utah with her brother. She taught art lessons alongside Chiura Obata and contributed to camp publications.

In 1944, *Fortune* magazine in New York hired her, enabling her to leave the camp and move to the East Coast. She took with her more than 2,000 drawings of her imprisoned life and, in 1946, published a selection of 206 of them as a graphic memoir. Titled *Citizen 13660* in reference to the number by which her family was known, the work captures the cruelty of the circumstances and the range of human responses to such conditions.

She continued working as a commercial artist and illustrator until 1951, when she devoted herself to painting full time until her death in 2001. In Okubo’s own words: “To me life and art are one and the same, for the key lies in one's knowledge of people and life. In art one is trying to express it in the simplest imaginative way, as in the art of past civilizations, for beauty and truth are the only two things which live timeless and ageless.”
Hi, my name is Sophie Barbisan. I’m the Associate Paper Conservator at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

You are looking at the portrait of Charlot by artist Dox Thrash, a beautiful example of a technique called carborundum mezzotint. This technique is a variant of a traditional mezzotint but requires less time and effort. A traditional mezzotint is done by evenly pricking an entire metal plate with a tool, usually a roulette or a rocker, which is quite labor intensive. The rough surface would then hold onto the ink, enabling the printing of a deep black. In the case of carborundum mezzotint, the artist would rub particles of carborundum onto the metal plate. Carborundum is carbide silicon, a diamond-like compound. It was used as an industrial abrasive and later for resurfacing lithographic stones. By rubbing the grit with a hand-rotated weight and the addition of water as a lubricant, this process created a uniformly pitted surface. The design was then scraped or burnished into the plate, which resulted in the lighter areas of the finished print.

Several versions of the portrait exist. Dox Thrash, one of the inventors of carborundum mezzotint, kept modifying the plate. Later editions of this print show Charlot with further refinements and the addition of irises.
STOP 5
Gallery 235
The Art Center

Speakers

Latausha Cox
Assistant Educator, Teacher and Student Learning
Saint Louis Art Museum

Kira Hegeman
Associate Educator, Teacher and Student Learning
Saint Louis Art Museum

[Latausha]
Hi, I’m Latausha Cox, Assistant Educator, Teacher and Student Learning.

[Kira]
And I’m Kira Hegeman, Associate Educator, Teacher and Student Learning.

[Latausha]
As educators, every day we witness firsthand the importance of youth voices, and are thrilled this exhibition recognizes young artists’ contributions to education and civic activities. Much like the work of their adult counterparts, their artworks share important lessons we can all learn from, including preserving memories, encouraging community connections, sharing diverse perspectives and practices, embracing hard work and play, and celebrating loved ones. These works honor the myriad of diverse experiences that make up the essence of every community.

When teaching in the gallery spaces, we often look for ways to help visitors make connections between works of art and their own lived experiences. Some of the strategies we use include open-ended questions, play, and encouraging wonder.

Let’s explore how these images might inspire our own unique discoveries. Consider how the whole collection of these 15 paintings could create a narrative. Take a moment to view each image, then imagine they are illustrations for a book. How might you arrange the images to create your own story inspired by these artworks?

Now, imagine you could transport yourself into one of the images. Where might you
land? What sounds would you hear in this space? What activities would you try? Who might you meet? What might you notice as you look beyond the limits of the frame?

[Kira]
In 1943, the Federal Art Project gave 39 paintings from the LeMoyne Federal Art Center to the Saint Louis Art Museum, including the 15 on view here. They were intended to be used as examples for instruction at the People’s Art Center, which was St. Louis’s first interracial art space for arts instruction. So, why might an instructor use these images in a classroom?

Each artwork invites students to learn skills while connecting to, learning about, and inquiring into their own environments and experiences. Viewing the work of other artists can build visual literacy and help students learn that there are many avenues to creatively share ideas. Engaging with works of art also encourages viewers to consider the perspectives, experiences, and stories of others, often from diverse or global contexts.

The artworks in this exhibition, including these paintings by youth artists, invite us to journey into homes, neighborhoods, and economic pursuits in different regions of the United States. They also enable us to compare these images and stories to our own homes, neighborhoods, and journeys. One thing I love about art education is that themes explored by artists in different time periods and places can have resonance for students now, in St. Louis. Imagine if you were a student in one of these art classes. What would you want to share about the spaces you call home?