

<http://www.connecticutmag.com/Blog/Arts-Entertainment/May-2015/Art-Documentary-Marks-80th-Anniversary-of-WPA-Opens-in-New-Britain-May-14/>

May 8, 2015

Art Documentary Marks 80th Anniversary of WPA, Debuts in New Britain May 14

BY KATE HARTMAN



After two years in office, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was still struggling to bring the country out of the Great Depression. Progress was slow going and Americans needed to go back to work. The president enlisted the help of trusted advisers, particularly Harry Hopkins, to brainstorm ways to accomplish that.

In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created out of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act and would become the most ambitious American New Deal agency. The four divisions of the Federal Project Number One employed thousands of artists and spurred the country's artistic Renaissance.

“It almost immediately put thousands of musicians, artists, writers, sculptors and dancers back to work nationally,” says **filmmaker Michael Maglaras**. “The numbers are staggering. Hundreds of thousands works of art were created.”

This year is the 80th anniversary of the WPA, and to mark the occasion Maglaras has created **Enough to Live On: The Arts of the WPA**, a documentary film about this Golden Age of American creativity.

“Today when you walk into the post office in Portland, or the post office in Thomaston or Southington or Lakeville, you’ll see a mural there that was created between 1934 and 1942 under a section of the WPA and paid for by the federal government,” says Maglaras, who lives in Ashford. “We have examples in our film about the innovative stuff that was being done.”

Maglaras began writing the film last year. With so much information available, and so many worthy works of art from which to choose, a nearly 11 hour film needed to be edited down to a watchable time. The final 90-minute feature, which Maglaras says represents a “good cross section of art” from Connecticut, Montana, Washington, Arizona and other places, will premiere at the **New Britain Museum of American Art** on May 14.

“The art that we show on screen will speak for itself as all art does,” says Maglaras, “but the real message is when America was at its lowest point, 25 percent of the population unemployed, 60 percent of the African-American population unemployed, we reinvented ourselves entirely. We have an enormous amount to take pride in because of that.”

Enough to Live On: The Arts of the WPA documents this seven-year period of artistic and cultural renewal and highlights some of the most impressive works and the art that still exists today.

“In 1937 the federal theatre project hired a 21-year-old Orson Wells to stage a performance in Harlem of Macbeth,” explains Maglaras. “He says, ‘If I’m going to do it I don’t want the play to be set in Scotland. I want to set it in Haiti and only hire black actors.’ Under the auspices of the federal theater project, this happened. That kind of stuff permeates this film and this experience.”

Many famous artists got their starts as WPA artists like **Jackson Pollock** and **Willem de Kooning**, who once said, “The WPA gave me enough to live on,” the quote that gave Maglaras’ film its name. It is a sentiment true of all artists employed by the program at that time.

The film, like the project itself, is about more than just the art. It’s also about the context within which these works of art were created. And perhaps more importantly, what the country was able to accomplish as a result.

“What’s really important is that Roosevelt believed that art needed to connect to the people,” says Maglaras. “He was determined to take art off of the plateau of the elitists, so you could walk into high schools, post offices and federal buildings [and see art]. He was determined to use art as a way to lift our spirits.”

nbmaa.org