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Documentary On 'The Arts Of The WPA' At NBMAA

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Eighty years ago this month, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed an executive order creating the Works Progress Administration, a Depression-era federal program that put thousands of unemployed people back to work. One of the most publicly visible projects under the WPA was the employment of hundreds of artists to create art in publicly accessible buildings such as post offices.

Today, hundreds of those murals and other public art pieces still exist. A documentary making its world premiere this week at New Britain Museum of American Art celebrates the WPA and the artworks it funded.

"Enough to Live On" gets its name from a comment by artist Willem de Kooning, who said that WPA work gave him enough to live on during those dark years. The film features work by Rockwell Kent, Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, Jacob Lawrence and other artists, both legendary and relatively unknown.

Michael Maglaras, the Ashford documentarian who made "Enough to Live On," said he was inspired to make the movie by a memory he had from his childhood in New Hampshire.

"My father thought that Franklin Roosevelt walked on water, and he was not alone," Maglaras said. "When I was a small boy I wandered downstairs to the basement and saw my dad working on

a project. He had a basement filled with tools and sawdust. Over on one area of his workbench there was a large photo of Franklin Roosevelt. I remember pointing to that as a kid and asking, 'Who's that man?'

"My father said, 'That is the second-greatest man who ever lived.' It was instilled in me very early that Roosevelt brought us back from the brink."

Maglaras sifted through hundreds of pieces of art and settled on 78 to showcase in his film, including one in Connecticut: the painting on the wall of the post office in Southington, created in 1942 by Ann Hunt Spencer. Maglaras said his favorite WPA murals are "Life of Action" and "Life of Contemplation," which Carl Peters created in Rochester, N.Y.

Maglaras tells of how Diego Rivera's controversial Detroit murals, created in 1932 and 1933, inspired many Depression-era muralists with their glorification of working men. Maglaras also tells the strange story of "The Fleet's In," created by Paul Cadmus in 1934. Its overt eroticism – and homoeroticism – infuriated a Navy officer so much he bought it and hid it, but today, it is still owned by the Navy, which proudly exhibits it in its Washington D.C. museum. Maglaras said his research indicates that his film is the only feature documentary to discuss the WPA artists.

"The story of this project needs to be told," he said. "How soon we forget."

"ENOUGH TO LIVE ON: THE ARTS OF THE WPA" will be shown on Thursday, May 14, at 6 p.m. at New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington St. Admission is \$25, \$20 members, and includes a pre-screening reception beginning at 5:30 p.m. Reservations: 860-229-0257 or whitehouseh@nbmaa.org.

<http://www.ctnow.com/entertainment/movies/hc-art-wpa-at-nbmaa-0514-20150511,0,4449427.story>