

The Hour

Film chronicles

WPA art in Norwalk

By Silvia Foster-Frau Updated Apr 22, 2016

NORWALK — Eighty-one years ago, President Franklin Roosevelt decided to save his country from the Great Depression by arming it — with artists.

And the remnants of that effort can be found in more than 30 murals around Norwalk.

“He believed that he had to bring America together. He believed that you have to keep artists off the streets and using their talents and skills and he was determined to do that. And as I show in this film, by 1939 we were essentially out of the Depression,” said Michael Maglaras, a documentary filmmaker of 217 Films from Ashford.

The Norwalk Arts Council, Historical Society and Westport Historical Society will be screening Maglaras’ film “Enough to Live on: The Arts of the WPA” at 7 p.m. May 4 at Norwalk Community College’s PepsiCo Theater.

Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, which commissioned thousands of artists across the country, funded more than 50 murals in Norwalk. With 31 murals in City Hall

alone, the town is considered as having one of the highest concentrations of restored Depression-era art in the country. “When we look at a piece of WPA art, we remember something fundamental of America: the breadth and depth of our artistic heritage,” said Maglaras.

The event starts with a 5:30 p.m. meet-and-great with Maglaras, producer and director, and his co-producer and wife, Terri Templeton. It’s part of NCC’s monthly film series. It’s free and open to the public.

“I’m hoping to give a hardworking filmmaker an audience,” said Gary Carlson, English Professor at NCC and founder of the NCC film series program. “Especially when he’s telling the story of a time when the government thought the arts were important enough to sponsor.”

The Norwalk Historical Society and Arts Commission reached out to Maglaras after finding out that his team had been scoping out Norwalk art to potentially include in the documentary.

Though the art was not featured in the end, a Norwalk native was. Robert Reynolds, 91, whose father lost his job during the depression, speaks in the film about seeing artists at the post office painting federally-commissioned murals and explains how that affected him.

“It shows the value that art had been and always has to ground us, to center us, to remind us that there are things greater than our particular trouble on that particular day,” said Maglaras. “The one thing that the WPA federal art project did, it gave someone a chance to look at a work of art... and for a moment, by grounded in something lasting and important.”

He spent 14 months working on this film and has shown it at a handful of locations around Connecticut. Maglaras said he and Templeton are the only American filmmakers that have been asked four times to screen their work at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

“It’s easy to despair, to say ‘How can we make it right? How can we make it better?’” said Maglaras. “... But what I hope this does is make people feel upbeat about America’s future. We are not down, we are not out. We endlessly come back, we are America.”