

THE WORKS PROGRAM

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--Works Progress Administration--



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WPA OFFICIAL CHALLENGES CRITICS OF FEDERAL ART PROJECT

A prominent critic of the Federal government's sponsorship of American art through its WPA Federal Art Program was challenged today by Thomas C. Parker, Assistant National Director of the project, in an address before the American Library Association in Kansas City.

Citing a recent statement in British newspapers by Homer Saint-Gaudens, director of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, who said that painting is a luxury to be supported by the "wealth of the social order", and that "Italy's government supports the top fifteen artists; the American government is supporting the lowest ranking artists", Mr. Parker declared:

"It might startle Mr. Saint-Gaudens to know that his famous exhibitions have harbored American artists whom he so superciliously designates as 'the lowest ranking artists.'

"It might surprise Mr. Saint-Gaudens to know that in his 1937 Carnegie International, fifteen out of 107 American artists included have been or are now employed as WPA artists.

"It might even cause Mr. Saint-Gaudens some embarrassment to know that three artists who were at one time or another on WPA were awarded prizes or honorable mention by Carnegie International juries.

"The Carnegie International, which has held annual exhibits of contemporary art for 40 years, will this year include 380 paintings, of which 100 will come from the United States. It may perhaps be due to the necessity of extended research in European countries that Mr. Saint-Gaudens' viewpoint appears a

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trifle old-fashioned and out of touch with present-day American life.

"The WPA Federal Art Project has based its work on the belief that in a democracy all artists should have an opportunity to work and do their best and that the ultimate judgment as to permanent values may be left to posterity. It believes, however, that the artist has his place in the community and that in a country such as the United States both the creative genius and the craftsman have a definite function in our culture."

Mr. Parker emphasized in his address the growth of the community art centers which have been sponsored by the WPA and the cultural benefits which these centers have brought the communities where they have been established. Fifty centers are now in operation in various parts of the country, he said, and have had a gross attendance of more than 3,400,000 since the program began. Community contributions total approximately \$250,000.

"Of particular importance," he added, "is the fact that the majority of this large attendance is not composed of casual visitors to exhibitions, but of culturally starved adults and children who are being given their first opportunity to participate actively in the arts and make art a vital part of their lives."

Illustrative of the popular support to be found for the establishment of community art centers, he described the genesis of such a center in Sioux City, Iowa. There, Junior League girls not only contributed \$1,000 in cash but gave their services in making draperies, polishing floors, etc., while members of the local plumbers and steamfitters unions contributed their services to install more than \$400 worth of plumbing in the reconditioned building which the center was to occupy.

In contrasting the conventional art museum with the WPA community art center, Mr. Parker declared that the former concentrates "almost entirely on

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the preservation of archeological fragments and upon the works of artists dead many centuries. It (has) failed to activate the general mass of people in the participation of art . . . Today, on the contrary, we are trying to make art an expression of the people; to broaden its meaning through mass participation as well as appreciation, and assiduously to avoid the imposition of preconceived ideas of what is best . . .

"It is my firm belief that ultimately art in America will become an ideal of living and will no longer be merely a detached esthetic experience. It is my belief that people will cease to think of art merely in terms of an isolated painting or piece of sculpture but will come to regard it as intimately as the books they read, with an understanding of its plastic language and its full significance in the life of today."

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