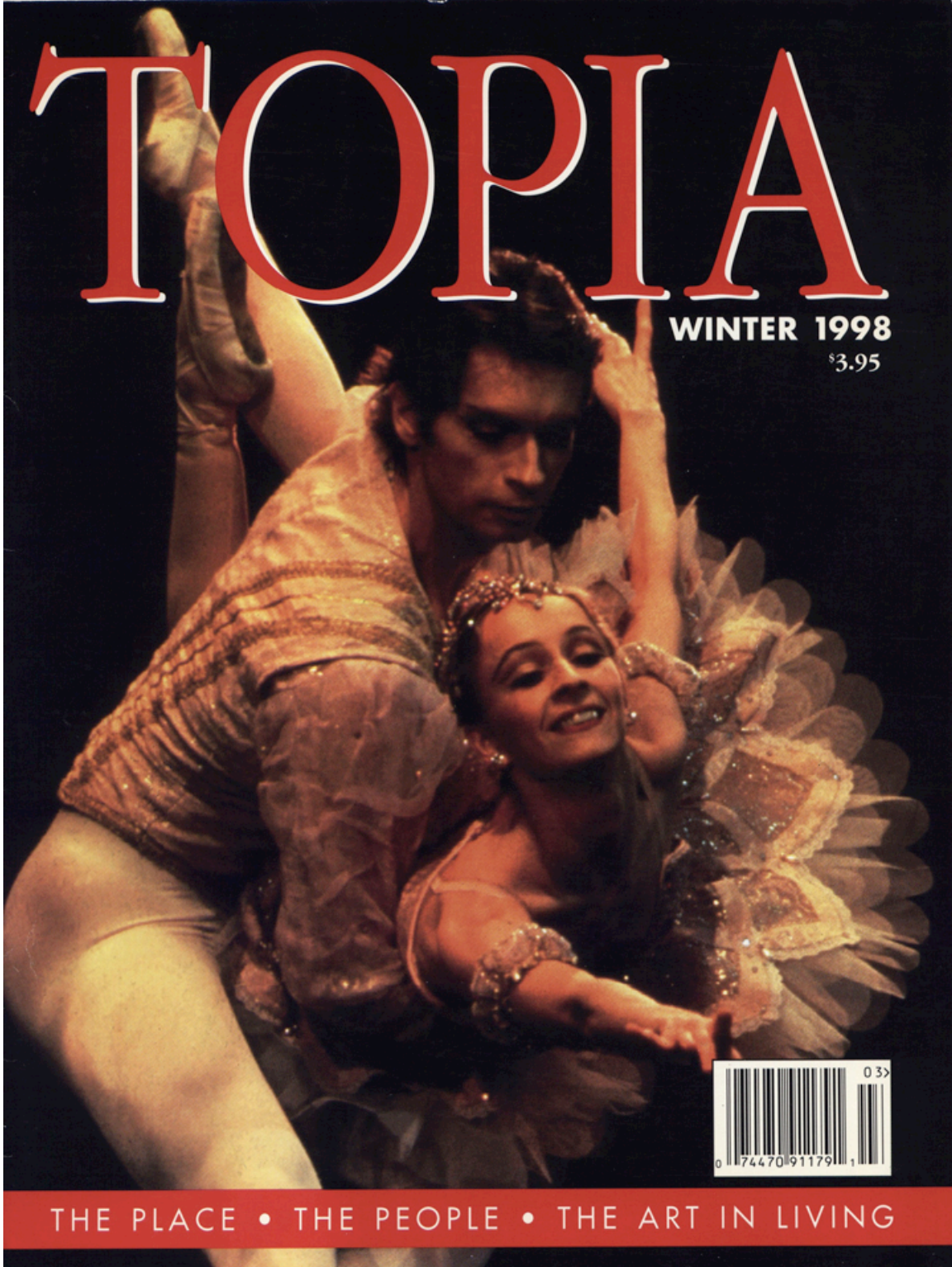


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THE PLACE • THE PEOPLE • THE ART IN LIVING

WPA Artists: Three Reflect on Six Decades of Creativity

by Maryanne O'Hara, photography by Tom Lingner

On a clean, clear morning in early September, James Lechay sits in his Cape Cod home talking of the past. A wall of glass overlooks pine thickets and the distant sea. His uncluttered canvases, their simple shapes bordering on abstraction, line other walls, adding to the serene and somewhat spare atmosphere of the room. Lechay has recently turned

every race, color, and gender to create art for government buildings. Other projects followed, most notably the ambitious WPA, which ran Federal Art, Writers', Theatre, and Music Projects with a budget of approximately \$120 million over eleven years.

Never before had the government so fully supported the arts —



ninety, and he is contemplating renewed public interest in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930s, which kept him employed as an artist during the lean years of the Depression.

The WPA was a unique experiment, part of the "new deal" that Franklin Delano Roosevelt pledged to a country in severe economic distress. The government formulated vast public work projects, then hired the unemployed, most of whom had to first qualify for relief, to staff them. Federally employed workers built the dams, roads, and public buildings that would become the foundation of the post-war boom economy. Artists, also federally employed, laid the foundation for something else — the spread of culture into small communities throughout rural America and into the American consciousness.

Art, the government said, was for everybody. Between 1933 and 1934, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), with a budget of just over one million dollars, hired artists of



and it hasn't since. The Federal Art Project employed some 5,000 artists who created thousands of easel paintings, sculptures, prints, and murals before the project ended in 1943.

Then the WPA was, for the most part, forgotten.

Now, though, there is new interest in the projects, and in artists like Lechay, who painted alongside



the likes of Jackson Pollock for six-and-a-half years as a member of the prestigious New York Easel Project. Recently, historians from the National Archives began interviewing Lechay, and just a few months back, he was invited, along with fellow WPA artists Lillian Orlofsky and Mischa Richter, to take part in a well-attended WPA symposium at the Truro Historical Society Museum on

he or she had to first qualify for relief, and the Home Relief program was strict. "You had to prove that you were poor," Lechay remembers. Home Relief investigators would show up at an artist's home for an inspection that could include even the icebox.

Once on the payroll, New York artists fought to stay on. The artists were protective of each other and made sure that all works submitted were indeed works of art. Even so, project administrators often threatened dismissals, which became the driving force behind the formation of the American Artist's Union. When an artist received a pink slip, union members protested. The picketing could become violent, Lechay recalls, with mounted police swinging batons and making arrests.

Despite struggles, the projects managed to fulfill a broader goal: to create art that would be accessible and meaningful to all Americans. In 1937, the WPA asked Lechay to spend the winter exhibiting WPA art in rural Las Vegas, New Mexico. Lechay

points out that the sheer number of galleries we take for granted today simply didn't exist in the 1930s. There were just the occasional little art centers, run by two or three interested people. That winter, Lechay and his late wife Rose mounted several exhibitions of WPA paintings in a little gallery that attracted local Spanish-speaking residents.

By 1939, ready for change, Lechay quit the WPA, rented a studio on 6th Avenue, and began a small school. In 1941, he was invited to submit work to a competition at the Art Institute of Chicago. His captivating, feathery *Pier on Sunday* took the Bronze medal and changed his life. Schools began to beckon with offers of teaching positions. When his son was born in 1945, he decided to give the University of Iowa a one-year try. Teaching provided him with the means to work freely, to develop a personal style that has always defied easy categorization — he loosely calls his work a form of abstract impressionism.

He stayed at Iowa thirty years.

Opposite page. Recent photograph of artist James Lechay taken at his Wellfleet home by Tom Lingner and a 1982 self portrait by the artist, courtesy of Krausbaar Galleries.

This page, above. Several recent works of the artist furnished by Krausbaar Galleries, New York where the artist had an exhibition from October 4 thru November 1 this year:

Above, top. Double Portrait: Rose and Daniel, c. 1989; *Above,* Green Vase on Blue Table with Red Flowers, c. 1988; and *above right,* Nude, 1985.

His art defies easy categorization and is in the collections of the Smithsonian, the Brooklyn Museum, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and numerous other museums and universities around the country. Mr. Lechay was also the subject of a recent retrospective exhibition at the Provincetown Art Association. Maryanne O'Hara is Assistant Fiction Editor at Ploughshares and her short stories are in current issues of Five Points and the Crescent Review.

Cape Cod. The National Archives itself is finishing up a near year-long WPA retrospective, "A New Deal for the Arts," which displays in Washington through January 11. Lechay supposes that one reason for new interest might be recent assaults on the National Endowment for the Arts. Perhaps, he says, people want to look more closely at a time when the arts were so generously funded.

But century's end is a time of summing up, of looking back and making judgments. Interest is renewed in events that went unexamined for years. We want to take stock, to record, perhaps even to question. What was this WPA really about, we ask?

Lechay and a few others remember.

Project administrators supplied paints, canvases, and stretchers, Lechay recalls, and every three months, he delivered a painting. He earned \$23.86 a week, but the pay didn't come easily, he says, at least not in New York, which ran the largest of the art projects. Before an artist could be assigned to a project,

WPA artist Allan Rohan Crite lives and works in Boston's South End in a townhouse that is part-museum, open to schoolchildren and other visitors. A narrow staircase winds up through four floors of

His time with the program was short, but "rather important," he says. "It did cover a formative period." Free to paint and study during that time, Crite credits his exploration of the art of other cultures with

estingly, the reason his association with the program was so short was a point of pride. Once Boston adopted Home Relief requirements, he quit, eventually finding work at the Boston Navy Yard, where he illustrated mechanical equipment for thirty years.

Crite is full of self-deprecating humor and quiet wisdom, so when he says, with a stern look in his eye and a bit of challenge in his voice, "I'm only interested in the art of my people. I'm very rigid about that," a listener can only wait for the other shoe to drop.

"Now of course, that sounds very racial," he says. "But if you look at it, part of my ancestry comes from Africa, part from Europe, and from Asia by way of the Indians. Those are all my people. Everything that's happened in the past is part of my history, part of your history, part of everybody's history."

His work of the last few decades has explored this global view of our common history. He currently focuses on what he calls documentaries: lively, fluid, pen-and-ink drawings of groups of people. In the eighties, he spent two years creating one such documentary that he collected in a binder and hand-carried to China when he and other African-American artists were invited to take part in a cultural exchange organized by the Guangzhou Art Institute.



rooms filled with paintings, drawings, woodcuts, and books. Crite is wry about the sixty-odd years that have passed since he painted for the government, remarking that he feels "like a Civil War veteran."

He worked as a non-relief artist in 1936, while he was completing his final year of studies at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. "I was developing a narrative of black people and making a commentary on what I saw," he says. "It helped to pay bills, and I was doing what I wanted to do and getting paid for it."

Crite worked at home and about every two months, delivered a canvas to the WPA office. "They seemed to be happy and satisfied," he says, gesturing to a reproduction of one of his oils, *School's Out*, which became the most well-known and reproduced of his WPA work.



helping him to get "out of the Greco-Roman prison" and gain the global perspective that became increasingly central to his work. Inter-

Reflections on the Afro-Asian, African-American Heritage of People of Color consists of scenes, one per country, which depict groups of

Paul Cadmus had just returned from two years of living and painting in Mallorca (Majorca) when he was hired by the PWAP in

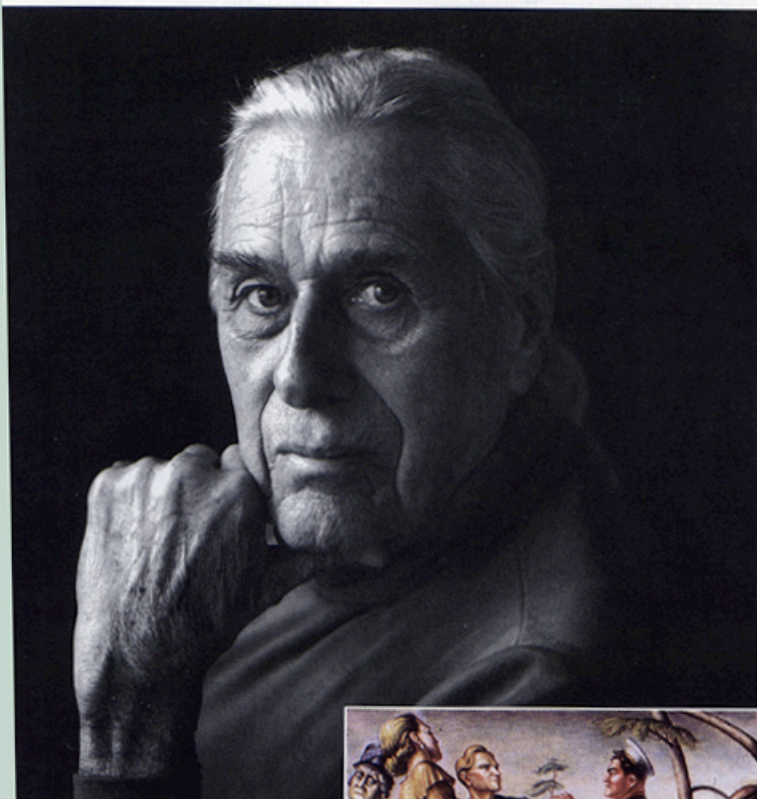
exude a comic over-ripeness, with clothes clinging to buttocks and thighs. In 1934, Washington's Corcoran Art Gallery organized an exhibi-

and disgraceful. Others defended the work and the artist's right to interpret reality as he saw it. The *Washington Post* wrote:

As opponents of censorship we can not condone Admiral Hugh Rodman's burst of indignation at the striking canvas, *The Fleet's In!*... Admiral Rodman has had a long and distinguished career as a sailor. That does not make him an art critic.

Cadmus himself once pointed out that just a few years later, Hitler was organizing his exhibitions of "Degenerate Art." He always maintained that he never wanted to shock but concedes that the controversy was a great start. And the project officials he dealt with, he says, were appreciative of his critical stance. Transferred to the Treasury Project, he completed sketches for murals in the Port Washington post office that eventually became half-size easel paintings, and completed a mural in the Parcel Post Building in Richmond, Virginia.

Since the WPA years, Cadmus has built a small, layered body of work that incorporates classicism with satiric, fantastic, expressive and meditative views. He once said that he never wanted to be a factory. He



New York in 1931. "It was wonderful," he says, appreciation and even delight still evident in his voice. "I had no money at all when I got back from Europe. I was able to live on the stipend and even save five dollars a week." He recalls the time as happy, busy, and productive. He rented a two-room bath and kitchenette on Morton Street for forty dollars a month, living mostly on eggs and onions and the occasional seventy-five cent five-course dinner at Stewart's Cafeteria. Stewart's became the model for *Greenwich Village Cafeteria*, one of two satirical works Cadmus painted for the PWAP. The other, *The Fleet's In!*, made Cadmus famous.

The Fleet's In! depicts a relaxed lineup of sailors and women carousing along a wall. The figures



bit of PWAP paintings and planned to include *The Fleet's In!*, until the Assistant Secretary of the Navy saw it and demanded its removal.

The controversy that erupted then — with strong opinions on sexuality, censorship, and federal funding of the arts — sounds all too familiar now. In some quarters, the painting was denounced as depraved

works slowly, and always has, mixing his own egg temperas, and working, as the old masters did, by laying on paint in single, painstaking, delicate strokes. He is a tenacious individualist, indifferent to critics and the historians who are still trying to place him. At ninety-four, Cadmus impresses as a man moving forward with inquisitiveness and charm and with a fierce independence.



The WPA was not without controversy, and many of the works it produced were less than memorable. But the program is worth remembering for the spirit in which it was conceived. George Biddle, who first proposed the idea of the projects to his former schoolmate, FDR, noted that for the first time in history, the federal government had recognized that it had the same obligation to keep an artist alive as to keep a farmer or carpenter alive.

Certainly, the government gave people, five-thousand of them, the means to do what they did best. Many WPA artists went on to dominate twentieth-century American art: Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky, Davis, Rothko and Avery. Abstract artist Joseph Solman declared the abstract-expressionist movement unthinkable without the encouragement to survive and experiment that was given artists by the WPA.

At the panel in Truro, Mischa Richter pointed out how wonderful it was to come out of Yale, where

Eugene Savage was teaching murals, and be able to put theory into practice. Lillian Orlofsky remembered that young as she was, she appreciated being able to see and converse with different artists of different ages and to experience the emerging abstract school in the making.

These artists express concern about today's dwindling support for the arts. "Our government is one of the least supportive of all civilized countries," Cadmus says. "Very embarrassing."

And Crite, sounding truly baffled, says, "Other social programs are supported by the government. I don't see why the arts shouldn't be. We support education. Art is the education of culture."

Art is something else, too, something Crite recognizes when he says, "I've been a bit of a historian in a way, unconsciously you might say."

The everyday scenes recently on view at the Boston Athanaeum offer examples. At the exhibit's opening reception, conversation centered on recognition and nostalgia — *ob, look. Remember this?*

Crite painted street sweepers and ice trucks and women and men in hats. He painted the details of streets and neighborhoods that no longer exist, as in *The Last of Dillon Street, January, 1944*, with its crane and wrecking ball destroying homes. He captured more elusive truths, too, evidence of a time past, when children in any city neighborhood could play safely at dusk. "I'm a recorder, a communicator," Crite said, in his quiet way, that night.

One of the oils depicts people in grief: three men on a streetcorner, reading, from a common newspaper, of the death of FDR in 1945, two years after the last of the projects ended. The painting itself is a reminder that although an era had clearly passed, the legacy of FDR's unique experiment in the arts had not. The seeds of support, the spread of the arts into middle America, the continuing controversy — these all live on. ♦

Opposite page. A study of Paul Cadmus by Jack Sbear is coupled with one of the artist's earliest and most controversial paintings, The Fleet's In!, the Navy Art Collection, Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C. This page, top. The Lid, 1990; above, left. Arabesque, 1941; and above, right. Horseplay, 1935. All of the work on this page is furnished by the artist's New York gallery, DC Moore. At age 94, the New York-born Connecticut resident still paints meticulously in his immediately identifiable style, sometimes referred to as symbolic realism, continuing the revival of the egg tempera medium of Renaissance art. He has been the subject of many studies, most notably a monograph by Lincoln Kirstein, as well as an award winning film by David Sutberland: Enfant Terrible at 80. Among his most recent shows have been ones at Yale University, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The DC Moore Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the Whitney's The Sailor Trilogy. His work is in many collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum, in New York alone.