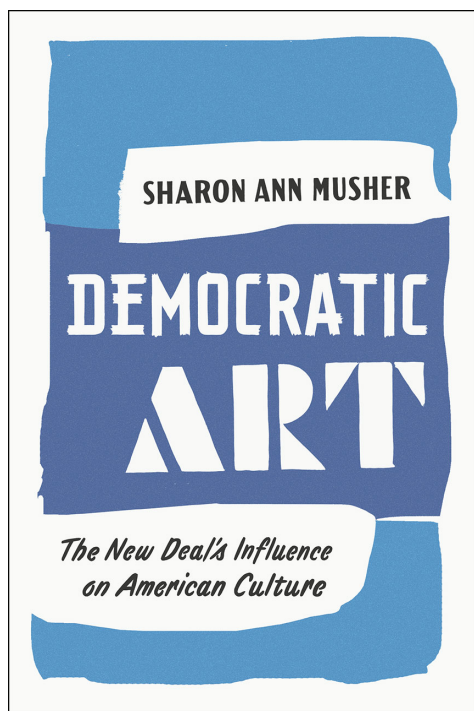


Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture

by Sharon Ann Musher. University of Chicago Press, June 2015. 293 p. ill. ISBN 9780226247182 (cl.), \$45.00.

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Written in the shadow of the 2008 financial crisis, at a time when public funding for the arts seems to be disappearing in America, *Democratic Art* investigates the question of how so many art projects received federal funding during the Great Depression.

Musher, associate professor of history at Stockton University, creates a typology of the intents and effects of publicly funded art projects, all of which sought to create and reinforce a national aesthetic. The author begins with "Art as Grandeur," outlining the Neoclassical underpinnings of the rebuilding of Washington D.C. in the mid-1930s. Subsequent chapters explain artists' and administrators' work at dismantling the Neoclassical narrative through open contests that promoted unknown talent and elevated the common man with Social Realism (Art as Enrichment); through political and social activism (Art as a Weapon); and through encouraging productive activities (Art as Experience). Backlash against

"radicalism and mediocrity" is detailed in "Art as Subversion." Musher concludes with the legacy of the New Deal, from the demise of its agencies to the contemporary struggles of the National Endowment for the Arts, striving to answer the question of how national attitudes around art have shifted so drastically.

Musher's approach is critical, recognizing that while "New Deal art exposes some of the key shortcomings of federal funding, it also illustrates its potential." The narrative depends on a long cast of characters, most of them white men of privilege, including Franklin D. Roosevelt. It is a task to keep their names in order, but Musher's account of these individuals and their

agencies' work adds nuance to what might be a well-worn story. At their core, the projects were revolutionary in that their administrators found value in creating and viewing art, and treated art-making as labor.

The book is beautifully made and well organized. A helpful list of abbreviations names the agencies that carried out art projects under the New Deal. The book includes a list of illustrations and a robust index, and the twenty-four halftone illustrations, most being black and white photographs, are captioned with descriptive information and sources. Musher's notes supply the bibliography, and include an impressive array of primary and archival sources.

Images of such public artworks are relatively easy to come by, as many are extant; however, comprehensive contextual research on New Deal art is rare. For example, Glenn Palmer-Smith's *Murals of New York City* (Rizzoli, 2013) is lavishly illustrated, but narrowly focused.

This book will be useful to art history departments, particularly those with an American focus. American studies and history will appreciate the text and its sources.