

A final historiographical question provoked by both books: is it possible for historians of social activism to avoid the heroic (or anti-heroic) treatment of their subjects? Do there always have to be retrospective political winners and losers? And shouldn't historians (whatever their political biases) serve as investigators, narrators, and storytellers of lives and times rather than as moralists and judges? These questions are not entirely rhetorical.

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Laura Hapke, *Labor's Canvas: American Working-Class History and the WPA Art of the 1930s* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

In the triumvirate of New Deal-sponsored cultural initiatives, several studies have examined the Federal Writers' Project and the Federal Theater Project; however, a comprehensive survey of the third artistic component of the WPA, the Federal Art Project (FAP), has been largely absent. Fortunately, there is now Laura Hapke's *Labor's Canvas*. For over two decades, Hapke has sought to place at centre the lives of labourers so often on the margins of American culture. This is evident in her previous works, such as *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (Rutgers, 2001) and *Sweatshop: The History of an American Idea* (Rutgers, 2004). *Labor's Canvas* emerges as a continuation of these studies, seeking to again place value on working-class history and culture. This text, at once an examination of art, history, politics, race, class, and gender, emerges as a seminal work for scholars of history, labour studies, art history, and American Studies.

What is evident from Hapke's study are the diverse and complex nuances that permeated FAP art. Divided into two main parts, Part One, "Male and Pale: Unionism and Art," and Part Two, "Catching the CIO Spirit: The FAP and Multicultural Workers," *Labor's Canvas* explores the complicated notion of "a WPA artistry both responsive to and ambivalent about labor" (8). This statement makes clear the thorny nature of the job for many WPA artists: "artists saw themselves as cultural workers who had much in common with the blue-collar workforce. Yet artistically, they struggled to reconcile social protest and aesthetic distance" (2). Whether seeking a way to accurately depict the "self in industrial work" or balancing their radical impulses with the aims of a government-subsidized arts program, artists found themselves in complicated and often contradictory positions (9). Yet these intricate political and cultural subtexts, Hapke observes, provide the rich undercurrent of FAP art.

Another important focus of Hapke's project, made especially apparent in Part Two, is the attention given to diversity and multiculturalism in WPA art. Many

FAP artists, as she contends, worked hard to represent race, gender, body, and labour accurately in their art. Hapke is astute in her observations about FAP artists and their accomplishments, particularly in that they “recognized that the American labor force was not monolithic” (2). She acknowledges that these artists produced works that recognized and celebrated the very diverse nature of Depression-era labourers and were integral in providing an alternative to mainstream America’s view of the blue-collar labourer as essentially male and white. Instead, these artists depicted workers, both male and female, and in “varying racial hues” (90). In this way, FAP artists sought to expand the country’s notion of what it meant to be working class.

One of the many accomplishments of *Labor’s Canvas* is its recovery of WPA artists whose names have been largely excluded from American Studies—Reginald Marsh, Dox Thrash, Isabel Bishop, and Raphael Soyer, just to name a few. Hapke offers in-depth analyses of their works, as well as context for how these artists fit into the larger, Depression-era cultural zeitgeist. Alongside this examination are the powerful images themselves. With over thirty illustrations accompanying Hapke’s study, the reader can see firsthand some of the complicated images from the FAP. Moreover, exploring these depictions calls for a repositioning of FAP art, which has traditionally been maligned: “from the New Deal era to our own, well-heeled art critics have often sneered at the simplified or brutally expressionistic figures who man concrete mixers, build bridges, chafe on or mournfully occupy breadlines, crowd factory gates, or swarm into mega-factories” (4). This is a common attitude towards working-class culture, whether it appears on canvas, in print, or on the stage. *Labor’s Canvas* forces critics and scholars to reconsider their previous dismissal of such works as well as their aesthetic notions.

Hapke focuses attention on this often overlooked segment of American labour history, emphasizing that “of crucial importance is the ‘bottom-up’ story of the common experience of company towns, family and community hardship, industrial speedups, grassroots activism, government relief jobs, and breadline homelessness” (2). In this way, Hapke’s work becomes part of the tradition of other “bottom-up” approaches, such as Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* and Studs Terkel’s *Working*. Much like Terkel and Zinn’s projects, Hapke’s *Labor’s Canvas* underscores the vitality and intricacy of working-class culture in a time that was wrought with political, aesthetic, and classed concerns. Hapke has succeeded amply in this endeavor, producing a work that is superbly researched and thoughtfully written. In exploring these complicated and important issues, Hapke has produced a truly significant work in *Labor’s Canvas*, one that solidifies her reputation as one of our most important labour studies scholars.

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