

Carl W. Peters and the Rochester WPA Murals

by Jessica Marten

On the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the Works Progress Administration in 2015, *Art for the People: Carl W. Peters and the Rochester WPA Murals* presents an impressive group of over sixty preparatory studies for murals made under the Federal Art Project in Rochester, New York. When a 1937 exhibition at the Memorial Art Gallery featured four of Carl W. Peters' murals and their preparatory studies, the local paper rhapsodized, "Carl Peters shows imaginative idealism and youthful lyricism in his mural

art. All his sketches...breathe a buoyant faith in American values."

The studies, which had been stored in a residential basement for almost thirty years, were acquired by the museum in 2009. Despite minor grime and losses, the images in charcoal, colored chalk, watercolor, and gouache are clearly the work of an exceptionally skilled draftsman. Even more remarkable, the group reveals Peters' artistic process for fourteen murals, many of which still exist in Rochester buildings. The drawings and paintings include studies of body parts from different angles, individual portraits, figural groupings sketched in over

the muralist's grid, and fully realized presentation studies.

The 1930s, now known as the period of the Great Depression, saw staggering unemployment that touched nearly every American family. President Roosevelt's New Deal agencies were designed to put Americans to work on a grand scale. In addition to road paving and bridge building, the New Deal generated multiple art projects. The Memorial Art Gallery contributed to Roosevelt's efforts by administering the city's highly-regarded Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA/FAP), employing



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All illustrated images are from the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, gift in memory of the friendship of Ellen W. and Thomas H. Miller with Blanche and Carl W. Peters, unless otherwise stated.

RIGHT: *Indian Allen*, 1937-38, o/c, approx. 10 ft. x 10 ft., Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High School.

BELOW RIGHT: *Study of Hands*, c. 1937-42, charcoal and pastel on paper, 18⁷/₈ x 24¹³/₁₆.

LEFT: *Study for "The Early Days of the Erie Canal" Mural*, 1938, w/c, gouache, and graphite on board, 21⁷/₈ x 30.

BELOW LEFT: *Study for "The Early Days of the Erie Canal" Mural*, 1938, charcoal and pastel on paper, 19 x 25.

BELOW FAR LEFT: *Study for "Active Life" Mural*, 1937, charcoal and pastel on paper, 25³/₄ x 19¹⁵/₁₆.



destitute artists to make art for the people.

Peters, an artist known regionally for his landscapes, recalled, "I couldn't get a job, I couldn't sell my paintings. Artists all over the country were in on [the FAP] so I went down to the Gallery and applied." The difference between responding to his personal artistic muse and responding to the demands of a federal patron led Peters to enroll as a muralist rather than an easel painter because, he said, "I didn't want to give my own work away." Peters received the highest skill classification possible under the WPA and was afforded greater autonomy in his work as a result.

An astounding thirteen of Peters' fourteen WPA murals remain in Rochester: on view, in good condition, and impressive in scale and beauty. Twelve are in schools in the Rochester City School District and one is in a local historical society. The murals, which will be reproduced in large scale for the exhibition, will remain in situ in the interest of preservation and because of their size; some measure over twenty-two feet tall.



Peters' first WPA mural commission was for two murals for the auditorium of Madison High School (relocated to Joseph C. Wilson Foundation Academy). The 1937 murals, *Contemplative Life* and *Active*

Life, represented the dual areas of study available at Madison High School: the academic and technical courses. Such pedagogic murals, designed to reflect the specialization of the schools in which they were placed,



were common under the New Deal. Peters represents the two courses of study at Madison while referencing a larger philosophical question pondered by artists and thinkers since ancient Greece. *Contemplative Life* is dedicated to literature and “depicts the contemplative studies of the academic courses.” *Active Life* depicts the “modern activities” for which students in the technical classes were prepared.

Quite different than the philosophical, symbolic *Contemplative Life* and *Active Life* murals, Peters’ 1937-38 murals for West High School (now Joseph C. Wilson Magnet High School) show an explicitly New Deal approach to historical subject matter. *White Woman of the Genesee* and *Indian Allen* feature two individuals who played prominent roles in the area’s origin stories. Mary Jemison, called the White Woman of the Genesee, and Ebenezer “Indian” Allen are regional examples of American foundation figures. Both Jemison and Allen were the subject of intense study leading up to Rochester’s centennial in 1934.

Over the course of six years, 1937-42, and in the midst of the Great Depression, the United States government provided Peters with the materials, the means, and the mission to create an impressive and lasting body of work. Peters continued to work for the WPA/FAP through 1942, as he painted ten more murals in Rochester: *The Early Days of the Erie Canal* for the Fairport Library (now Fairport Historical Museum), *Science and Humanity* for the Rochester Academy of Medicine (lost or destroyed), and the eight-panel series *The History of the Lake Ontario Region* for Charlotte High School (extant).

The drawings and watercolors that make up the group of Peters’ mural studies provide an enticing window onto the artist’s process and his experience working for the WPA/FAP.



ABOVE: Carl W. Peters painting WPA mural *Science and Humanity* (lost or destroyed) for the Academy of Medicine Museum, c. 1941, Carl W. Peters Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, University of Rochester.

RIGHT: *Active Life*, 1937, o/c, approx. 22 ft. x 7 ft. 7 in., Joseph C. Wilson Foundation Academy.

ABOVE LEFT: Unidentified assistant painting WPA mural *Algonquin Fisherman* for Charlotte High School, c. 1941-42, Carl W. Peters Papers, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, University of Rochester.

LEFT: *Contemplative Life*, 1937, o/c, approx. 22 ft. x 7 ft. 7 in., Joseph C. Wilson Foundation Academy.



It is unclear why Peters retained the preparatory studies for his murals. Studies are often discarded when their use has been fulfilled. It is appealing to imagine that he too was taken with their beauty and couldn't bring himself to dispose of such lovely and accomplished work.

Peters' idealized images reflect the economic and cultural circumstances of the period in which he lived and the audience for whom his murals were commissioned. The ongoing existence and preservation of the murals and preparatory studies attest to the artistic skill of Carl W. Peters, the success of Rochester's FAP under the auspices of the Memorial Art Gallery, and the lasting legacy of Roosevelt's New Deal. The murals are Rochester's hidden treasures, now brought to light and further illuminated by insight gleaned from the artist's preparatory studies. Thirty years after his WPA murals first met public approval in 1937, Peters said of the work he did under the federal project, "If they're good murals, done by good men, they'll stay on the wall." And they have.