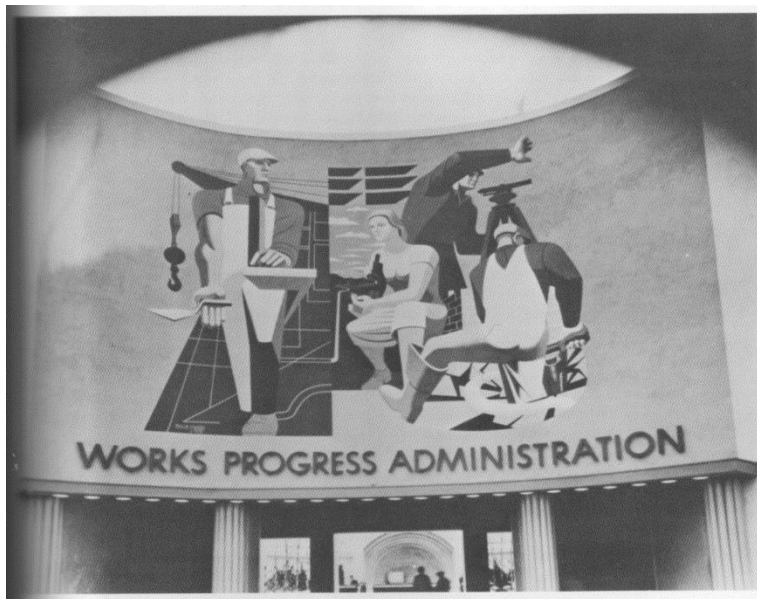


Dissertation Proposal, New School for Social Research Three Essays on the Political Economy of Art

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Introduction

The dissertation is of the three essay type. The first essay is on the methodology of art economics. The second is an applied work on the economics of museums which combines consumer theory and is related to the “educational purpose” of museums granted Not-For-Profit (NFP) status in the US tax code. The final essay is historical in nature and is a study of the government-funded art of the New Deal era as evaluated through the lens of state theory. These essays introduce new theoretical and empirical approaches into the field of cultural economics. (Current versions of the essays and related materials including this proposal can be found on my website, “Dissertation” page.)



February 14, 2014

Chapter 1. The “Value Difference” in Art Economics

This methodological essay addresses the research question: what are the value theories used in cultural economics which can help define the field as one with a shared vision of art containing non-exchange value.

The motivation for this research is found in Mark Blaug (2001:125), “Where Are We Now in Cultural Economics?”, who writes that “cultural economics lacks a single dominant paradigm or overarching intellectual theme that binds all of its elements together”. I find that Professor Blaug’s thesis does not fully capture the pre-analytical visions of those researching and writing on the economics of the arts.

My claim, buttressed with examples in the essay, is that indeed cultural economics does share a common ‘bond’. This common bond is the belief that art is different than other economic goods in society (see for example Throsby 2003:28-29 for a list of non-exchange values in art, and, Varian 1987 for a canonical representation of mainstream economics with value being realized in market exchange with given and unchanging individual preferences). Art contains properties that give value beyond exchange value, I call this shared analytical vision the “value difference” in art economics (more on which below). It is important that we highlight these intrinsic values, which also go beyond individual use-value, in order to fully capture the importance of cultural goods in human flourishing.¹

The methodology is historiographical in nature. Following Victoria Chick (1998:1867) who finds that “economics is defined by its subject matter”², I conduct a literature review of the field of cultural economics and outline the common research themes as published by

¹ Indeed the second and third essays in the dissertation deal with preference creation, something mainstream economics assumes away with stable preferences prior to social interaction.

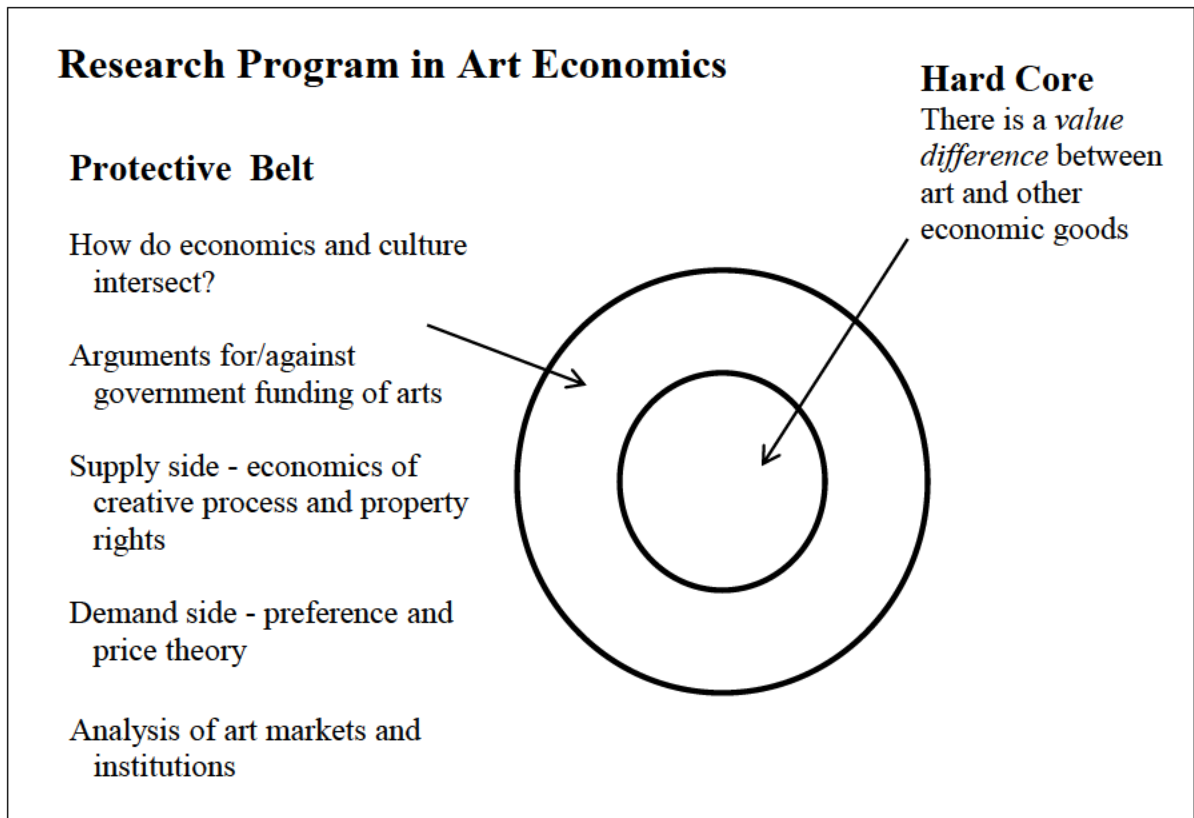
² Robbins (1932) definition of economics as the study of scarce resources I argue does not apply to art because the supply of art is greater than the demand for art, as witnessed by the phrase “starving artist”. Throsby 1994 finds that 75% of those who consider themselves artists must sell their labor to the commercial sector in order to make ends meet.

the practitioners of cultural economics. In presenting the literature review I attempt a systematic classification of the categories in the art economics research program.

I find that there is in general a pre-analytical vision shared by the cultural economist. It appears that both orthodox cultural economists (those using the tools of neo-classical welfare economics) and heterodox cultural economists (those using more sociological, structural, political economy, Marxian, feminist approaches) share a belief that art as an object of study has value which makes art different from other commodities; art is different from other economic 'goods' (scarce resources) because art and other cultural heritage has value beyond exchange. I therefore devote the main section of the essay to value theory and how art economics as a field reintroduces non-exchange value to economic analysis.

As a means of exposition it is helpful to classify the art economics research program in terms introduced by Imre Lakatos in *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programs* (1978). The metaphysical *hard core* of the cultural economics research program is the "value difference" in art. The *protective belt* are the specific categories of applied and theoretical research against which the hard core is irrefutable. In the essay I explore both orthodox and heterodox approaches to the *protective belt* research categories as found in published works in order to support the assertion for the *value difference* thesis of the essay.

Below we find a heuristic which shows the results of the literature review in Lakatosian terms. In the essay I explore the protective belt categories in relation to how value theory is used in each research program category.



I will illustrate two results here of the “value difference”, one finding from each of the first two “protective belt” categories found in the Lakatosian heuristic shown immediately above. We can see from each of these examples how art and culture are viewed by the analyst to be *different* from other economic goods in the *value* of the good to society.

1) Under the category “How do economics and culture intersect” I evaluate as one example Michael Hutter’s chapter in Arjo Klamer, editor, *The Value of Culture* (1996). Here we find that art is an “inexhaustible *source event*” which provides the raw materials for the economy’s “*resource event*”. The relationship between art (culture) and the economy is symbiotic. Human ingenuity is limitless, but the creative depend on the economy for support. Art and culture are a limitless source of value (not scarcity or exchange value), but this value as well is dependent upon the support given by scarce economic resources.

2) Under the category “Arguments for and against government funding of the arts” I give Tyler Cowen’s 2006 book, *Good & Plenty: The Creative Success of American Arts* as an example. Cowen, not known in general for government support of specific sectors, argues against his “libertarian friends” and for the government subsidy of artists on a decentralized basis because subsidy allows a richer supply of art. Cowen believes that art contains value which should be subsidized in production, despite the finding, as noted above, that there is an over-supply of art.

The *value difference* in cultural economics is important because it draws-upon and helps to clarify the role of art and culture in society, value which makes-up and helps to explain our historical cultural heritage.³ Too as claimed the *value difference* helps to define “cultural economics” as a body of knowledge, and as a research program with its own unique characteristics.

Chapter 2. The Role of Museums in Utility-Enhancing Consumption

The theme of this essay is the economics of museums. There are two main related research subthemes forming the research question. The first is consumer theory and human flourishing. Tibor Scitovsky (1976 and 1988) writes that people consume too much for comfort and not enough for novelty, by which he means the finer arts, because there is the risk of the unknown in consuming the new. Due to this risk aversion in consumption some individuals may not be realizing possible levels of life-time utility (flourishing). I then tie in the fact that Not-For-Profit (NFP) museums in the United States receive tax-free status under the tax code for their educational mission.

³ The current film, *Monument Men*, is a Hollywood example of how art is valued by some as a shared cultural heritage defining both our pasts and as proposed in the film, possibly our futures.

The *thesis* is that, following Scitovsky, the consumption of the finer things in life may create more utility than habitual consumption. However there is risk to consuming the new, and, therefore museums can help reduce this risk through education. I then devise a measure to see if indeed museums are emphasizing this educational role in their programmatic activities.

In order to be eligible for tax-free status museums must meet certain criteria. I find that the provision of educational programs might be the criterion that museums best meet for this NFP status. Therefore museum programs which introduce the public to fine art, and therefore reduce the risk of “consuming” this fine art, address Scitovsky’s critique of consumption.

I review the literature on how cultural economists and museums professionals evaluate the economic performance of museums and find that there is no common consensus on evaluation. For example Paulus (2003:51) states, “a museum cannot be reduced to one function; its three basic functions are research, preservation and communication”. In addition each NFP organization has its own charter which defines goals locally. Given the competing goals NFP museums face for use of scarce resources I focus on what they all share in common, which is the tax exemption. It is estimated that foregone real estate taxes due to the tax exemptions given to not-for-profit organizations (who own some of the most valuable parcels of real estate in US cities) amounts to between \$17 and \$32 billion, or between around 4% and 8% of all real estate taxes. (Kenyon and Langley 2011).

The research in this essay is important because it addresses theoretical and empirical gaps related to the economics of museums:

- 1) The research finds a common shared measure of value-creation (education for the finer things in life) for museums, value which can add to human flourishing, and;
- 2) The research examines what value individuals get from NFP museums in the United States for the extra real estate taxes they have

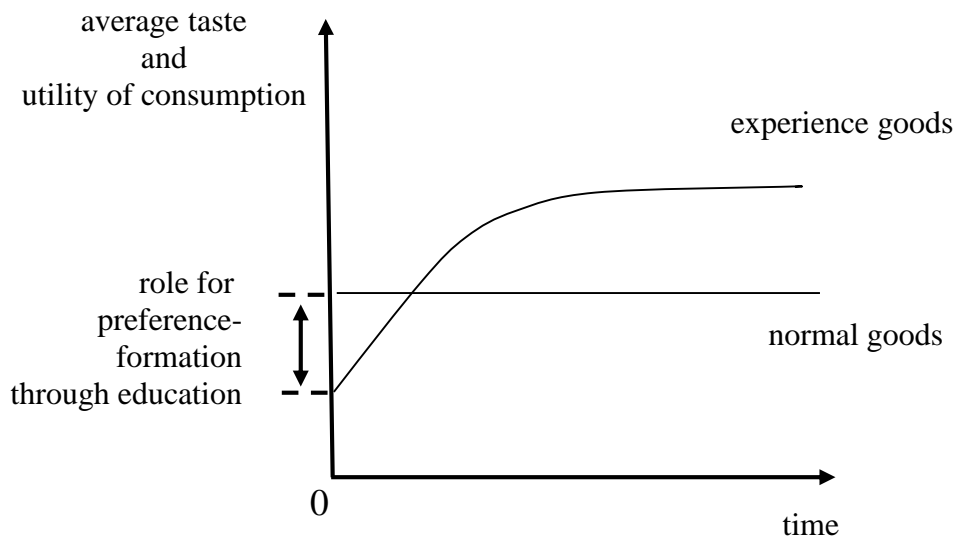
to pay, either directly or indirectly, to make up for the fact that the museums do not have to pay these taxes.⁴

The methodological approach is both theoretical and empirical. I begin the essay with a discussion of Scitovsky's consumption theory delineating consumption categories as comfort goods (through habituation) and as opposed to novel or experience goods, for which there is a risk hurdle to consumption. I then build a diagrammatic model which illustrates how increased consumption of novel or experience goods⁵ relative to normal goods can increase the utility of consumption over time.

I also show in this diagram the "experience (or price) gap" needed to be overcome to allow this utility-enhancing consumption. Because of the risk involved in consumption for novelty as opposed to comfort, the "average taste" does not include experience goods, the taste for novelty is under-formed and appears below the taste for normal goods. This experience gap can be overcome by education which at the margin equalizes the preferences for normal and experience goods as shown below (Source: Lévy-Garbona and Montmarquette, 2003, with modifications and additions by author).

⁴ Museums are granted NFP status through the federal tax code which exempts federal income tax, and in most cases localities then follow this by exempting NFPs from local taxes, including real estate taxes.

⁵ Experience goods up to point have increasing utilities in that the more one learns about jazz or classical music or modern art and literature the more one appreciates the "consumption" of these goods. Thus this is counter to most commodities which have diminishing marginal utilities.



Next I conduct a bibliographical survey of the performance measures for museums as found in the literature and realize that there are many competing ends for a given museum's scarce resources, and that there is no apparent consensus amongst museum professionals, except an individual organization's mission statement, for evaluating the economic performance of a NFP museum. By default I determine that one economic measure common to all NFP museums would be education as a percentage of a museum's resources, given the public purpose of an educational mission for which the organizations are granted NFP tax status.

For the empirical portion of the essay I create a list of the "top" museums in the United States based upon, 1) attendance and 2) the ability to attract foundation grants.⁶ I then isolate those museums who report educational expenditures and determine the percentage of

⁶ Paulus (2003) recommends the ability to attract foundational grants as one measure of a museum's performance in that these grants are less "self-interested" than other funding sources. I use this measure as well in order to increase the sample size from just attendance only.

revenues spent on educational programs. I do this for a base year 2007 and find that, pre-financial crisis, the top NFP museums in the US spend on average approximately 5.83% of revenues on education.

I then compare 2010 data to the 2007 data and find that although museum revenues in aggregate were down by 17% after the financial crisis, expenditures on education actually increased to approximately 6.26% of aggregated revenues for 2010. We can also observe that the amounts spent on education in 2007 (5.83% of revenues) and in 2010 (6.26%) exceeds the low estimate of real estate taxes lost of 4% but not the high estimate of 8% (however this does not account for the loss in federal or local income taxes due to the NFP tax status). This finding may be helpful for cultural economists who are involved in the strategic planning of NFP museums during a time of fiscal austerity, not least of which is questioning the NFP status of the tax code.

Chapter 3. The Political Economy of New Deal Art (1933-1943) as Seen Through the Lens of State Theory

This essay examines the federally-funded art-production of the New Deal. The research question addressed is whether or not this state art-production might be seen as “propaganda”⁷ serving a self-interested state during the introduction of the many unprecedented New Deal programs and policies.

Beito (2000) and Cohen (1990) contend that the New Deal period in US history was a time of unprecedented change in the role of the federal government in the lives of people in the United States. Both writers claim that the social welfare programs offered by the state⁸ in

⁷ “Propaganda is the means by which charismatic leadership, circumventing intermediary social and political institutions like parliaments, parties and interest groups, gains direct hold upon the masses” (Schivelbusch 2006:73).

⁸ For our purposes in this paper, following Wagner (2007), we are defining the “state” as that entity which has the monopoly power to tax and “government” is the form that represents this state, be it constitutional democracy, absolute monarchy, theocracy, dictatorship, etc.

effect “crowded-out” the previously existing decentralized mutual aid. Smith (2008) proposes that the massive public works projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in all 48 states as well helped to acculturate a larger presence for the federal state into the daily lives of Americans.

The US President’s Office of Management and Budget (2013) reports that federal revenues as a percentage of the economy almost doubled between 1933 (the first year of the New Deal) and 1940 (the last pre-WWII year of the New Deal).⁹ And, Fishback (2008) writes that the New Deal “created the most dramatic peacetime expansion of government in American economic history”. The increased role of the federal government in American federalism here noted is because the New Deal introduced numerous interventions to address the prolonged and deep unemployment during the Great Depression, the worst period of unemployment in US history.¹⁰

What is also unique during this period is that almost 25% of US families at one time or another received their wage-income from the US government through the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1943. Thus by the end of the New Deal period many Americans had expectations that the federal government would or should use relief funding to act as an “employer of last resort”, again something unprecedented until that time (Howard 1943 and Foster and McChesney 2009).

It is estimated that between 1% and 2% of those receiving income from the WPA were artists, the first time in US history that the federal government had such large-scale state-funded art programs (U.S. Federal Works Agency 1947). The essay explores the political economy of this state (employer) – artist (employee) relationship with textual analysis, using state theory as a lens, of the art produced in relation to the rise of the state in the economy.

⁹ OMB 2013, Table 1.2

¹⁰ For example William Barber writes that in 1936 only 30% of the labor force was employed with private entities, the rest were in “public works and government service, the Works Progress Administration and relief” (Barber 1996:99).

The New Deal period gives a natural experiment in state-funded art-production in a modern democracy, something which has not occurred to such a scale before or since.¹¹ This natural experiment in political economy, with the concomitant growth of the state in the economy and the massive production of state-art, can allow for an in-depth analysis of the research question: can indeed art be used as state propaganda in a democracy? If we find that the art production propagates a larger role for the state then, following Frankel (2006)'s "print statism" and Cohen (2008)'s "worker statism", we can call this public production "art statism". *If propaganda is not present then it is not art statism.*

There have been attempts to evaluate the culture production under the New Deal using political economy where the state is seen as using art to create "cultural democracy" as a public good (Langa 2008) and to create obedient citizen-soldiers (Russell 2010). Schivelbusch (2006) evaluates the monumental architecture and back-to-the-land programs of the 1930s as allowing an association of the state with social welfare. Jonathon Harris in *Federal Art and National Culture: the Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (1995:7) comes the closest to a comprehensive study of New Deal art as serving the state in its attempts to gain power (both the art and FDR's speeches were "'national-popular' rhetoric supporting Roosevelt's reformist policies") using Gramsci's theory of hegemony, although in the final analysis Harris finds that the New Deal served the interests of monopoly capitalism as opposed to serving the state itself as is claimed in this essay.

The essay uses historiographical, theoretical and empirical methods, as well as archival research from several sources. I apply the case study approach and use the work of Ben Shahn and other archival records to test the assertion that some New Deal art may be art statism.

¹¹ It is well known that *totalitarian* states attempt to use propaganda and censorship in the arts (Shostakovich 1979, Schivelbusch 2008, Matynia 2009), this essay studies state propaganda in a *democracy* where the state must maintain its perceived legitimacy.

I begin by presenting a literature review of the studies of New Deal art and as related to the New Deal programs while differentiating the theoretical approach in the essay from the precursors. I then present the relevant state theoretical approach used in this essay, building upon the work of Weber (1919), de Jasay (1985) and Wagner (2007), followed by a discussion of “propaganda” using Schivelbusch (2006) and Welch (2013). Given what could be seen as value-laden terms, “propaganda”, “statism”, “self-interest”, I attempt in the essay to be very precise when establishing categories.

Next I provide an encapsulated historiography of the New Deal to justify the claim that there were significant structural changes in American political economy during the New Deal (as opposed to Harris 1995’s proposed “reform”) and to set-up the context for analysis. For the concluding empirical research I use primary sources from several archival sources to test the claim that the New Deal art-production may be art statism.

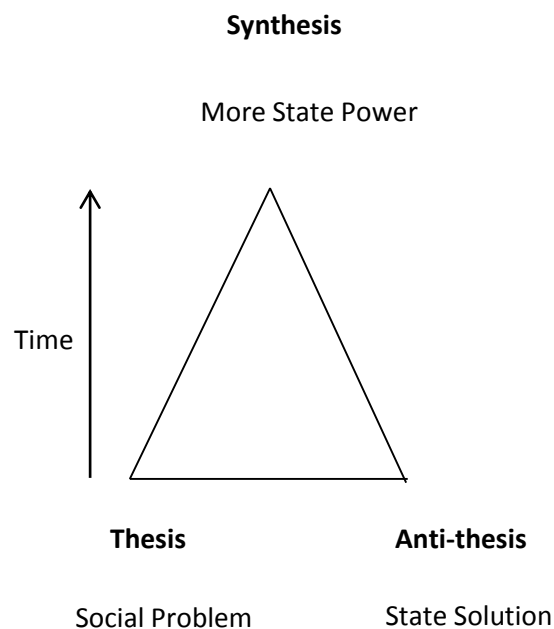
Although the most well-known state-art project of the New Deal period is the Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), the art under examination in this essay, and as found in the archives, will include both FAP art and other public art production during the New Deal. For example the Treasury Department’s Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) created more than 1,500 murals (out of the total 4,000) in public spaces while the FAP created more than 2 million posters (thousands of runs of thousands of lithographs) “supporting New Deal programs”.¹²

I find so far that the content of some art-production of the period closely follows and supports the New Deal programs being introduced. I also find that there is adjustment to the content of this art as it is being produced, when it might be seen that the message in the art went beyond what could be construed as a “legitimate” message for the state to be propagating.¹³

¹² <http://www.indiana.edu/~libsalc/newdeal/WPA.html>

¹³ The need for a democratic government to remain legitimate was introduced by Max Weber in *Politics as a Vocation* (1919).

In addition for the theoretical foundation I adapt the dialectical approach formed from the Fichte Triads as found in for example *Rules for Radicals* (1971) by Saul Alinsky, where at a given moment the public art is used as propaganda to create *fear* (the thesis) as manifested in a social problem, the state then proposes/promotes its state solution to the problem (the anti-thesis, which offers *hope*), with the succeeding moment being an increase in the legitimate power of the state as it creates or enlarges monopolistic government programs to address the problem (the synthesis, which results in *progress*).¹⁴



For example from the Ben Shahn archives at Harvard University there is a letter (attached Appendix) dated November 7, 1940 from Shahn to Mr. Edward B. Rowan at the Federal Works Agency, Washington, DC where we can read the Fichte Triads in Shahn’s mural proposal for the

¹⁴ “It is quite obvious that in reality this compliance [with a legitimate state] is the product of interests of the most varied kinds, but chiefly hope and fear” (Weber 1919:34).

Social Security Building. The social problems as outlined in “the three panels of the east wall” are “Child Labor”, “Unemployment” and “Old Age”. The state solution to the social problem is found on the “west wall” where we find “Public Works” and “Social Security” both of which are major contemporary New Deal programs.¹⁵

We can read this mural as being in service to the state (*art statism*) in that the mural uses aesthetics and emotion to create preferences in the viewer of this public art (voter, citizen, government program recipient, taxpayer, bureaucrat). Preferences for an increase in state power as manifested with the New Deal programs (federal monopolies on retirement savings and public works projects) may be now part of the emotional as opposed to rational realm because a viewer may believe the message conveyed in the public art and therefore change his or her belief-system about the role of the state in social provisioning.¹⁶

¹⁵ Shahn’s “The Meaning of Social Security” is in the building which now houses the Voice of America (VOA) in Washington, DC. I have attached a photograph of the “east wall”, from <http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/projects/department-of-health-and-human-services-muralsand-frescoes-washington-dc/> , accessed 8/15/13. This art appeals to the fear emotion.

¹⁶ We find in the essay in our discussion on propaganda that emotional messages may be more successful than rational ones in gaining acceptance for a “belief” (Raul etal. 1940:205).

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Archives

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
U.S. National Archives, College Park, MD
Stephen Lee Taller Ben Shahn Archive, Harvard University,
Cambridge, MA
New York Historical Society, New York, NY

(COPY) Please return to the Section of Fine Arts. Only copy

Jersey Homesteads
Hightstown, New Jersey
November 7, 1940

Mr. Edward B. Rowan
Section of Fine Arts
Federal Works Agency
Washington, D. C.

Dear Ed:

Following is a detailed description of the content of the Social Security Building sketches, with titles for the separate panels.

Your choice of the quotation from President Roosevelt's message to Congress has stood me in good stead. Since I have an embarrassment of riches in social security material - both in feeling and in data - I have taken the President's words around which to build the mural. They afford a much-needed limitation as well as a motif:-

"Among our objectives, I place the security of the men, women and children of the Nation first.

"This security for the individual and for the family concerns itself primarily with three factors. People want decent homes to live in; they want to locate them where they can engage in productive work; and they want some safeguard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated from this man-made world of ours."

(West Wall)

Thus, I have used the long unobstructed wall on the west side of the building to interpret the meaning of social security, and to show something of its accomplishments. On this wall I have developed the following themes:

"Work"

"The Family"

"Social Security"

As a plastic means of emphasizing these themes I have placed each group over a doorway in large scale, projecting them somewhat forward from the rest of the mural.

The Family

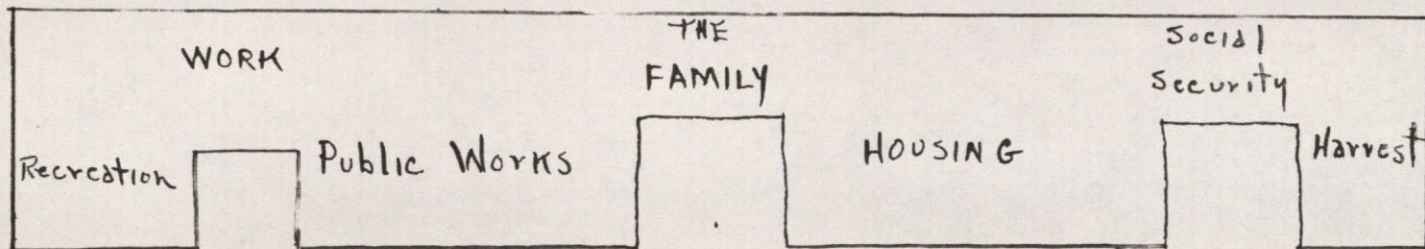
Using the Family as a central theme, over the middle door, I have placed over the left door, the theme of Work, over the right that of Security. Immediately surrounding the

Work

- 1
- Security
- ousing
- Public Works
- Recreation
- The Harvest

Family are, on the right side, the building of homes, on the left, a suggestion of tremendous public works, furnishing employment and benefiting all of society. At the extreme left of the panel are seen youths of a slum area engaged in healthy sport in handball courts. At the extreme right is seen the Harvest--threshing and fruit-gathering, obvious symbols of security, suggesting also security as it applies to the farm family.

Thus, for the west wall, we have:



West Wall

(East Wall)

Since the panels of the east wall are recessed, and because the evils of insecurity are being ameliorated, I have used that wall to portray the insecurity of men, women and children.

Unemployment

Unemployment being the greatest cause of insecurity, I have devoted to it the large central panel. I have tried to give the feeling of endless waiting, men standing and waiting, men sitting and waiting, the man and boy going wearily into the long empty perspective of a railroad track. Against a background of the typical stark, unlovely company house, I have placed in close proximity waiting men and discarded machines.

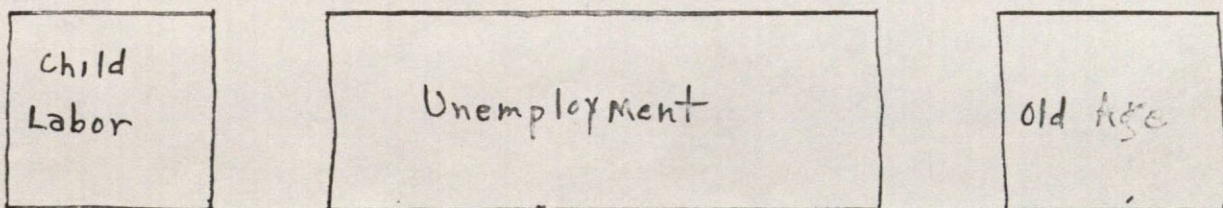
Child Labor

The panel to the left depicts the insecurities of childhood. The little girl of the mills opens doors to show us breaker boys working in a mine. The crippled boy issuing from the mine symbolizes the perils of child labor. To the right, a homeless boy is seen sleeping in the street; another child leans from a tenement window.

Old Age

The panel to the right shows the insecurity of dependents--the aged and infirm woman, the helpless mother with her small child.

Thus, the three panels of the east wall:-



East Wall

If this is in any way inadequate it can either be elaborated or condensed. I think of the work in pictorial terms, and therefore I may well have neglected some aspect of it in presenting it verbally.

We might discuss it Monday or Tuesday.

Very sincerely yours,

Ben Shahn

