

Historic Depression-Era Murals Lie Hidden Among Us

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

A mural of historic significance, known to art historians but unfamiliar to the general public, is displayed in the lobby of the Sidney Hillman Apartments at 22 South 22nd Street. Painted by Philadelphia artist Joseph Hirsch, and covering three walls, 11 feet high and 65 feet long, this immense artwork traces the early history of labor unions in the U.S. and includes a depiction of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Originally commissioned in 1940 by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) for their office and social building, the mural was moved to its current installation in 1984. Unfortunately, the mural sustained damage in several spots.

In his 2012 *Ars Judaica* article Matthew Baigell, American art historian and professor emeritus of art history at Rutgers University, noted “The panels...record the dreams of generations of immigrants who hoped to find a better life in America for themselves and their children...” and is “arguably the most complete example of social concern in an art project of the 1930s.”

Nancy G. Heller, professor of art history at the University of the Arts and co-author of *The Regionalists: Painters of the American Scene*, also included a detail from this mural in her book. Works by Hirsch can be found in the permanent collection of the



This detail of an immense mural painted by Joseph Hirsch traces the early history of U.S. labor unions. The figure of then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt appears standing in the lower right corner.

Philadelphia Museum of Art as well as in major museums in New York; Boston; Washington; Dallas; Youngstown, Ohio; and Independence, Missouri.

Born in 1910, Joseph Hirsch attended the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art (now the University of the Arts) and

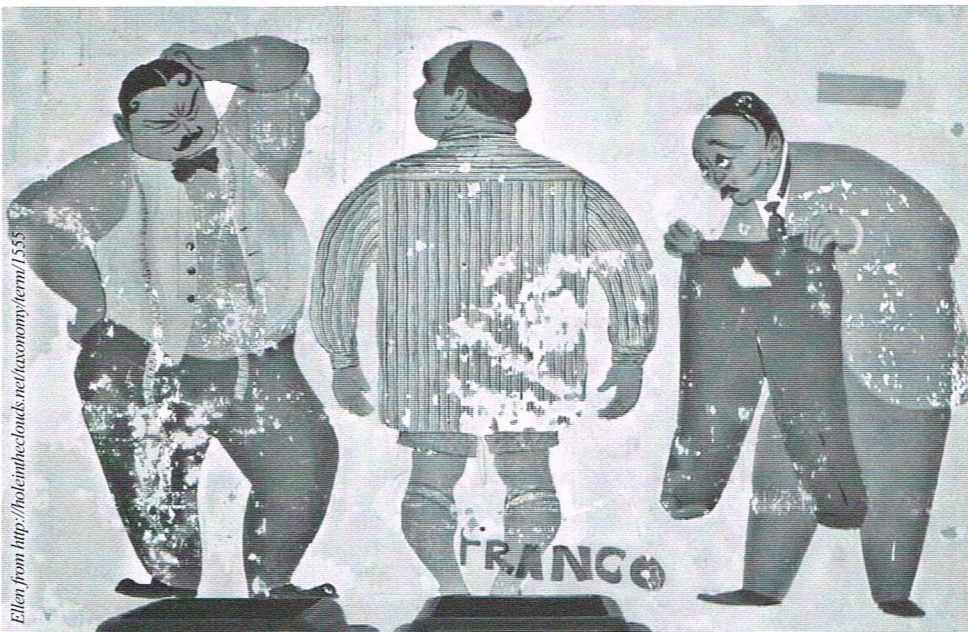
later studied in New York City with George Luks. Throughout Hirsch’s career, his subjects focused on social commentary. During the 1930s, Hirsch was employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in Philadelphia, where he completed murals for the Municipal Court. In 1938, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America commissioned Hirsch to paint murals to decorate the basement of their office building and social center at 2101 South Street. Although the building is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, it is currently a gym operated by City Fitness, and Hirsch’s murals lie hidden beneath mirrors in what are now exercise rooms.

During World War II, Hirsch worked as an artist for Abbott Laboratories, producing artworks illustrating the war effort, one of which was the most widely produced war-bond poster, “Till We Meet Again.” He later illustrated Navy aviation training and medical literature, and Army operations in Italy and North Africa. Those works reside in the permanent collections of the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army.



Detail from a Joseph Hirsch mural on display in the lobby of the Sidney Hillman Apartments.

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Mural entitled "A Mechanical Engineering Problem," commissioned by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). Sidney Hillman, whose namesake building houses notable labor-themed Depression-era murals, was founder of the ACWA.

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After the war, Hirsch sold paintings through New York galleries, received commissions from corporations, and designed playbills. He taught at the Chicago Art Institute, the National Academy of Design, and the Art Students League in New York City. He died in 1981.

The WPA, a federally funded New Deal agency, implemented public-works projects such as buildings, dams and roads, while giving paid employment to millions of Americans left jobless by the Great Depression of the 1930s. In addition, the WPA employed musicians, artists, writers,

actors, and directors to create arts, drama, media, and literature projects. Among these projects were murals in public buildings, painted by otherwise destitute artists as a form of workfare, and at the time their work was not considered especially valuable.

Many of these paintings depicted workers with exaggerated muscles, and consisted of composites of a range of vignettes. Some of the murals have been destroyed or painted over. According to William Zimmer, in his 1988 *New York Times* article about WPA art, "As the 1930s grow more distant, the value of the murals as art and social history is increasingly understood; when they can get their hands on them, restorers are painstakingly saving them."

Thousands of other murals of the Depression era have been discovered in public schools and government buildings in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Rene Ruffner, a Virginia artist and fine-arts appraiser, is currently working on a biographical index of more than 7,000 artists who created work under the WPA and three other federal programs during the Depression.

How to Find Depression-Era Art Near Home

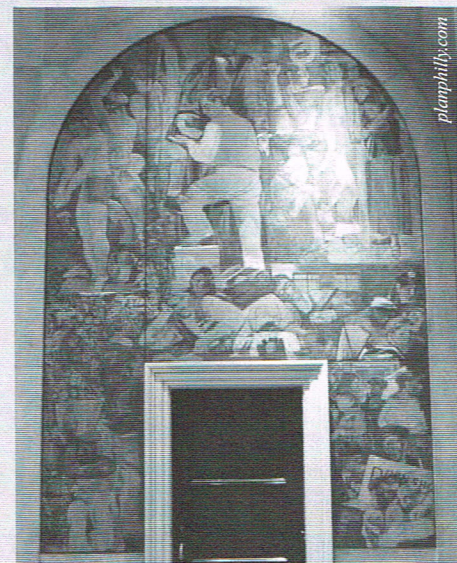


George M. Harding mural in transom of doorway, Main Hall, Family Court

The Sidney Hillman Apartments building is not open to the public; however, those interested in viewing Depression-era art can find exhibits and guided tours available in Philadelphia from time to time. There are experts on Depression-era art at PennDesign, the Pennsylvania

Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), and the University of the Arts. Recently, PennDesign Alumni conducted a guided tour of the Family Court Building, 1801 Vine Street, which houses 37 WPA murals. And PAFA mounted an exhibition, "WPA and Its Legacy," consisting of works from its collection by artists employed by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and the WPA, which ran from November to April. Patricia Stewart, a faculty member at the University of Arts, teaches an entire course about WPA-era art, in which trips to see these murals figure prominently.

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George M. Harding mural, Main Hall, Family Court

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