

# NEW BRITAIN INDUSTRIAL Museum

## QUARTERLY

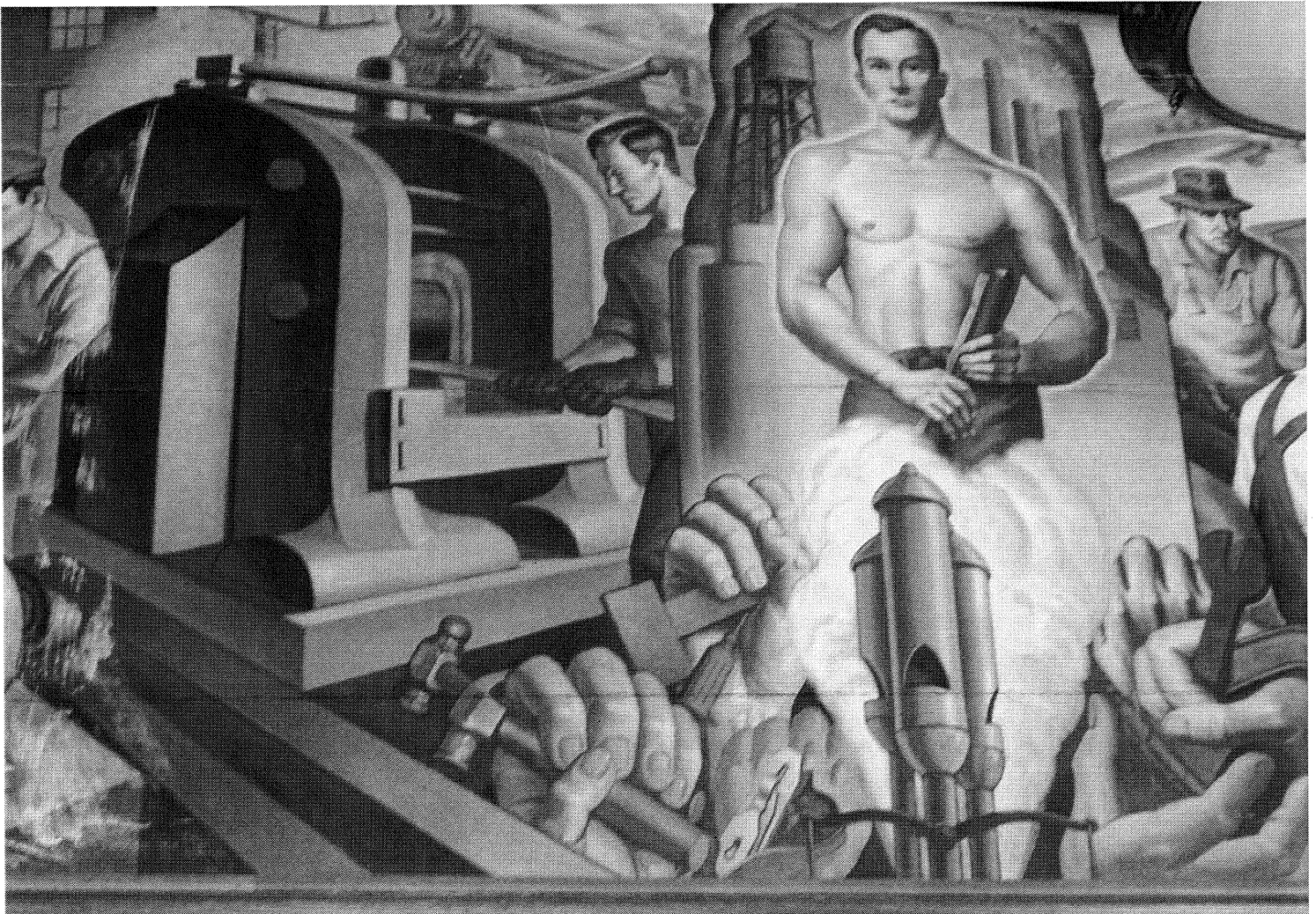
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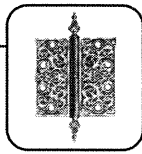
### *THE GREAT DEPRESSION, the W.P.A. and the F.A.P.* *(Federal Art Project)*

As the years go by, there are fewer people who remember the Great Depression of the 1930s and with the news today of the Stock Market hitting new highs, it is probably difficult for young people to realize what those years were like. Prior to 1929 there had been technological advances and cash infusions in the market, which caused production in the factories to soar. There were not enough consumers to keep up with the volume of products manufactured. Consequently,

industries lost sales and men were laid off from their jobs so they couldn't afford to buy. Building came to a halt and the demand for construction materials and tools disappeared, which was particularly hard on New Britain industry. Finally on October 29, 1929, the stock market collapsed. People lined up at warehouses to receive food; flour, sugar, rice and yes, even canned horsemeat from the government. Although milk was selling for .14 a quart and bread was .09 a loaf, there were many who couldn't afford to feed their families and it became a common site to see someone selling



New Britain High School Mural (1941)



pencils or apples on the city streets to make a few cents. A number of people lost their homes when they could not meet their mortgage payments. The yearly income of an average family was reduced by 40% and was about \$1,368. The land of opportunity became the land of desperation.

On May 6, 1935 the federal government created the Works Project Administration, which came to be known as the WPA. It was created to help provide economic relief to U.S. citizens who were suffering through the Great Depression. The Federal Art Project was one of the divisions of the WPA. It existed in all 48 states and its strongest program was in art education for children. New Britain Alderman Louis Salvio recently rescued student paintings from the attic of the Benjamin Franklin School, which were probably from this program. He had the foresight to have them restored and framed and they are now a wonderful asset to the Children's Department at the New Britain Public Library.

The Federal Art Project had two other goals: To provide artworks for non-federal public buildings such as court-houses, libraries and schools, and to provide jobs for unemployed artists on relief rolls. One of these projects in New Britain consisted of three mural panels, which were installed in the library of the New Britain High School on Bassett St. The first panel was installed in the fall of 1940 and represents American history. The second, done by Frank Rutkowski of Hamden, is entitled "American Industry" and was installed in March of 1941. The third is on education with special reference to the history of local educational institutions. The High School building has now been made into apartments for senior citizens. The first and second murals are still hanging in what was the library and is now being used as both a library and a social gathering place as well as a postal facility for the residents.

It is the second mural that particularly peaked our interest. It is painted in oil on canvas and has almost a three dimensional look in which the main elements are machines, such as stamping presses, electric motors, grinders etc. that one would have found in many of the factories in town. Mr. Rutkowski went right into the plants and sketched actual people operating some of these machines. There are six men tending their machines and in the center is one large figure of a workman, which dominates the work. The artist has tried to express the physical aspect of industry by giving his main figure a strong body with brawny muscles. However, in his hands he is holding rolled blueprints, which present the intellectual side necessary to the success of industry.

In the background are factory buildings and chimneys and in the foreground is a steam whistle, which called people to work. The NB Industrial Museum has in its collection the steam whistle, which was blown morning, noon and night at The Stanley Works. Especially memorable is the whistle blowing at 11:00 A.M. on November 11th in observation of what was known as Armistice Day and the end of World War I. The whistle could be heard all over town and citizens stopped for a moment of silence and prayer. This holiday is now known as Veterans Day.

Another set of murals executed under the Federal Arts Project of the WPA, although not connected with local industry, was done by Joseph Scarrozzo, now of Farmington. They depict the life of Nathan Hale and were installed in the Nathan Hale Junior High School in 1941. In talking with Mr. Scarrozzo, he told us that he had been friendly with Walter Korder and Sanford Low at the New Britain Art League on Cedar St. They suggested that he apply to the FAP. He had to meet professional standards and also the relief requirements of the Connecticut WPA relief board. After he was selected, his project was carried out on the top floor of the Walnut Hill School, where he was supplied with easels, paint and canvas and was paid \$75.00 a month. Periodically his work was reviewed as well as his financial status. Joe later went to work for The Stanley Works and when he had a free moment he would sketch, often in watercolor or conte crayon, people in the factory. He suggested we look over some of the "Stanley World" publications, which the museum has in its collection, for examples of his work.

It is also interesting to note that a number of artists, who worked under grants during the Great Depression, became famous in time. Many of these are listed in the collection of The New Britain Museum of American Art including Thomas Hart Benton, who painted the murals "Arts of Life in America" for the library of the Whitney Museum in New York in 1932 and were later acquired by the local museum.. Other well known names include Jackson Pollock, Ben Shahn, Stuart Davis, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, John Sloan, Grant Wood and William Zorach.

World War II brought about the demise of the program, as efforts were concentrated on the war. However, during the extent of the program, the estimated number of artworks produced was 2,566 murals, 17,744 sculptures, 108,099 paintings and 240,000 prints.

— Lois L. Blomstrann