

THINKING
BIG

An Educator's Guide to The 19th Annual
Chicago Humanities Festival
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Robert Irwin *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow & Blue* ©2006. Linear polyurethane paint on 6 aircraft honeycomb aluminum rectangles, overall installed: 10'-1/2" x 54' x 22'; aluminum rectangles: 16' x 22' each. Photo by: Genevieve Hanson / Courtesy PaceWildenstein

2008 Terra Foundation Lecturer on American Art: Erica Doss

Erica Doss, Art Historian



Erika Doss holds a BA from Ripon College and a MA and PhD from University of Minnesota. For 21 years Doss was the director of the American Studies program and professor of fine arts at the University of Colorado,

Boulder. Currently she works as an art historian and chairperson of the Department of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Doss's primary teaching and research interests are in the areas of modern and contemporary American art history and

material/visual cultures. Public culture and public response to that culture has been the primary impetus for her work. She is the author of numerous publications including *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (1991), *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities* (1995); *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (1999), *Looking at Life Magazine* (editor, 2001); *Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002).

al.nd.edu. University of Notre Dame. 24 April. 2008. <http://al.nd.edu/resources-for/faculty-and-staff/faculty-list/bio/edoss/>

colorado.edu. University of Colorado. 24 April. 2008. <http://www.colorado.edu/finearts/erikadoss/ErikaDossCV.pdf>

colorado.edu. University of Colorado. 24 April. 2008. <http://www.colorado.edu/arts/arhistory/doss.html>

Getting to the Core: Chapter

In 1940, the mural *Harvest* was unveiled in the Grand Junction, Colorado Post Office [47]. Painted by Louise Ronnebeck, *Harvest* was one of 1,100 public murals commissioned by the US Government's Section of Fine Arts during the New Deal. Depicting a young couple harvesting peaches against a backdrop of advancing white settlers on the left and retreating Ute Indians on the right, *Harvest's* focus on family, labour, and the local landscape is typical of much American Scene art during the 1930s.

Visualized in terms of skyscrapers and factories, Southwestern exoticism, and African-American citizenship during the 1920s, modern American art was redefined during the Great Depression, a devastating economic collapse which began with the 1929 stock market crash and continued until the early 1940s. With industry shutdowns and a dramatic slump in urban construction (by 1932, steel plants operated at only 12 per cent of capacity and industrial construction had dropped from \$949 million to \$74 million), images of smoking factories and towering skyscrapers were no longer viable American icons.

Instead, 1930s artists turned to images of the American people, alternately titled 'the folk' or 'the masses' depending on liberal or leftist political views. Other artists looked to the American landscape, much of it ravaged by the traumatic environmental upsets of the era. Still others continued to experiment with non-representational art, aspiring to utopian visions of universal harmony. Despite their stylistic and, often, political, differences, 1930s artists negotiated new understandings of modern American art, opening the aesthetic playing field to a broader range of artists, art styles, and places for art. Women artists gained greater public presence; indeed, a 1935 survey showed that 41 per cent of Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists were female. Almost a third of the artists who worked for government-funded art projects were from working-class backgrounds. The New Deal's generally non-discriminatory hiring practices extended further to artists of diverse racial and ethnic origins. Despite sweeping social and political stress on national unity, the modern art of the Great Depression was remarkably pluralistic, although not uncomplicated, like the era itself, by persistent tensions of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. (Doss 97-98)

Doss, Erika. *Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

REFLECTION: Photographs

Burned into the memory of Depression America, Lange's Madonna-like image may be the 1930s most famous documentary photograph. Visiting a migrant camp of pea pickers near Nipomo, California in March 1936, Lange quickly shot pictures of a 32-year-old woman (Florence Thompson) seated under a makeshift tent with three of her seven children. 'Look in her eyes!' *Midweek Pictorial* urged in 1936, using Lange's compelling photograph to illustrate the inequities inherent in farm tenancy, and demanding its change through government reform (Doss 106-107).

Doss, Erika. *Twentieth-Century American Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.



As noted in her biography, **Erika Doss** is interested in “modern and contemporary American art history and material/visual cultures” and “the public response to that culture.”

Lesson Plan: The Mural as “Slice of Life” History

Essential Question: How can a mural tell the story of a group at a particular time and place in history, and how does an artist's style affect the telling of that story?

Goals

This lesson is suitable for English/Language Arts, Social Science, and Art classes. In addition to web research, it addresses skills of visual literacy and analysis, presentation, and the collaborative conceptualization and creation of a work of art within a set of established aesthetic parameters (i.e., the WPA-style mural).

Objectives

Students will closely observe a Works Progress Administration (WPA) mural in order to identify its subject, its point of view, and the images and techniques used by the artist to convey these ideas. They will then create their own class mural conveying student life in their school in the year 2008.

Materials

- Art for the People: The Mural Reference Book for the Chicago Public Schools, by Heather Becker
- Louise Ronnebeck's mural, “Harvest,” in full (if available)
- Other New Deal/WPA-era mural images are available:
- New Deal/WPA Art Project: <http://www.wpamurals.com/>
- New Deal Network: <http://newdeal.feri.org/>
- A Guide to Chicago's Murals : <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/305996.html>
- The Chicago Conservation Center: <http://www.chicagoconservation.com/pages/departments/murals/murals.html>
- Art supplies for mural

Timeframe

This activity will take place in two parts—students will first select, analyze, and present their findings on a WPA mural (three days); they will then create a mural representing elements of their school community (two to five days, depending on the level of detail).

Process and Procedure

1. Show students a full image of Louise Ronnebeck's *Harvest* (if available; otherwise, choose a similar WPA mural) After providing some basic history on the mural and its artist, noting the prevalence of female artists during the New Deal era, lead a discussion of the mural's subject, its point of view, and the images and techniques used by the artist to convey these ideas. Ideally, students will have their own photocopies of the mural allowing them to "actively read" it.
2. Student research groups of two to four will then select a mural to analyze using either the book or web resources available to them in their classrooms and/or schools. The teacher should guide them to choose a mural like Ronnebeck's, that is to say a mural depicting the work and/or activities of a specific group of people in a certain place at a certain time – one that tells a story.
3. Then, students will analyze the mural as they did in Step One above; in other words, they will analyze the mural's subject, its point of view, and the images and techniques used by the artist to convey the central idea. Once their analysis is complete, they will present their mural and their analysis to the class.
4. Give students time to discuss how they would represent their own school community in a mural similar to the one they selected and analyzed. If people were to look at such a mural in 50 or 100 years, what might their reaction be? What would they think about the lives of an American student in 2008? What key experiences, figures, and activities should they include? How can they arrange the mural to encompass all pertinent details in a single image? How can they utilize specific artistic style and technique in doing so?
5. Break students into groups to work on parts of the mural. How you divide the students is up to you – by quadrant, by subject, etc. Prior to beginning the mural, each group will create an annotated mural sketchbook to indicate their planning process.
6. Finally, students will begin to work on their mural. The medium is up to each teacher and dependent upon each school's resources—you can use anything from paint and canvas to marker on butcher paper. If you have limited resources, another suggestion could be to create a mosaic mural using magazines images.

Assessment

Class notes (or "active reading") on the mural chosen for the class to discuss (*Harvest* or similar mural) with a focus on its subject, its point of view, and the images and techniques used by the artist to convey these ideas; small group notes on self-selected mural (with a focus on the same); mural planning sketchbook (reflecting small group mural planning discussion and process); and, finally, the group mural.



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