



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## **Modernism for the Masses: Painters, Politics, and Public Murals in New Deal New York**

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This research project will be the first comprehensive scholarly study to address the relations between modern art, leftist politics, and the New Deal federal art initiatives in New York City during the turbulent years of the Great Depression. While this period in American art remains largely associated with the dominance of figurative works and the promotion of what was perceived as a tradition of native realism, the art scene was considerably more factional and complex than canonical narratives indicate.

Significantly, the use of an abstract visual vocabulary was not nearly so marginal as current art-historical scholarship continues to suggest, nor were the relations between modernism and realism as polarized as standard formal and theoretical assessments maintain.

The purpose of this project is to explore the ways in which artists with varying degrees of commitment to the left, such as Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981), Stuart Davis (1894–1964), Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), and Balcomb Greene (1904–1990), negotiated a rapprochement between modernist aesthetics and leftist politics within a complex cultural field deeply divided by contending ideologies. Specifically, it will examine these relations with respect to public muralism, an art form that underwent a significant transformation during the decade, emerging as a vital manifestation of revolutionary popular art and serving as an exemplary means for bringing art to the people.

In an effort to offer some corrective to the inadequacy of received notions of 1930s public art, the primary goals of my research are three-fold: to analyze the ways in which artists embraced and/or contested the political mandates of the Communist Party, the Popular Front, and the New Deal state in order to achieve a rapprochement between modernist aesthetics and leftist politics; to offer an alternative to the still widespread tendency to treat modernism and realism as antipodes on the aesthetic spectrum; and, finally, to examine the ways in which both Roosevelt's New Deal and the Communist Party's Popular Front were politically and ideologically able to accommodate the development of modernism, particularly within the context of the Work Progress Administration's Federal Art Project.