Work and Play
A Case Study of Philip Guston

- The Great Depression left the nation in a desperate state. 1929-1939
  - Unemployment rates soaring, savings lost, the banks collapsed, homes lost, and hunger ravaging the nation
- President Franklin D. Roosevelt established a federally funded program in efforts to help end the crisis by creating and providing new jobs.

The WPA (Works Progress Administration)
Philip Guston timeline

- **1910**: Born: June 27, 1913, Montreal, Canada
- **1919**: Moved to L.A., California, Age 6
- **1927**: Manual Arts High School in L.A.
- **1929**: Expelled from school with friend Jackson Pollock, For disorderly behavior & drawing cartoons that ridiculed the academic program
- **1930**: Otis Art Institute, L.A. Meet Reuben Kadish
- **1934**: Guston & Reuben set to work for first federally funded art project in California (the Civil Works Administration Arts Projects). Artists kicked off project by administration, got into a quarrel.
- **1935-1936**: Moved to NYC. Joined WPA mural art division.
- **1939**: Mural “Maintaining America’s Skills” for WPA building, World’s Fair. Mural “Work and Play” Queensbridge housing, under WPA
- **1980**: Died June 7, Woodstock N.Y.

Political timeline

- **1914**: July 28 WWI
- **1918**: November 11 WWI ended
- **1919**: November 11 WWI ended
- **1929**: October 29, Stock market crashed.
- **1932**: November Franklin D. Roosevelt won presidential elections
- **1933**: March, President Roosevelt took office.
- **1935**: May, 6 WPA executed
- **1935**: FAP created under the WPA
- **1939**: Sept. 1 WWII
- **1945**: Sept. 2 WWII ended
- **1943**: WPA ended

**1929-1939**: The Great Depression
A young, eager, passionate and rebellious artist Philip Guston was hungry to paint.

The Great Depression

- Aware of the harder realities of everyday life, witnessing the spread of the social unrest of depression, these young artists wanted to appeal to the public and create works of art that conveyed a social message, a social message concerned with the issues and problems of the time.
FAP (Federal Arts Project) 1935-1943

- Established under the WPA and director Holger Cahill in 1935
- Federally funded work program for artists and the arts
- Provided work relief, brought the arts to the public, wanted to integrate art into the everyday life of a person.

“Sell to the American people the idea that art is and should be an integral part of our civilization.”
- Edward Bruce (Treasury Dept. Washington, Advisory Committee to Treasury on Fine Arts), January 19, 1934

Credit Smithsonian Archives of American Art

How did the FAP promote idea: “Art is for everyone?”
- Created public works of art: Murals and sculptures.
- Established 100 community art centers throughout nation.
- Created exhibitions.
- Provided free art classes and art education for adults and children.
Guston working on the “Work and Play” mural

Children are watching as Philip Guston works on the Queensbridge mural. As intended by the FAP program “integrate art,” these children are receiving first hand experience in “Art.” They are witnessing and learning how art is made.
Philip Guston & Mexican Mural Movement

- Inspired by the Mexican Mural Movement (1920’s): The Mexican Government hired Muralists in efforts to reunify a country torn apart by the Mexican Revolution. Large numbers of murals with nationalistic, social, and political messages were created on public buildings with the belief that art was for the education and betterment of the people.
- Guston & friends watched Mexican Muralists such as Jose Orozco & David Siqueiros hard at work.

- David Alfaro Siqueiros, *America Tropical*, Olvera Street, 1932, CA. Image Credit America Tropical Interpretive Center.
- Jules Langsner, Philip Guston, and Reuben Kadish with the mural *Inquisition* in Mexico, circa 1934. Image Credit Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
Artists organized a group who demonstrated and rallied for the unionization of artists. They believed that artists were workers and art was a cultural labor like any other labor job worthy of government support. The Movement also fought for the protection of their employment as well as improving working conditions.

- 1937 - Artists’ Union became local 60 of the United Office and Professional Workers of the CIO.
Philip Guston was interested in and studied Italian Renaissance Fresco art. When Mexican Muralist Orozco would give lectures on Giotto (Italian renaissance painter) Guston and friends such as James Brooks and the Pollock brothers would attend these lectures. The lectures were given at the New School and at the Artists’ Union.

“I was the President of the Union of 3 years... during which time, of course, I got to know most of the artists in New York... Oh, I was active with men like Stuart Davis, Arshille Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Ben Shahn, Bernarda Bryson, Philip Guston…” - Boris Gorelick, 1964. Credit Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute.
Queensbridge Housing

Philip Guston hard at work on the mural “Work and Play” for the Queensbridge community center in Long Island City.

Site of Philip Guston’s mural “Work and Play.” The Queensbridge housing complex, a WPA funded project.

Philip Guston working on mural for Queensbridge, 1940 July 29. Image Credit Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

View of Queensbridge projects during construction. LIC, Queens, N.Y. May 15, 1939 Image Credit LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.
“The material in this mural is related to the general activities of the Community Center.” - Philip Guston, Explanation of mural in letter. Credit LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.

- The Groups, Starting from Left to Right:

- **The Dignity of the family unit**
- **Children playing and fighting in a semi-comic aspect, in the background - debris, etc. and crime lending into**
- **Demolition, planning and construction**
- **Athletics**
- **Musical expression, drama, gaiety**
- **Health - care of the child**
- **Youngsters at play, craft activity - in foreground. In background - adult education**
- **The arts and crafts - Sculpture, painting, puppeteering and teaching**
Bibliography


Cahill, Holger. “Oral history interview with Holger Cahill.” Interview by John Morse with the help of Peter Pollack. 1960, April 12 and April 15. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute*.


O’Connor, Francis V. *Arts For The Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administration of the WPA Federation Art Project*. 1973. *Internet Archives*.

Internship
Research based internship.

Archival research conducted - involves searching through archival records.

Archival records - held in institutions such as libraries and museums which are accessed on the web or in person by appointment.
Archives

An Archive is a collection of historical records/documents

- The La Guardia and Wagner Archives
- The Library of Congress Archives
- The Museum of Modern Art Archives
- The NYC Department of Records and Information Services
- The New York Public Library
- The Queens Library Archives
- The Smithsonian Archives of American Art
Archival Documents

Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Online

La Guardia and Wagner Archives, In person at La Guardia Community College

Letter welcoming George Constant to the WPA, 1934 Jan.17
Image Credit Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Philip Guston explanation of mural design for “Work and Play”
Credit LaGuardia and Wagner Archives

WPA labor and costs letter, 1939 Jan. 11. 
Credit LaGuardia and Wagner Archives
Books & Magazines Found Through Archives

Art Front, Magazine, 1934-1937
Image Credit Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

O’Connor, Francis V. Arts for the Million: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project, 1973
Book Credit Internet Archive

Image Credit University of California Press

Book Credit The Museum of Modern Art.