



*Three families camped in the rain behind a billboard advertising progress of the times, Kern County, California, 1939. Photo by Dorothea Lange, FSA-OWI Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.*

## Surviving Hard Times

Bridging the 1929 stock market crash and America's entry into World War II in 1941, the 1930s was a complex decade darkened by depressing economic statistics and fascist dictators, yet brightened by head-spinning inventions and the emergence of vibrant, all-American art forms.

In his 1933 inaugural speech, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared, "We have nothing to fear, but fear itself." He then launched "A New Deal" to lift America out of the Great Depression. Government solutions, such as interstate highways, Social Security, and publicly funded rural electrification, went from being radical ideas to everyday expectations. And the federal government, for the first time, provided major support to each state for the arts.

The Works Progress Administration (WPA) recognized artists as skilled workers and included them in its relief programs. Programs like the 1933-34 Public Works of Art Project hired them to decorate public buildings.

Between 1935 and 1943, separate federal projects for visual arts, writing, theatre, and music, sent funds to the states to employ artists in producing, teaching and touring the arts. By 1939, over 25,000 works by WPA artists were being circulated nationally and performers were touring to small towns around the country. Writers, actors, photographers, musicians, playwrights, and other artists were given variations of the same basic job: provide high quality American art to Americans.

The Federal Art Project employed over 5,000 visual artists who produced 108,099 portable paintings, 2,566 murals, and 17,744 pieces of sculpture. On average, artists were paid \$95 a month (worth \$1,215 today) and were expected to turn in a specific number of works within a certain amount of time.

The artworks they created are as diverse as the people who created them. In celebrating freedom of expression, the nation's first major public support for the arts produced a uniquely American legacy.