

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION:

PHILIP GUSTON'S "WORK AND PLAY"

Philip Guston (1913-1980) was born in Montreal, Canada, to Ukranian-Jewish immigrant parents, and eventually the family moved to California. Guston's interest in the arts truly began in 1923 after the tragedy of losing his father. His mother found that art became his coping mechanism and encouraged cartoon lessons to manage his grief. Guston soon enrolled in Los Angeles Manual Arts School, where he met fellow aspiring artist, Jackson Pollock.

While studying at Otis Art Institute on scholarship, Philip Guston learned modern European art movements, however his artistic skills were mostly self taught. Feeling discouraged by the academic approach to art, Guston set off to produce paintings free from the constraints of school. At the age of 18, he collaborated with artist Reuben Kadish to paint his first indoor mural. The painting was politically charged and marked the start of a theme of political corruption which Guston returned to in most of his work.



Philip Guston, On-Site at the Jacob A. Riis Settlement House Community Center in Long Island City, Queens, 1940 Aug. 21, Libsohn, Sol, 1914 – 2001, photographer. Credit: WPA Federal Art Project.

In 1947, Guston met fellow painter Bradley Walker Tomlin. They joined the Modern Expressionist movement that was sweeping the artistic world. As a result, Guston transitioned from painting murals to painting privately in his studio. During this time, and throughout his life, Guston held several teaching positions at universities across the country such as New York University in Manhattan and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

Guston's artistic persuasions would shift throughout his life as he lived in new cities, became acquainted with various circles of artists, and experienced monumental periods of various art movements. From his role in the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1940's and 50's to his cartoon-style realism works in the 1970's, Guston's work has impacted generations.

THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

Around the time Philip Guston left school, the Great Depression was in full effect. After spending time in California and Mexico, Guston moved to New York and was able to find work designing and painting murals commissioned by the Works Progress Administration. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 by Franklin D. Roosevelt, as part of the New Deal, a series of executive orders that were intended to provide "Relief, Recovery, and Reform". The WPA alone employed 8.5 million men and women, mainly in public works infrastructure jobs.

Eleanor Roosevelt, a lifelong supporter of the arts, successfully persuaded her husband to create an additional branch of WPA called Federal Project One. Federal One, as it came to be known, created jobs specifically for actors, musicians, writers, and artists. Although disparaged by some as frivolous spending, Franklin Roosevelt saw the program as a way to employ out of work artists in their craft and to create art that might lift the spirits of a community beaten down by economic crisis. As a result, about 17,000 sculptures and 2,500 murals were created by artists and displayed in public spaces nationwide including Philip Guston as one of the participating artists.