

WORK AND PLAY

PHILIP GUSTON (1913-1980) 1939-40, SYNTHETIC RESIN EMULSION ON GESO 5.9 X 40 FT.

The **Work and Play** mural was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration in 1938 to be displayed at the Jacob A. Riis Settlement House Community Center in Long Island City, Queens (figure 1) The mural depicts scenes from the community as observed by Philip Guston. Families, construction workers, musicians and other prevalent figures work and struggle against a minimalist backdrop, as is a recurring theme in Guston's murals.

Guston endured several interruptions during the painting process of the mural. Work was paused when the artist was commissioned again by the WPA to paint a mural for the 1939 New York World's Fair, to be displayed at the Works Progress Administration Building (figure 2). Guston quickly resumed work on **Work and Play**, however another delay would soon come.

"The Federal Art Project was my training ground. I feel very strongly about this. We were all poor, or most of us, and to have the time and opportunity to continue working — I was in my twenties, which is the important period, the crucial period for the young painter — this was most important and figures significantly in my own development. The project kept me alive and working — it was my education. I have two thoughts. That practically all the best painters of my generation developed on the New Deal projects such as Pollock, deKooning, Brooks, Greene and Baziotes. I could go on and on. My second thought is the reason it was good was because it had a broad base due to the economic situation we were in — the Depression — and all kinds of art and styles, plus all degrees of talent were employed. Everybody was given an opportunity to prove himself. The artists I mentioned, who have come such a long way, are proof of this."

— Philip Guston Interview, January 29, 1965. Conducted by Joseph Trovato for the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Art's Oral History project.

While Guston's style changed over the years, traces of his earlier work can be noted in **Work and Play**. The image of a group of children fighting is taken from an earlier painting **Gladiators**, 1940 (figure 3). **Work and Play** echoes the social realist style of the Mexican muralist movement. Led by prominent artists such as Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), the movement sought to promote social and political messages through painting. It's no surprise that the politically engaged artist Philip Guston, would emulate the social realist style which commonly consists of simple pictorial elements, muted colors, and dynamic and layered compositions that are embedded with symbolism — exposing hardship and socio-political conditions of the working class.

In the early 1960's a commercial sign painter was commissioned to restore the aging **Work and Play** mural. After work was completed, Guston claimed the piece was no longer his, as the restorer greatly changed the design and style of the mural. For instance, art dealer and friend of Guston's, David McKee, claims the original painting depicted a "Renaissance solemnity" but the restored version has "sweet and syrupy" faces. In 2011, the mural was once again restored with the hope to bring back the essence of Guston's original work (figure 4). The project was completed by New York School of Visual Arts alumnus Joseph F. Tiedemann, with royal backing by Princess Mary of Denmark.



(Figure 1) Philip Guston, On-Site at the Jacob A. Riis Settlement House Community Center in Long Island City, Queens, 1940 Jul. 29, Shalat, photographer. Credit: WPA Federal Art Project.



(Figure 2) Philip Guston, NY World's Fair 1939, 1939 Feb. 15, Robbins, David, photographer. Image Credit: WPA Federal Art Project.



(Figure 3) Philip Guston, *Gladiators*, 1940, oil and pencil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



(Figure 4) SVA alumnus Joseph F. Tiedemann working in the process of restoring the mural back to Guston's vibrant colors. 2011. Image Credit: School of Visual Arts, NY.