Elizabeth Olds (1897 - 1991)
*Miner Joe*, c. 1938
Lithograph
1943.730

The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through; and they would be eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government’s cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve.

George Biddle, in a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, May 9, 1933

With the stock market crash of October 1929, America began its descent into the Great Depression. In the decade that followed, American painters and printmakers set forth in images the fears and frustrations of a broken nation. Artists as a group had been extremely hard hit; by 1940, as few as 150 American artists earned more than $2000 a year from the sale of their work. When President Roosevelt took office in 1932, he instituted a series of federally sponsored work programs for the unemployed as a means of sparking the economy and restoring the self-respect of American workers. In 1933, Roosevelt received a letter from his former classmate, the artist George Biddle, praising the social significance of state-sponsored murals in Mexico and encouraging the president to extend his own work relief programs to artists. Reportedly, it was
Biddle's letter that motivated the largest federally sponsored art project in American history -- known as the Public Work of Art Project (PWAP) from 1934 to 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Federal Art Program (WPA/FAP) between 1936 and 1939, and the Works Projects Administration of the Federal Works Agency (WPA/FWA) from 1939 to 1943.

The WPA/FAP workshops were established in major U.S. cities by 1935. Once accepted into the program, visual artists were assigned to one or more of the various divisions, which included mural and easel painting, graphics, sculpture, and education. Prints, paintings, and sculptures produced in the WPA workshops were placed in schools, hospitals, courthouses, jails, colleges, and housing projects; WPA murals still decorate many schools, post offices, libraries, and other public buildings. While the quality and particularly the content of the WPA mural commissions had to meet the approval of the Treasury Department, the easel and graphics divisions retained a fairly free hand as to the style and type of subjects that an artist could explore. The graphics division, in particular, placed a high value on experimentation; the development of serigraphy, or color silkscreen, was one outcome of this openness to experimentation.

WPA prints were intended for a broad public. As a result, their imagery was both socially conscious and easy to "read". Strongly influenced by the broad, symbolic figures of the Mexican muralists praised by Biddle, WPA prints are often described as "Social Realism." Social Realism addressed traditional themes in the American graphic arts, such as the city, the street scene, and the
landscape, in a very different way than these subjects had been dealt with before. WPA prints addressed the theme of the worker and the inequities suffered by the working class with poignancy and compassion. Just as the public sponsorship of the WPA/FAP engendered a greater sense of "belonging" to society for many artists, the public structure of the program also eliminated long-standing barriers of prejudice in the arts. Females, immigrants, and black artists were not faced with the obstacles usually presented by the art market, and were able to experiment and contribute to the forum of public art. One of the most innovative and focused WPA/FAP female artists was Elizabeth Olds.

Elizabeth Olds' commitment to art and to art as a vehicle for social change was apparent at an early age. In the early 1920s, she studied at the New York Art Students' League with George Luks, a member of the Ashcan School who painted the gritty realities of modern urban life (see Roof, Summer Night, slide 13). Olds credited Luks with developing her artistic sensibilities as well as her interest in socially relevant themes. In 1926, she received the first Guggenheim Fellowship to be awarded to a woman for work and study abroad; she traveled in Europe for a period of three years, visiting great museums and observing the peasants who inhabited the countryside. In 1932, Olds viewed the murals by Mexican muralist Jose Clemente Orozco at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, reconfirming her commitment to creating art about and for the common man and worker.
Olds became a member of the year-long PWAP pilot program in Omaha in 1934 and produced a set of ten black-and-white lithographs depicting various jobs involved in the city’s meat-packing factories. Dressed in a white work apron and rubber boots, Olds first sketched the workers out on the "killing floor." It was a subject that she found worthy of her talent. *The Stockyard Series*, as the set is called, received national recognition. Olds' imagery of the working class became popular with the leftist movement of the 1930s, and many of her pictures appeared in issues of the radical journal *New Masses*.

In 1935, the artist returned to New York and, as a member of the WPA/FAP's graphic division, spent the next several years exploring the subjects of miners and steel workers. Both large groups of workers were fighting for unionization, and Olds worked as a reporter at large, sketching the workers in their job settings and at union meetings. *Miner Joe* was produced as both a silkscreen and a lithograph, two printing processes which Olds helped both to develop and popularize. (She was one of the first artists to transform silkscreening from a commercial process into an expressive fine art medium; furthermore, she was a pioneer in using lithography as an expressive, artistic medium rather than as a mechanical process for reproducing paintings.) Influenced by the Mexican muralists, Olds created *Miner Joe* with strong, geometric shapes, bold lines, and aggressive areas of light and shadow. The light plays over the dirt and grime on the miner's face, accentuating his fatigue and deprivation of fresh air and sunshine in the dark, cramped, and sooty mining shafts.
The early 1940s marked the beginning of World War II and the
wringling of federal interest and funding for art projects. Graphic
divisions shifted their focus to map making and war posters, and by
1943 the WPA/FAP workshops were closed. Elizabeth Olds turned to
teaching, writing, and illustrating children’s books. After the war, all
federal funding for the arts was discontinued until the National
Endowments for the Arts and Humanities were established under the
administration of President John F. Kennedy.  

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Have students research the WPA/FAP -- its origins, its scope, and
its impact. Assign them the project of learning about any WPA/FAP
murals that might exist in buildings in their community (and
possibly in their own schools).

Federal funding for the arts is now provided by the NEA. Have
students learn about the NEA’s beginning, purpose, and contributions
to the arts in the United States.

2. Elizabeth Olds was very influenced by the Mexican muralists
Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco. Have students research these
two artists and their work, noting similarities in philosophy and style
to Olds’ work.
3. Olds' *Miner Joe* and Louis Lozowick's *Tank #2* (slide 15) are both lithographs. Have students compare the two works of art; how has each artist handled the medium and the process? What similarities and differences can students notice?

4. See "Realism and Idealism" and "Printmaking Processes" in the "Sample Lessons" section.