

William D. White: Artistic Truth and the Great Depression

By Nancy Carol Willis

William D. White came of age, artistically speaking, around 1920 following two years of study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia (1914-1917) and a six-month tour of service with the Engineer Corps at the end of World War I. He was likely introduced as an illustrator to the Hercules Powder Company in Wilmington, Delaware around 1922 by Brandywine School of Art illustrator, Gayle Porter Hoskins, with whom White briefly studied. From 1922 through 1929, White created roughly 200 illustrations for the *Hercules Mixer* and *The Explosives Engineer* magazines. More importantly, roughly half of these images were lucrative oil painting commissions.

With the onset of the Great Depression in 1930, Hercules ceased commissioning oil paintings in favor of less expensive pencil and ink drawings, two-color covers, and duotones. By 1933, roughly one-third of the non-farming workforce was unemployed, and many more, including William D. White, were underemployed. Newly-elected president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, launched his New Deal, a plan to shore up the banking industry, stimulate the economy, and put people to work. One program, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), not only funded construction projects such as roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals, but also allocated some of its dollars for art.

The idea for a federal arts program came from George Biddle, a former classmate of Roosevelt who had studied painting with Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. He suggested employing muralists to decorate the newly constructed federal buildings. In December of 1933 lawyer and painter, Edward Bruce, was hired to lead the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP). In a press release dated December 11, 1933, Bruce stated that approval of the PWAP *“has recognized that the artist, like the laborer, capitalist, and office worker, eats, drinks, has a family, and pays rent, thus contradicting the old superstition that the painter and sculptor live in attics and exist on inspiration.”*



Children in the Tree, 1934, 34x30, oil on canvas

On January 5, 1934 William D. White was chosen as one of five Delaware artists hired under the Public Works of Art Project for a weekly salary of \$42.50. White completed mural projects for the Delaware State Hospital and the Harlan School in Wilmington. He created various drawings and easel paintings, including the masterfully-rendered and charming visual narrative, *Children in the Tree*, which the PWAP placed on permanent loan with the Wilmington Society of Fine Arts (now the Delaware Art Museum). This painting is currently on display in the Middleton Study of historic state-owned Buena Vista.

William D. White also created three paintings of Civil Works Administration laborers constructing the Wilmington Water Works building. The paintings appear quickly executed with thinly-applied paint and loose brush strokes – as if White painted them on location in the snow. One painting was sent to Washington D.C., and the other two were hung in the Water Works building upon its completion in 1935. These latter two paintings were re-discovered in 2016 and are depicted below. The paintings may have been planned as a triptych, as the horizon line continues from one painting to the next, and only the painting on the right is signed.



Two of three 1934 PWAP paintings depicting Civil Works Administration laborers.

The Public Works of Art Project lasted a mere six months, but in that time 3,671 artists nationwide produced roughly 15,000 works of art. The program was replaced by several others which ran concurrently. Well-known Delaware artists including Edward L. Loper, Walter Pyle Jr., and Edward L. Grant, were employed under the Federal Arts Project (FAP). From 1937 to 1941 William D. White worked 4,590 hours and earned \$8,200 on various projects for FAP. Although no record was kept of specific projects completed, one newspaper article cites White's paintings and drawings of Wilmington's east side as good examples of the artist relating his art to community life.

White also submitted mural designs for the Section of Fine Arts Forty-eight States Competition to decorate one post office in each of the 48 states plus 16 bonus murals. The Section received

1,475 entries for 64 commissions. Although William D. White did not win one of these commissions, he was selected based on the strength of his designs to decorate the new Dover Post Office through the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). White was the only Delaware master artist to receive a TRAP commission.



Harvest, 1936, oil on canvas applied to wall, Dover Post Office, now owned by Wesley United Methodist

William D. White's 1936 five-panel post office mural titled, *Harvest, Spring, and Summer*, depicts the farming of vegetable crops in central Delaware. *Harvest* (pictured above), measures nine feet high by 13 feet wide. The mural, *Spring*, was destroyed in a renovation project in 1967.

These murals embody the subjects and themes of American Scene painting as defined by the New Deal art programs. Artists were encouraged to create realistic paintings that depicted the industry, commerce, agriculture, history, and recreational events of the artists' native land. Artworks were to be optimistic and apolitical, creating a distinctly different style from European modernist art.

William D. White portrayed the farmers as statuesque, Paul Bunyan-type figures, with oversized hands that work the earth to put



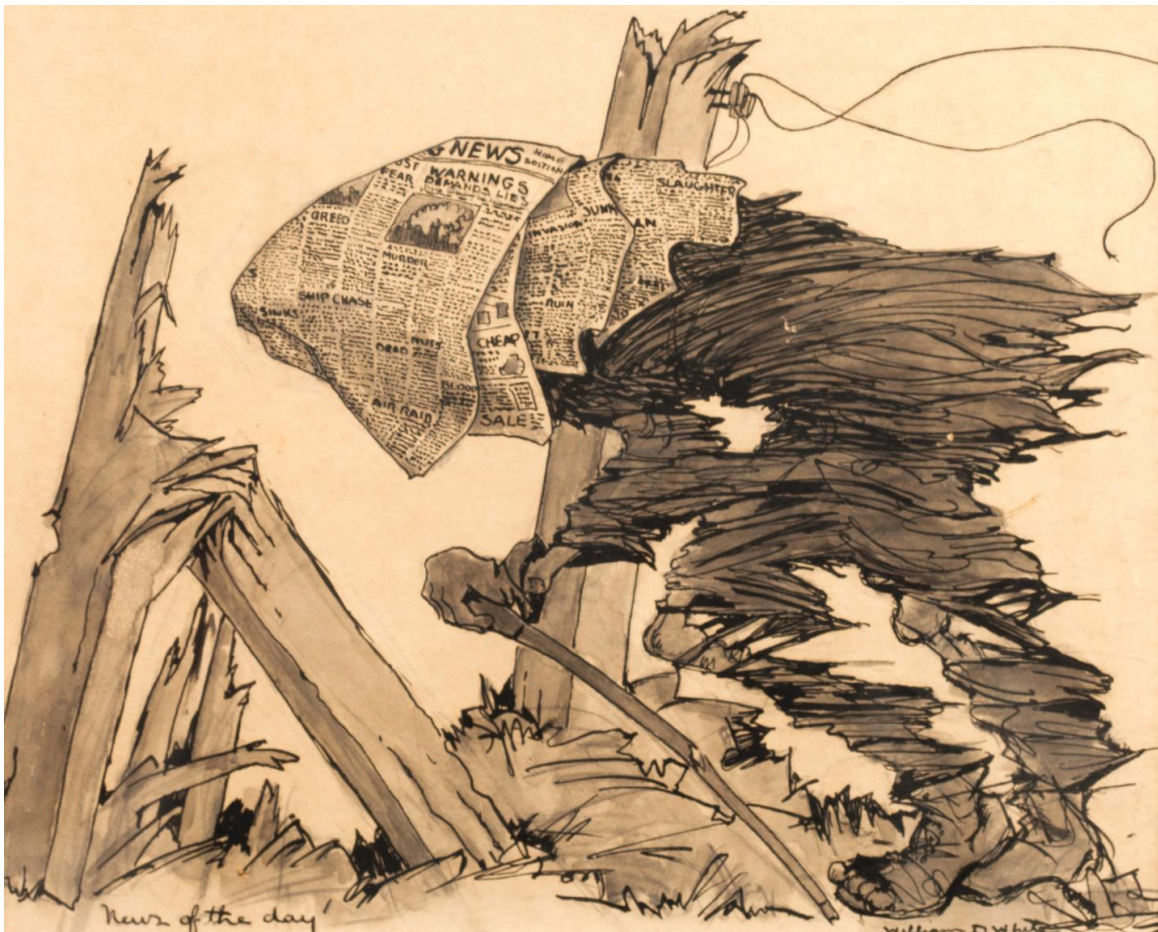
Summer, 1936, 8 x 9 feet, (old) Dover Post Office

food on the table. His visual wit is also evident as a straight-faced farmer dumps a basket of potatoes over the postmaster's door. White considered the murals to be his best work to date.

It's difficult to measure the impact of the New Deal art programs on the average American family. In 1930 only 40% of American homes had telephones and fewer than 50% of households owned a car. Very few people had access to art museums located in large cities. Nationally acclaimed artists such as Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, and John Steuart Curry, along with the best regional artists like William D. White, were hired to decorate statehouses, court buildings, and post offices, thus bringing quality artwork to families across America. American Scene painting stands today as the closest the United States has ever come to imposing an official artistic style.

William D. White's Unique Artistic Voice

In response to the economic uncertainty of the Great Depression era, a faction of artists called Social Realists arose. Artists including Reginald Marsh and Diego Rivera sought to focus attention on social problems through their paintings and murals. William D. White had more to say about poverty, unemployment, and class discrimination than can be gleaned from his idyllic farming murals or a painting of children playing in an apple tree. In the 1930s he began creating satirical pencil and ink cartoons. In contrast to the often drab, sad images of the Social Realists, White employed exaggeration and humor to mock society's inability to relieve suffering.



News of the Day, c1935 pencil & ink on paper, 11x8.5

Consistent themes and imagery characterized White's brand of social satire. He depicted apocalyptic scenes devoid of background context, where all of the symbols of society – homes, government buildings, churches, and schools – lay in ruin. He focuses our attention on the absurd plight of his characters. Consider *News of the Day*, for example. White draws a skeletal figure dressed in rags and leaning on a cracked cane. His body is bent into a gale force wind and his head is shrouded by a newspaper. The figure presses forward toward what, exactly, while the newspaper headlines shout “warnings, lies, murder, slaughter, fear, greed, air raid, ship chase, dead, ruin, and nuts.”



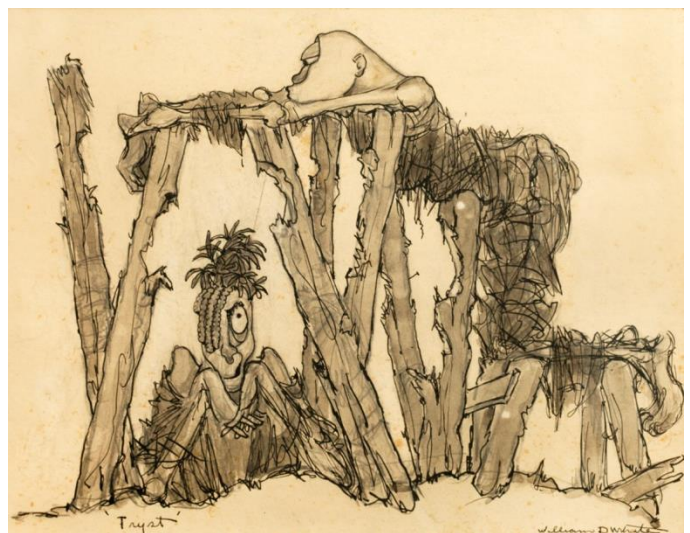
You Bit Me, c1935, pencil and ink on paper



By the Aggies, c1935, pencil and ink on paper



1776, c1935, pencil and ink on paper



Tryst, c1935, pencil and ink on paper

Other drawings show figures bound with ropes, unable to move from their current places or circumstances. In *You Bit Me*, White may be commenting on President Roosevelt's famous fireside chat, where he promised that “in a land of vast resources no one should be permitted to starve.” Meanwhile, millions of people nationwide relied upon soup kitchens sponsored by charitable organizations. In an overtly political cartoon titled *1776*, two tightly-bound characters parody Archibald M. Willard's patriotic *Yankee Doodle 1776*, where fife and drum players lead

the charge for independence from tyranny. These images seem to echo the nation's fear surrounding an inevitable second world war.

William D. White also spoke about the human condition, both individually and relationally. These images embraced an irony that despite the unprecedented expenditures of the New Deal programs, prospects for prosperity remained dim. To underscore this sense of futility, White rendered a brutish figure grasping the beard of a shoeless man, a gesture clarified by the title, *By the Aggies*. In *Tryst* a demure temptress lures a bony, apathetic man to her lair.

In September of 1940 the Wilmington Society of Fine Arts sponsored an exhibition titled, "Murals, Paintings, Drawings: Delaware WPA Art Project." The exhibit was held in the recently opened Art Center on Bancroft Parkway (now the Delaware Art Museum). Eleven of William D. White's satirical cartoons were displayed in this fitting conclusion to the Federal Arts Project in Delaware. He even sold a few of these drawings to the Hercules Powder Company, as in the 1944 example, *These are the Time Wasters*.

William D White continued drawing his cartoon figures for the rest of his life. Soon after the 1940 WPA art exhibition, White's mother died and his large family home in the Penny Hill area of north Wilmington burned to the ground. White built a primitive, one-room structure on the site out of wood and stucco. He didn't bother wiring for electricity. In effect, White became one of his own cartoon figures, often depicting himself as a rogue in *May I Come In?* (below left) or a clown, (below right) dancing with a child.

