



# Art created during Depression era on display at USD

**By Travis Gulbrandson**  
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On Wednesday, the John A. Day Gallery at the University of South Dakota became the temporary home to several dozen pieces from one of the most unique eras in American art.

"Dust, Metal and Stone: The Graphic Arts of the 1930s" features more than 60 original intaglio and lithographic prints created by Regionalist and Realist American artists during the 1930s.

Alison Erasmus, director of USD Art Galleries, said the show's title is a reference to the Graphic Arts Division of the Federal Arts Project (FAP), a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

"That started in 1935, and a lot of the artists who are represented in 'Dust, Metal and Stone' worked for the FAP," Erasmus said. "It was mostly printmakers in the Graphic Arts Division.

"This was a really unique time in the nation's history, when the federal government funded creative work in a really novel way," she said. "They were doing it as a measure to relieve unemployment for artists, so that was a core purpose. There was just a lot of rich history with these prints, a lot of

interesting names, a lot of famous names, a lot of the regionalists in the area."

The prints are "original" in that they were signed by their respective artists and taken from a limited edition of prints.

They were culled from USD's collection of approximately 300 that were made by the Associated American Artists Company, which sought to "democratize" fine art through the sale of affordable, original prints by American artists such as Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry.

"A lot of these artists made prints, but they were also muralists, so they gained a certain amount of notoriety," Erasmus said. "The purpose of the Associated American Artists Company, which is where these prints came from, was to support well-known artists at that time, artists who had a name."

When the company started in 1934, the prints retailed for \$5 each, Erasmus said.

"Obviously, these are not prints that were funded by the federal government," she said. "Otherwise they would not belong to us. But they did initially come from the Associated Artists Company. They had a



"Dust, Metal and Stone: The Graphic Arts of the 1930s" will be on display in the John A. Day Gallery at the University of South Dakota through Sept. 20.

(Courtesy photo)

very similar vision to the FAP in that they wanted to democratize art. They wanted art to be affordable. They wanted big names to catch people's attention, and they would think, 'Oh, wow, only \$5 for a Thomas Hart Benton print.'"

The theory of "democratizing" art also opened up new avenues for women artists like Peggy Bacon and Marion Greenwood.

"They were hired by the FAP, as well," Erasmus said. "So, there was some leveling of the playing field in that sense."

The prints now on display in the Day Gallery have not been seen in "a couple of decades," the last time being a statewide tour, Erasmus said.

"They are quite a gem," she said. "They had been in older frames when (they) initially traveled around the state, so they all needed to be reframed, and they all needed to be organized."

That task fell to Jennifer Padgett, a graduate student studying printmaking who proposed taking an independent study in collections management and exhibit curating.

"It's kind of like a hands-on art history course, because she was actually working hands-on with these prints, analyzing them, trying to figure out what the processes were," Erasmus said. "We had some documentation, but really there's a lot of research that can be done when you are in direct contact with the objects, and so she had a full semester of researching the prints, learning more about the artists who made them, and also the printmaking techniques, and as a printmaker she was very qualified for that. She was very good at adding to our collection information."

It would not have been possible to put all 300 prints on display in the gallery, so they were grouped together according to theme.

"We wanted to talk about the Dust Bowl, but also the agrarian theme," Erasmus said. "It really is pronounced. It probably is the bulk of the prints. We have few prints that depict subject matter of urban life. It's mostly the plight of the farmer."

Even so, some of the

work could be considered propaganda, Erasmus said.

"This is government-funded artwork, and so it's really up to the viewer to decide if they want to buy that this is the true Americana," she said. "What I would argue is that there are certainly myths in this. There's the myth of the heroic laborer, there's the myth of agrarian paradise.

"Especially during the Dust Bowl, this was not really the case," she said. "There was a lot of unemployment, and we had stripped the earth's surface and created the Dust Bowl with our over-tilling."

Erasmus said the artists used their work to honor the American farmer, as well as to argue

for a return to self-sufficiency, which they saw as viable through small-scale agriculture.

"I think there is a lot of idealism there that will speak to regional audiences," she said. "It's so pertinent to the history of South Dakota and the history of this region. ...

"This exhibition is really a part of our heritage," she said.

"Dust, Metal and Stone" will be on display through Sept. 20.

The John A Day Gallery is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Weekend visits may be arranged only by special appointment.

For more information, call University Art Galleries at 677-3177.

There will be an open house for at the I.O.O.F. Hall, 1224 E Cherry St. Vermillion, SD 57069

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