

Media Contact:

Mary Roberts
(414) 839-4175
mroberts@buzzmonkeyspr.com

Jewish Museum Milwaukee opens new exhibit June 17

Nearly 70 pieces showcase Great Depression artwork; Document plight of everyday workers

MILWAUKEE, WI – June 8, 2021 – Jewish Museum Milwaukee (JMM) launches its newest exhibit, *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime: Jewish Artists of the WPA* on Thursday, June 17. *Brother Can You Spare a Dime* explores the life of the everyday worker, and their importance to the national infrastructure, through artwork created during the Great Depression by diverse artists, many of them Jewish, through the establishment of the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Art Project. The exhibit features nearly 70 prints, oil paintings and sculptures and runs through September 5.

“In times of crisis, how we represent ourselves – documenting and reflecting our lives and experiences - is a litmus test for our society. FDR’s New Deal art programs engaged artists across America and put them to work making public art to adorn civic and community spaces with the goal of lifting communal spirits during one of the most devastating times in US history, while providing wages for those unemployed artists. The programs also aimed to create a broader public appreciation and connection to the arts.” said Molly Dubin, Jewish Museum Milwaukee curator.

The Federal Art Project was the visual arts arm of the WPA which ran between 1935 and 1943. The program employed 10,000 artists to create murals, paintings, sculpture, photography, graphic art, theater sets and posters. These artists created a vast body of public art to adorn civic and community spaces including libraries, post offices and federal buildings, some of which adorn our public spaces to this day. While one of the project’s goals was to lift communal spirits, the somber mood of the country and the grit necessary to navigate the arduous conditions became innately depicted topics of the works.

Says Dubin, “The struggles and hopes depicted in these works have parallels to current events and circumstances. With unemployment rates during the pandemic matching Depression-era levels our society is struggling with familiar social and economic inequity, cultural and racial divides and anti-immigration sentiments. Visual expression of the plight of the everyday worker is at the heart of this artworks’ purpose.”

Artists of disparate beliefs and backgrounds participated in the WPA. Regionalism assisted in identifying an artist's provenance - whether an urban backdrop depicting a neglected New York tenement, rustic midwestern farms, boats docked at coastal ports, or laborers hard at work in sundry settings. Featuring work by Jewish artists in local and regional collections, the exhibit explores individual and collective contributions and their WPA-Federal Art Project legacies.

Programming highlights include:

- **Virtual Opening Preview** – *Wednesday, June 16, 7 p.m.* WPA exhibit preview with talk by a Library of Congress curator highlighting the collection of an ethnomusicologist who captured distinctly American Music including legendary blues musician Lead Belly. Entertainment by award winning Blues musician Fruteland Jackson performing some of Lead Belly's most famous songs including 'Good Night Irene' and 'The Midnight Special'.
- **We Are America: The Cultural Programs of the Great Depression** – *Thursday, July 15, 7 p.m.* Betsy Pease, Assistant Professor of History, at Concordia University discusses the broader context of the New Deal and Depression-era culture, highlighting art, music, writers and more.
- **How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America**. *Tuesday, July 27, 7 p.m.* As part of the WPA, the Federal Writers' Project interviewed formerly enslaved people, marking the first major collection of oral histories about slavery in America. Author Clint Smith discusses his debut work of nonfiction.
- **Wall to Wall: How Mural Art is Changing Milwaukee's Cityscape** *Tuesday, August 24, 7 p.m.* Stacey Williams-Ng, founder of Black Cat Alley, moderates a panel discussion featuring three prominent local mural artists who are telling the story of our city through their artwork.
- For a complete list of programs, tickets and more information on the new exhibit visit www.jewishmuseummilwaukee.org. Connect with Jewish Museum Milwaukee on Facebook and Instagram @JewishMuseumMilwaukee and on Twitter @JewishMuseumMKE.

About the Jewish Museum Milwaukee

The Jewish Museum Milwaukee is dedicated to preserving and presenting the history of the Jewish people in southeastern Wisconsin and celebrating the continuum of Jewish heritage and culture. The history of American Jews is rooted in thousands of years of searching for freedom and equality. The museum builds bridges between diverse groups of people through shared difficult histories and uses historical events and art to explore contemporary topics.

###