



Episode 710, Story 1: WPA Mural Studies

Elyse: Our first story searches for connections between a collection of unusual paintings and the largest job creation program in our nation's history. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt takes the oath of office in 1933, 15 million Americans are unemployed – 25% of the workforce idled by the Great Depression. Within his first one hundred days Roosevelt launches bold reforms.

President Roosevelt: I pledge myself...to a New Deal for the American people.

Elyse: FDR's New Deal work programs will put more than 8 million back to work. And not everyone is laying roads and mixing cement – the program also employs over 40,000 in various arts projects. This unprecedented harnessing of artistic talent will create thousands of paintings, sculptures and murals for public buildings across the country. But today, nearly a third of this artwork is missing – what happened to these important pieces of our nation's history? Evelyn Cook of Molalla, Oregon, has inherited some paintings that may be part of this lost work.

Evelyn: You know, I've seen my aunt's artwork all my life. And now I wonder if there are others out there being inspired by her work as well? Hi, Elyse! Welcome!

Elyse: Thank you, thank you. Wow. Look at these! Wow, they're incredible. Now who's the artist?

Evelyn: It was my aunt, Thelma Johnson Streat. And we think that they were done in the early 1940's.

Elyse: And can you tell me a little bit about her?



Evelyn: From the time I was a little child my mom told us we had this famous aunt, who was a famous artist, and so whenever she'd come to town we'd have these big, you know, family get togethers and that's me and that's my aunt Thelma. She was just bigger than life, very flamboyant.

Elyse: This says, Negroes worked in packing houses as early as 1875. Men were victims of exploitation. And then over here, for many years this was the Negro woman. It seems like these are about the role of the African American in the workplace. Was she always political?

Evelyn: No these are very different from her other paintings.

Elyse: Evelyn says her most of her aunt's work was more abstract. What else can you tell me about these paintings?

Evelyn: Well, really not a lot. We think she may have been an artist in the WPA program under FDR.

Elyse: The Works Project Administration was a Franklin Roosevelt-era program to help the unemployed, including thousands of artists. Evelyn has long been curious whether her aunt's paintings were the starting point for something bigger.

Evelyn: We'd like to find out if they were sketches for a larger mural project and if they were ever painted. And if so, where are they?



Elyse: For someone who's been dealing with art for my entire professional career, this is gonna be one fascinating investigation. In my work as an appraiser and auctioneer I've seen a lot of 19th and 20th century American art, but I've not studied work commissioned by the WPA. The size of these says that they could have been studies for murals. I mean, this one alone looks like it's over six feet long. And, the styles are different on all of these, so maybe it was a multiyear project? The themes of labor and race occur again and again in the work. Thelma's making a pretty bold statement. It's quite possible these were created as part of the Works Project Administration. As the Great Depression worsened, FDR took an unprecedented step. In 1935 at the suggestion of George Biddle, a former prep school friend turned artist, Roosevelt created a subdivision of the WPA to help artists. The grandly named Federal Project Number One had several subsections helping thousands of artists across different fields. For the first time in our history, artists, writers, dancers and actors were given a small stipend; enough so that they could devote full time to their creativity. The Federal Music Project staged public concerts. Graphic artists created posters with public service messages, writers published tour books celebrating every state, and Federal Theater companies toured the country. But the muralists were the most visible part of these New Deal art programs, often working as the public looked on. WPA murals went up in all kinds of public buildings, including libraries, schools, hospitals, and courthouses. Was Thelma Johnson Streat part of that program? There's not a lot written about her, but I can piece together some of her story from these articles. Thelma was born in 1911 in Yakima, Washington. At age 18 her portrait titled "The Priest" won an award in a New York exhibition of African American artists. In 1942, Alfred Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, personally selected her painting, the rabbit man, for MOMA's permanent collection.

Thelma became the first African American woman to have her work acquired by the museum. But her work was not always well received. This is from the Oklahoma City's *Black Dispatch*,



December 4th, 1943. And listen to what it says. “Thelma Johnson Streat’s *Death of a Black Sailor* is attracting attention.” According to the news accounts, she was twice threatened by the Ku Klux Klan when he showed her work at an exhibition in Hollywood. But I can’t find anything about her working on murals for the WPA. I’m in Chicago to meet someone who knows all about finding and restoring lost WPA-era art. Heather Becker is the head of the Chicago Conservation Center – one of the leading art conservation laboratories in the country. I have these paintings. They’re by an artist named Thelma Johnson Streat. To me they look like they could be studies for murals. Have you ever seen anything like this before?

Heather: No, I haven’t. But, this actually looks like a mural sketch. If you look at the scale it’s as though it reads as a narrative. Which is very common with mural art.

Elyse: Heather says many WPA artists created work that paid tribute to the grandeur of the nation and celebrated the American worker. Their artwork helped raise the spirits of a country suffering through the Great Depression.

Heather: The reason why mural art was so profoundly effective, during the WPA, was because the audience was starting to see themselves in the imagery. And if they are allowed to be put back to work and be good at what they do, this country will become strong again.

Elyse: How might an African American artist, who was a woman with very strong political views, fit into this program? Heather says there would certainly have been a place for Thelma’s bold political themes in the Federal Arts Project. Some works created by WPA artists were so idealistic and politically charged that many conservatives objected.



Heather: There was a lot of people who fought against these programs and thought that there shouldn't be government funding for this kind of thing.

Elyse: The muralists at San Francisco's Coit Tower came under fire in 1934 for including images of the communist party's newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. One mural featured a poor family panning for gold as a rich family looks on. Outrage over the murals kept Coit Tower closed for weeks. Heather says there is another reason this art might have been created as part of the WPA.

Heather: This is actually an executive order, "workers who are qualified by training and experience to be assigned to work projects shall not be discriminated against on any grounds whatsoever." So, actually, it was a great time for African Americans and women to be employed by the WPA.

Elyse: Is there any way to tell if Thelma's paintings were ever made into murals? Heather explains finding lost murals can be tough. Of the 2500 murals created during the WPA period, at least a quarter of have been lost. Many of the murals she located in Chicago had been simply painted over. But she has an idea.

Heather: I would try the GSA, which is the General Service Administration, which is actually the owner of all of these works of art.

Elyse: Heather has found that the GSA's records on the WPA are far from complete, but they may be able to tell me if Thelma worked in the Federal program. I'm on the General Services Administration website, and this is interesting. Evelyn was right. Her aunt did work for the WPA.



The GSA record contains five pieces of Thelma's artwork created for the Federal Art Project. One went to Minnesota, one to Portland, and three are in San Francisco. But the titles don't match any of the mural sketches I'm investigating, and neither do the materials or dimensions. Judy Bullington is a Professor of Art History at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. She's been studying the work of Thelma Johnson Streat for the past 10 years. Judy says while Thelma isn't widely known today, in the 1930s and 40s she achieved critical acclaim.

Judy: She was collected by Eleanor Roosevelt, Diego Rivera, by Roland Hayes, by Paulette Goddard, by Charlie Chaplin.

Elyse: I have these paintings. And I think they're studies for murals. Judy's not surprised to see the themes of labor and race. She says Thelma's work became more political in the late 1930s.

Judy: It was during this time in San Francisco that Thelma met Diego Rivera. And this was gonna have an influence on her.

Elyse: Diego Rivera was one of the leaders of the Mexican Mural Movement of the 1920s. A member of the Communist party, he created popular political murals throughout Mexico that often included attacks on the ruling class, the church and capitalism. Dozens of US artists visited Mexico in the 30s to study with Rivera. One of Rivera's students was George Biddle, the childhood friend of FDR who had proposed the New Deal art programs. Now, are you aware of any murals that might exist of hers? I understand that a lot of murals were destroyed.



Judy: Yes. That is, uh, true. But, um, a lot of the murals were not necessarily done in the true Fresco style. What we're discovering is that there were a lot of works that were painted on canvas.

Elyse: Judy explains that in the Fresco style, murals are painted directly onto wet plaster, while canvas murals are painted onto canvas attached to the wall.

Judy: So, you know, there's a possibility that some of Thelma Johnson Streat's murals might be rolled up in a basement somewhere.

Elyse: I'm at City College of San Francisco, meeting historian Will Maynez. The school is home to the largest continuous Rivera mural. Just incredible. It's massive. Now what exactly is it?

Will: Well, this is a Fresco mural painted by Diego Rivera in 1940.

Elyse: And what's the name of it?

Will: We call it Pan American Unity for short. But he called it the artistic expression of the north and of the south on this continent.

Elyse: Well, what does that mean?

Will: Well, he was promoting a joining of all the countries north and south on this continent – Canada, Mexico, the United States. He's got all the cultural arts of the Americas, astronomy, sculpture, architecture. And, on this side of the mural, he's talking about the mechanistic arts of



the United States, which he just loved our machines. And he joins them together, and this will be the emblem of this new fusion that he wants north and south.

Elyse: Will says Rivera created the mural at the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition, a World's Fair held on Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay. The 23 ton mural took Rivera more than six months to create, working with dozens of assistants. Rivera's mural was part of an interactive exhibit, called art in action. The entire project was sponsored and paid for by the WPA.

Will: There was this whole area where sculptors were going, lithographers, weavers. And people would come in and watch all the stuff. But the...the main star was Diego Rivera.

Elyse: I want to show you these mural studies. They were done by an artist named Thelma Johnson Streat.

Will: I've never seen these before, but I have heard of the name Thelma Johnson Streat. I'm pretty sure that my research partner, Julia Bergman, has a file on her, over at our collection.

Julia: Here we have a letter written by Diego Rivera to Galka Shayer in Los Angeles. She was a German art dealer and collector. And I'll read. It says, "This is to introduce Mrs. Thelma Johnson Streat. Her work, in my opinion, is one of the more interesting manifestations in this country at present. It is extremely evolved and sophisticated enough to re-conquer the grace and purity of African and American Indian art."

Elyse: So Diego was really impressed with her.



Julia: Absolutely. Actually, this letter led to an exhibition of Thelma's work in Los Angeles shortly thereafter. It's very cool. He did not write these very often. Julia says she, too, has searched for Thelma's murals – and in her searching she discovered something interesting.

Judy: This is home movie footage that we acquired a couple of years ago. And it shows scenes from art in action. This is, live action of Rivera at work, and as the camera moves across to the left, we see revealed the image of a young woman.

Elyse: So wait. Is that Thelma!?

Julia: Well, we think it could be. Unfortunately, her face is in profile.

Elyse: Right.

Julia: We can't see for sure.

Elyse: So do you mean it's possible that Thelma could have helped create this mural?

Julia: Well, that is a very good question. And I have one more thing I can show you.

Elyse: Great. What Julia shows me next will certainly be of interest to Evelyn. First I want to thank you. It was a great investigation. And I checked with a lot of experts, and you were correct. Some of the paintings that you do have, most likely were used as studies for murals.

Evelyn: Oh, okay



Elyse: I tell Evelyn how Thelma did create artwork for the WPA. But, that I could find no surviving works of WPA art she created. So maybe someday Thelma's murals will surface. But, even though I couldn't find her murals, I did find something else.

Julia: Let me show you this file. This is an unpublished manuscript by Beatrice Judd Ryan, who was one of the organizers of art in action. And on page ninety-five, Beatrice wrote, "Rivera stands high up on the scaffold. His awkward bulk emphasized by the colored girl, Thelma Streat, beside him, tall and slim in her blue jeans. Art in action below has just come alive and the artists, like a hive of bees, are all at work."

Elyse: So she was there! She worked on the mural.

Julia: She was there, absolutely. And we have confirmation that she was one of the few assistants who actually was allowed to put paintbrush on the mural. Rivera had dozens of assistants. But they couldn't all paint. Thelma was one of the few.

Elyse: That seems like an honor for an artist like Rivera.

Julia: Thelma Johnson Streat was a very talented artist. And Rivera knew it.

Evelyn: So she actually worked with him on the WPA murals. That's awesome.

Elyse: And I have a present for you. This is a copy of a letter from Diego Rivera, talking about your aunt Thelma and what a great artist she is.



Evelyn: Oh, this is really special. As a child, I always felt she was a big deal. You know, bigger than life. And now, as an adult, I can see that that was really true, that she really was a big deal internationally. It's exciting. It makes us really feel proud that she was part of our family history.

Elyse: By 1943, as war time employment rose, the WPA Art Projects were finally disbanded. In its 8 year history the project created more than 2500 murals, 17,000 sculptures, 108,000 easel paintings and 240,000 art prints. It wasn't until 1965, 22 years later, that Congress again supported the arts with a dedicated agency. The National Endowment for the Arts was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, with a yearly budget of nearly three million dollars. Unlike the WPA arts projects, which were created primarily to promote relief for artists, the NEA's has as its mission to "foster the excellence, diversity, and vitality of the arts in the United States."