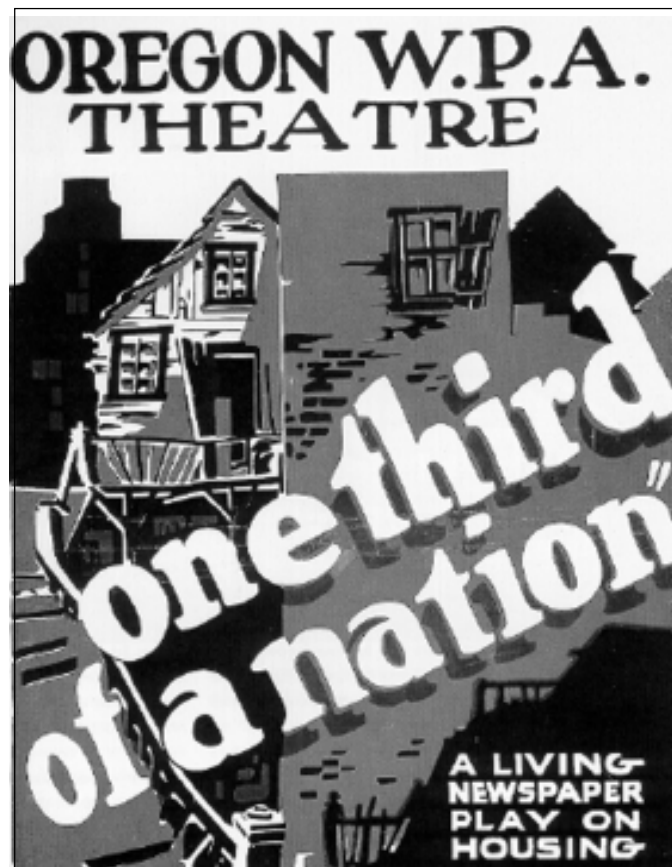


# THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE ARTS

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 8-12

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## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

And then the Depression came.” This familiar lament more than distinguishes one decade from another. Within its meaning are the images and realities of disaster: the crash of the stock market, the howl of the dust storms, the cry of the hungry, the silence of the shamed. Thousands of Americans watched their destinies evaporate. The horizon of prosperity looming “just around the corner” seemed to fade from view. While the Depression may have jolted many out of the American Dream, its pattern of unemployment, frustration, and despair was neither a universal nor identical condition.

Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal was the political response to the Great Depression. Establishing the foundation of the modern welfare state while preserving the capitalist system, the New Deal experimented with unprecedented activism in an attempt to relieve the social and economic dislocation experienced by “one-third of the nation.” Federal programs extended not only into American business, agriculture, labor, and the arts; but into people’s daily lives. Despite a mixed legacy with respect to recovery and reform, the political response under Roosevelt proved that economic crisis did not require Americans to abandon democracy. Moreover, American popular culture during the 1930s revealed that economic and social “hard times” did not cause an abandonment of imagination, humor, or fun.

The material in this unit is designed to impress upon students the varying effects of the Great Depression and New Deal on the lives of ordinary Americans. The unit’s focus is primarily (but not exclusively) on the people rather than the policies, especially their fears, uncertainties, resilience, commonality of suffering, and survival. Individual lessons ask students to make inferences and to develop historical perspectives based upon evidence. The New Deal’s documentary impulse and funding for the arts provide a unique opportunity for students to expand their skills in “reading” the visual and literary records of the 1930s. Still, it is important to note that the exercise of documenting the Great Depression gained momentum as the crisis wore on. What students see and read as records of life in the thirties tells only part of the story.

### II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit concerns artistic and political responses to the worst economic crisis in American history. These lessons fit into the context of a larger unit on the Great Depression. Teachers should introduce these lessons after examining the causes of the Great Depression. Students will then be offered not just an experience (however limited) of depression-era life, but historical antecedents for contemporary debates over the proper role of government in business, labor, agriculture, the arts, and individual’s lives.

### **III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY**

This unit is designed to correlate with Era 8: Standard 1B of the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). In seeking to “understand how American life changed during the 1930s” students will utilize materials and activities which provide opportunities to (a) “explain the effects of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl on American farm owners, tenants, and sharecroppers,” and (b) “explain the cultural life of the Depression years in art, literature, and music, and evaluate the government’s role in promoting artistic expression.”

This unit cannot provide all of the possible ways to understand how American life changed during the 1930s; nor all the ways the New Deal addressed the Great Depression. It does offer a variety of documentary source materials--plays, literature, public record, and writings--to enable students to analyze significant aspects of life in the 1930s and some New Deal responses. This unit also provides a variety of options enabling teachers and students to go beyond the documents provided and extend the lessons.

Lessons provide active learning strategies. Reading, writing, role playing, and creating visual exhibits are some of the activities which challenge students to think on a variety of levels utilizing different approaches for different learning styles.

### **IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES**

- To explore the effects of the Great Depression and New Deal on ordinary Americans.
- To understand how some aspects of American life changed during the 1930s.
- To explain aspects of the cultural life of the Depression years and debate the government’s role in promoting artistic expression.
- To identify cultural trends of the 1930s by analyzing the documentary expression in the arts.

### **V. LESSON PLANS**

1. Documentary Film—“The Plow that Broke the Plains”
2. Documenting the Migrant Experience
3. Film Study of the Grapes of Wrath
4. The New Deal’s Federal Theater Project

## **VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE ARTS**

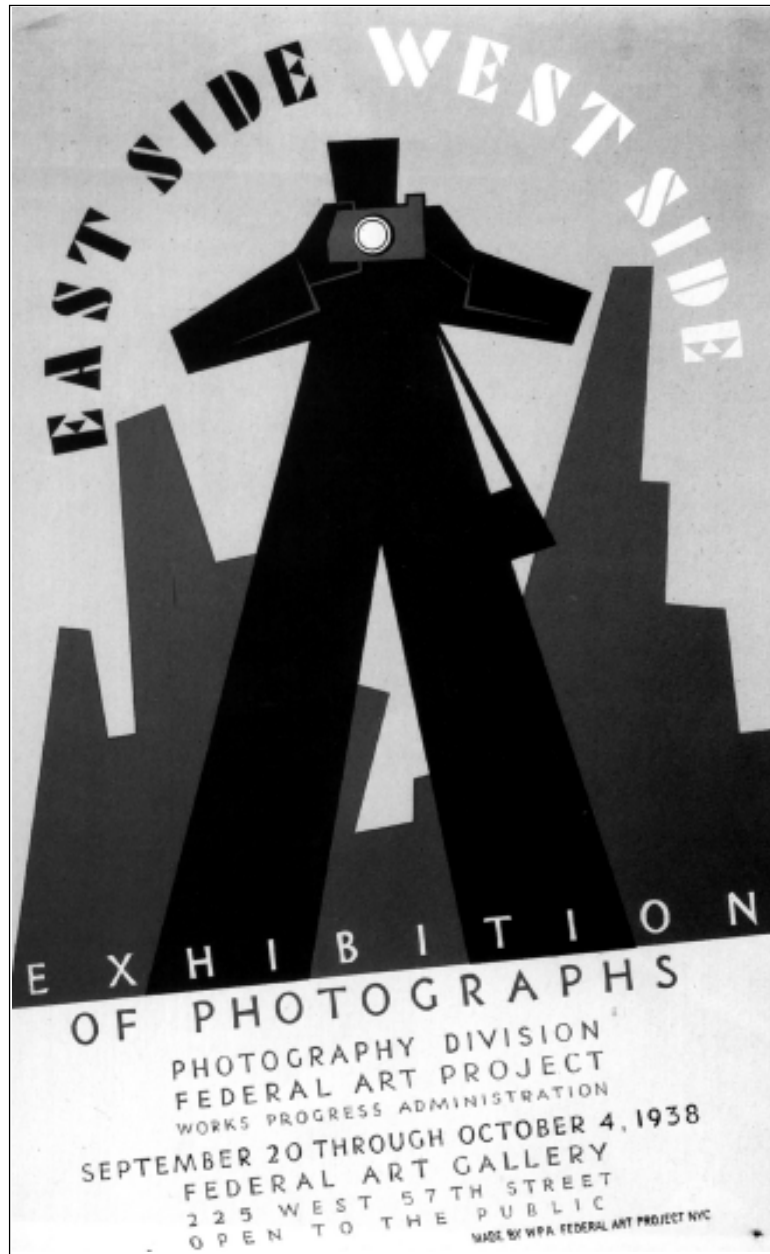
The 1930s marked the worst economic collapse experienced by this nation. Unemployment peaked at nearly 25% and hovered above 15% throughout the decade. Many a “forgotten man” disappeared into the Depression. Wavering confidence in the nation’s political and economic institutions called for bold experimentation and compelling leadership. Although Roosevelt’s New Deal measures never brought the country to complete recovery, government activism that produced Social Security, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), direct relief, labor reform, work projects, housing, and agricultural subsidies was unprecedented. Many saw Roosevelt as a savior who genuinely cared about the American public. To them, his voice over the airwaves gave reassurance that the values defining the American political experiment and cultural identity would prevail.

Under the New Deal, the notion of work expanded beyond the construction of roads, bridges, dams, and buildings. Government patronage for the arts inspired creativity, provided entertainment, and promoted American culture. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) became the New Deal’s largest employment agency. Under the WPA the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers’ Project, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Federal Music Project employed thousands of artists, writers, actors, film makers, musicians, and dancers. Other government agencies also supported aesthetic endeavors. The Resettlement Administration (RA), later absorbed by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), produced documentary photographs, and the Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture commissioned post office murals. Not only did this New Deal for the arts put Americans to work, it also celebrated American workers, the nation’s history, its talents, and its diversity. Arts projects did not necessarily ennoble ordinary lives, but these lives became the subjects for plays, interviews, murals, and photographs, producing a documentary record of how the Great Depression affected them.

Like other New Deal remedies, however, the arts programs endured controversy. Critics charged that these programs were wasteful, amateurish, or that they flagrantly promoted the New Deal agenda and radical politics. At the same time, independent artists such as John Steinbeck and John Ford, who found creative inspiration in these socially conscious times, came under fire from forces who saw their work as leftist dogma disguised as art. However, the America that wasn’t on the breadlines generally embraced the trend by artists to record the American that was. And even those who eked out a living on government relief sometimes found it possible to listen to the radio, go to the “pictures” (movies), enjoy “the funny papers,” or read popular fiction from the Book-of-the-Month Club.

The New Deal had its weaknesses. It failed to alleviate the protracted poverty of migrant workers and urban poor, and either excluded or restricted access to relief agencies by racial minorities and women. Roosevelt’s “court packing” scheme threatened to undermine the system of checks and balances. Even the Keynesian

experiment of deficit financing, which fueled the successful war economy, resulted in reliance on government spending as policy, rather than careful application of deficit spending as an emergency action. Nevertheless, at a time when fascism seemed to some like the most expedient solution to economic crisis, the New Deal proved that capitalism and democracy could adapt and survive.



*East Side West Side Exhibition of Photographs*  
Anthony Velanis, New York City Federal Art Project, WPA, 1938  
Library of Congress