

THE LEGACY OF BORIS DEUTSCH

A Centennial Exhibition

Judah L. Magnes Museum

Berkeley, California

May 24 - September 20, 1992

Boris Deutsch—The New Deal Art Projects

In 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated the New Deal, which included a series of work-relief programs designed to lower the unemployment rate among artists and to bring art to the people. These projects, administered by various government agencies, would last until 1943, putting thousands of depression-era artists to work creating, among other things, murals, paintings, and sculpture to decorate government buildings.

Boris Deutsch was actively involved in New Deal art projects from their inception. In the early thirties Deutsch (who shared a studio with the young Jackson Pollock and Ben Shahn in Washington D.C.) was hired by the Resettlement Administration to travel throughout the United States and sketch the American scene. The completed paintings were then hung in government offices. Between 1941 and 1944 Deutsch also created three post office mural projects for the Section of Painting and Sculpture of the Treasury Department, all of which are still extant: in Reedley, California, near Fresno; one in the Los Angeles Terminal Annex Post Office (eleven murals); one in Hot Springs (now Truth or Consequences), New Mexico. The Post Offices in Los Angeles and Hot Springs are now listed in the National Register of Historical Places. Included in this exhibition are sketches and compositions corresponding to the first two mural projects as well as compositions possibly submitted to mural competitions and not accepted.*

Deutsch's representation of grape pickers in Reedley and most of the small compositions shown in this exhibition are typical of the murals commissioned by the government at that time, which usually depicted events from American history or scenes of industrious American laborers working in fields, mines and factories, often with a local focus. Far less typical is the ambitious eleven-mural project in Los Angeles, representing cultural contributions of the Americas. Some of the paintings portray advances in science and industry, a far cry from the more humble laborers; and six of them feature indigenous peoples from North and South America—a radical departure from the portrayal of white Americans found in most American murals. (Deutsch also deviated from the norm with his "Indian Bear Dance" in Hot Springs, New Mexico.) The extent to which Deutsch has represented the every-day

While Deutsch claimed that his mother had the greatest influence on his artistic career through her early support, it was his wife Riva who encouraged the artist throughout hard times and poverty. The totality of his work stands as a monument to a period of American art which only recently is being re-examined and recognized.

In choosing from extensive material now in the care of the Judah L. Magnes Museum, it is our aim to present a selection of Boris Deutsch's paintings in chronological sequence. The viewer will be given a sense of the artist's growth from early experimentation in various modes to his sensitive concern for the human condition to his preoccupation with the future, prompted by man's first arrival on the moon.

On the one-hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth, we take pride in presenting a part of his important legacy.

Ruth Eis
Curator