

Exhibition Belies 'WPA Art' Label

By Andrew Hudson

THE EXHIBITION, "Federal Art Patronage 1933 to 1943," at the University of Maryland's Fine Arts Center until May 13, is truly historic. It is the first comprehensive exhibition of "New Deal art" since President Roosevelt's "honorable discharge" of the various Government art programs in 1943.

In his catalogue introduction to the show, Dr. Francis O'Connor, Assistant Professor of Art History at the University, points out that the generally used label "WPA" for the art program of the Roosevelt Administration is inaccurate. There were three distinct programs.

THE FIRST program, called the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), was a program of work-relief for professional artists under the auspices of the Treasury Department. It lasted from December, 1933, to June, 1934, and employed 3749 artists who produced 15,633 works of art, from murals to ceramics.

On April 24, 1934, an exhibition of 551 of these works went on show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

A "Sketch of Old Baltimore Waterfront" by Herman Maril, included in the present show at College Park, was one of several works that Mrs. Roosevelt selected to hang in the White House.

THE SECOND program began in October, 1934, as the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture and continued as a Section of Fine Arts until June, 1943. It was concerned with art for government buildings, and was led by the same men who supervised the PWAP: Edward Bruce, Edward Rowan and Forbes Watson.

One per cent of all public building construction funds allocated by Congress was set aside for artistic decoration and commissions were awarded through open competitions.

Several mural designs (rather set and academic in style for Government buildings in Washington and post offices and Federal courthouses across the country) are included in the University of Maryland show. Some of the murals can still be seen in the Justice Department building and the Social Security building.

George Biddle's mural on the theme of "Society Freed Through Justice," (located in the 5th floor stairwell at Justice) is remarkable for a technique of cross-hatching thin strokes of diluted color that gives it the brilliance of a watercolor or a crayon drawing.

THE THIRD program, the WPA Federal Art Project, was devoted to the principle of work-relief. It was started in August, 1935, and lasted, with several changes of name, until April, 1943. Directed by Holger Cahill, it aimed to help the artist conserve his skills and develop his talents, whatever the result, and to increase cultural awareness in the Nation. Exhibitions were sent around the country; classes in art were initiated; Community Art Centers and Federal Galleries were set up.

Many artists who went into the countryside from big cities remained there and are the artistic leaders of their communities today.

Most important of all, however, was the encouragement and support given to the individual artist. At its peak, the Federal Art Project employed about 5000 artists, engaged to create easel painting in all media: murals, sculpture and fine prints. In the easel division, artists were permitted to work in their own studios. Many future members of the postwar New York School benefitted from this opportunity to explore freely new artistic directions.

In the exhibition at College Park, there are two early paintings by Jackson Pollock, who was employed by the Easel Division of the

Federal Art Project throughout its duration.

In their roughness and crudity, these two works show a strong temperament and a striving after abstract form. They have a wildness and an urgency. The paint doesn't go on properly, but looks awkward, ill at ease and restricted by the subject matter. As his later work shows, Pollock had to revolutionize painting in order to express his own poetic vision.

"SUN DECK," an early painting (1936) by Adolph Gottlieb, shows him by contrast much in command of his art. The way in which rhythms

"Sweatshop" by George Biddle

are set up by the nearly repeated shapes of figures and funnels; tension created by the merging thrusts of the curved chair legs; and design on the surface of the canvas is combined with movements into a pictorial space, show the hand of an assured, intelligent painter with a strong sense of form.

Other works that point to an enlightened attitude on the part of the officers and supervisors of the WPA Federal Art Project are Ad Reinhardt's geometric abstract painting of 1942; Arshile Gorky's sketch for a large mural (since destroyed) at Newark airport; and strongly abstract paintings by Morris Graves and Loren MacIver.

The show at the University of Maryland is well worth seeing. It's not often that one

gets a chance to see early Pollock and early Gottlieb. Francis O'Connor, who selected and assembled the exhibition, also created a catalogue which, with its full chronology and bibliography, is an important document. And Washingtonians will find that the exhibition is not without a local touch: in addition to the sketch by Herman Maril, there are also early works by William Calfee, Mitchell Jamieson, and Jacob Kainen.