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Antiques

Eve M. Kahn

1930s Children's Art On Display in SoHo

The Works Progress Administration kept artists employed during the Great Depression, teaching the masses. In New York City about 50,000 people a week, mostly children, took free painting and drawing classes at community centers.

The young artists captured details of their daily lives, like rivets on subway cars and filigree brackets on streetlights. They also imagined sandy beaches along the East River and sheep grazing below the Coney Island roller coaster.

The teachers, a reporter wrote in 1937, "prefer slum neighborhood classes because they are 'much more interesting.' The work is more imaginative, more unexpected, more mature."

About 20 years ago a collection of 19 W.P.A. children's paintings from New York were donated to the Children's Museum of the Arts on Lafayette Street in SoHo. On Wednesday they were put on display for the first time, alongside recent paintings by local schoolchildren.

The W.P.A. paintings' donor, Sara Mazo Kuniyoshi, was the wife of the Japanese-American painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi. It is not clear how he acquired the works, but he did know many W.P.A. art teachers. "My feeling is that the collection came about through his friends," Prescott Trudeau, the museum's curator, said.

The students' names and ages are penciled on the backs, amid a few paint smears. Alvin Rotker, 10, depicted a family relaxing at a grassy riverbank. Lucy Menga, 12, portrayed one of her W.P.A. teachers wearing a puffy-sleeved striped dress and reading a newspaper.

The museum has been contacting the artists and their descendants and inviting them to the show. Mr. Rotker, now 83, a photographer and business consultant in New Jersey, said in a recent phone interview that when the museum called, "I thought it was a charity organization raising money, and I really almost dissed them."

He does not recall attending W.P.A. classes during his child-



CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF THE ARTS

Tony Bonada was 12 when he painted this work for a Works Progress Administration program in Queens in the 1930s.

hood in Brooklyn, but he knows of no other Alvin Rotker, and his father, a plumber, did work for the W.P.A. Referring to the museum's Web site, he said, "I saw the link, but I don't remember painting it."

Last year 21 students, ages 9 to 14, took a W.P.A.-inspired free painting workshop at the museum, with a field trip to Reginald Marsh's 1930s frescoes of skyscrapers, docks and sailors at the United States Customs House in Lower Manhattan. Artists' statements accompany their watercolors at the museum. "When I have an idea to make something, I have to do it right away," Mekhi Hayes DueWhite, 11, wrote about her still life of a souvenir store selling miniature 9/11 memorials and fake currency with President Obama's image. "I cannot stop myself, and I lose track of time."

The museum's narrow main gallery is tucked around a stairwell. The organization is now raising \$6.4 million to create larger quarters on Hudson Street, slated to open in the fall. In a 60-foot-long exhibition space there, antiques from the permanent collection will be kept on view. In addition to the Kuniyoshi pieces the museum owns 1930s children's art donated by the W.P.A. artist Joseph Solman, including a painting of the Red Sea parting by a student of Mark Rothko.