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Archives of American Art

Celebrating 175: Ben Shahn, Social Security Building Mural, Washington DC, 1940-1941

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TO THE ARTISTS

It is a great pleasure to me to be able to announce in this Bulletin a series of important national competitions. One series is for the decoration with murals and sculptures of the new Social Security building in Washington, D. C. The other is the competition for murals and sculpture to decorate a combination of cargo and passenger ship being built by the United States Maritime Commission and to be called the "President Andrew Jackson."

The fact that the Section of Fine Arts has secured this important extension of its activities is due in part to the splendid response which the artists won through their mural designs entered in the 48-State Mural Competition. But the main reason why our field has been extended is because of the great interest on the part of President Roosevelt in the work of American artists. Without his splendid support of the program of the Section of Fine Arts the additional commissions now open to the artists would not have been made available.

After many discussions the Section of Fine Arts has decided that any suggestions made to the artists in regard to the murals and sculptures for the Social Security Building, Washington, D. C., should be limited to general statements. At our request Mr. Arthur J. Altmeyer, Chairman of the Social Security board, has prepared a statement of "The Meaning of Social Security." This the artists will find invaluable, both as a philosophical and as a realistic approach to the great subject of social security.

We are also publishing a letter to me by Henry Varnum Poor. There is probably not a painter in America today who has not argued and thought about those qualities, so difficult to put into words, which we term mural. Other painters, I am sure, will find the same deep satisfaction in Mr. Poor's wisdom that I have found.

That the execution of murals and sculpture for the Social Security Building offers to the artists significant and welcome opportunities which will challenge their utmost creative resources is self-evident.

As every one knows the United States Maritime Commission is carrying out for an extensive program of ship construction. On the results of the competition for murals and sculpture reliefs for the President Andrew Jackson, will probably depend a considerable number of future commissions for the artists. I hope that the results will be so successful that the Section of Fine Arts will be able to announce further competition for the decoration of United States Maritime Commission vessels.

The artists are in no way limited in subject matter. They are urged to consider what they themselves would like to see as decorations in vessels traveling the seas.

The Section is delighted with the wide interest which is developing in art throughout the country. In this connection I want to express again my appreciation for the generous spirit in which the artists have collaborated with us.

Details as to the national competitions announced in this Bulletin will be found beginning on Page 11. It is hardly necessary to add that all who

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