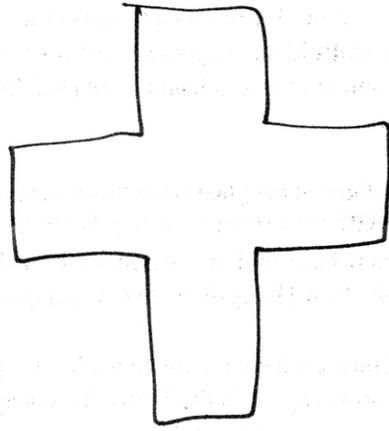


WORK



PLAY

**WORK AND PLAY**, a.k.a.

**CULTURAL AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF A COMMUNITY CENTER**

Synthetic resin emulsion on gesso, approx. 1.8 x 27.4 m.

Mural for Queensbridge Housing Projects

Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House, 10-25 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Long Island City, Queens NY

Created for the Works Progress Administration Fine Arts Project (WPA FAP) by Philip Guston, 1939-1940

Disowned by the artist following 1960s restoration

**The Mural**

(Left to right) An idealized family (father, mother, child); children play-fighting; slums being demolished; construction workers building the Queensbridge projects; a trio of basketball players; musicians and dancers; a doctor checking a boy's heartbeat; young people engaged in leisure activities. Several motifs from Guston's late paintings (work shoes, a trash can lid, angular jumbles of limbs) figure prominently in the work; the group of fighting children was a direct precursor to the painting *Gladiators* (1940) in MoMA's collection.

**Then**

Begun by Philip Guston while on the WPA FAP payroll in 1939, the Queensbridge mural can be considered both Guston's first and last WPA mural. After moving to New York in 1936, Guston had made sketches and proposals for murals in the Penn Station subways and Kings County Hospital, Brooklyn as a WPA employee; however, none of these were realized. After beginning the Queensbridge mural in 1939, Guston interrupted his work to execute the mural *Maintaining America's Skills* for the exterior of the WPA Building at the 1939 World's Fair. He returned to finish the Queensbridge mural in 1940. During the mural's execution, Guston was briefly taken off the scaffold due to government inspectors' suspicions of Communist content (the area where a dog's tail crosses a boy's leg was interpreted as a hammer and sickle); such extreme anti-Communist vigilance was common in WPA oversight at this time.

Weary of "officialdom" after completing the mural, Guston resigned from the project and moved to Woodstock, New York to focus on easel painting; however, he continued to apply for government mural commissions under the Section of Fine Arts (overseen by the Treasury Department, a separate New Deal initiative based on individual awards rather than an hourly wage) and, in the next two years, painted murals in Georgia, New Hampshire, and Washington D.C.

Since their construction, the Queensbridge housing projects have remained the largest public housing complex in North America with 3,142 units housing approximately 6,900 people. In the 1950s the management transferred residents above a certain income level to middle-income housing, changing the racial balance of the occupants from predominantly white (mostly Irish- and Italian-American) to predominantly African-American and Latino.

**Now**

After an unknown commercial sign painter restored the work in the 1960's, Guston declared the work irretrievably compromised and attempted to have his name removed from the project. Scholars do not refer to the existing mural as Guston's work; black and white photos from the WPA archive suggest some of the ways it has changed. The images of young people at play on the mural's far right have changed significantly with some figures apparently removed. Guston's longtime dealer David McKee claimed that where Guston's figures had "Renaissance solemnity," the restorer gave them "sweet and syrupy" faces. Others have declared the differences much less substantial, based on photographic evidence.

The Jacob A. Riis Settlement House, which runs the Community Center today, is a 120-year-old non-profit organization serving over 1000 people annually with both adult and youth programs. According to Jacob A. Riis staff, the mural rarely receives visitors, despite being mentioned in many of Guston's biographical texts and catalog entries.

More than almost any other artist, Philip Guston had a career which dramatically reflected major shifts in the mid to late twentieth century art world, embracing Social Realism, Abstract Expressionism, and figuration in turn. Likewise, federal housing policies and public optimism for their effectiveness have radically changed since the New Deal era. Perhaps reflecting the difficulties of negotiating cycles of politics, aesthetics, and history, *Work and Play* is not recognized as part of the artist's oeuvre nor entirely dissociated from it; it is neither being preserved nor destroyed. Occupying a unique position in art history, *Work and Play* pushes us to imagine new ways to maintain, study, and appreciate living, changing public artworks.