

THE KNOWING HANDS THAT CARVE THIS STONE

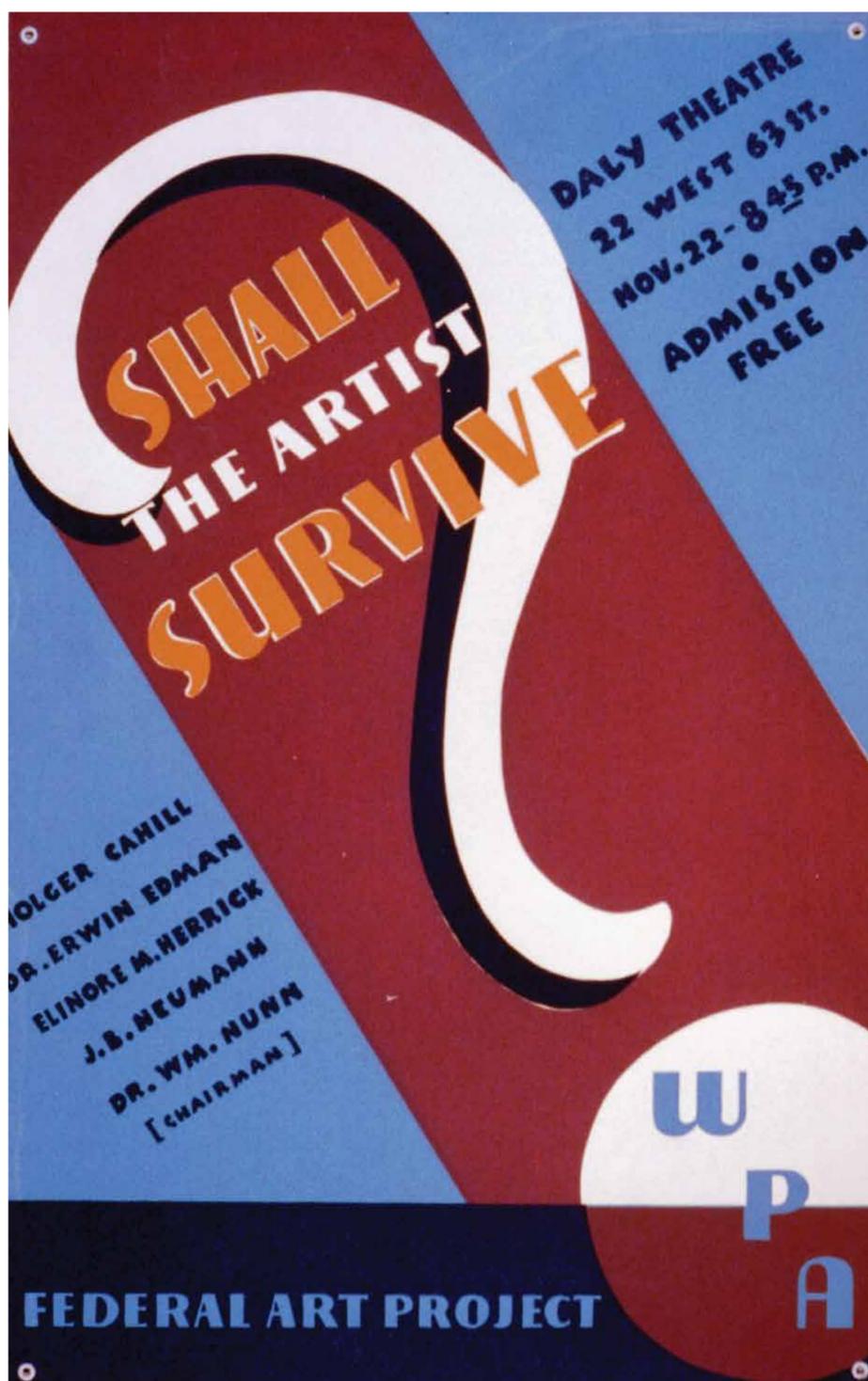
The New Deal Art of Lenore Thomas Straus

Lenore Thomas Straus was a young, self-taught artist, when she carved significant large-scale works for the Resettlement Agency, and other New Deal relief agencies in the late 1930s and early 1940s. As citizens struggled under the weight of the Great Depression, which had begun in 1929, jobs were hard to find, especially for artists. The situation would change, however, with the 1933 election. While campaigning, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people." Once elected president, he followed through on his promise and created a sweeping array of offices and agencies, all designed to help people across the country.

One such agency was the Resettlement Administration, headed by economist Rexford Guy Tugwell. The Resettlement Administration built Greenbelt, one of three green towns that were bold experiments in town planning. They also provided jobs for people who needed them and housing where there had been shortages. These towns: Greenbelt, Maryland, Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wisconsin, as well as many of the other communities built by the federal government during the New Deal, often featured art in the form of free-standing sculpture, murals, and friezes.

The art was created under many different programs in addition to the Resettlement Agency, such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which became the largest of the New Deal programs. It, in turn, created Federal Project One, whose mission was to employ artists, writers, teachers, actors, and more. With employment, artists and other creators were often able to pursue their craft in ways they had not been able to do before. Many went on to significant careers, such as Berenice Abbott, Benjamin Abramowitz, Thomas Hart Benton, Jacob Lawrence, Alice Neel, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Ben Shahn.

Following her federal employment, Lenore Thomas Straus continued to work as a sculptor and artist at her home and studio in Accokeek, Maryland, and later in Maine. Her art continues to inspire today. Her story typifies how federal agencies offered a new deal to millions and left a legacy of important infrastructure projects, an outpouring of artistic creations of all kinds, and a stunning visual record of who and what America was in the 1930s.



WPA Federal Art Project poster, c. 1936-1941
Works Progress Administration Poster Collection, Library of Congress

ALL THE STONES THAT HAVE FORMED THE SCULPTOR

The Early Life of the Artist

Lenore Thomas was born in 1909 in Chicago, Illinois to Andreas and Lucy (Haagsna) Thomassen. She described her mother as both American and Dutch. Her father had emigrated to the United States from Norway and altered his name to Andrew Thomas. Lenore would add the name Straus later after she wed. Andrew Thomas ran a small dry goods store and died when Straus was only eleven. He taught her to sail on Lake Michigan, a pastime she would love throughout her life. She also felt a kinship with his native Norway. Later in life she visited the country and wrote and illustrated a book about the experience called *The Tender Stone* (1964). She would later carve an 8 foot tall sculpture of a woman which was installed in the Lofoten Islands in Norway.

Straus described her childhood as one spent largely outdoors. In 1937 she remarked to a reporter that as a child she wanted to be a carpenter and would frequently take apart orange crates in order to build little huts. She attended Chicago public schools, then spent two years at the Chicago Art Institute, but left because she felt it was too formal. It was there that she studied sculpture and as she put it later, she had "been at it ever since." Rather than continue to attend classes, she decided to educate herself. She worked in a stone yard and learned from the craftsmen there. She also borrowed their tools. During this time, she studied the work of many other sculptors including well-known modernists Henry Moore (1898-1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975). Hepworth's influence on Straus is clear, as she often depicted versions of a mother and child in her work, as Straus herself did.

While still in Chicago, Straus became interested in trying to bring sculpture and architecture

together. She felt that sculpture should be integrated with the design and function of buildings. She went so far as to visit prominent architects in Chicago with photographs of her work in hand, but there was no work there, so she left in 1935 and moved to Staten Island, New York. There was no work there either, so she taught art at a private girls school in Connecticut. Then, like so many others seeking employment during the Depression, she moved to Washington, D.C. because as she stated, "It was the only place where one could get a sculpture commission job." Following her move, she began work with the Resettlement Administration, one of the agencies that had been established as part of the New Deal.



Lenore Thomas Straus in Accokeek, Maryland, c. 1937
Courtesy of the Straus family

THE APPLICATION OF SPECIAL SKILLS

Sculpture for Experimental Communities

After arriving in the Washington, D.C. area in 1935, Lenore Thomas Straus began working for the Resettlement Administration, where she would work for the next several years in what was known as the Special Skills Division. The division employed artists, woodworkers, illustrators, and many other kinds of craftspeople, who assisted the administration with posters, paintings, and sculpture. Craftspeople in this division even made designs for furniture to be used in some New Deal communities, such as Greenbelt. Around 1938, however, she said in an interview that the Resettlement Administration jobs “ran out,” at which point she received some commissions from the Section of Fine Arts in the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department. The Section of Fine Arts was the agency responsible for the art that was being included in many post offices across the country.

One of Lenore Thomas Straus’ first commissions in 1935-1936 was to create art for a New Deal community called the Jersey Homesteads, (renamed Roosevelt in 1945). It was unusual amongst the other New Deal communities because it was established specifically for resettled Jewish garment workers. The plan was that they would work in a garment factory and collectively farm the land. The sculpture Straus created for the Jersey Homesteads was the Sewing Woman, which referenced the garment workers who lived there. Ben Shahn, a well-known WPA muralist and artist, was also employed at the Jersey Homesteads to create a mural inside the school building. He and his wife moved there and attracted many other artists to the community, which resulted in the formation of an artists’ community. Despite the ultimate failure of the original idea, many of the homes that were designed by architect Louis Kahn, maintain their modernist lines. Both Straus’ sculpture and Shahn’s mural are still on display in the local school.

Straus also created a piece to be installed on the playground of a Public Works Administration project, called Langston Terrace in Washington D.C. The community was built primarily for African Americans, and was designed by prominent African American architect, Hilyard Robinson. It opened in Washington D.C. in the spring of 1938, and featured a central courtyard and playground populated by huge, whimsical animals. Straus’ contribution was a large frog. The piece allows children of varying heights and ages to interact with it in different ways. Several other sculptors also contributed animals to the playground.

There are references to another commission that Straus may have done for a New Deal community near Cumberland, Tennessee. In an interview, she mentions that she completed a figure of a “mountain woman” in black walnut wood, which is native to the area around Cumberland. She said that she hoped that the familiar image might stimulate an interest in carving amongst the people living there, but an image of the piece has not yet been found.

Straus also created small ceramic wall hangings for post offices in Fredonia, Kansas, Covington, Virginia, Leetonia, Illinois and Webster Springs, West Virginia.



Children at play on the frog Lenore Thomas Straus created for Langston Terrace, Washington, D.C.
National Archives Records Administration

THE GENTLE MARYLAND COUNTRYSIDE

A Home in Accokeek

Lenore Thomas Straus moved to Accokeek, Maryland in 1936 and would live there for the next 40 years of her life. She married, raised a family, and worked in her studio there. She also became close friends with Alice and Henry Ferguson, wealthy Washingtonians who had purchased land and a farmhouse in Accokeek in the 1920s to use as a weekend and summer retreat. Hard Bargain Farm, as Alice Ferguson named the property, was a lively place. She was an artist, and attracted a dynamic, artistic, and intellectual group of friends to visit, swim, play volleyball, and go boating there. The landscape was, and still is, heavily wooded with hills and valleys which flow down to the banks of the Potomac River. Across the river is a view of Mount Vernon, home of George Washington.

Straus first lived in Accokeek in a rented house which belonged to Alice and Henry Ferguson, but later she would hire mid-century architect, Charles Goodman, to build a home. In various interviews, she spoke of her love for the area. At the end of a day at work in Greenbelt, for instance, she said she looked forward to "a romp with my dogs and row on the Potomac." Both the Straus' and the Fergusons, as well as other residents in Accokeek, began to work cooperatively to preserve the rural atmosphere of the area. The Fergusons sold lots to like-minded friends. The area eventually became the Moyaone Reserve, named after a Piscataway village that Alice Ferguson (an amateur, but accomplished, archaeologist) found evidence of along the Potomac River. There is a history of citizen activism there, as there is in Greenbelt, and a sensitivity and concern for the environment as well.

Many examples of Straus' work remain in Accokeek. Some are on the grounds of private residences and some are part of Hard Bargain Farm, like the portraits she carved of both Alice and Henry Ferguson, which are the gateposts near the front door of the farm house. The Blue Rhinoceros is another example of Straus' work that is on the grounds of the farm. It has been recently restored by the Alice Ferguson Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the environmental sustainability of the Potomac River watershed.



A tile crafted by Lenore Thomas Straus, date unknown.
Courtesy of the Alice Ferguson Foundation

THE PREAMBLE TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

Art for a School Building

Following her other work for the Resettlement Administration, Straus continued to work for the New Deal agency, and began work on a major commission for Greenbelt, Maryland. She proposed a series of bas reliefs, or shallow sculptures, which would be included on the front of the school building. According to a newspaper article, she decided that the series would illustrate the preamble to the Constitution, "to familiarize the younger generation with its importance." In the same article, she stated that she believed that "the subject matter for culture should be very closely related to the people living in that community..." She sculpted average Americans in the panels; farmers, factory workers, laborers, secretaries, scientists, mothers, fathers, and children.

In an interview in 1979, she said that she was determined that the work have social significance. She submitted one sketch, probably for the "Establish Justice" panel, that actually showed a miscarriage of justice. It depicted the lynching of an African American man, as a judge turned his back on the scene. She said that it was the only one of her designs which was rejected. The panel for the phrase, "provide for the common defense," was also politically charged. She described it as a line of "robot-like soldiers invading a peaceful community," and that "the family symbolizes the resistance of the people to war." The style of Straus' sculpture could be classified as social realism, an art movement which focused on social issues and the struggles of everyday life. Art in this style often depicted muscular and sturdy men and women, with heavy limbs and broad shoulders, capable of meeting the challenges that lay ahead.

Straus carved the bas reliefs on Center School, as it was known, from panels of Indiana lime-

stone which had been built into the outer wall of the building. One is over the main doorway and five are under the windows of the gymnasium. She used a pneumatic hammer, as well as a chisel, and the work took over a year. It was difficult work, and she had to wear a hat, goggles, and gloves in addition to her work clothes because she was allergic to the dust from the limestone. She worked with one assistant, Tony Lucasini, who engraved the words at the base of each panel into the stone. Straus took photographs of the work that she and Lucasini were doing. She also photographed other workers on the Greenbelt project who were nearby, including African American laborers. Although Greenbelt was built by both African American and white workers, because of segregation, only white families would occupy the homes when it opened in 1937.



African American laborers working in front of the school building. Photograph by Lenore Thomas Straus c. 1937
Greenbelt Museum Collection

MOTHER AND CHILD

Art for the Center of a Community

The Mother and Child statue in the center of Greenbelt, Maryland was Lenore Thomas Straus' last sculpture for the Resettlement Administration. The purchasing of the stone was also one of the last acts of Rexford Guy Tugwell as head of the administration before he left his position. The stone, including delivery to Accokeek, cost \$770, mounting the stone at Straus' studio cost \$30, then delivery and setup of the completed work in Greenbelt cost \$195, bringing the total for the work, in terms of materials, to \$995. The stone had been purchased by the Resettlement Administration, but Straus qualified to receive relief, so she was paid from WPA funds. The government paid \$7 per day to rent the air compressor that she used and her WPA wage was \$5.40 per day. Nonetheless, she worked on the sculpture for over a year and carved the three massive blocks of limestone, which totaled 17 tons, at her studio in Accokeek, Maryland. Over the course of her work on them, she reduced the stones to 12 tons. The three pieces were then transported by truck to Greenbelt and carefully reassembled on site. The *News Review* of November 9, 1939, reported that children cheered as the last stone was lowered and cemented into place. The statue was dedicated the following week. Two drinking fountains, one on either side of the statue were installed soon after.

The sculpture has been a source of controversy over the years. One of its nicknames is the Buddha and stories abound of teenagers in the '50s, '60s, and '70s mistreating it. Burning tires have been thrown onto it, and one story details how a particularly ambitious group tried to pull it over with a chain attached to a pickup truck. Beginning in 1993, however, a group of concerned citizens began guarding the statue over Halloween weekend to protect it from would-be vandals. Despite ongoing differences of opinion regarding the statue, it has become an important landmark and its presence in the center of town contributes to a sense of place in Greenbelt. The city government had conservation work done on the statue in 1999 and in 2007.

What's *your* opinion of the Mother and Child? Do you love it, hate it, or just feel neutral about it? And why? Given the opportunity to carve a massive sculpture in the center of an experimental town, what subject matter would you choose?



Lenore Thomas Straus at work on the Mother and Child statue in Accokeek, Maryland c. 1938.
Greenbelt Museum Collection

THE STONE WILL STAND LONG AFTER HANDS ARE GONE

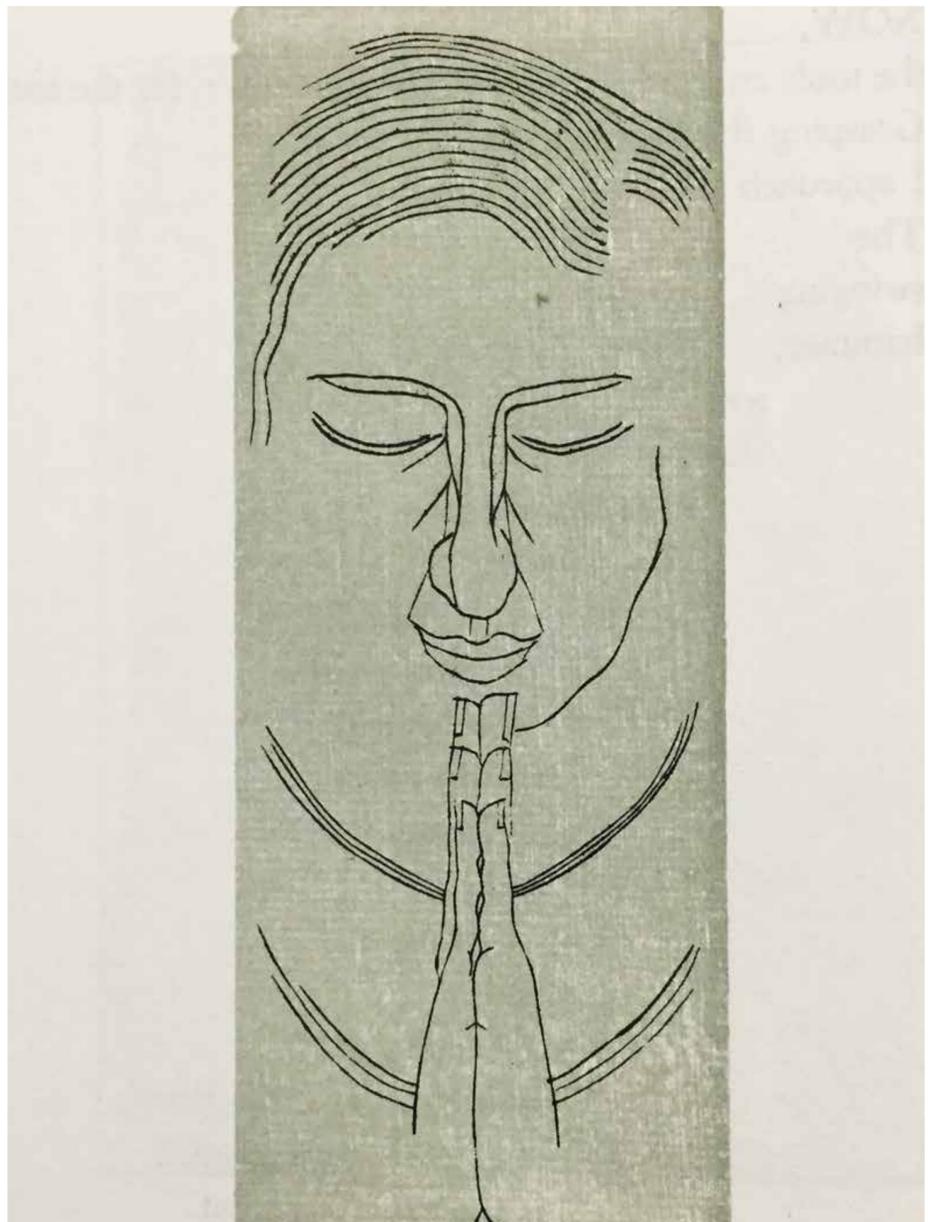
Lenore Thomas Straus' Ongoing Influence

The art and legacy that Lenore Thomas Straus left, continue to inspire and influence those who study her work. She was a sculptor, painter, lithographer, poet, and printer. Over the course of her life, her work was shown at the Chicago Art Institute, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney, the Corcoran Gallery, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and at private galleries. In 1975 she moved to Maine, where she became involved in Zen Buddhism and continued to make art. The Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Blue Hill, Maine, where she taught as a visiting artist, established a scholarship in her name in 1988, the year that she died. She was 78. "Life with Lenore," said the school's director, "was always a kind of shared celebration. She spoke to each of us so directly, expressing her own integrity and personal journey both in her work and in her willingness to be present with us."

One young woman Straus mentored was Sue Hoya Sellars (1936-2014). Sellars knew that she wanted to be an artist while still in high school, and so she approached Straus at her home in Accokeek, Maryland. As Sellars recalled in an oral history, the home was so modern, with large walls of redwood, that she was unsure where to find the door. She knocked, however, and "one of the walls slid open" and Straus came out. Following that first meeting, Straus helped Sellars learn about all aspects of art, and she went on to a thriving career illustrating biological, anthropological, and psychological textbooks. She continued to create fine art throughout her life. Like Straus, she was also interested in social justice, especially the women's movement. Sellars, in turn, mentored artists as well, including California artist, Shiloh Sophia McCloud (born in 1970). Sellars and McCloud taught together for over twenty years and founded an art movement known as Intentional Creativity. McCloud teaches others, particularly women, to use art and self-expression as ways to heal from trauma.

She feels that there is a direct line of influence from Lenore Thomas Straus to Sellars to her, and on to those with whom she works.

As Lenore Thomas Straus wrote in *Stone Dust* (1969), one of the books of poetry that she composed and illustrated, "the stone will stand long after hands are gone." Her legacy and that of the thousands of artists, writers, poets, musicians, actors and craftspeople of the New Deal will continue to stand as reminders that even in the most difficult of times, creativity and imagination, when properly nurtured, can prevail and have the ability to uplift us all.



An illustration from *Stone Dust*, Lenore Thomas Straus, 1969

OTHER NEW DEAL ARTISTS IN GREENBELT

Lenore Thomas Straus is certainly the most visible of Greenbelt's ties to the art of the New Deal, but there were other artists living in Greenbelt who had also worked for the WPA. Benjamin Abramowitz (1917-2011) was one such artist, as was Dorothy McGee (1906-2003), who used the name Morrow for her art.

Abramowitz was a prolific painter and sculptor who moved to Greenbelt in 1941. He grew up in New York City, the son of Russian immigrants, and studied art at the National Academy of Design. In 1936, he began working for the WPA. At first, he taught art to both children and adults. Later he worked on mural projects, then became a senior printmaker and painter. When he moved to Greenbelt in 1941 he was employed in Washington, D.C. as a lithographer, doing graphic assignments for the federal government. His critically acclaimed work spanned eight decades and was shown, or is in the collections of, major museums, such as the Baltimore Museum of Art, The Phillips Collection, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two of his works that depict Greenbelt, *Parkway Apartments* (1947) and *Girls* (1947) were recently gifted to the Museum.

Dorothy McGee (1906-2003) was another artist, who moved to Greenbelt from New York City with her husband, John McGee, in 19, 41. McGee took classes at Syracuse University and at the Artists League in New York City. She, like Abramowitz, had been employed by the WPA to teach art classes to children. She taught in Harlem. She used the name Mary Morrow for her work during this era because, like many other artists at the time, she was cautious about using her real name when making art for certain causes, for fear that she might be accused of being a socialist or communist. Many artists who had worked for the WPA were in fact subjected to scrutiny, following the establishment in May 1938 of the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee.



Parkway Apartments, Benjamin Abramowitz, 1947.
Gift of Pamela Gregory and Richard Marcus
Greenbelt Museum Collection