Exhibit Features Historic Public Art on UIC’s Medical Campus

By Kevin O’Brien

The Works Progress Administration, launched during President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second term in office, may be most closely associated in peoples’ minds with large-scale public construction projects such as road and bridge building. A substantial part of the WPA undertaking, however, was an effort to employ painters, sculptors, writers, actors, and other creative individuals to produce artworks for public distribution or for display or exhibition in public buildings or performances. The Federal Art Project, the section of the WPA responsible for the production of artworks in a variety of mediums, hired visual artists to create murals, sculptures, and other forms of art for display in venues such as public schools and post offices.

The Federal Art Project section for Illinois was headquartered in Chicago and throughout its existence engaged in a wide variety of statewide activities to fulfill its mission. Its legacy is in part familiar to many in the Chicago area because of recent efforts intended to preserve the large number of murals created for display in area public schools. Less well known is the cluster of artworks created on the premises of the University of Illinois medical campus for exhibition in the Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy. An exhibit now underway in the Special Collections and Archives Department of the UIC Library of the Health Sciences titled “The Federal Arts Project on the University of Illinois Medical Campus” documents the history of this chapter of U.S. cultural history through photographs and interpretive text.

Visitors to the exhibit will learn how Chicago painter Rainey Bennett was hired to coordinate the small group of artists chosen to work on the medical campus. Among those involved in the project were husband-and-wife sculptors Edouard and Olga Chassaing, Swedish immigrant woodcarver Carl Hallsthammar, and painters Jefferson League, Ethel Spears, and John Stephens. A large room in the College of Medicine’s west tower was turned over to the project for use as a communal studio for the artists. A photograph in the exhibit shows sculptor Edouard Chassaing hard at work in the studio. Most of the artworks were completed by 1938.

The wide variety of artistic media produced by the project is well preserved on campus today. In
the UIC Library of the Health Sciences Special Collections and Archives Department (and featured in the exhibit) are three mahogany wood carvings on historical themes by Carl Hallstrommar and three canvas murals by Ethel Spears, originally displayed in a girls’ orthopedic ward of the University of Illinois Research and Education Hospitals. Elsewhere on campus are a set of colorful mosaics depicting the signs of the Zodiac created by John Stephens, a series of fresco portraits of prominent figures from the history of medicine and science, a series of paintings illustrating the use of natural medicines in pharmacy, and three monumental sculptures by Edouard and Olga Chassaing. Most of the pieces of art are visible to visitors to campus.

Unfortunately, not all of the artwork survived. Lost or misplaced are a series of murals by Rainey Bennett which served as companion pieces to the Ethel Spears murals and a print by artist Edgar Britton. Hopefully, these pieces will turn up one day in a closet or storage area somewhere on campus.

“The Federal Arts Project on the University of Illinois Medical Campus” is installed in two display cases on the third floor of the Library of the Health Sciences and may be viewed during the library’s hours of operation through the spring of 2016.

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