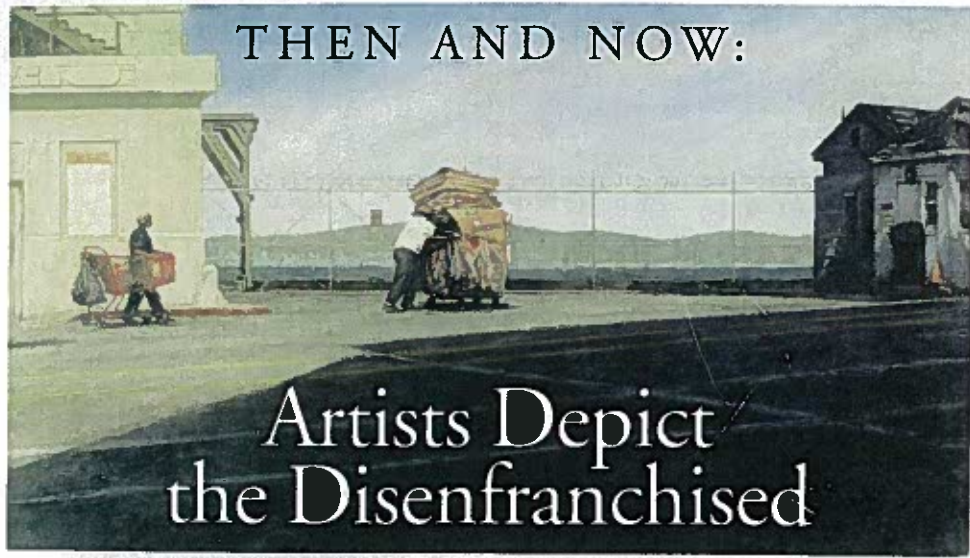


## THEN AND NOW:



# Artists Depict the Disenfranchised

Above: Christine Hanlon's oil on canvas, "Third Street Corridor," 1998, is on display at the California Historical Society as part of *Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present*, opening February 19.

by Jean Schiffman

We Americans used to call them hobos. The word itself is cute and unthreatening, conjuring up images of the carefree, whistling wanderer with a knapsack on his back.

A traveling exhibit, *Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present*, underlines the conceptual differences between then and now, as well as the similarities. For example, the artists sponsored by the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA)—the Depression-era government program to create jobs—were themselves mostly from the ranks of the disenfranchised, and often portrayed their poverty-stricken brothers and sisters as noble. Now society calls them the homeless, and generally sees them as mentally ill, drug addicts, drunkards. And the government no longer funds the artists who portray them. Terminology and perceptions have changed.

Then we had breadlines, tramps and beggars; now, several wars and another economic collapse later, we have soup kitchens and foreclosures, shantytowns and tent cities, panhandlers and street people.

The differences between then and now in the way artists reflect society's, and the government's, attitude toward the poor are striking. Produced by San Francisco's California Exhibitions Resources Alliances (CERA, which develops tours for small and mid-sized museums), *Hobos to Street People* premieres this month at the California Historical Society (CHS), which has enhanced the exhibit with materials from its own archives. Divided thematically into four sections—daily realities; displacement, **CONTINUED ON PAGE 3**

rootlessness and vulnerability; urban vs. rural; struggle and hope—it features 42 artworks by more than 30 artists.

During the Depression, photographer Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) famously captured in black and white the gaunt and stoic faces of rural migrant workers, and Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) mass-produced his lithograph "And Now Where?" (1936), showing a slump-shouldered, nobly suffering couple in transit. Today, Sandow Birk's oil on canvas, "GI Homecoming" (created especially for this exhibit), shows an Iraqi vet returning home with an amputated leg (it harkens back to Norman Rockwell's classic 1945 *Saturday Evening Post* cover, "Homecoming," points out CERA executive director Adrienne McGraw). And Christine Hanlon's oil on canvas, "Third Street Corridor," 1998, shows a bleak vista in this beautiful city, with two figures pushing loaded shopping carts—today's iconic accessory of the homeless—to a recycling center. The art is in a variety of media, either with California themes or by California artists or artists who have worked here. Some of the artists have been homeless, others actively involved in homeless rights movements.

It is the intention of curator Art Hazelwood—whose own work is included in the exhibit—to emphasize the differences in government response to poverty then and now, at the 75th anniversary of the New Deal. Himself an activist for the homeless in San Francisco, Hazelwood

explains that homelessness declined after World War II; thus it was not widely depicted in art until the late 1970s, when, due to lack of funding, institutions for the homeless folded and the homeless infiltrated into the community. Socially conscious artists in this later period, unlike their WPA counterparts, work not under government auspices but rather with nonprofit organizations and activist groups. But the goal has always been the same: to make poverty visible.

The use of media is similar between the two time periods, Hazelwood notes: printmaking was prevalent during the Depression and continues to be prevalent. There are also some differences: then there was a lot of lithography; now artists use screenprinting. Photography remains an important media for representing poverty, from Lange (whose photos in the exhibit include "Skid Row," 1937, showing South of Market's Howard Street) to today's journalistic photographers such as Francisco Dominguez ("Laborer Soup Kitchen," 2008).

But the ways that today's artists express poverty are different. Whereas Lange and her contemporaries tended to ennoble the poor, now, says Hazelwood, "there's more of an attempt to at best show solidarity." Some of the contemporary posters in the exhibit depict mass mobilization and solidarity with the displaced. Contemporary artists, says Hazelwood, have approached their work as a call to action from society and the government, as opposed to New Deal artists, whose focus was on portraying our common humanity.

And while many of the show's photographs reveal the gritty reality of life among today's street people, Hazelwood points out that there is also a hidden face



Left: Charles Surendorf, "California," 1938, wood engraving. On display at the California Historical Society as part of its new exhibition of artwork, from the Great Depression to the present, that explores our society's disenfranchised.

of homelessness: people living in cars, shelters, fleabag hotels. "The problem of homelessness is [lack of] housing," says Hazelwood. "That's central." He adds, "What we see on the street is the bottom [rung] of poverty in the city. So I've tried to incorporate different realities and ideas of homelessness."

Says executive director David Crosson, CHS is about making history a part of our contemporary lives—which are themselves a product of our past. "We want to be part of a contemporary dialogue about contemporary issues," he says, explaining CHS's enthusiasm about launching this art exhibit, which will travel to other museums in California until 2011. "Unfortunately, there's nothing more contemporary than homelessness." He adds, "This art is not just good art: it'll make you think about how art changed people, and how it may change you."

Among the material from CHS' collection that will appear only in the San Francisco leg of the tour is photographer Ira Nowinski's "No Vacancy" series, which documents the displacement of residents due to South of Market redevelopment—ironically, in the very location where

CHS, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and other arts institutions exist today.

Other works on display bear particularly evocative titles. Among the contemporary ones: Eric Drooker's painting "Under Bridges"; Claude Miller's screenprint "Housing Crisis, Condition: Critical"; Jane "in vain" Winkelman's painting "The New Drop Dead Welfare Center." And from the Depression: Albert Potter's woodcut "Brother Can You Spare a Dime."

Hazelwood points to two particularly emblematic artworks. One is a photo by Lange of a family, "probably Okie," in a car; the baby, on mother's lap, clutches a Pepsi bottle with a nipple on it. Hazelwood contrasts that with David Bacon's contemporary photo of indigenous farmworkers from Mexico in a migrant camp in San Diego, with a mother holding a baby. "Both show strong, noble people in very different situations, 75 years apart," he says. "They are what the show is about—where we are now, and where we were then."

And, he adds, the works in this exhibit are great art. "The WPA art was maligned for years after the **CONTINUED ON PAGE 5**

Depression," he says. "It was considered lowbrow. Since the 1980s, [this art] has become extremely important again in American history. A lot of the artists considered unimportant then are now the subjects of mass interest. And a lot of new, interesting work is being done by artists who are becoming more politically engaged, and not only in the issue of homelessness."

As McGraw comments, "People are looking to the new administration. Will there be a New Deal? And will it affect artists?"

Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present, Feb. 19-Aug. 15, California Historical Society, 678 Mission St. Free. 357-1848. [www.californiahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.californiahistoricalsociety.org) ★