

Homeless plight from 1930s to today depicted in S.F. art exhibit

By Laura Casey
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A little more than a year and a half ago, when Art Hazelwood was putting together the exhibit "Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present," he says he was unaware how relevant the show would be when it finally opened late last month.

While homelessness has been a huge problem for decades, especially in San Francisco, the economic challenges we face today — high unemployment, a failing bank system and tens of thousands of home foreclosures — were not as widespread and part of daily conversation as they are now, Hazelwood says. Talks about the New Deal, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Great Depression were more abstract.

"The show seems more topical with every passing day," Hazelwood says.

"Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present," at the California Historical Society through Aug. 15, features 75 pieces from more than 30 artists nationwide working through the last 75 years to document homelessness and the government's role in the crisis. It features paintings, prints, some mixed-media and photography.

The main point of the show, Hazelwood says, is showing that the federal government took poverty and homelessness seriously in the 1930s and '40s

and tried to address those issues through programs such as the New Deal.

"Since the late 1970s," Hazelwood continues, "the government has washed its hands of these issues. But it could, again, do something about it. That's the central political message."

What's striking is how hard it is to tell what era some works were made. For example, artist Clare Leighton's wood engraving "Bread Line" features sharp-edged bodies huddled in line for something to eat, not unlike some of the images on today's nightly news. The piece was made in 1932.

In a nearby gallery are two photographs, one by famed artist Dorothea Lange named "Mother and two children on the road Tulelake, Siskiyou County, California 1939/1975," and one by photographer David Bacon, "San Diego, indigenous woman and children are part of the community of farm workers from Oaxaca, living in a camp on a hillside outside Delmar, 2005." Both photographs show a mixture of pride and desperation, women living with children on the edge of society. And the photographs were taken decades apart.

The show points out the staggering number of homeless veterans of war with posters by the San Francisco Print Collective, a group that makes graphic art to support social justice movements. There is also a striking contemporary image of a G.I. homecoming by Sando Birk that is a modern-day, albeit more depressing, replica of Norman Rockwell's classic painting "Homecoming G.I." painted in 1945.

One image that is hard to forget is painter Christine Hanlon's "Third Street Corridor, 1998," which shows a homeless man pushing an overflowing shopping cart while another man with yet another cart looks on. It is such a common sight in Bay Area city cores,

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but few people make the connection between the shopping cart representing both homelessness and American shopping prosperity, Hazelwood says.

"It's actually quite devastating as a critique on us as a society, the shopping cart representing poverty," he adds.

While admission to the California Historical Society is usually \$3, museum leaders have waived the fee to let anyone interested in the exhibition see the works for free.

The show will be up until Aug. 15. It will then go on a tour of the state for three years, starting at the campus museum of UC Merced. While the exhibition at the California Historical Society features 75 works, the traveling show will be smaller.

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EXHIBIT: WHAT: "Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness from the New Deal to the Present" HOURS: noon to 4:30 p.m., Wednesday-Saturdays through Aug. 15 WHERE: The California Historical Society, 678 Mission St., San Francisco COST: Free MORE INFORMATION: 415-357-1848, www.californiahistoricalsociety.org

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