Two facts guide this exhibition on the multifaceted art of Maurice Merlin (1909–1947). First, he was committed to recording the social and political upheavals of the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. Second, he worked in a range of media displaying flexibility as he adjusted to the constraints of the lithographic stone, the silkscreen, or the woodblock.

As a young man, Merlin moved with his family from Sioux City, Iowa, to Chicago, where he studied at the Art Institute. Around 1937, he relocated to Detroit and found employment with the Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration, part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal. At this time, his art depicted the gray, gritty reality of American life, where layoffs had led to mass unemployment. For example, in *Man on Bridge* (1930s)
and *No Work Today* (ca. 1939), unemployed men anxiously loiter about. Like William Gropper (1897–1977), Joseph Shapiro (n.d.), and John Davies (1901–1965), fellow Detroit artists employed by New Deal programs, Merlin depicted a desolate and sterile countryside. Referring to the widespread bankruptcy of family farms and the droughts that created the Dust Bowl, these despoiled landscapes demonstrate that neither city nor country offered a safe haven from the Great Depression. Merlin also took aim at the injustices of his period. Rendered in stark black and white, *Black Legion Widow* (ca. 1936) depicts a pregnant woman mourning the murder of her husband at the hands of the Black Legion, a Ku Klux Klan offshoot centered in Ohio and Michigan. In *Mass Meeting* (*Madison Square Garden*) (1940), delegates of Jewish-American labor and solidarity groups vote to boycott German goods in response to Nazi atrocities. Other work takes a broadly sympathetic outlook. In *Little Negro Boy* (1930s), Merlin represents an African American child with dignity and tenderness without hiding the realities of poverty and substandard housing created by racial prejudice. Indeed, those who left the South during the Great Migration encountered racism in the North.

Looking at his late work, one considers the directions Merlin did not take because of an untimely death. Some pieces resemble work from the 1930s. There are quickly sketched watercolors of military life and vignettes of southern farms, probably located near Fort Benning, Ga., where he was stationed. However, the twisting, animated geometry of *Mobilizing Michigan* (ca. 1941) displays a keen feeling for vibrant color effects that might have translated nicely into abstract painting which so many former New Deal artists embraced in the late 1940s. As it stands, the tone of Merlin’s body of work is frequently bleak, but its despairing tone was, paradoxically, a motivation for change: seeing a problem is the first step. Like other WPA artists, Merlin viewed art as having a vital role in national renewal in the face of the Great Depression and, later, World War II.

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Assistant Curator of American Art

*Note: This essay is indebted to the research of Peter Merlin as well as conversations with Minna Gossman and Ed Ogul.*

_This exhibition has been generously supported by the Susan and Stephen Chandler Exhibition Endowment, funds from Steve Martin for exhibitions of American art, and the Sam Francis Foundation._
**Paintings**


*Little Negro Boy*, 1930s. Oil on canvas. 19 1/2 x 23 1/2 in. Private collection.

*No Work Today*, ca. 1939. Oil on canvas. 23 x 29 1/2 in. Merlin Family.

*Wash Day*, 1940s. Oil on illustration board. 17 x 27 in. Merlin Family.

*Watercolors and Gouaches*

*Rail Center*, 1930s–1940s. Watercolor. 7 x 9 in. Peter Merlin.

*Army Truck*, early 1940s. Watercolor. 6 3/4 x 9 1/2 in. Peter Merlin.

*Farm Scene*, early 1940s. Watercolor. 5 1/2 x 8 1/4 in. Peter Merlin.

*Cityscape*, 1940s. Watercolor. 22 x 16 in. Peter Merlin.


Commercial graphic sketch, mid 40s. Gouache. 16 x 20 in. Peter Merlin.

**Prints**

*Huron River*, 1930s. Woodcut. 5 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. Peter Merlin.


**Works by artists affiliated with New Deal arts projects in Michigan**


**Maurice Merlin** and the American Scene, 1930–1947

John Davies. *Autumn*, 1939. Mezzotint. 7 1/6 x 10 9/16 in.+


Joseph Shapiro. *Up the Road*, 1939. Lithograph. 10 3/16 x 8 11/16 in.+


*Imaginary Landscape*, 1930s. Lithograph. 13 x 10 1/4 in. Peter Merlin.

*Self Portrait*, 1930s. Lithograph. 12 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Peter Merlin.

*Farm Boy*, 1930s. Lithograph. 14 x 11 1/2 in. Peter Merlin.


*What About India?*, ca. 1941–43. Serigraph. 30 1/2 x 23 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

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*Courtesy of the Fine Arts Program, Public Buildings Service, U.S. General Services Administration. Commissioned through the New Deal art projects and on loan from the University of Michigan Museum of Art.*

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**Cover:**

*Little Negro Boy*, 1930s

Oil on canvas 19 1/2 x 23 1/2 in.

Private Collection