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Testimony on Raised Bill # 7016

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**AN ACT CONCERNING AN APPROPRIATION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF
CONNECTICUT ART**

“The Federal Art Project in New Haven,” an exhibition at the New Haven Museum & Historical Society, recently sparked new awareness of the extraordinary legacy of Works Progress Administration (WPA)-era (1930s) artists in creating public art that connects Connecticut with its past.

What began as a social program to provide employment for artists during the Great Depression produced murals, paintings, sculptures, signs and even stained glass that found its way into schools, post offices, court houses and other public spaces around Connecticut.

What is extraordinary about this work is that, to a degree unsurpassed anytime since, this art was intentionally conceived to embellish and decorate public spaces with compositionally sophisticated work, but especially to inspire citizenship and awareness of Connecticut’s heritage.

Generations of Connecticut students and families were inspired by great Connecticut stories presented in art – stories that cultivated citizenship, civic awareness, and state pride.

In Bridgeport the subject was manufacturing, in Clinton, the old Post Road, in Lakeville, Ethan Allen making iron cannon balls for the Revolution, in New Haven – Nathan Hale and the Pursuit of the Regicides, in New London the great age of the whaling trade, in Portland Shade Grown tobacco, in Thomaston early clockmaking and so on.

This little known chapter in the history of American art was largely forgotten when the cultural revolutions of the 1960s replaced representational art with art based on concepts, abstraction and a politics that made a virtue out of denigrating traditions. An approach based on *art for art’s sake* displaced art that supported and expressed the ideals and values of patriotism and community. Representational art was scorned for many years. Some of the best of the WPA-era art was covered up, taken down or destroyed.

The New Haven Museum (founded 1862), Connecticut’s 2nd oldest historical organization, wound up as the central repository for archives and photographs associated with the Federal Art Project in Connecticut. This archive provides important documentation and a benchmark for conservation analysis.

We recommend a strategic initiative either through the Connecticut State Library or the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism to conduct a survey assessing the current status of the various WPA-era projects carried around Connecticut. The results of this survey

should be displayed and publish in print and/or web-based format so foster awareness and access to this important chapter in Connecticut art.

The value of this work in inspiring citizenship, teaching about public art and teaching Connecticut's great stories will be substantial. The survey may inspire an art conservation initiative, a major exhibition involving one or more of Connecticut's museums, and a deepening understanding of Connecticut's heritage. The results will be made accessible for classroom use and will inspire new understanding of public art.

In 1980 a modest project like this fostered the rediscovery of Connecticut Impressionism – a discovery that 25 years later has had a transformative impact on tourism and national awareness of Connecticut art. In particular it prompted the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, the Bush-Holley House in Greenwich, and the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London to revitalize what they present and how they present it.

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