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WEEKEND FINE ARTS/ LEISURE

ART IN REVIEW

'American Identity' 'Figurative Painting and Sculpture, 1930-1945'

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
24 West 57th Street, Manhattan
Through Aug. 1

"American Identity" presents two dozen paintings and sculptures made before and during World War II, a time when the question of national character was on the minds of many artists. The show's most interesting works, however, are those that least lend themselves to portentous generalizations.

Warren Frank Wheelock's portrait of Fiorello La Guardia is not without political resonance, but its main attraction is in the exacting smoothness of the wood carving and the diminutive yet robust scale of the rotund little man in his wide-brimmed hat.

With a busy, colorful watercolor brush, Reginald Marsh describes with comical acuity and no allegorical pretension a daffy-looking blonde in beachwear with big legs, big hair and big sunglasses striding across the sand. Raphael Soyer's tender, softly focused painting of two pretty young women in a bare apartment has the emotional subtlety of a vintage New Yorker short story. And Laura Wheeler Waring's portrait of a handsome black woman in a flowered dress does something portraits do far too infrequently: it projects the feeling of a real, vibrant personality.

More numerous are works making larger statements about American society: heroicizing paintings of industrial workers by Edmund Lewandowski and Jackson Lee Nesbitt, for example, or Fletcher Martin's painting of a black boxer and his smirking white manager or William Gropper's cartoon of fat-cat Congressmen. The impulse to edify, it seems, all too often leads to empty clichés.

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