Conflict and Consensus: New Deal Mural Post Office Art

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During the Great Depression, the federal government commissioned murals for federal, state, and local buildings, in what Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz "…describes as the most innovative and comprehensive program for government patronage in American history (Park and Markowitz, 1984, p.5)." Of all the arts during the period of the Great Depression, perhaps the most prominent was painting in general, and mural painting in particular. It is ironic that the genesis for this patronage was not inspired by democratic philosophy but by an unlikely source, Communists inspired ideology in the form of Mexican public art. The social experiment of Mexican President Alvaro Obregon during the 1920s, in which artists painted murals in public spaces praising the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, captured the imagination of American artist, George Biddle. Biddle, who became known as the "father of federal art projects," believed a similar arts project could be imported into the United States not only to keep artists employed in time of severe economic hardship, but to popularize Roosevelt's New Deal on the walls of America as Diego Rivera and others had done in Mexico (McKinzie, p. 5)

Diego Rivera, along with Jose Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros referred to as Los Tres Grandes in Mexico (Lee, p. 52) had already influenced American art. In 1926, when Diego Rivera was first approached about the possibility of creating a mural in San Francisco, it must have seemed ironic that corporate representatives of American industry, which had a virtual stranglehold on Mexican natural resources (Lee, p.55) should seek out a man who was a membe**r** of the Mexican Communist Party (MCP). Rivera's affiliation with the MCP, contrary to popular opinion, was never committed and, as a matter of fact, he was expelled from the MCP not once, but twice (Lee, pp. 52-54). That Rivera was hobnobbing with American Industrialists such a John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford, essentially betraying the MCP for his own artistic ambitions (Lee, p.55) certainly did not endear him to his former fellow travelers, and the fact that Rivera had agreed to a mural commission in the United States must have struck them as tantamount to treason. Whereas Rivera was an indifferent member of the MCP and had strange capitalists bedfellows as benefactors, the art he created in the United States, especially his highly controversial and subsequently destroyed mural in Rockefeller Center in New York City that depicted Lenin, Marx, and Trotsky showed little embrace of the rich. Or for that matter any artistic sensibility. Barbara Clark Fogel, wife of Seymour Fogel an assistant to Rivera on the mural writes the following observation:

> I have no desire to go into the Radio City ruckus. It's a bit late in the day for that. But, that Diego was a radical was common knowledge. I can't speak with any authority on the matter, but I rather imagine he was a very surprised man when he was awarded the contract. The puzzle in my mind, then and now, is why Diego was commissioned and by whom, in the first place. Architecturally, too, it was a puzzler, for to attempt to graft expression of one culture-in this case Mexican with its earlier Indian overtones-upon a structure so reflective of another-New York skyscraper-suggests a complete lack of a sense of discrimination-of fitness. Integration is integration-not a

> hodgepodge. However, Diego was commissioned, and the farce was acted out in the finis-to the delight of the press. (Fogel and Stevens, p. 130)

That American capitalists first sought out Rivera was an attempt on their part at de-escalating Mexican-American tensions, for the less than noble purpose of further capitalist exploitation of Mexican resources, but the fact they looked to Mexican muralists in the first place was indicative of how powerful and influential Mexican public art was at the time. George Biddle considered it nothing short of "…the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance (McKinzie, p.5)." Of course, by the time Rivera finally arrived in America in 1930, the stock market had crashed and the United States was in economic chaos.

Rivera, however, brought not only his art to the United States but also his philosophy. However estranged he was from the MCP, his concern for the downtrodden and oppressed classes had a definite resonance in a nation that now witnessed a severe unemployment problem. His assistants who worked for him such as Seymour Fogel, embraced his philosophy and emphasized the plight of the homeless, the brutality committed against African-Americans and the impoverished victims of police abuse during the so-called "bread riots" in their art of the mid-1930s. Roosevelt himself was on record as calling for Americans to fight against "the forces of privilege and greed (McElvaine, p.275)," a stance which aligned him in the minds of some with leftist ideology, the antithesis of regional conservatism. The School of Social Realism crystallized around this focus as well as illustrations of the proud union man and industrial worker. Artistic renditions and the Marxist-Communist philosophy that inspired them, became increasingly attractive to a growing portion of the population who probably would not have gravitated to such extremes views had not the stock market crash revealed the deep dichotomy between the haves and have-nots inherent in capitalism.

If Rivera and the Mexican School had been seen by Biddle as prototypes for an artistic championing of Rooseveltian paternalism and the accomplishments of the New Deal, such an influence came at a price. Social Realists saw the government as unresponsive to their cause. A 1935 article in *Art Front,* a leftist magazine titled "Morals in Murals" summed it up neatly: "The murals designed for public buildings…seem to meet with official approval in inverse order to their social and artistic worth (Kao, et al, p.58)." Social Realism was seen by many in the United States as a threat to their perception of traditional American values. Those seeking to defend traditional values such as independence, self-determination, self-reliance, faith, the family and other principles of Jeffersonian democracy came to be known as Regionalists. The farmer and the land were the iconography of this school, as well as larger than life hero's of America's past and significant incidents in local history.

Perhaps no area in the country was as staunchly regionalist as the rural South. The South had always harbored deep suspicions about the role of the federal government in local affairs since the Civil War and Reconstruction. Beckham notes that northern artists were too often selected to paint murals in the South and that "…such enterprises as the TVA, the WPA, and the CCC were instances of a Yankee government's gentle reconstruction. All too often, though these projects brought jobs, new state parks and cheap electricity, outside bureaucrats were sent to administer them, once again depriving the South to control its own affairs (p.48)." Southern mural art at the time reflected a desire on the part of the South to seal itself off from such a perceived northern invasion, where "the background is invariably circumscribed by buildings, forests, circles of people. The figures…are protected from each other and the viewer and from the world beyond the South by some natural, artificial barrier (p.24)." As Anthony Lee observed: "Self –avowed regionalism in painting…generally takes shape when a threat is perceived on the horizon (p.60)."

The problem the government faced in its federally funded art projects during the New Deal was how to bridge the divide between the Social Realists and Regionalists, those who saw progress in labor unions and the triumph of the industrial worker and those devoted to family, faith and farm. In the larger context, this debate was not so much about the left and right politically or even artistically, but about the role of the federal government versus local autonomy, a debate which remains with us today.

The debate between the role of the federal government and local control in terms of the "artistic worth" of a mural played itself out in some highly controversial murals throughout the country. At a time

when most Americans were living a desperate existence, clinging to the margins of life, many of these Americans were touched in personal ways by the artistic works of the FAP. In most places, the murals and paintings in public buildings were a source of civic pride but, not all. Today, as then, art was often criticized.

Frank Mechau's mural *Ranchers of the Panhandle Fighting Prairie Fire with Skinned Steer* located in Brownfield, Texas created a good deal of disagreement because some viewers considered it too gruesome. "Mechau wanted to depict a graphic but practical-and, by his claim, authentic-method ranchers used at one time to control prairie fires.. ..His research revealed that cowboys, would create a fire line by killing a steer, skinning it, and then dragging the carcass along the edge of the fire to halt the progress of the blaze (Parisi, 2004, p. 29)." He was not the only artist criticized. Throughout the country there were disagreements between submissions approved by the Section jury in Washington and local authorities.

For a variety of reasons many murals were disliked and even loathed by citizens of the community. Stephan Hirch's mural for Aiken, South Carolina, Court House had to be covered by a drape almost immediately after its completion because local people felt that the woman depicted as Justice looked like a mulatto. "Citizens of Paris, Arkansas, likewise opposed a mural design of Joseph Vorst, which depicted a poor black farmer barely able to scratch a living-a sight un-welcomed to many of the people of Arkansas who already felt themselves to be the butt of northern jokes about poverty and ignorance (Marling, 1982)." Fletcher Martin found himself involved in two controversies surrounding his works. *The Horse Breakers* designed for Lamesa, Texas found the postmaster had a few good words to say about it. In addition to complaining that the horses pictured did not resemble West Texas horses "now or ever before", he said that the horse-breakers looked "like some square headed Russians or something else (Parisi, 2004, p. 74)." His other mural, a masterpiece of design for the post office in Kellogg, Idaho had to scrap it completely and start over because citizens objected to its content. "Kellogg is a mining town, and many towns people felt that his depiction of a mine accident, however brilliant artistically, was a 'monstrosity' and 'travesty on mining in general (Schammel and Haverkamp, 1995, p. 55-60)."

In 1939, Edward Rowan, Operations Director of the Section launched the "48 States Competition" by far the most ambitious national art project to date. It called for murals to be created for one new post office in the then forty-eight states. Murals would be awarded on the basis of national competition judged by a jury of Rowan and other artists. Seymour Fogel, a New York artist won the competition for the Safford, Arizona Post Office, a state with a rich Indian cultural history. His subject was an Apache dancer.

Citizens were up in arms over the proposed mural. Fogel saw his work as a tribute to the American Indian culture of the Southwest. Rowan saw it as an exceptional work that met the highest artistic standards. Many people in Safford, however, saw only Apaches-and they hated Apaches with a vengeance. These protestors reflected the prevailing prejudices that viewed Indians in Arizona as worthless degenerates. Due to the public furor this Apache dancer created, Fogel was required to do a series of uninspired vignettes entitled *The History of the Gila Valley.* (Fogel and Stevens, 2001, pp. 290-910).

If Social Realists were seen as aligned with industry, it was due neither for their love of capitalism nor their allegiance to Washington politics but, rather to the socialist iconography of the union man and the collective ideal that this implied. That is the proud union man triumphing over capitalist exploitation. Rivera himself was "fascinated by economic and industrial development (Garreau, p.61)." Regionalism, as it had its roots at least partly in nineteenth Century Populism, was agrarian and staunchly anti-Wall Street, anti-big business and by extension, anti-big government. In their view the "farmer…is the backbone of the nation because he is the model of independence, enterprise and traditional virtue (Park and Markowitz, p. 156),"

The government was largely responsible for this quandary in its insistence that public art approved either by the Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration or WPA (hereafter referred to as the "Project," as it was in the 1930s) or the Treasury Section of the Fine Arts (the Section) should be totally faithful to all aspects of local history, geography or industry in its broadest definition while attempting to please regional vanity and self-image by means of it s dictum that "the public is the patron

of the arts." They obviously concurred with the Regionalist, Grant Wood who stated, " a work that does not make contact with the public is lost (Marling, p. 92)." The quandary lay in how to carry out "Roosevelt's scheme for moving workers and work into the countryside, to introduce aspects of Roosevelt's programs for economic progress, industrialization and modernization in rural communities whose firm Regionalist outlook was being catered to at the time (McElvaine, p.155)."

Edward Bruce, formerly head of the short- lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and then head of the Section sought to tackle this problem. Vowing that he would rid public art of personal and political agendas and "stop the Mexican invasion at the border (McKinzie, p. 57)" he sought to be a centrist with respect to the two often-warring artistic camps. "The Section provided the patronage and in their negotiations with artists and the public, moved the art toward the center (Park and Markowitz, p.176)." This "realist coalition" that Park and Markowitz identified produced a form of art that we have termed American Idealism, a melding of farm and factory, of region and modernization by means of industry that allowed the federal government to enter small town America, while artistically praising the unique local genius of the region. It was no mean feat, yet the realist coalition that produced American Idealist Art (although such a genre was not confined only to the Section) got "radicals and liberals" to work together in what they thought was a progressive cause (p.179)."

What constituted American Idealism, as opposed to Regional and Social Realism? Simply stated, it was a synthesis of the two. When Julian Woeltz painted *Gang Plow* for Amarillo, Texas, he combined the Regionalist theme of farming with modern machinery that made tilling the soil more efficient. Lee Allen created a similar composition in *Soil Erosion Control* for Omaha, Nebraska, where the horse, the hand-sown seed and shovel are combined in the mural with a modern tractor. Jean Swiggert's *Local Industry* for Franklin, Indiana, depicts a factory at the center that is flanked by two groups of local citizens including a young boy carrying a calf. These two groups serve as a theatrical curtain, as if what is Regional is being drawn back to reveal the shape of the future.

Other mural artists that created American Idealist compositions sought to include the centrality of the American family as a metaphor for this synthesis: as if farm and industry connoted a single family unit for all Americans. This was nowhere more apparent than Harry Steinberg's aptly titled mural *The Family-Industry and Agriculture* for Ambler, Pennsylvania. At the center of the composition is a family consisting of a husband, wife and small infant flanked to the left by a factory and to the right by a farm. It is tempting to interpret the infant in such work as symbolic of the fruit of the synthesis, the future where technology and the land produced miracles of abundance, a theme that was very part of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair. Seymour Fogel in *Security of the People* in what was once the Social Security Building in Washington, DC again places a family-father, mother holding an infant, boy and girl-between grid-work trellis on the left (a stand in for the farm) and the iron grid-work of new construction on the right. Michael Spirion also included the family prominently in his *The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry* for Decatur, Illinois.

We must point out that, despite their mutual animosity, there was a point of convergence between these two camps, and that was the American worker. American Idealists played to that convergence. Park and Markowitz underscore this: "The ideal of Social realism…is conveyed by the image of the worker in heavy industry. The worker, as the source of national wealth, is often depicted as a heroic figure: large, muscular, strong and effective. When an agricultural worker appears in Social Realist work he is treated in the same way, and often the unity of interests of these workers is stressed (p.158)." Thus in Seymour Fogel's studies for *The Nation-Security and Insecurity* do we see the proud industrial worker, lunch pail in hand and hammer slung over his shoulder, striding confidently toward the viewer, while in the same composition, equally heroic images of farmers thresh wheat and gather corn. The American Idealist unity of factory and farm is often presented as a unity, a heroic equality, of those who work both in steal and soil.

Comparing and contrasting helps to clarify how American Idealists work endeavored to introduce technological progress into purely rural and regional settings. Charles Thwaites *Threshing Barely* for Clinton, Wisconsin shows farmers using pitchforks and other hand held tools to accomplish the task at hand. Joe Jones, on the other hand, in *Men and Wheat* for Seneca, Kansas portrays the use of modern

farm machinery to harvest the crop. Natalie Henry's *Local Industries,* recall rural pursuits such as feeding chickens and picking and sorting fruit by hand, "industries" in its broadest sense. H. Louis Freunds, *Paris, Arkansas-Gateway to Mt. Magazine* however, displays along with wheat in the foreground, industrial plants and modern highway vehicles. It might be interpreted that such illustrations merely represent "the mixed economies of certain towns (Park and Markowitz, p. 54-55)," the "mix" itself is representational significant. This is not to insinuate that artists who executed American Idealists works stayed only with that genre. They did not. Joe Jones, whose work was previously cited, also painted farming the old fashioned way. In *Harvest* for Charleston, Missouri he created farmers with pitchforks and horse drawn carts.

We are, thus, by no means stating that the genre we refer to as American Idealism was mutually exclusive of others during the 1930s. It was not. Despite the acrimony between Regionalists and Social realists the artistic expression of the time was far more fluid than one might suppose. Some artists never deviated from their philosophic camps-Grant Wood and Thomas Harte Benton among the Regionalists and Rockwell Kent and Ben Shahn among the Social Realists-many, who because of economic necessity learned to become philosophically flexible. The father of one of the presenters is a case in point. Seymour Fogel, a disciple of Diego Rivera and Social Realist throughout the Great Depression commissions from both the Project and Section required a variability in style. It must be remembered that the federal government was keenly sensitive to the wishes of the local populace where the murals were to be installed. Great care was taken to oversee the work in progress and suggestions were frequently incorporated into the murals. Fogel created a Social Realist mural for the WPA Building at the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair, Regionalists murals for Cambridge, Minnesota and Safford, Arizona (only after local furor forced scrapping of the original design) and American Idealist mural for the Social Security Building in Washington, DC. American Idealism was part of this artistic fluidity, not something that could be neatly excised from it.

We are also not stating that American Idealism was specifically a government formulation, an artistic directive if you will, although the centrist, Bruce came as close as any to defining it. It grew mutually in response to the needs of the nation as a whole where continued divisiveness was clearly counterproductive to the common good. If mural art was to be in the service of Franklin D. Roosevelt and is New Deal policies and programs, as Biddle had envisioned from the very beginning, it had to allow for depictions of the progress Roosevelt had hoped for in the nation, even in strictly rural and regionalist settings. As Park and Markowitz aptly state: "…the identification of factory and farm workers, and the recognition of their common interests could produce a better society in the future (pp.54-55)." In this way the region could be honored while modernization and the government that promoted it would be seen not as an invader, but a new neighbor.

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