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Emily S. Warner

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Abstract

In the decades around World War II, a number of abstract painters sought to “unframe” their abstractions and expand them into wall-filling murals. This dissertation analyzes moments from the history of unframed abstraction during modernism’s rise and popularity in the United States, from ca. 1935 to ca. 1960, in and around New York. Scholars have generally treated such murals as large-scale paintings rather than murals; moreover, they have located American abstraction’s growing scale firmly in the postwar years. This dissertation revises these views by examining the rich history of abstract wall painting across the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and situating the murals within the architectural, social, and institutional contexts of their sites. Installed on the walls of public houses, hospitals, private homes, and office buildings, these murals raised urgent questions about art’s place in daily life, abstraction’s relationship to decoration, and collaboration between architects and painters. Using archival sources and period literature, it reconstructs the spatial and visual logic of the murals, many of which are now lost or altered. It also draws on a growing interest in reception and consumption within studies of modern American art.

Arranged roughly chronologically, each chapter examines murals located in a different site type: the public institutions of the New Deal state, the pavilions of the 1939 World’s Fair, the 1940s home, and postwar commercial and civic buildings. The project situates the geometric abstractions of the American Abstract Artists within an ethos of community and social life, inculcated by the New Deal Art programs; compares painted and kinetic murals at the 1939 Fair to contemporary graphic design and exhibition display; explores Jackson Pollock’s murals within the decorative values of the upper-middle-class home; and shows how both the American Abstract Artists and the Abstract Expressionists benefitted from a boom in postwar building, which enabled the realization of ambitious murals for educational, religious, and corporate spaces. Together, the chapters offer a history of how abstraction functioned in the built environment at a time of tremendous change in American social and cultural life.

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ABSTRACTION UNFRAMED:
ABSTRACT MURALS IN NEW YORK, 1935-1960

Emily S. Warner

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Supervisor of Dissertation

Michael Leja

Professor of the History of Art

Graduate Group Chairperson

Michael Leja, Professor of the History of Art

Dissertation Committee

David Brownlee, Frances Shapiro-Weitzenhoffer Professor of 19th-Century European Art

Christine Poggi, Professor of the History of Art

ABSTRACTION UNFRAMED: ABSTRACT MURALS IN NEW YORK, 1935-1960

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Emily Sansone Warner

For my parents

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ABSTRACT

ABSTRACTION UNFRAMED: ABSTRACT MURALS IN NEW YORK, 1935-1960

Emily S. Warner

Michael Leja

In the decades around World War II, a number of abstract painters sought to “unframe” their abstractions and expand them into wall-filling murals. This dissertation analyzes moments from the history of unframed abstraction during modernism’s rise and popularity in the United States, from ca. 1935 to ca. 1960, in and around New York. Scholars have generally treated such murals as large-scale paintings rather than murals; moreover, they have located American abstraction’s growing scale firmly in the postwar years. This dissertation revises these views by examining the rich history of abstract wall painting across the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and situating the murals within the architectural, social, and institutional contexts of their sites. Installed on the walls of public houses, hospitals, private homes, and office buildings, these murals raised urgent questions about art’s place in daily life, abstraction’s relationship to decoration, and collaboration between architects and painters. Using archival sources and period literature, it reconstructs the spatial and visual logic of the murals, many of which are now lost or altered. It also draws on a growing interest in reception and consumption within studies of modern American art.

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INTRODUCTION

“Abstract design [...] may yet seem frequently more sociable, more at peace with itself and its environment, when filling a wall than when bounded by a frame.”—E.A. Jewell, 1938¹

“There was a reviewer awhile back who wrote that my pictures didn’t have any beginning or any end. He didn’t mean it as a compliment, but it was.” —Jackson Pollock, 1950²

What would it mean to free abstraction from the confines of the easel painting? For many painters in the decades around World War II, this question was an exciting one, and it moved them towards an art form in which they had little to no training: the mural. From the mid-1930s onwards, American painters working in diverse styles—from the geometric designs of the American Abstract Artists to the machine aesthetic of the World’s Fair to the gestural styles of Abstract Expressionism—turned toward muralism as a means of unframing their abstractions. This unframing was, in part, a formal one: extending abstraction along hallways or enlarging it to cover walls gave painters such as Albert Swinden, Stuart Davis, and Jackson Pollock new ways of configuring scale, surface, and space; it allowed them to make paintings without “beginning or end,” and to relate them to the spaces of modern architecture. But the unframing was also a social one: in monumental wall paintings for public houses, kinetic devices for World’s Fairs, and cladding for domestic interiors, abstract painters glimpsed the prospect for a more concrete and profound connection between art and its audience.

¹ E.A. Jewell, “Commentary on Murals: Exhibition at the Federal Art Gallery Presents WPA New York Region Survey,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1938, 117.

² Berton Roueche, “Unframed Space,” *New Yorker*, August 5, 1950, 16.

This dissertation examines moments from the history of abstract muralism during modernism's rise and popularity in the United States, from ca. 1935 to ca. 1960. Looking at abstract murals by Swinden, Ilya Bolotowsky, Davis, Pollock, Lee Krasner, and others, it recovers the range of meanings with which artists and viewers invested abstraction at large scale and in architectural locations. Unframed and installed on walls, abstraction offered a backdrop to community, a therapeutic balm, a form of spectacular entertainment, a decorative accent to the modern home, an inexpensive nod to monumentality, and a promotion of corporate or institutional brand. The viewers of these murals, moreover, were not only art enthusiasts; they were also tenants, workers, patients, pedestrians, inhabitants of modern homes, and dwellers in a changing urban fabric. They encountered abstract murals in their living and working spaces not with the focused attention of a museum visitor, but with the intimate, casual, and even distracted attention of regular acquaintance. The artists were ambivalent about such functions. While they worried about their art's invisibility—its tendency, when unframed and expanded, to disappear into the spatial fabric—they also welcomed what seemed like a new level of perceptual and psychological intimacy with viewers. Their murals became the very walls of the modern world—reinserted (they hoped) into a vital position within the viewer's experience and within daily life more broadly.

The artworks in this study sit at the intersection of two different trajectories, abstraction and muralism, both of which have been used to write influential accounts of American art. American abstract painting, from the nature abstraction of the Stieglitz Circle to the American Abstract Artists group to Abstract Expressionism, has been a touchpoint for narratives about cosmopolitanism, nativism, and the United States'

complex relationship to European traditions. For its part, muralism has served to foreground questions of audience and publics in American art, from the democratic (if paternalistic) aims of beaux-arts muralism to the revolutionary history painting of the Mexican muralists to the taxpayer-funded mural projects of the New Deal. These two histories rarely meet. When they do, they are often posed as opposites, two divergent paths within American art, one leading to a serious if elitist engagement with form, and the other to a populist but outdated engagement with social life.

Yet the abstract painters who turned to muralism in the decades around World War II were concerned with elements of both of these paths. They considered representational art a backwards step, away from formal (and, in an expanded sense, political) innovation. But they also saw muralism as an unprecedented opportunity to reach a wider public and enter more substantively into their viewers' lives. In abstract murals, these goals converged. The expanded scale and architectural integration of mural art enabled new formal experimentation, geared to the embodied, mobile viewer. The quotidian and institutional settings of abstract murals—living rooms, hospitals, office lobbies—pulled abstraction away from its ivory tower and inserted it into the flows and currents of daily life. We can only understand the abstract murals of the midcentury decades if we look at both histories, the development of environmental abstraction, on the one hand, and the rising importance of muralism as a public art, on the other. Here, and in the chapters that follow, I draw on both histories to elaborate the particular role that abstract murals played for American viewers at midcentury.

The dissertation focuses on abstract murals experienced in and around New York City, for reasons both practical and methodological. Practically, this imposes some limits

on what would otherwise be a sprawling study. New York also provides an unusually rich vein of abstract wall painting from the 1930s and early 1940s, through the Mural Division of the New York City Federal Art Project, which actively encouraged abstraction. Methodologically, siting the study in New York makes a particular historiographic intervention. Large-scale abstraction in the United States has mostly been associated with painters of the New York School, such as Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko. Looking at their paintings in the postwar years, viewers and critics glimpsed an environmental abstraction that overflowed the bounds of the canvas itself. Typical is Clement Greenberg, wondering if the new dimensions of Pollock's canvases pointed "a way beyond the easel, beyond the mobile, framed picture, to the mural," or Katharine Kuh, observing, about Rothko, "One tends to enter *into* his canvases—not merely look *at* them."³ Both Pollock and Rothko would go on to make murals, some of which I discuss in the ensuing chapters. Yet unframed abstraction is not the province of Abstract Expressionism alone. From at least the 1930s onward, American artists and viewers glimpsed—like Greenberg and Kuh—a latent extensibility and spatiality in abstraction; and, like Pollock and Rothko, artists turned to muralism as the means of instantiating those characteristics in architectural space. This dissertation aims to tell a richer and more complete history of abstract muralism in the United States by putting canonical postwar artists, such as Pollock, alongside little-known artists of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Swinden. Furthermore, it prioritizes murals themselves, and not just the large canvases that became the mainstay of exhibitions from "Large-Scale Modern

³ Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock" [1947], in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), vol. 2, 124-5; Katharine Kuh, "Mark Rothko," *Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* 48.4 (Nov. 15, 1954): 68.

Painting” (Museum of Modern Art, 1947) to “Paintings for Unlimited Space” (Betty Parsons Gallery, 1958–59). It is one thing to contemplate unframed abstraction, and another to use muralism to put such ideas into practice. This study examines moments where the desire for an environmental, unframed abstraction found realization in mural form.

Located at the interface between art, architecture, and the inhabited spaces of living and dwelling, the abstract mural constitutes an ideal (and overlooked) site for studying modernism’s public life at midcentury. In analyzing several moments from the history of abstract muralism, the dissertation offers a new way of writing about abstraction, one that prioritizes architectural space and audience over artistic style or movement. Throughout, I attend not just to murals’ artists, but also to the architects, designers, patrons, and viewers that served as their essential co-creators. As Kristina Wilson has argued, studies of modernism have been slow to adopt a reception focus, emphasizing instead production and artistic intention.⁴ This dissertation offers a viewer’s history of abstraction, in the broadest sense: alongside formal concerns, it considers reception, spatial layout, building function, and institutional context—all factors that determine how abstract murals were experienced by their viewers at specific moments. In keeping with this emphasis on embodied viewership, the dissertation is organized not by artist but by site type. Each chapter is devoted to examining how abstract murals functioned in a given type of space or institution: first, in the public institutions of the New Deal state; second, in the consumerist techno-utopia of the New York World’s Fair

⁴ Kristina Wilson, *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925-1934* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009).

of 1939–40; third, in the 1940s home; and, fourth, in the public spaces of postwar office buildings and civic structures. Together, the chapters offer a history of how abstraction functioned in the built environment at a time of tremendous change in American social and cultural life.

In Chapter 1, “Murals for the Community: Abstraction and Public Space in the 1930s,” I examine how a particular mode of geometric abstraction—and its desire for extension across broader architectural spaces—intersected with New Deal rhetoric about art for the people. Over the course of the early and mid-1930s, painters in the American Abstract Artists group (including Bolotowsky, Balcomb Greene, and Swinden) developed a form of abstract painting indebted to European predecessors like Piet Mondrian. The Mural Division of the Federal Art Project gave these painters their first opportunity to realize large-scale, architecturally sited versions of their abstractions. Simultaneously, it offered them (and their viewers) a new vocabulary for understanding abstraction’s public role, one influenced by a period philosophy of “art as experience” and by the unprecedented expansion of the administrative state into new spheres like culture and employment. In murals for the Williamsburg Housing Projects and the Chronic Diseases Hospital, we see abstraction sutured into the architectural fabric and figured as the necessary and enriching background for the daily lives of workers and the chronically ill—polities with new institutional definition within the New Deal cultural economy.

If the murals in Chapter 1 were meant to endure, shaping the lives of those dwelling among them, the public abstractions discussed in Chapter 2 were made for more ephemeral and spectacular spaces, in and on the pavilions of the New York World’s Fair of 1939–40. Abstraction in mural making was reinforced by its use throughout the fair—

in modern graphics, industrial design, and in other areas touched by the cult of the machine. Stuart Davis, members of the American Abstract Artists, and the lesser-known figures Henry Billings and Eric Mose all executed murals in various abstract styles, often with the explicit hope of attracting a broader and more popular audience than fine art was capable of doing. The resulting murals faced two related, but not identical, tensions: that between art and design, and that between art and entertainment. The Fair offers a concrete case study in modernism's romance with popular culture, at a moment when the nature and reach of consumerism in American society was being transformed and extended.

Both abstraction and the mural have a long history within private domestic settings, the subject of Chapter 3. The chapter begins with the domestic murals of several artists and architects from ca. 1940—Fernand Léger, Paul Nelson, George L. K. Morris, and Suzy Frelinghuysen—before turning to three mural projects by Pollock that span the decade of the 1940s. Although much has been made of Pollock's debt to Mexican muralism and his teacher Benton, comparatively little has been written about his murals' imbrication with the domestic—a striking fact, given that they were all involved, through patronage, visual syntax, or both, with the private home. Pollock's diverse mural projects, for an apartment vestibule, a suburban dining room, and an unbuilt museum pavilion, adopted unframed abstraction as the fitting background for midcentury domestic life. His two final mural projects, moreover, offer a vision of that life explicitly geared to the sophisticated leisure activities of the upper-middle class.

The final chapter returns to the public spaces of the city, examining the popularity of abstraction in ornamenting the entryways of civic and corporate buildings in the 1950s.

Longstanding interest in murals on the part of architects and abstract painters (documented across the first three chapters) intersected, during this decade, with a postwar building boom to produce an unprecedented number of abstract mural commissions. Abstract Expressionists Hans Hofmann, Lee Krasner, and Adolph Gottlieb created works in mosaic and stained glass for building lobbies and facades; at the same time, geometric abstraction reminiscent of the murals of the FAP returned in works by Josef Albers and Fritz Glarner. Like the FAP murals two decades earlier, these postwar murals were discussed in terms of civic space and the public sphere. Their production and reception, however, were deeply inflected by the commercial gallery—which exhibited mural mock-ups and courted new institutional patrons—and the corporation’s turn toward art collecting.

The Abstract Environment in Modern Art

The abstract murals of the midcentury decades were informed by two, distinct histories: environmental abstraction and muralism. The abstract environment plays a central role within histories of modern art and architecture. Around the turn of the century, diverse milieux in Paris, Vienna, and elsewhere emphasized the expansion of painting’s formal elements into space. For the French avant-garde, this involved an elevation of *décoration*: “Away with easel pictures!” painter Jan Verkade exclaimed in his memoir of the Nabis circle of the 1890s. “The work of the painter begins where that of the architect is finished. Hence let us have walls, that we may paint them over.... There are no paintings, but only

decorations.”⁵ Paul Gauguin’s expansive fields of color and Synthetist approach to form (along with his creation of carvings and decorative objects) led to his status as, in the estimation of Maurice Denis, the “decisive example of Expression through Décor.”⁶ Or, in the more polemical words of Albert Aurier, Gauguin is “a decorator of genius: walls! walls! give him walls!”⁷ In Vienna, Gustav Klimt’s paintings found walls through collaboration with architect Josef Hoffmann, for whom he made several murals. As Jenny Anger has argued, a marriage of two different conceptions—the French emphasis on flat fields of color, and a predominantly German emphasis on linear ornament—would define the category of the decorative for abstract painters of the prewar and interwar years.⁸

Klimt’s example highlights the central role of architecture in shaping the idea of the abstract environment in Europe. Klimt’s murals owe much to Hoffmann’s guiding interest in the interior as an integrated whole, in which art, architecture, and decoration create a spatial unity. This idea had gained popularity several decades earlier, notably in the English Arts and Crafts movement, and by the decades around the turn of the century it would constitute a major concern of Art Nouveau, Wiener Werkstätte, and Deutsche Werkbund architects. Hermann Muthesius, who popularized the English Arts and Crafts movement with his 1905 *Das Englische Haus*, characterized the integrated interior as “a

⁵ Jan Verkade quoted in Nicholas Watkins, “The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic,” in Gloria Groom, ed., *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890-1930*, 1-28 (Chicago and New Haven: Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University, 2001), 1.

⁶ Maurice Denis, “The Influence of Paul Gauguin” [1903], in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp, 100-07 (Berkeley: University of California, 1984).

⁷ Albert Aurier, quoted in Jane Beckett, “The Abstract Interior,” in *Towards a New Art: Essays on the Background to Abstract Art 1910-20*, 90–124 (London: Tate Gallery, 1980), 95.

⁸ Jenny Anger, *Paul Klee and the Decorative in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 33.

whole, the essence of which lies in fact, in its totality, in its quality as space.”⁹ Like their English predecessors, Muthesius and others imputed a moral dimension to the collaborative work necessary for such “total” spaces: collaboration among architects, artists, and designers, they thought, signaled the return of a more integrated and cohesive social order.

The abstract environment received its most explicit articulation in two artistic movements of the interwar years: the Bauhaus in Germany (1919-1933) and the de Stijl group in the Netherlands (1917-1932). Although Bauhaus artists produced significant abstract murals,¹⁰ the most influential contribution of the school lay in its broader philosophy. Through its workshops devoted to sculpture, weaving, typography, and other arts, the Bauhaus sought to “bring together all creative effort into one whole, to reunify all the disciplines of practical art.” Furthermore, it subsumed these under the broader goal of architecture, or the “complete building.” “The ultimate, if distant, aim of the Bauhaus,” Walter Gropius explained in the school’s program, “is the unified work of art—the great structure.”¹¹ Such total environments were the aim of de Stijl artists, as well, although they put less emphasis on industry and production than the Bauhaus, and gave color (often in unmodulated rectangles and squares) the main role in enlivening architectural surface. As Nancy Troy has argued, collaboration between architect and

⁹ Hermann Muthesius, quoted in Beckett, “The Abstract Interior,” 91.

¹⁰ On these murals, see Sabine Thümmler, “Die Werkstatt für Wandmalerei” in *Bauhaus*, ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend, 452-61 (Cologne: Könemann, 1999); Peter Chametzky, “From *Werkbund* to *Entartung*: Willi Baumeister’s ‘Wall Pictures’” in *The Built Surface*, ed. Karen Koehler, vol. 2, 159-85 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002); and Christine Mehring, “Vasily Kandinsky Designs for Wall Paintings. 1922,” in *Bauhaus, 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*, ed. Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman, 122-29 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005).

¹¹ Walter Gropius, “Programme of the Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar,” in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. Conrad Ulrich, 49-53 (Cambridge: MIT, 1970), 50.

painter was at the heart of de Stijl, where it possessed a “moral integrity” akin to its status under the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements of the nineteenth century.¹²

Certain of these European movements exerted direct influence on artists and architects working in the United States. This is especially true of de Stijl; as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the work of Theo van Doesburg and Mondrian was important for several members of the American Abstract Artists group as they developed an expansive, geometric approach to abstraction. For its part, the architectural inheritance of the integrated interior, and the central role of the arts within it, would shape American abstract muralism through European architects who worked in the United States, as well as through figures trained in or committed to European modernist ideas. Swiss-American architect William Lescaze, for example, advocated the inclusion of modern art in buildings throughout his career, and played an important role in abstract murals by the American Abstract Artists of the 1930s and by the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s. The discourse of the New Monumentality, which arose in the wartime and immediate postwar years, would also move across the Atlantic as an influential way of incorporating abstraction into the built environment, now on the larger scale of city planning and urbanism.

As this brief sketch makes clear, the history of the abstract environment in European modernism betrays a diversity of approaches, in both architecture and painting. Few scholars have attempted to knit together these approaches into one history, and even fewer to connect that history explicitly to the rise of abstract painting. One exception is Jane Beckett’s essay on the “Abstract Interior” (1980), which considers many of the

¹² Nancy J. Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge: MIT, 1983), 4.

movements described above, along with cabaret interiors, decorations by Wassily Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, the Omega Workshops in London, the studio environments of Die Brücke artists, and the Maison Cubiste in Paris.¹³ We could also add here El Lissitzky's three-dimensional *Prouns* (which the artist referred to as the "transfer station between painting and architecture"¹⁴), Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, and avant-garde exhibition practices across Europe. In excavating certain episodes in the American history of the abstract environment, this dissertation is committed to preserving a similar diversity of styles and approaches, from the constructivist aims of the American Abstract Artists to the machine experimentation of Henry Billings to the emotional tenor of gestural painting.

Linking these diverse approaches was a core belief in abstraction's natural, even inherent, suitability to the large scale, and its ability, once unframed and expanded in space, to profoundly shape viewers' individual and social lives. The pursuit of these ideas entangled artists, architects, and viewers in three recurring problems, which are worth reviewing here: collaboration, the integrated space, and decoration. American muralists and viewers frequently invoked collaboration as the necessary condition for producing integrated spaces in which architecture and painting functioned together. Yet actual collaboration between architects and painters was rare in the United States—and

¹³ Beckett, "The Abstract Interior." If few scholars have treated these various abstract environments together, many scholars have written excellent accounts of specific modern movements, works, or periods in which the question of spatial totality or ensemble guides the argument. See, for example, Troy, *De Stijl Environment*; Nancy J. Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (New Haven: Yale University, 1991); Wilson, *The Modern Eye*; Richard Meyer, "Big, Middle-Class Modernism," *October* 131 (2010): 69–115; and Megan Luke, *Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2014).

¹⁴ El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, eds., *Die Kunstismen* (Baden: Lars Müller, 1990), xi.

exceedingly rare for those abstract painters at the heart of this study.¹⁵ The central problem lay in how and when mural commissions were advertised, sought, and awarded; in the New Deal programs, in commissions by individuals, and in the work sponsored by corporations, the duties of architect and painter were split in ways that discouraged joint work. Nevertheless, the integrated interior and the collaborative work necessary to produce it remained consistent tropes in period criticism, invoked as the gold standard for successful abstract murals.

Decoration was an even more complex issue within large-scale abstraction. In Europe, the decorative had both positive associations, as indicated in the French avant-garde's embrace of the term, and negative ones: critics of Henri Matisse, for example, derided his expanses of color and arabesques as tapestry and wallpaper designs. As a range of scholars have argued, the negative aspects of the decorative were closely tied to marginal figures in society: women, foreigners, and the lower classes emerged as the decorative's feminine, exotic, and mass cultural dimensions.¹⁶ In the 1930s United States, the decorative did not spark the same anxieties, at least not among painters expanding their abstractions to mural scale. Terms like "house painter"¹⁷ were largely used positively to describe the clean, modernist forms of the American Abstract Artists and others. In the 1940s, by contrast, the decorative's negative associations with the feminine and the mass cultural came to the fore. The slippage of abstract art into mere decoration

¹⁵ Collaboration has a complex history in the European context, as well; Nancy Troy has charted its rise and eventual fall within the de Stijl movement, as artists and architects competed for authority. See Troy, *De Stijl Environment*.

¹⁶ See Jacques Soullou, *Le Décoratif* (Paris, 1991); Alastair Wright, *Matisse and the Subject of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2004); and Anger, *Paul Klee*.

¹⁷ "Architectural Painting," *Time*, June 6, 1938, 39.

was a central worry of Greenberg, Pollock, and others in the Abstract Expressionist group, and large-scale murals accelerated this perceived degeneration.

One of the central insights of this project is that scale can function in unexpected and contradictory ways. While large dimensions can invoke monumentality and grandeur, they can also create spaces of remarkable subtlety and closeness. Abstract murals—non-referential, repetitive, and non-hierarchical in arrangement—are particularly capable of switching between such registers: unfurling along a hallway, covering a freestanding wall to its outer edges, or filling in the blank plane between paired windows, a mural might utterly dominate its space or quietly inhabit it; or it might, in certain cases, do both at once. The artists in this study used two main approaches in scaling up their abstractions. In the first, the mural is conceived as a surround: unframed abstraction that encircles its viewers, whether literally (installed on curving supports), perceptually (achieving dimensions that dwarf viewers and fill their peripheral vision), or in concert with the architectural space more broadly (acting as one abstract surface among many). In the second type, the mural is conceived as a signboard or monument, usually flat and rectangular, whose main task is communication. Unframed from the small dimensions and aesthetic context of the easel painting, the signboard mural broadcasts symbols or meanings to the viewing public. Where the appeal of the abstract surround lies primarily in its intimacy—its ability to inform the subject on a quotidian and psychological level—the signboard mural operates more overtly as a form of public address.

The distinction between these two types is by no means absolute. Several murals incorporate aspects of both: Stuart Davis's gargantuan, black and white World's Fair mural (1939) arranges abstracted symbols for viewers to read in the manner of a

chalkboard, but it does this as part of a multimedia environment of ambient sounds and colors. Similarly, Hofmann's mosaic for a public-school façade (1958) acts as an eye-catching banner from across the street and as a more ambient, unfurling surface for pedestrians walking alongside it. Nevertheless, the distinction is a useful one for understanding different conceptions of how large-scale abstraction should relate to its architectural shell and its audience. Chapters 1 and 3 deal primarily with murals conceived as abstract surrounds, and Chapters 2 and 4 with those structured as abstract signboards. Although these two types appear to point in opposite directions—the one inward to the interior, and the other outward to the world—neither belongs exclusively to the domain of the public or the private. The New Deal murals of the first chapter, for example, are abstract surrounds that deal centrally with the question of the public and the state.

Modern Muralism in the United States

None of the artists in this study were trained as muralists. They were, instead, painters, some committed exclusively to abstraction and some working in a variety of modern styles, who embraced the mural as the logical vehicle for expanding abstract art to a new scale and social position. Yet the mural brought with it its own history and assumptions. If the de Stijl group and the Bauhaus wall painting workshop pointed out directions in muralism for American abstract painters, the mural field was also defined by other approaches: by Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, by the political and epochal narratives of the

Mexican muralists, and by a “renaissance in mural painting”¹⁸ in the United States itself, which encompassed regionalists, modernists, and Art Deco muralists alike. Scholar Francisco Reyes Palma, examining muralism in relation to the Mexican state, has defined the “mural device” as a “vision and meaning machine” that pulls together artistic practice, governmental activity, and architectural space.¹⁹ Beyond its relevance to state ideology in Mexican muralism, the concept of the “mural device” is useful for understanding that murals produce meaning at the intersection of individual, institutional, and cultural factors. In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s United States, the mural was not just a medium; it also entailed assumptions about audience, architecture, and public space. Such assumptions are not inherent to muralism, but they are historically related to it in important and enduring ways. Before proceeding, it is useful to review here the history of modern muralism in the United States, which set the agenda, rhetoric, and expectations for what murals could mean and do in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

The first cohesive mural movement in the United States flourished in the decades around 1900, in what is today termed beaux-arts muralism. Edwin Blashfield’s mural for the Library of Congress is an iconic, and typical, example. It accommodates itself to the architectural dictates of the space, the Library’s dome collar and lantern, and communicates allegorical messages about nation and history—in this case, providing a cycle of twelve figures, each representing a major civilization and its particular

¹⁸ Painter and teacher Winold Reiss, the *New York Times* reported, “forecast a renaissance of mural painting in this country equal to any in Europe as soon as building on a large scale is resumed. ‘Architects had reached a point just before the crash where they were cooperating closely with mural painters and interior architects.’” See “N.Y.U. Names Reiss As Mural Art Aide,” *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 1933, N2.

¹⁹ Francisco Reyes Palma, “Mural Devices,” in *José Clemente Orozco in the United States, 1927-1934*, ed. Renato Gonzalez Mello and Diane Miliotes, 216-29 (Hanover, N.H. and New York: Hood Museum of Art and Norton, 2002), 217.

contribution (writing, religion, science) to world knowledge.²⁰ Although beaux-arts murals enjoyed widespread popularity around the turn of the century, they were not treated kindly by modernism's ascent. By the 1920s, even as major commissions by John Singer Sargent and Gari Melchers were being completed, the style was widely perceived as outdated.²¹ *New York Times* critic E.A. Jewell echoed many when, in a 1929 column entitled "Mural Art Picks Up," he mused, "Have we at length bade eternal farewell to the stilted, tedious investiture of a generation gone by?"²² Lincoln Kirstein was blunter in his critique a few years later, dismissing the output of the National Society of Mural Painters (the inheritors of the beaux-arts tradition) as the worst kind of academic art, "the academy of a particularly strangulated, debased and flat archaisticism—the dilution of models already diluted."²³

Kirstein offered this assessment as part of an important exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932, "Murals by American Painters and Photographers." Bringing together murals by modernists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Stuart Davis, and Charles Sheeler, the exhibition was one of many attempts, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, to define the contours of a mural renaissance taking shape in the United States. Kirstein, Jewell, and other writers pointed to the Mexican muralists and to U.S. artists Boardman Robinson and Thomas Hart Benton as models for a new American muralism suited to

²⁰ On beaux-arts muralism, see Bailey Van Hook, *The Virgin & the Dynamo: Public Murals in American Architecture, 1893-1917* (Athens: Ohio University, 2003).

²¹ Hook, *The Virgin & the Dynamo*, 185-7.

²² E.A. Jewell, "Mural Art Picks Up," *New York Times*, December 8, 1929, X14.

²³ Lincoln Kirstein, "Mural Painting," in *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, 7-11 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 9.

modernism and the modern world.²⁴ They posed questions about modern materials and techniques (recommending photography and automobile paint, among others); modern subject matter (praising commerce, labor, abstraction, and the city, and widely denouncing allegory of any kind); and the nature of modern architecture (noting how its “plain surfaces” required visual enrichment²⁵). They frequently commented on the speed of modern life and modern building, and how it discouraged thoughtful murals or decorative programs. And they returned again and again to the question of architectural integration, how the mural should “unite itself to the esthetic idea of the architect and become an extension and enrichment of his plan for the whole.”²⁶ Although different answers to these questions would be proposed over the course of the next three decades, the issues delineated by critics around 1930 would prove remarkably persistent.

Critics at this time also began to explore the question of abstraction in murals. Jewell praised a slew of representational muralists, but also singled out Augustus Vincent Tack’s “decorative abstractions,” large panels of floating colors done for art collector Duncan Phillips.²⁷ Elizabeth Luther Carey, writing in the *New York Times*, praised two modernist murals as “entering wedge[s] for purely abstract design in public buildings,” and offered an early version of an argument that would come to dominate abstract mural

²⁴ Interest in Mexican muralism, already piqued in the United States at the end of the 1920s, reached new heights in the early years of the following decade, with Diego Rivera’s exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1931-32 and with major murals in the U.S. by Jose Clemente Orozco (1930, 1931, 1934), Rivera (1931, 1933), and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1932). Robinson’s murals for the Kaufmann Department Store in Pittsburgh (1929) and Benton’s murals for the New School in New York (1931) were frequently cited in the press as major examples by U.S. artists.

²⁵ Hildreth Meière, “The Question of Decoration,” *Architectural Forum* 57.1 (July 1932): 1-8; 1.

²⁶ Elisabeth Luther Cary, “The Painting on the Wall Moves Toward Modernism,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1930, X9. Cary’s two examples are Arthur Covey’s mural for the Squibb Building and Putnam Brinley’s mural for 120 Wall Street.

²⁷ E.A. Jewell, “Murals for Radio City,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1932, X12.

discourse over the next decade: that abstraction was “logically the wholly appropriate type of decoration for the new architecture.”²⁸ For Carey, as for later observers, the abstract language of modern architecture required an equally abstract decorative art.

The mural programs of the New Deal exerted a profound influence on both artists’ and the public’s attitude toward murals. Through the Treasury Department’s Section of Fine Arts (1934-43), which commissioned murals and sculpture for federal buildings, and the Mural Division of the Federal Art Project (FAP; 1935-43), which created works for non-federal tax-supported buildings, a generation of artists who had worked sporadically or not at all on wall paintings was given the opportunity to create murals. It is hard to overstate the significance of the New Deal programs: of the more than twenty painters whose murals are discussed in detail in this dissertation, more than half worked on murals under the FAP, and all but six worked on the FAP in some form.²⁹ The New Deal also gave a new prominence to the mural in American cultural life, and solidified its populist associations, both through iconography (frequent subjects included the rural family and urban laborers) and through expectations about the government’s role in providing art to the people in their schools, hospitals, courthouses, and other public spaces.³⁰ Historically black colleges and universities were also a significant patron

²⁸ Carey, “The Painting on the Wall Moves Toward Modernism.”

²⁹ The artists who were not on the FAP rolls were either too wealthy to qualify (for example, Suzy Frelinghuysen, George L. K. Morris, and Robert Motherwell) or else ineligible by nationality (Josef Albers, Fritz Glarner, and Hans Hofmann). Fernand Léger was ineligible because of his French nationality, but nevertheless secured an unpaid position as the director of an FAP mural project for the French Line Pier. The other artists that worked on the FAP Mural Division are Ilya Bolotowsky, Byron Browne, Henry Billings, Dane Chanase, Stuart Davis, Balcomb Greene, Paul Kelpe, Lee Krasner, Eric Mose, Joseph Rugolo, Louis Schanker, Max Spivak, and Albert Swinden. William Baziotes, Adolph Gottlieb, and Jackson Pollock were employed on the FAP Easel Division.

³⁰ On the various strands of populism inculcated through New Deal iconography, see Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington, DC:

of murals in the 1930s and 1940s, as David Conrad has pointed out; Talladega College, Fisk University, and Hampton Institute commissioned important murals by Hale Woodruff, Aaron Douglas, and Charles White.³¹

Murals retreated as a mainstay of art production in the 1940s, especially after the discontinuation of the New Deal programs in 1943 meant the loss of their main patron, the federal and state governments. At the same time, the mural assumed importance in the discourse around the nascent Abstract Expressionist group. Greenberg gave the most well-known elaboration of this idea, explaining that “There is a persistent urge, as persistent as it is largely unconscious, to go beyond the cabinet picture, which is destined to occupy only a spot on the wall, to a kind of picture that, without actually becoming identified with the wall like a mural, would *spread* over it and acknowledge its physical reality.”³² Other critics frequently invoked a similar comparison, especially toward the end of the decade and into the 1950s. Despite the dip in mural production, the American mural tradition continued to shape artists of these years. Pollock studied with Benton and was deeply influenced by the Mexican muralists, and artists such as Krasner and Max Spivak, introduced to muralism through their work on the FAP, realized murals in the postwar years.

Smithsonian Press, 1991) and Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995). Andrew Hemingway provides a useful overview of the politics of New Deal murals in his *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University, 2002), 170-76.

³¹ David Conrad, “Community Murals as Democratic Art and Education,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 29.1 (1995): 98–102. See, on these murals, Stephanie Mayer, *Rising Up: Hale Woodruff’s Murals at Talladega College* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2012) and Breanne Robertson, “Pan-Americanism, Patriotism, and Race Pride in Charles White’s Hampton Mural,” *American Art* 30.1 (March 2016): 52–71.

³² Clement Greenberg, “The Situation at the Moment” [1948], in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 194–95. Greenberg here elaborates a position that he had begun exploring in 1943.

Murals found renewed patronage in the 1950s and 1960s, as twin booms, in the art market and in construction, created consumer demand for modern art and a host of buildings in which to site wall paintings. The corporation also emerged in these decades as a powerful cultural force and art patron. Through office buildings' ground-level plazas and outdoor sculptures, the corporation helped engineer a new conception of both public space and public art, different in kind (but often employing similar rhetoric) from the one inculcated under the New Deal. By the end of the 1960s, a more radical vision of the mural emerged in cities such as Chicago, Boston, and New York, one that would dominate the community mural movement of the 1970s and beyond. Often eschewing commissions and official sponsorship, community murals such as the *Wall of Respect* (1967-71) developed in tandem with the Black Arts Movement and the Chicano Art Movement and took many of their cues from urban street art.³³

In addition to the issues of the abstract environment, then, abstract murals of the mid-twentieth century raised questions developed in the context of the mural field more broadly; viewers encountering abstract murals tended to expect a connection to public space or public life, and they pondered what a truly modern mural might look like. Critic and historian Lewis Mumford offered one of the most perceptive comments about American muralism in 1935, in a review of a mural exhibition at the Grand Central Galleries in New York. Mumford shared the excitement of critics eager for a mural renaissance in the United States. But he was also more sensitive to the form's contradictions, especially in the modern age. He praised the murals on display, noting

³³ On the community mural movement, see Eva Cockcroft, John Weber, and James D. Cockcroft, *Toward A People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (New York: Dutton, 1977); and Alan W. Barnett, *Community Murals: The People's Art* (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1984).

that the mural form had brought out the best in the exhibited painters, but he added an important caveat: the mural, he wrote, “has excited the imagination of contemporary American painters” by offering “two helpful illusions—the illusion of an audience, and the illusion of a destination.”³⁴ Americans were working with a new vigor in their murals, but it was precisely by operating under twin illusions: of a public and of a space where that public might congregate. Although offered in the mid-1930s, Mumford’s insight applies to the entire period of American muralism under study in this dissertation. In a modern age of mass media, ephemeral building stock, and increasingly splintered publics, the mural’s popularity—and its appeal to certain artists—may have been due, in part, to its ability to symbolize a more cohesive and rooted form of art viewing than actually existed.

Recent mural scholarship has dealt explicitly with these and similar contradictions. Anna Indych-López’s *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (2009) focuses on murals in their expanded field of circulation and dissemination.³⁵ Indych-López pays careful attention to the actual spaces in which murals were experienced: she argues that finding U.S. art markets for works physically sited in Mexico necessitated a whole range of moveable mural forms, from Diego Rivera’s “portable frescoes” at his 1931-32 New York retrospective, to prints and photographs of in-situ mural cycles. Similarly, Romy Golan’s *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (2009) examines portable mosaic panels, hanging tapestries, and other forms of “nomadic” muralism that gained popularity in

³⁴ Lewis Mumford, “Paints, Palettes, and the Public Wall,” *New Yorker*, February 16, 1935, 50-52.

³⁵ Anna Indych-López, *Muralism without Walls: Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros in the United States, 1927-1940* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 2009).

interwar and early postwar Europe.³⁶ Both these books offer a welcome revision to the uncritical acceptance of murals as a stable and rooted public art form. In the chapters that follow, I attend to abstract murals both as architecturally sited phenomena and within the wider field of portability, exhibition display, and reproduction within which they circulated.

³⁶ Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009).

CHAPTER 1

MURALS FOR THE COMMUNITY: ABSTRACTION AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE NEW DEAL

A photograph in the Archives of American Art shows the abstract painter Harry Holtzman dressed in a suit and tie and standing before a large demonstration board (**fig. 1.1**). On the board are several pieces of paper, tacked up for the audience to see, and covered with shapes and arrows. On one, a darkly colored triangle sits among a circle, rectangle, and two crosses of various size; on another, strong contrasts of dark and light fill two rectangular blocks, from which arrows protrude. The inscription on the photograph's back provides the event and location: "Harry Holtzman of the American Abstract Artists," it reads, "in demonstration of abstract art / main gallery / American Art Today Building."³⁷ Alongside the inscription are stamped attributions to both the New York City Federal Art Project and the New York World's Fair of 1939–40, where the American Art Today Building stood.

Taken in July 1940, the photograph challenges a number of our assumptions about art and audience in the New Deal period. For one, it indicates that, the preponderance of social realist and regionalist styles notwithstanding, abstraction found devoted adherents in these years. This included new groups—the American Abstract Artists (AAA) was founded, by Holtzman and others, in 1936—as well as government support, whether through the Federal Art Project's coordination of exhibitions and

³⁷ Photograph, July 4, 1940, Archives of American Art (hereafter AAA), Holger Cahill Papers (hereafter HCP), Series 3.14, digitized microfilm, reel 5298, frames 915-916.

demonstrations (as here³⁸) or through the abstract murals, paintings, and prints produced on the Project's rolls. By 1940 abstraction certainly constituted a vital part of "American art today," as the Fair's building was called. Perhaps most strikingly of all, the photograph presents abstraction as a decidedly social and educational activity. The abstract studies that Holtzman gazes upon in the photograph are not there for his own perusal alone, or even for a group of likeminded artists stopping by his studio. Rather, they exist for the masses of people that flocked to the New York World's Fair, then in the midst of its second season. Like other demonstrations sponsored by the Federal Art Project and held at the American Art Today pavilion—on fresco technique, printmaking, and the like—Holtzman's "demonstration of abstract art" aimed to widen art's impact: to bring art to a larger public, and to make that public's engagement with it more meaningful and gratifying. In short, the demonstration sought to put abstraction back into a vital relationship with its viewers. "Abstract art," wrote the AAA in 1937, "does not end in a private chapel." Instead, a "combination of art and life" should prevail. Abstraction's "positive identification with life," they insisted, "has brought a profound change in our environment and in our lives."³⁹

One of the primary ways that abstract artists sought to effect this "profound change," in both environment and life, was through muralism. In this and the following chapter, I examine how abstract murals functioned in the contexts of the two sponsoring institutions for Holtzman's demonstration: the Federal Art Project, which employed

³⁸ See the correspondence between Harry Holtzman and Mildred Holzhauer, July 1940, AAA, Records of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (hereafter WPA-FAP), reel DC93, frames 1464-1465.

³⁹ Hananiah Harari, Jan Matulka, Herzl Emanuel, Byron Browne, Leo Lances, Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, and George McNeil, "Letter to the Editors," *Art Front* 3.7 (October 1937): 20-21; 21.

thousands of jobless Americans to make art, and the New York World's Fair of 1939–40, which presented “The World of Tomorrow” to its millions of visitors. Unframed abstraction played a role in both the New Deal's vision for a public-oriented art and in the World's Fair's vision of a technologically advanced, consumerist future. Previous scholarship on abstract muralism of the New Deal period has tended either to sideline it completely—to assume that, because abstraction lacks the populist appeal of realism, it cannot be a form of public art—or, conversely, to argue that a profound complementarity underlies the radicalness of abstraction and of public art. In this latter view, the political commitment of the artist, the perceived politics of the mural form, and the radicalness of abstraction all mutually enhance one another.⁴⁰ Yet both kinds of readings ignore the rather complex ways in which murals actually functioned and were understood. For one thing, abstract murals were not always perceived or even intended as political; as we will see in this chapter, artists and viewers also spoke of them as decorative or therapeutic in nature. Furthermore, even when politics was at the forefront of a muralist's mind, the truly interesting questions involve how claims about publicness intersected with the actual specifics of installation and reception. What do we make of a claim by an artist like Balcomb Greene, for example, that abstraction could operate subconsciously on the viewer's psychology, and gird him against political inaction and oppression? How do such claims sit with what we know about a given mural's site and installation?

⁴⁰ See, for example, Jody Patterson, “The Art of Swinging Left in the 1930s: Modernism, Realism, and the Politics of the Left in the Murals of Stuart Davis,” *Art History* 33.1 (2010): 98–123; Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University, 2002), 170-71 and 174-76; and Greta Berman, “Abstractions for Public Spaces, 1935-1943,” *Arts Magazine* 51.10 (1982): 81–85.

The first step toward answering these questions is reconstructing the mural's public life: where and how did it meet its audience? Rather than excerpting and re-presenting abstract murals as two-dimensional oil paintings, I will attend to their spatial and architectural locations as much as possible. In order to facilitate this, I have chosen to focus on relatively few examples (in this chapter, three main case studies), trading breadth for depth. Previous scholarship on individual artists and on the Federal Art Project generally—which has amassed lists of abstract works, investigated the current whereabouts of New Deal murals, interviewed living artists, and gathered scattered archival information—has built an impressive and invaluable foundation for further study.⁴¹ Building on such work, I undertake a different approach here, focusing on select murals as sited works of art intersecting with an array of audiences.

In this chapter, I argue, first, that the most important context for understanding abstract murals of the 1930s and early 1940s is the wider public culture of the New Deal; second, that murals had to navigate between this culture and an older, inherited understanding of public art; and third, that certain realities of the New Deal's ideology, bureaucracy, and patronage structure produced particular ways of envisioning and reading abstract murals. I will begin by outlining the public art culture of the New Deal period, a culture created by the unprecedented expansion of government into new areas of

⁴¹ I am particularly indebted in this chapter to Francis V. O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (New York: Graphic Society Ltd., 1969); Nancy J. Troy, "The Williamsburg Housing Project Murals and the Polemic of Abstraction in American Painting of the 1930s" (M.A. thesis, Yale University, 1976); Susan C. Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of Its Impact Upon American Art" (Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1974); Greta Berman, *The Lost Years: Mural Painting in N.Y. City under the WPA Federal Art Project, 1935-1943* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978); and Sandra Kraskin, "Ilya Bolotowsky: A Study of His Painting and an Examination of His Relationship to the Development of Abstract Art in the United States" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1993).

citizens' lives. I will then turn to two suites of abstract murals done for municipal sites with their own, particular claims to the public sphere. The first, a set of four murals installed in the Williamsburg Housing Projects in Brooklyn, New York in 1938-9, added geometric shapes and colors to the spare, rectilinear social rooms in the complex's basement. The second, four murals installed in day rooms at the Chronic Diseases Hospital on Welfare (now Roosevelt) Island in the East River, produced enveloping abstract environments, surrounding patients with soothing and therapeutic designs. Finally, I will examine mural exhibitions like the 1938 "Murals for the Community" at the Federal Art Gallery in New York City, elucidating the central role that exhibitions played both in developing New Deal public culture generally, and in provoking discussions about abstract muralism in particular.

The Public Culture of the New Deal

The mural appealed to painters within the AAA's ambit in part because of precedents by European modernists like Piet Mondrian, Theodore van Doesburg, and Fernand Léger, as I discuss presently. But an equally important influence was the new importance that the mural assumed within the New Deal art economy. These murals, in turn, must be understood within the vast reorganization and reconceptualization of the public sphere that President Franklin Roosevelt's initiatives precipitated. The extensive array of New Deal programs served to forge new ties between citizens and government, often in arenas that had previously occasioned little or no government intervention, such as employment, culture, and public life. Furthermore, such ties cut across levels of government in new ways. In New York City, with its extensive municipal apparatus, and a mayor who prided

himself on his close relationship with the president, these changes created a particularly dynamic mix of city, state, and federal intervention within the civilian sphere. The operations of programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA) made government newly visible in the New Deal period: in the words of historian Mason B. Williams, such programs “catalyzed a rapid and far-reaching change in popular expectations for public sector production,” by “linking citizens to the government in new ways, [and] by enabling citizens to ‘see’ government differently.”⁴² It is in this sense of public—of a civil society newly conscious of itself and its imbrication with government—that New Deal art ought to be understood. More significant than the public sites of certain murals, and even than the public funds that paid for them, was the broader reengineering of a public whose contacts and relationships with government were more manifold and visible than ever.

New Deal art arose in and further bolstered this public; in its reach and its visual nature, it was potent and concrete proof of the new relationships between government and citizens. Through programs like the WPA’s Federal Art Project (FAP; 1935-1943), the Treasury Department’s Section of Fine Arts (1934-1943), and predecessors like the short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP; 1933-1934), the 1930s saw a veritable explosion of art in the daily lives of New Yorkers.⁴³ Lectures, classes, and exhibits

⁴² Mason B. Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: Norton, 2013), 205.

⁴³ There was some degree of relief available for artists in New York before these programs. The Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) was a New York State agency created by then-Governor Franklin Roosevelt in 1931. The College Art Association also managed art relief programs, first with funds from the Gibson Committee, a charity group, and then with federal money from the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the temporary jobs program that President Roosevelt launched in December 1933 and which expired 18 months later.

proliferated across existing civic centers and museums, while new community art centers were founded. Weekly schedules of FAP events and exhibits appeared in the *New York Times* and other papers, detailing when, for example, a group of children's paintings would be on view at a local church, or when FAP posters or photographs were to debut at a Salvation Army or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Other centers screened FAP-produced films, and artists and administrators frequently spoke on the radio to discuss their projects or to mention an upcoming mural dedication.

This expansion of a public art culture—that is, an art culture embedded in the daily life and popular media of an unprecedentedly wide swath of citizens—left its mark in period texts, where a particular set of criteria and claims are invoked in discussions of the FAP and related programs. Defending the FAP against threatened cuts in 1938, New York administrator Paul Edwards wrote to his superiors in D.C., stressing the numbers of works produced and, especially, the public's engagement with those works:

Nearly a million [...] New Yorkers in these two and one-half years [since 1935] have flocked to the almost one thousand WPA gallery and other art exhibits of the work of our artists! Would it not seem that the WPA has stimulated in this city a new and

The WPA was created in 1935 as a long-term jobs-creation program, with Harry Hopkins as its director. Its cultural arm, known as Federal One, oversaw not just the FAP but also the Federal Writers, Theater, and Music Projects, and the Historical Records Survey. For an organizational overview of the various art programs of the New Deal, see Martin R. Kalfatovic, *The New Deal Fine Arts Projects: A Bibliography, 1933-1992* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1994) and O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*. A detailed administrative history can be found in William Francis McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1969).

unprecedented appreciation of the arts, that it has carried art to the people as it has claimed, and that it has enriched the cultural life of this city?⁴⁴

Of primary importance to Edwards was the extent and experience of citizens taking part in a new and enlivened art culture. Commenting on the FAP's active Teaching Division, Edwards cited the "public demand in the concrete form of waiting lines of New Yorkers." He continued, "While no Raphael may emerge from this great body of students, rich veins of creative talent in the community have been revealed and their attendance at WPA classes has brought to almost one-half million New Yorkers a deeper enjoyment of art."⁴⁵ More important than the quality of work produced were the process and experience of art viewing, teaching, and making.

John Dewey had articulated the germs of such ideas in philosophical terms in the early 1930s, arguing for an understanding of art as deeply enmeshed in personal and social experience. In terms similar to those employed by the AAA only a few years later, Dewey argued that art should be seen not as an "intruder in experience from without" but rather as "the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience."⁴⁶ Understanding art's "continuity [...] with normal processes of living" is a means to a richer form of perception, and to a truer understanding of art's meaning.⁴⁷ Indeed, for Dewey, art's profoundest meaning comes not when considered as

⁴⁴ Paul Edwards to Ellen S. Woodward, weekly letter, May 5, 1938, 4-5, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90. Edwards administered all of the Federal One programs (the Art, Writers, Theater, and Music Projects, and the Historical Records Survey) for New York City. Edwards's weekly letters to Ellen Woodward in the national office in D.C., and Audrey McMahon's letters to her supervisor Edwards, are an invaluable source of information for the day-to-day activities of the New York City project.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 46.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.

an ideal or walled-off entity, but when thrust back into the currents of reception and public life: “communication [may not be] the intent of an artist,” he writes, “But it is the consequence of his work—which indeed lives only in communication when it operates in the experience of others.”⁴⁸ As in his writings on the public sphere and on experience more generally, Dewey’s aesthetic theory contains a profound hope for a renewed synthesis of man and his environment. “Works of art that are not remote from common life,” he writes, “that are widely enjoyed in a community, are signs of a unified collective life. But they are also marvelous aids in the creation of such a life.”⁴⁹

Dewey’s notion that art and its public might be redefined—and a new, more collective culture attained—surfaces throughout the New Deal art programs. In 1934, while administering one of the predecessors to the FAP, Audrey McMahon offered an early description of a new relationship that obtained between the artist and his public:

If public beneficiaries, the artists are also public benefactors. Through this economic need [of employment], now being met, the artist has been brought into direct contact with the people, his people; and what he has always dreamed of telling them, teaching them and doing for them, he is at last in a position to accomplish.⁵⁰

Such rhetoric was repeated by artists and citizens as well as administrators: they emphasized that the artist was newly in touch with the community (he had “descen[ded]

⁴⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁰ Audrey McMahon, quoted in E.A. Jewell, “The Waxing Mural Tide. Ambitious Program Promoted by College Art Association Under CWA Prospers,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1934, X6. McMahon would soon after be appointed the regional director of the New York FAP, in 1935.

from the so-called ivory tower”⁵¹), and that the community was newly understanding of the artist’s role. Such lines of contact and communication were the roots for a rebirth of a true American culture. Letters to Washington regarding the FAP cite its “definite contributions to American culture,” the “splendid program of bringing culture to large masses of American people,” and “the great democratic culture which is being born in America.”⁵² Or, as *Fortune* magazine commented in May 1937, “The Federal Art Projects were set up not only to let artists produce art but to educate and interest the masses of the people and prepare if possible the kind of soil in which ‘a genuine art movement’ might be expected to flower.”⁵³

The most eloquent spokesman for this new public art culture was Holger Cahill, appointed national director of the FAP in 1935. As director of the FAP, Cahill reported directly to Harry Hopkins in Washington, the head of the WPA and a member of Roosevelt’s cabinet, and was responsible for programs in all forty-eight states of the country. Yet he also maintained close ties to New York City, where he frequented FAP events and where his wife, Dorothy Miller, served as Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Cahill was himself an admirer of Dewey’s philosophy.⁵⁴ In the catalogue for the 1936 exhibition “New Horizons in

⁵¹ McMahon, “Foreword and Greetings from the Federal Art Project,” in “Art in Democracy,” brochure for a Federal One event on June 7, 1938, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90, frame 1468 ff.

⁵² Letters and telegrams to President Roosevelt and WPA Director Harry Hopkins from Wesley Curtwright (April 27, 1938), Girolamo Piccoli (April 20, 1938), and Irving D. Gainin (April 27, 1938), AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90.

⁵³ [Archibald MacLeish], “Unemployed Arts,” *Fortune*, May 1937, 108-17. The article is unsigned, but Holger Cahill attributes it to MacLeish; see Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts,” in *Art for the Millions: Essays From the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O’Connor, 33-44 (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973).

⁵⁴ For Cahill’s own reflections on Dewey, see Cahill, “American Resources in the Arts.”

American Art,” a proving exhibition for the FAP hosted at MoMA, Cahill articulated a robust vision for this new public art culture, describing, often in Deweyan terms, how the Project was “breaking down” the artist’s previous “isolation.”⁵⁵ “For the first time in American history,” he proclaimed,

a direct and sound relationship has been established between the American public and the artist. Community organizations of all kinds have asked for his work. In the discussions between the artist and the public concerning murals, easel paintings, prints, and sculptures for public buildings, through the arrangements for allocations of art in many forms to schools and libraries, an active and often very human relationship has been created.⁵⁶

In Cahill’s vision for a federal art project, it was the texture of these relationships—developed as communities asked for and responded to works of art, and as artists envisioned their public more clearly—that truly mattered.⁵⁷

In both its daily operations and its guiding philosophy, the FAP effectively redefined a swath of artistic products as public in nature. FAP paintings and sculpture, prints and posters were—regardless if one glimpsed them in a museum, a school lobby, or reproduced in the newspaper—part of the common wealth, made by and for community members. This rapid expansion of what counted as public art had interesting

⁵⁵ *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁷ Belisario Contreras’s foundational study of Holger Cahill and Edward Bruce (director of the Treasury Department’s Section of Fine Arts) devotes considerable time to a similar reading of Cahill’s philosophy, detailing how its values of participation and social integration contrasted with Bruce’s more traditional emphasis on “idealism” and excellence. I have tried to show here, however, that the New Deal public art culture was shaped by much more than just Cahill’s personal worldview. Rather, it was part of a larger remapping of the American public sphere prompted, in no small part, by a new administrative state. See Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1983).

ramifications for murals, whose own claims to being a public and civic art form had long been mapped along other routes. In the rhetoric of beaux-arts muralism, which began in the 1870s but lingered well into the 1920s, murals were seen as monumental and permanent works that spoke to the body politic. Local histories, origin stories, and allegories of Truth and Justice were addressed to a collective citizenry, one imagined as cohesive and capable of cultural uplift. As the modern mural movement gained steam around 1930, critics lambasted the older tradition's "strangled, debased, and flat archaisticism."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, certain of its modes of understanding the mural persisted. For one, artists, critics, and FAP administrators repeatedly emphasized the mural's permanence, even when that permanence was more imagined than real. Two other related motifs, inherited from the beaux-arts tradition, also continued to shape the 1930s understanding of the mural: the form's ability to speak to a collective audience, and its integration with its architectural site.

An older conception of the mural—permanent, collective, and site-specific—thus continued alongside the new public art culture inaugurated by the New Deal. In some cases, the FAP explicitly addressed the tension between these modes. In a document on the FAP's "Portable Mural Project," the older ideal of permanence is defended even while modern conditions prompt a reevaluation:

While the portable mural sounds like a contradiction in terms, it was evolved out of a contemporary need. Classic mural decoration is a great art allied to architecture; it is valued for its monumental and permanent qualities and, in its pure form, is an integral

⁵⁸ Lincoln Kirstein, "Mural Painting," in *Murals by American Painters and Photographers*, 7-11 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), 9.

part of the architectural plan. But modern life has abolished permanency for the majority of people. Immediate use and speed are conditions of contemporary living. The life of a modern building is today often shorter than the life of an individual. [...] [The mural's recent] popularity has extended its use, but lack of permanency and high cost make murals out of reach for the individual and even for smaller groups or organizations. The portable mural is the hybrid form which answers the need for integrated and unified decoration for these new transitory conditions of modern living.⁵⁹

The mural's diverse heritage in the 1930s—coming both from an older, nineteenth-century conception of public space and from the New Deal's contemporary public art culture—led to several tensions about the mural's function and effect. Could murals be both permanent monuments, addressed to enduring and rooted collectives, and flexible prods for community participation and art experiences? They were frequently claimed as both: part of the shifting, experiential fabric of everyday life but also timeless and permanent creations. Attending to these mixed and sometimes contradictory claims will help us understand how artists and viewers understood the murals they encountered in spaces such as the Williamsburg Houses and the Chronic Diseases Hospital.

⁵⁹ Federal Art Project, "The Portable Mural Project," unpublished document, ca. 1936, the Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records (hereafter MoMA Exh. Rec.), 52.2, the Museum of Modern Art Archives (hereafter MoMA Archives), New York. My thanks to Marci Kwon for bringing this document to my attention.

Daily Life, Public Housing, and the Politics of the Williamsburg Murals (1938-9)⁶⁰

In November 1938, the *Magazine for Art* ran a feature on “Art for Housing Tenants.” The author, Olin Dows, was a New Deal arts administrator.⁶¹ Touring recent public housing projects in New York, Camden, Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, and Atlanta, Dows showed readers the muscular statuary and murals of industry and city life that the government programs had commissioned from artists across the States. Dows applauded the “social consciousness” underlying the federal art programs, and he described the public murals and sculpture using familiar Deweyan tropes of experience and community.⁶² The work produced was “better, more personal, various and vital” than privately produced art; its inclusion in housing projects was “help[ing] make art as a spiritual commodity more easily and more intimately available to greater numbers.”⁶³ One such project, though, stood out from the rest: in his stop at the Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn, Dows described a set of three murals, produced under the FAP, that were entirely abstract. As he writes,

Complete abstraction reigns in the Williamsburg housing project in Brooklyn. Here three of [architect] William Lescaze’s social rooms are painted with rather large geometrical symbols from ceiling to baseboard by Paul Kelp, Balcomb Greene and Ilya Bolotowsky. In each room the same system is employed, alternating a decorated wall or panel with one painted a plain color, sometimes allowing a door to give the

⁶⁰ I wish to thank Anne Lockwood and Harriet Irgang Alden for their assistance in locating important documents related to the Williamsburg murals.

⁶¹ Dows worked not for the FAP, but for the sister (and, sometimes, rival) program, the Treasury Department’s Section of Fine Arts.

⁶² Olin Dows, “Art for Housing Tenants,” *Magazine of Art* (November 1938): 616-23, 662; 662.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 617, 621.

needed relief between two detailed passages. In one room a restrained harmony of blues, greys and deep brown, and well chosen stylish shapes make particularly effective murals. If you like abstraction you will enjoy its skilful [sic] use in these carefully executed arrangements.⁶⁴

By March of the following year, a fourth mural was added to the housing complex, this one by Albert Swinden.⁶⁵ Like the other three, it was composed of abstract shapes and covered a section of wall “from ceiling to baseboard” in one of the social rooms.

Dows’s article, which ran with a black and white photograph of the two panels by Paul Kelpe (**fig. 1.2**), should help dispel the notion that abstraction was considered unacceptable for mural art in the 1930s. Within the regionalist and democratic ethos that undergirded the federal art programs—structured to represent art as practiced across the country—abstraction’s inclusion alongside other styles (albeit always as a minority) was certainly appropriate. Even Dows’s phrasing (“If you like abstraction”) carefully situates it as one stylistic choice among many. As we will see, though, another, more radical idea also arose in period discussions: that abstract painting might find its *best* expression when scaled up to the spatial demands of modern architecture. This idea, with roots in European avant-gardes like de Stijl and in the writings of Fernand Léger, mixed, in 1930s New York, with the period’s emphasis on a public, experiential art culture. Indeed, abstract murals of the 1930s were far more likely to abandon the older ideals of monumentality and grandeur that still informed, to some degree, representational murals.

At Williamsburg, the murals blended seamlessly into the architectural space; socially,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 621.

⁶⁵ Swinden’s mural was photographed on-site on March 29, 1939 (AAA, Federal Art Project Photographic Division Papers [hereafter FAPPD], box 22, folder 29).

they clad the walls of rooms dedicated to community meetings and other gatherings, thus insinuating themselves into the quotidian spaces of the tenants' lives. Like other abstract wall paintings, the Williamsburg murals exhibited a continual tension between visual claims to autonomy and to a more syncretic, environmental integration with space.

In a memoir written in the 1970s, FAP regional director Audrey McMahon described the process by which murals like those for Williamsburg were created. The head of New York's Mural Division, the "talented and indefatigable Burgoyne Diller," had the job of finding the space, the building, and the sponsor. They were constantly on the prowl for good tax-supported locations and receptive sponsors. This was no mean problem: the idea of wall decoration and reimbursement for materials, scaffolding, and other incidental costs had to be sold to the sponsor; a plan suitable for the space developed; an artist who painted in the genre which the purpose of the building demanded enlisted; a subject suitable to all involved determined, research into the subject to be depicted undertaken; and preliminary sketches prepared and approved by our own committee, the sponsor and his group, and the Municipal Art Commission, if a city building was involved.⁶⁶

Muralists would have already been vetted by the FAP (having proven both unemployment and artistic talent), and it was Diller's job to then locate and elicit support from a public (i.e., tax-supported) building to act as sponsor. The FAP paid the artists' wages and the sponsor paid material and construction costs. In the case of Williamsburg, the sponsor was the Public Works Administration (PWA), the industry-investment arm of

⁶⁶ Audrey McMahon, "A General View of the WPA Federal Art Project in New York City and State," in *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor, 51-76 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 59-61.

the New Deal, which erected several housing projects in the 1930s.⁶⁷ Because the Williamsburg Houses were not a municipal building, the further approval of the Municipal Art Commission was not required.

A well-respected abstract painter at the time of his appointment as mural supervisor, Diller knew many of the Williamsburg artists personally. A student of Hans Hofmann's at the Art Students League in the early 1930s, Diller was one of the central champions in New York of a Mondrian-influenced abstraction, along with his close friends Albert Swinden and Harry Holtzman.⁶⁸ He was also—along with all four of the Williamsburg muralists, and dozens of other New York abstract painters—one of the founding members of the AAA.⁶⁹ Diller's administrative presence on the FAP was responsible for the relatively large number of abstract murals in New York, compared to the other state projects; about ten percent of the completed murals under the New York FAP were abstract in style.⁷⁰ New York artist Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne remembered

⁶⁷ Such projects notwithstanding, the PWA's housing policy was overwhelmingly geared toward middle-class home ownership rather than low-cost housing. For the bigger picture of federal funding of public housing, see Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University, 1990), especially ch. 7, "Government Intervention."

⁶⁸ On Diller, Hofmann's students, and the formation of a new abstract coterie in the early 1930s, see Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists Group," especially "Abstract Artists in New York, 1930-1942," 80-190. On the complex reception of Mondrian among New York's abstract painters, see Nancy J. Troy, *Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1979).

⁶⁹ On the American Abstract Artists, see Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists Group"; Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History 1936-1941," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14.1 (1974): 2-7; and Larsen and John R. Lane, eds., *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, 1927-1944* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute and Abrams, 1983).

⁷⁰ Quantifying the number of abstract murals on the project is difficult because it depends on subjective judgment about what qualifies as abstract. The New York FAP allocated a total of about 200 murals to public institutions (O'Connor, *Federal Support for the Visual Arts*, 54). According to my count, 23 abstract murals were completed and installed at New York institutions; the number goes up to 28 if we also include murals completed on the project that were not ultimately installed at their intended New York destinations (for example, Stuart Davis's *Swing Landscape*). Greta Berman has estimated that about 20% of the New York FAP murals were "modernist," in which she includes "abstract, semi-abstract, surrealist and

Diller “encourag[ing] and expedit[ing] transfers of abstract artists to the mural division, gathering them, so to speak, ‘under his wing.’”⁷¹ For Diller, as for other abstract artists, the mural was the form best suited for exploring abstraction’s potential.

Diller found a supportive champion for the abstract murals at Williamsburg in William Lescaze, the complex’s main architect. Built in 1936-37, the Houses were the first public housing project to receive direct aid from the PWA, and they were touted as a successful “slum clearance” project.⁷² The Houses are enormous, taking up ten city blocks near the Williamsburg Bridge in Brooklyn; their most striking feature is the angle at which they sit on the plot, diagonal to the streets around them (**fig. 1.5–1.6**). Lescaze, himself a former painter, supported integrating modern art into contemporary building, and was thus a natural partner for a scheme involving abstract painters; he wrote to McMahon early on in the process recommending “the nursery, the office, some recreation rooms and perhaps some passages throughout the buildings” as appropriate sites for “decorative treatment” in the Houses.⁷³ Although Diller would go on to shepherd several abstract projects through the New York Mural Division over the next several years, the Williamsburg murals were some of the first—and, when first proposed, by far the most

photomurals.” See Berman, “New York WPA Artists, Then and Now,” in *New York City WPA Art* (New York: Parsons School of Design and NYC WPA Artists, Inc., 1977): xxvi-xxii; xix.

⁷¹ Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne, “American Abstract Artists and the WPA Federal Art Project,” in *The New Deal Art Projects*, 223-44; 227. Ilya Bolotowsky remembers Diller’s dedication in this regard as well; see Larsen, “American Abstract Artists,” 491.

⁷² For basic information on cost and construction of the Houses, see Public Works Administration, “Williamsburg Houses, Brooklyn, New York,” Project H-1301, in *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the Assistance of the Public Works Administration* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939): 662-3.

⁷³ William Lescaze to McMahon, January 3, 1936, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College (hereafter LGW), New York City Housing Authority Archives (hereafter NYCHA), box 0053C1, folder 14.

ambitious.⁷⁴ Initial plans called for murals by twelve different painters, whose diversity reflected the fertile and complex painting scene in 1930s New York.⁷⁵ The number was eventually reduced to the four artists already mentioned: Kelpé, Bolotowsky, Greene, and Swinden.

Dows's article, with its brief but illuminating stop in the Williamsburg Houses, demonstrates a particular way of understanding abstract murals, reading them closely in concert with the architectural space. His sense of how the panels interact with the unpainted parts of the rooms is borne out by extant period photographs, taken shortly after the murals' installation. The two panels by Kelpé, which fill the entire space on either side of a door, introduce a dynamic, tilting movement into the room, the only circles in the rational, right-angled space of the interior (**fig. 1.2–1.4**). In the photographs, their dynamism is offset not just by the "plain," undecorated door between them, as Dows notes, but also by the clean white ceiling and the bare walls at right angles to the murals. Within each panel, bands of color traverse (at left) or climb (at right) the canvas, emphasizing, respectively, the horizontal or vertical direction. Curved wedges—one in green, the other orange—strengthen the directional emphasis of each panel, and also contribute to a sense of implied rotation across the murals, as though the circles were

⁷⁴ In 1936, when initial sketches were made, the only other abstract murals on the FAP docket were Eric Mose's *Power* at Samuel Gompers High School and Arshile Gorky's *Aviation* for the Newark Airport Administration building. On Gorky's Newark murals, see Ruth Bowman, *Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered* (Newark, NJ: Newark Museum Association, 1978) and Jody Patterson, "'Flight from Reality'? A Reconsideration of Gorky's Politics and Approach to Public Murals in the 1930s," in *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective*, ed. Michael Taylor, 74–93 (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009).

⁷⁵ The full list of artists originally slated to do murals for the Houses was as follows: among "the country's leading abstract painters," Francis Criss, Stuart Davis, Paul Kelpé, and Jan Matulka; and among the "younger artists," Ilya Bolotowsky, Harry Bowden, Byron Browne, Willem de Kooning, Balcomb Greene, George McNeil, Eugene Morley, and Albert Swinden. See Burgoyne Diller, "Abstract Murals," in *Art for the Millions*, 69–71.

turning, clock-like. By slightly varying the tilt of the long bands, and by introducing other small shapes and playing with color overlaps, Kelpe provides an arrangement that is consonant with the rectilinear space of the room and yet not wholly submitted to its discipline. If Dows reads the other murals in his article as much for their represented content as for their participation in the design scheme, at Williamsburg he focuses almost exclusively on the latter, emphasizing the murals' internal "harmony" and their coherence with the wider building.

Bolotowsky's 17-foot-long mural, installed two housing blocks over (**fig. 1.7**), inverted the Kelpe layout: instead of two painted panels on either side of a door, his was installed as a long, central panel in between two windows (**fig. 1.8–1.11**). With its organic forms floating relatively untethered in a white-grey ground, the mural is by far the most open of the four in its internal composition. Organizing the mural, and tying the main block of shapes in with the more isolated forms, is Bolotowsky's strategic placement of recurring color, with yellow, blue, and red linking different shapes together across the canvas's expanse. Despite being less rectilinear than the other murals, with its addition of forms indebted to Joan Miró, the mural projects a sense of balance and poise in its space. This is due, in no small part, to the subtle but important gestures that Bolotowsky makes toward integration with the architecture. A thin black line at left, for example, continues the implied line of the base of the windows, while two sets of horizontal stripes—one at upper left, the other below the periscope shape on the right—echo the windows' gridded surfaces, as can be seen in the photograph and the sketch (**fig. 1.9–1.10**). Oblique planes, especially the cream-white triangle that appears to stream in at left, mirror the inclined window stools on either side. Scholars have often discussed the

play of flatness and depth in Bolotowsky's mural: the shapes appear to project into or out of the canvas, even as they hover on its surface. These spatial relationships take on a new charge in the Williamsburg social room, where the windows, lowered ceiling, and wall set up their own play of right-angled, inclined, and projecting planes. Bolotowsky was one of the most successful of the abstract muralists on the FAP, realizing murals not only at Williamsburg but also at the Chronic Diseases Hospital and the New York World's Fair, both of which will be discussed presently.

If Bolotowsky punctuated his canvas with sharp, intense bouts of color, Balcomb Greene's mural was more subdued (**fig. 1.12–1.14**). The arrangement is emphatically, almost perversely, uncentered: no jutting or centrifugal shapes form dominating motifs. Instead, we are treated to a subtle interaction of forms that plays out evenly across the canvas: a swelling curve in grayish blue at right faces a darker, similar shape at the other edge of the painting; a stretching rectangular column exhibits a barely perceptible change in color, from navy to black. The composition is saved from total stasis by the introduction of a few critical motifs: a stepped rectangle at bottom, a thin diagonal line crossing the middle, and a half-filled circle suspended, moonlike, in the mural's tan center. The layering and abutting of forms, along with the tan and white colors, creates a continual oscillation between figure and ground. Interestingly, the mural's palette of tans, greys, and blues picks up the dominant color scheme of the Williamsburg Houses' façade, with its tan bricks and blue tile work. The horizontal grey-blue forms even seem to restate the building's signature element, the grey stripes that run along the entire façade just above each row of windows (**fig. 1.6**). Whether or not Greene intended a

reference to the Williamsburg exterior in particular,⁷⁶ his mural's interlocking and overlapping geometries are deeply resonant with architectural forms more generally, appearing like an architectonic façade translated into paint. Assessing just how its forms played out in the architecture of the room is difficult, given the dearth (and quality) of extant installation photographs. Yet it is clear that the mural's "cool austerity" and "remoteness," to quote one scholar, make more sense within an architectural matrix—where it blends with and echoes the cool austerity of other forms—than as a stand-alone painting.⁷⁷ Greene credited his mural work with enabling what he termed a greater discipline in his painting: "My working on the W.P.A. in the mural division," he wrote in 1937, "has corrected in me a tendency towards work too active, not sufficiently disciplined."⁷⁸

The fourth and final mural to be installed, by AAA member and secretary Albert Swinden, continued the architectural themes that Kelpe, Greene, and, in his own way, Bolotowsky, had already begun to explore (**fig. 1.15–1.17**). Abandoning the subdued earth tones of Greene, Swinden's mural returned to the bright primaries that Bolotowsky had used to such vibrant effect. Fitted into a nine-by-fourteen-foot wall at the end of a

⁷⁶ It is unknown if Greene visited the Houses before beginning his mural. We know that another muralist originally on the roster for Williamsburg, Stuart Davis, visited the site in August 1937 (Ani Boyajian and Mark Rutkoski, *Stuart Davis: A Catalogue Raisonné* [New Haven: Yale University, 2007], no. 1613). Another group of muralists visited the near-completed Houses in November or December 1937, according to artist Hananiah Harari (Harari, "Who Killed the Home Planning Project?", letter to the editor, *Art Front*, [December 1937]: 13-15). However, it is unknown if Greene was with this group and, furthermore, if he had already completed his mural at this point, which is usually dated circa 1936. Nevertheless, it is not far-fetched to imagine that he had access, through Diller and Lescaze, to information about the building's plans and color scheme.

⁷⁷ Barbara Dayer Gallati, *The Williamsburg Murals: A Rediscovery. Five Monumental Works from the 1930s by Ilya Bolotowsky, Balcomb Greene, Paul Kelpe, and Albert Swinden* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1990), n.p.

⁷⁸ Balcomb Greene, "Question and Answer," *Art Front* 20 (February 1937): 9-12; 12.

long social room, Swinden's mural is deceptively simple: an assemblage of rectangles in blues, yellow-gold, black, white, and silver-grey abut and overlap one another, with two colors—a light beige and a deep red—used just once, near the center of the composition. Yet the arrangement is expertly planned to impart a sense of centripetal, maze-like movement, as though the rectangles were nested into one another, directing one's view insistently toward the center. Like his peers, Swinden uses a smattering of small, carefully arranged forms to disrupt the rectilinearity of the mural: thin black lines, a pair of differently-sized rings, a tiny floating black square, and two kidney-like blobs. Swinden's mural is particularly at home in its location, its shapes smoothly rhyming not just with the upright column and horizontal bench but also with the cuboid edges of the ceiling that intrude onto the wall and frame its upper portion.

The consonances between abstraction and architecture, so at play in the Williamsburg murals, were not just a matter of interest to painters. Mainstream periodicals also turned to this theme. When *Time* magazine ran a column on the Williamsburg murals in June 1938, it titled the piece "Architectural Painting," and singled out a particular role for abstraction in this context. "About all the painting most strictly modern architects want in their buildings can be done by a house painter," it began, adding:

This fact greatly grieves the young school of muralists who have found their inspiration in Rivera and Orozco, their opportunity under WPA. Lately, however, a few architects and a few painters have had a happy, conciliatory thought. If modern

architecture relies on the beauty of abstract forms, why should it not employ, for certain chaste effects, the painting of pure abstractionists?⁷⁹

Why not, indeed? To the eye of the *Time* writer, Lescaze's modern architecture demanded not the representational scenes of a Rivera acolyte but instead the "pure" abstractions of Greene (capable of "inventive, exhilarating design"), Bolotowsky (expert in the "blob, or kidney, type of abstraction"), and Kelpie ("adept at solidly built, rectangular abstractions"). Like Lescaze's architecture, these murals dealt in the "beauty of abstract forms," creating harmonious spaces of color and shape.

The pursuit of "architectural painting" did not belong to the Williamsburg muralists alone. Various avant-garde artists in interwar Europe, some much admired by the AAA group, were experimenting with similar problems on the other side of the Atlantic. Léger's architectonic abstractions of the 1920s, although smaller than the large-scale walls by Swinden and Greene at Williamsburg, utilize a similar vocabulary: horizontal and vertical elements in red, blue, white, and black are arranged into carefully balanced compositions that echo the beams, joins, and planes of simplified architectural form (**fig. 1.18–1.20**). The architectural collaborations pursued by the de Stijl group in the Netherlands (1917-1932) remain the most rigorous and theoretically sophisticated approach to "the painted abstract environment, in which pure color, free of all figurative associations, was merged with modern architecture to form an encompassing, total work of art."⁸⁰ AAA member A.E. Gallatin played an important role in bringing examples of such work to New York; his Museum of Living Art included work by Piet Mondrian

⁷⁹ "Architectural Painting," *Time*, June 6, 1938, 39.

⁸⁰ Nancy J. Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge: MIT, 1983), 3.

(acquired by 1933),⁸¹ constructivist César Domela (by 1936), De Stijl founder Theo van Doesburg (by 1938), and Léger, one of whose abstract mural studies was in the collection by 1937.⁸²

Formal and spatial similarities notwithstanding, the “architectural painting” created for Williamsburg differed considerably from the work of European artists—a result both of differing artistic approaches and, crucially, the different relationships among architect, painter, and patron. The similarities and differences become clearer if we examine a De Stijl mural project in greater detail. Van Doesburg’s collaborations with architect J.J.P. Oud in 1919-21 make an instructive comparison. In 1920, van Doesburg designed an interior color scheme for two of Oud’s Spangen housing blocks in Rotterdam, Spangen I and V (**fig. 1.21–1.22**).⁸³ As at Williamsburg, the painting responds intimately to the architectural space, with areas of yellow and white defining lower and upper portions of the wall, and with a picture rail acting as a horizontal black band dividing them. Yet unlike the Williamsburg examples, van Doesburg’s manipulation of color extends beyond the bounds of any definable “mural,” covering the door and, as Oud makes clear, essentially standing in for the expansive effects of wallpaper: “the painterly colour scheme of strongly contrasting colours (yellow, grey, blue, black),” Oud writes,

⁸¹ According to Nancy Troy, it was in 1933 that Ilya Bolotowsky, Burgoyne Diller, and Harry Holtzman were all introduced to Mondrian’s work, through Gallatin. On this, and on the different ways in which each artist absorbed the lessons of the European painter, see Troy, *Neo-Plasticism in America*.

⁸² Work by Léger and the Bauhaus and de Stijl artists was also exhibited in New York by the Société Anonyme and MoMA.

⁸³ Van Doesburg also provided a façade design and stained glass windows for the exterior. For the Spangen housing scheme at large, see Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, *J.J.P. Oud, 1890-1963: Poetic Functionalist. The Complete Works* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2001), 218-38.

“devised for the interior by Theo van Doesburg in relation to this wall treatment makes wallpaper superfluous.”⁸⁴

The color harmony of mural and room was also a concern at Williamsburg, at least in the project’s early stages. In 1936, a “color consultant” offered his positive assessment of the mural sketches’ “color and scale,” and noted that “Some of the murals will need further study with relation to room colors but this can easily be controlled as the work progresses.”⁸⁵ Indeed, the murals by Francis Criss were never installed on-site because, according to the *Time* article, they were “out of key with allotted color schemes.”⁸⁶ The same could be said of Davis’s *Swing Landscape*, with its raucous palette, also not installed. Yet these attempts at harmony between mural and room are timid in comparison to the outright merging of mural and wallpaper functions at Spangen. Van Doesburg’s painterly intervention in the room operates at a scale both larger and subtler than that of the American muralists. Rather than bringing the viewer’s eye to any one spot on the wall, or serving as a single work of art, van Doesburg’s scheme creates a coloristic envelope that surrounds the viewer and emphasizes the interactions of space and color throughout the room.

Importantly, van Doesburg’s Spangen designs would have been applied to more than one interior, with the whites, yellows, blues, and black recurring in several units on the ground floor. There was some degree of coordination between murals in the different rooms at Williamsburg, as well. If we look at the initial roster of muralists identified for

⁸⁴ J.J.P. Oud, “Municipal Social Housing, ‘Spangen’ Polder, Rotterdam” [1920], in *Nederlands Architectuurinstituut*, J.J.P. Oud, 226.

⁸⁵ David C. Comstock to H.A. Gray, October 1, 1936, LGW, NYCHA, box 0053B8, folder 11.

⁸⁶ “Architectural Painting,” *Time*, 39.

the project—Diller had commissioned twelve in 1936—it is clear that the final selection of four represents a reduction in stylistic diversity. Gone is Eugene Morley, who prepared industrial sketches of bridges and construction, as are abstract artists whose designs maintained links to recognizable objects, like Criss and Davis. Further, several Williamsburg sketches employing a more lyrical, organic abstraction—by Harry Bowden, Byron Browne, Willem de Kooning, and George McNeil—never advanced beyond the design stage. These changes, which unfolded sometime after July 1937, betray a commitment to mural and architectural cohesion over and against a commitment to an even distribution of styles. (This latter commitment is evident at the project’s beginning, when the color consultant noted approvingly that “the style is well divided between the more traditional and the abstract modern.”⁸⁷) The result, when the final four works were all installed by 1939, was a collection of murals that broadly share in color and style: they all employ a recurring set of primaries and earth tones, exhibit a debt to de Stijl painters, and use sharp, rectilinear edges. Notwithstanding this relative unity—which far exceeded, I would argue, that of any other abstract mural suite on the New York FAP—the murals still lack the precise repetition that we see at Spangen.

Finally, the degree of collaboration in the two mural projects is vastly different. In Rotterdam, Oud specified the yellow color for the wall, and then gave van Doesburg freedom to develop the scheme in relation to (and expanding over) doors, picture rail, and ceiling. In Brooklyn, by contrast, the collaboration only moved in one direction, with the completed architecture influencing the murals. Lescaze himself noted that the planning process for the murals at Williamsburg was far from “ideal,” since the design for the

⁸⁷ Comstock to Gray, October 1, 1936, LGW, NYCHA, box 0053B8, folder 11.

building was complete before murals were considered.⁸⁸ The very use of a “color consultant” at Williamsburg speaks to a system of specialized and separate functions, rather than close collaboration between artist and architect. Yet the close collaboration sought by Oud and van Doesburg had its own pitfalls. When Oud criticized another of the painter’s color schemes, this one for the Potgieterstraat façade of Housing Block VIII, van Doesburg wrote back an angry letter, severing their relationship: “given the fact that the execution of the whole was assured; given the fact that I am no house-painter but take these things seriously; given the fact that I am van Doesburg, I have, I seize the right to cry: NO----NO----NO.” It was either his way or nothing, he added in German: “Entweder so-----oder Nichts.”⁸⁹ There were many reasons why the de Stijl ideal of collaboration eventually fell apart, but, as Troy has argued, a major factor was the competing visions of painter and architect.⁹⁰

Ironically, it was the lesser degree of collaboration between Lescaze and the Williamsburg painters—or, more precisely, the particular bureaucratic structure through which they interacted—that prevented similar outcomes for the FAP murals in Brooklyn. The FAP essentially acted as a clearinghouse for unemployed artists and their products, allocating easel paintings and prints to tax-supported institutions or, in the case of murals, matching muralists with potential sites. This process favored individual, autonomous objects rather than systems and total environments: mural slots needed to be found and

⁸⁸ Lescaze still, however, saw the result as a positive one: “It must be said, however, that the rooms are simple, so that at any rate none of the architectural ornamentation will quarrel with the murals.” See Lescaze, “An Architect’s Point of View,” unpublished typescript, ca. 1936-37, AAA, HCP, Series 4.4, digitized microfilm, reel 5291, frames 1272-1274.

⁸⁹ Theo van Doesburg, letter to J.J.P. Oud, November 3, 1921, quoted and translated in Troy, *De Stijl Environment*, 86, 211 n24.

⁹⁰ See Troy, *De Stijl Environment*.

filled. While muralists could, and did, tailor their designs to the sites in question, there was relatively limited room for doing so, compared to a truly collaborative effort. In effect, a major tension existed within the FAP's Mural Division: on the one hand, the bureaucracy's distribution ethos envisioned murals as bounded, singular entities, even while, on the other hand, muralists (and, to some extent, administrators like Diller) valued an ideal of architectural integration. In a pamphlet for another suite of abstract murals, at the WNYC Radio Studios in the Municipal Building, the FAP notes that the "artists planned the decoration of the entire [room], coordinating architecture, interior decoration, furnishings and the murals as one modern, functional entity."⁹¹ What is striking is how little the murals in question actually appear integrated into their architectural surroundings. The tension between standalone artworks and integrated murals was best resolved, I would argue, at Williamsburg and at the Chronic Diseases Hospital, although through very different means.

What the tenants themselves thought of the murals is difficult to determine. Diller imagined the murals playing a role in tenant leisure. "The decision to place abstract murals in these rooms," he wrote in an essay around 1936,

was made because these areas were intended to provide a place of relaxation and entertainment for the tenants. The more arbitrary color, possible when not determined by the description of objects, enables the artist to place an emphasis on its psychological potential to stimulate relaxation. The arbitrary use of shapes provides

⁹¹ Federal Art Project of New York, "Murals by Louis Schanker, Byron Browne, Stuart Davis, Hans Wicht," pamphlet, ca. 1939, AAA, HCP, Series 8, digitized microfilm, reel 5295, frames 1229-1240.

an opportunity to create colorful patterns clearly related to the interior architecture and complementing the architect's intentions.⁹²

If arbitrary shapes and colors allowed the murals to complement the architecture, they also, in Diller's telling, laid the groundwork for a psychological function, creating a space of "relaxation" and "entertainment." Diller and Lescaze also noted that tenants with blue-collar jobs would not be interested in looking at scenes of factories and industry: abstraction would be a welcome relief.⁹³ In Lescaze's telling, the lack of realism is precisely what invests abstraction with its capacity to inspire an emotional response to form: "I have been very much interested," he wrote to a Housing administrator, in helping [the FAP] to obtain murals for the social rooms which would not be of a too definitely representational character but rather murals, which by means of colors and forms, would cheer up those rooms and continue the message of light, open air and imagination, which we have tried to embody in the buildings themselves.⁹⁴

Whether or not we accept Diller's understanding of the murals as inculcators of leisure and entertainment, he is right to read them in the context of the social rooms' functions and the moods prevailing there. Many tenants of public housing expressed a desire for a renewed "community spirit" in their buildings, and saw basement-level social rooms as

⁹² Diller, "Abstract Murals," 69.

⁹³ See Lescaze to McMahon, November 2, 1936, AAA, HCP, digitized microfilm, reel 1107, frames 870-873; and Lescaze, "An Architect's Point of View." Housing administrator Langdon Post made a related argument for "more rural" scenes in the Houses, since "the sketch depicting certain scenes in New York City [likely Eugene Morley's] was perhaps bringing the tenants' ordinary life too closely into the home" (Langdon Post to Burgoyne Diller, October 30, 1936, LGW, NYCHA, box 0053C1, folder 14).

⁹⁴ Lescaze to Post, June 28, 1937, LGW, NYCHA, box 0053D3, folder 10.

an important means to accomplishing this.⁹⁵ The archives of the Williamsburg Houses are full of references to the myriad clubs holding meetings and lectures in the social rooms. In this sense, we can understand the murals as participating in that public culture of renewed community contact and social cohesion so celebrated by Cahill and Dewey. It is clear that Lescaze saw the murals, like the building itself, as “an attempt at thinking of architecture in terms of human beings.” The “abstract and stimulating patterns in strong and beautiful colors,” he hoped, “would add to the enjoyment of the people who were to live” there.⁹⁶

Balcomb Greene, perhaps the most theoretically minded of the AAA group, wrote extensively about the effect of abstract art on the viewer. Like Diller and Lescaze, he saw abstraction’s potential as deeply psychological; unlike them, he attributed to it a radical, transformative effect on the spectator. As he wrote in a 1938 essay, “The abstract artist can approach man through the most immediate of aesthetic experiences, touching below consciousness and the veneer of attitudes, contacting the whole ego rather than the ego on the defensive.” Operating “below consciousness,” abstract painting could touch the psychological apparatus directly, and without deceptive ideologies:

There is nothing in [the abstract artist’s] amorphous and geometric forms, and nothing within the unconscious or within memory from which he improvises, which

⁹⁵ See Thrysa W. Amos, “What Tenants Want in Apartments,” *Architectural Record* 84.2 (August 1938): 62-65; 64. Amos’s article summarizes the results of a survey of 105 tenants in 25 different buildings in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. A photograph of the Williamsburg Houses begins the article.

⁹⁶ Lescaze, “An Architect’s Point of View.” Ironically, one of Lescaze’s major attempts at humanizing the architecture here—the tilted orientation of the buildings—was a notable failure. Rather than increase sun exposure, as hoped, it created fierce wind tunnels and worked to seal the complex off from the surrounding area. On this, see, for example, Talbot Faulkner Hamlin, “New York Housing: Harlem River Houses and Williamsburg Houses,” *Pencil Points* 19.5 (May 1938): 281-92.

is deceptive. The experience is under its own auspices. To whatever extent it helps reconstruct the individual by enabling him to relive important experiences in his past—to that extent it prevents any outward retrogression.⁹⁷

Greene's mural for Williamsburg, with its layered planes of tan, white, blue, and gray, was not a means for relaxation, the artist hoped, but rather a prod to personal (and, in the broader sense, political) reconstruction. Greene expanded on abstraction's transformative role in another text, where he directly linked modern art to personal experience and thus social potential. Léger, he wrote,

has a social function in his art because he is a ruthless destroyer of weak sentiments in the people who view him. Picasso must transmit some of his tremendous vitality, release some of the latent energy in people caught in the conventional grooves of life. Get to like Picasso well, get to be able to take the hurdles of his rapid changes with him, and pretty soon you'll be hurdling over a lot of impediments in the everyday life you have always with you.⁹⁸

For Greene, abstract art was, by nature, shocking and thus potentially transformative. By cladding the walls of the social rooms in abstract designs, the Williamsburg murals might create an experience both intimate—directly playing on the tenants' perceptual and psychological makeup—and political—encouraging a reevaluation of one's life and the world.

This avant-garde idea of modern art's role coexisted with a more populist and in some ways paternalistic understanding of abstraction's reception. For some abstract

⁹⁷ Balcomb Greene, "Expression as Production" [1938], in *American Abstract Artists: Three Yearbooks (1938, 1939, 1946)* (New York: Arno, 1969), 31.

⁹⁸ Balcomb Greene, "Question and Answer," 11.

painters, the FAP's role was less to commission art that would shock viewers into radical transformation than it was to provide the service of cultural uplift. Hananiah Harari, an abstract painter who would go on to design a mural for the Central Nurses' Home on Welfare Island,⁹⁹ described his visit to the Williamsburg Houses in a letter to *Art Front* in December 1937, after the complex was completed but before the murals were installed. Admiring the "modern, beautiful, functional dwellings" that had been erected, and approving of the murals that were soon to arrive in the social rooms, Harari nevertheless pointed to the "tragedy" of Williamsburg: inside the model apartments—"unpretentious, neat, cheerful" rooms—were "stuffed [...] a hodge-podge of satins, laces, mirrors, odd tid-bits and frostings," and, worst of all, "the most complete collection of 5 and 10 cent store prints [...] that an unscrupulous furniture dealer could conjure up." Harari's letter perceptively identifies the intrusion of commercial interests into an ostensibly public enterprise: the model apartments were open to future tenants, who likely "assume[d] that these 'furnishing suggestions,'" complete with price tags and payment plans from private dealers, "had an official authorization." Yet Harari appears particularly concerned about the effects on the tenants' aesthetic judgment. He pictures tenants who will "perceive a most glaring discrepancy between the [dime store] prints and the creative art they will find in the public rooms of their new dwellings"—that is, the abstract murals—"which will make for confusion about a subject which is already overly confused in the minds of many." In order to "improve the standard of artistic taste of the American worker," Harari urges the reestablishment of the FAP's defunct Home Planning Bureau, which

⁹⁹ For the mural, see photograph in the National Archives (hereafter NA), Record Group 69-AN; a copy also exists in the AAA, FAPPD. It is unknown if the mural was ever realized at full scale or installed.

encouraged sensible (and presumably modernist) means of home decorating, among other efforts. He ends his letter by noting “the limitless opportunities for artists for the decoration of housing projects and for the artistic guidance of their occupants.”¹⁰⁰

These texts give us a sense of the range of functions envisioned for the Williamsburg murals by their makers. They would form a backdrop for leisure and relaxation; they would lay the groundwork for a perceptual revolution in the viewer, with political implications; they would—if it were not for the kitsch of the units—provide “artistic guidance” for the confused working poor. Yet in terms of actual reception history, we are left with scant evidence. Harold Ickes, the head of the PWA that was building the Williamsburg Houses, found several of the murals “unintelligible and entirely lacking in decorative qualities,” an opinion that, to the degree it captured a majority opinion on abstract art at the time, may have been shared by occupants.¹⁰¹ There does exist a suggestive letter from the Tenants’ Council of the Williamsburg Houses, first discussed by Andrew Hemingway, protesting the coming funding cuts to the WPA which “will mean the closing down of Federal Art Project, and all white collar workers.”¹⁰² The timing of the letter is compelling, drafted right around the time that two of the murals may have been installed.¹⁰³ Yet the FAP touched tenants’ lives in many ways, both as an employer and as a facilitator of popular events like art classes or the Home Planning Bureau. We do see tenant appreciation for art installed and integrated into dwelling in the

¹⁰⁰ Hananiah Harari, “Who Killed the Home Planning Project?”, 13-15.

¹⁰¹ Harold Ickes quoted in Troy, “The Williamsburg Housing Project Murals,” 8.

¹⁰² Tenants’ Council of Williamsburg Houses to Harry L. Hopkins, May 20, 1938, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90, frame 121. Hemingway discusses the letter in *Artists on the Left*, 176, 314 n141.

¹⁰³ We do not have exact dates for the installation of the murals, but we know that two of them were in place by around May 31 or June 1, 1938. See “Architectural Painting,” *Time*.

response to plans for an Art Lending Library at Williamsburg; such a library, “besides its ornamental value,” wrote the tenant newspaper, “would cultivate a taste for art.” Yet the prevailing taste here ran decidedly to more traditional styles: ““That Rembrandt picture would look lovely in my living room,”” the newspaper muses, imagining future tenant experiences; ““I wonder how that sculpture of Shakespeare would look on my radio? Isn’t that landscape mural just too beautiful for words?””¹⁰⁴

Perhaps the most definitive piece of evidence we are left with is the murals’ passive neglect. By the time Nancy Troy wrote her Master’s Thesis on the murals in 1976, only the Kelpe murals remained relatively intact, although these, too, had suffered some damage. In the nearly forty years since their installation, the murals by Bolotowsky, Greene, and Swinden had been painted over; they were rediscovered only in the late 1980s, and removed, along with the Kelpe panels, to the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where they remain on long-term loan. On the one hand, this passive neglect tells us something very obvious and very common: public art is routinely neglected, especially as the memory of its origins fades from living memory. Yet it also reinforces an earlier point, that the murals may have rather expertly blended in with their surroundings. Swinden’s blocks of color, nested into the blocks and cubes of a wall; Kelpe’s tilting circles and rectangles framing a door; the abstract shapes of Browne and Bolotowsky, making allusions to the architecture around them: these compositions asked to be seen less as stand-alone murals than as integral parts of the building. One trade-off for being integrated into the modern functionalism of the Houses was that the murals disappeared

¹⁰⁴ *Projector of the Williamsburg Houses* 2.1, January 25, 1939, LGW, NYCHA, box 0054C3, folder 14. To my knowledge, the Art Lending Library was never established.

into them—were so consonant with surface and space that they claimed no more special attention than the rooms themselves. When the rooms needed fresh coats of paint, there may have been few markers to designate the wall paintings as separate, autonomous works of art. The merging of mural and wallpaper that Oud and van Doesburg anticipated in the Spangen housing blocks, or that *Time* magazine imagined at Williamsburg in comparing the muralists to house painters, could undermine the status of the murals themselves.

Abstract Environments at the Chronic Diseases Hospital (1941–42)

When the majority of the Williamsburg murals were installed, in the spring of 1938, the New York FAP was at a highpoint. With scores of artists on the rolls, the Project had produced hundreds of artworks, and was enjoying regular and positive attention in the press. Murals remained one of the most visible and commented-upon manifestations of the Art Project, and a mural exhibition in May and June of that year—discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter—helped solidify the mural’s position as the preeminent form of public art. That summer and fall, however, brought a series of new challenges. The Coffee-Pepper Bill, which would have provided for a permanent art project, was defeated in Congress; around the same time, funds for the FAP were cut, resulting in layoffs of art workers from the rolls. The following year, Federal One was dismantled, turning the art, writing, and music projects over to state control, and requiring that localities (in this case, New York City) provide at least 25% of costs.¹⁰⁵ If this

¹⁰⁵ These changes were part of the 1939 ERA Act, and went into effect on August 31, 1939. The FAP was retitled the WPA Art Program, reflecting the fact that it was no longer a federal-level project. For the sake

represented a curtailment of Art Projects across the country, in New York it was coupled with the return of a highly disliked administrator, Colonel Brehon Somervell, who reassumed the role of New York project director.¹⁰⁶ The entry of the United States into World War II further curtailed art activity. By the end of 1941, most remaining cultural programs were converted to war efforts, and in February 1942 the remnants of the FAP were officially integrated into the War Services section.

During the final years of the New York FAP, as both resources and political will dwindled, a remarkable set of abstract murals was installed at the Chronic Diseases Hospital on Welfare (now Roosevelt) Island, just to the east of Manhattan in the East River. These murals are all the more remarkable for being realized during the years of the Project's dismantling: although preparatory sketches date back as early as 1937, the murals were not painted and installed until 1941-42. Furthermore, the murals bear no signs of patriotic fervor or anti-Axis war messaging, instead cladding four circular day rooms with abstracted forms and colors. The geometric layers and organic motifs of Bolotowsky, Swinden, Joseph Rugolo, and Dane Chanase swelled up and around the rooms' doors and windows, and, following the curving shape of each room, created a nearly fifty-foot half-circle of decoration to envelop the patients within. Sited in a city hospital, the murals imagined a different sort of public than at Williamsburg, and their function was often understood in terms of therapeutic decoration.

of consistency, I will continue to refer to "FAP art" throughout this chapter. On the changes of 1939, see McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* and Kalfatovic, *New Deal Fine Arts Projects*.

¹⁰⁶ On Brehon Somervell's tenure, see McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* and Kalfatovic, *New Deal Fine Arts Projects*. For an account from the point of view of the local New York office, see McMahon, "A General View," and the essays by Audrey McMahon and Norman Barr in *New York City WPA Art* (New York: Parsons School of Design and NYC WPA Artists, Inc., 1977), ix-xv.

The Chronic Diseases Hospital broke ground in 1937, a five-building complex that stretched nearly a seventh of the length of Welfare Island (**fig. 1.23**). It was demolished in 2014, but not before three of the FAP murals were located and removed.¹⁰⁷ Designed by Isadore Rosenfield, its spatial and architectural considerations were informed by the patient-centered philosophy of S.S. Goldwater, the city's hospitals commissioner. Housing the chronically ill in their own facility, Rosenfield and Goldwater thought, would insure their specific needs were met, and not lost amidst the acute problems of the general patient population. Attending to the "problems of circulation, control, orientation, view, [and] ample ground space," Rosenfield designed four V-shaped wards—angled to lengthen sun exposure and views of the East River—with a main administration building at the center.¹⁰⁸ A two-story corridor ran the spine of the complex from north to south, connecting the five buildings, and continuous balconies wrapped around the wards, providing outdoor space. Throughout the hospital, ramps created easy mobility for patients in wheelchairs or on gurneys. The floor of every ward also included two round day rooms, whose windows opened onto south-facing views. These day rooms served as common areas for patients, whose beds were arrayed along the ward's main corridors.

¹⁰⁷ The Chronic Diseases Hospital, renamed Goldwater-Coler Hospital, was decommissioned in 2013 and torn down in 2014 to make room for the Cornell Tech campus. My thanks to Judith Berdy at the Roosevelt Island Historical Society for sharing with me her experience and understanding of the complex. Three of the four abstract murals are extant: Bolotowsky's was rediscovered under layers of paint and conserved under the auspices of New York's Adopt-a-Mural program in 2001, and it remains in the best condition of the three. With the impending demolition of the hospital, a search was undertaken for the remaining murals, which located those by Rugolo and Swinden, but not Chanase. The three extant murals remain under the care of Cornell University, which has pledged to display them at a future site on its Roosevelt Island campus.

¹⁰⁸ Isadore Rosenfield, "The Fruit of Research," *Modern Hospital* 48 (March 1937): 58-64; 62.

It was in these circular day rooms that the FAP murals were installed (**fig. 1.24**). A family member coming to the hospital in 1942 to see a patient would arrive at one of the two visitor entrances, an arrangement that kept visitors separate from service deliveries and patient admits in the main Administration building. The south entrance (see **fig. 1.25**) would place a visitor equidistant between Wards A and B; turning left would take her north along the spine of the complex, toward Ward B, where a right turn at the apex of the V-shaped ward would lead on to the odd-numbered rooms. Halfway down this stretch of corridor, past several patient beds and nurses' stations, was the inviting void of the day room. Stepping into the light-filled common space, the approaching visitor would soon find herself surrounded by, on one side, a string of windows, and, on the other, the multicolor symphony of Bolotowsky's mural (**fig. 1.26**). With its stretching expanses of blue and tan, its bold, repeating color areas in yellow and red, and the sail-like triangles dotted along its length, it would have unfurled opposite the windows in its own, abstract version of the river view and skyline across from it.

Installed in Day Room B-11 around November 1941,¹⁰⁹ Bolotowsky's mural was soon followed by others. Although the day room directly above was left undecorated, the rooms on the third and fourth floors both received FAP murals: in Day Room B-31, Joseph Rugolo's abstracted wharf scene played out in lively, Coney Island yellows and reds, while on the top floor, in Day Room B-41, Albert Swinden's syncopated rhythm of square and rectangular color areas brought the room to life in a scheme of blues, greys,

¹⁰⁹ The Bolotowsky mural was photographed on-site on November 25, 1941 (NA, 69-ANM, box 1), although the final approval from the municipal Art Commission of New York was not processed until much later, on May 11, 1942, Art Commission of New York (hereafter ACNY), submission 6717, series 2034, certificate 6611.

tans, and red accents.¹¹⁰ One final mural, by painter Dane Chanase, was also installed, one ward over, in Day Room A-41; like Swinden's, it occupied a fourth-floor space.¹¹¹ In all four cases, the murals were painted on canvas sections that were then lined with lead paint and attached to the curving wall of the day room across from the out-facing windows. As blueprints, floor plans, and extant sketches for the murals make clear, the artists built their compositions around the existing architecture, leaving room for the interior doors and windows that faced onto the rest of the busy ward. One particularly detailed architectural drawing shows the position of each day room in relation to the nurses' station (just behind the room's entrance) and the bed wards, which continued both to the left and right of the room (**fig. 1.27**). On the first floors, both the wards and the circular day rooms were lined with outdoor terraces. This meant that Bolotowsky's mural faced windows that looked out onto the terrace.

Each artist approached the design problem of a curving, hemispheric mural in his own way. By the time of the Hospital commission, Bolotowsky's style had evolved considerably from the Miró-influenced abstraction on display in his Williamsburg mural. By the mid-1940s, Bolotowsky would articulate his own form of Neoplasticism, absorbing, as Troy has argued, the lessons of Mondrian but with the inclusion of

¹¹⁰ Joseph Rugolo's mural was photographed on-site on July 1, 1942 (AAA, FAPPD, box 19, folder 45), and received final approval by the Art Commission two weeks later, on July 13 (ACNY, submission 6734, series 2034, certificate 6635). Albert Swinden's mural received final approval from the Art Commission on July 14, 1942, but may have been installed prior to that date (ACNY, submission 6735, series 2034, certificate 6636).

¹¹¹ Dane Chanase's mural was photographed on-site on March 25, 1942 (NA, 69-ANM, box 2) and received final approval from the Art Commission on April 13 (ACNY, submission 6709, series 2034, certificate 6627). Photographs of Chanase at work on the mural suggest that substantive portions were completed by late January of that year (AAA, FAPPD, digitized collection).

secondary and tertiary colors.¹¹² In the Hospital mural (**fig. 1.28–1.29**), Bolotowsky's design is far more geometric and planar, leaving behind the blobs and kidney shapes of the mid- and late 1930s; at the same time, he has moved away from the bright primary colors of Williamsburg to a more expansive palette with subtler colors, including pastels. There are also clearer references to the outside world, although these remain fairly abstracted: suggestions of sails and sailboats, especially at the mural's right edge, can be glimpsed as simplified triangles and parallelograms. As in the Williamsburg mural, an occasional vertical element protrudes upwards against (or even breaking through the top of) the horizontal forms, although there is far more complexity here in their arrangement. Thin black lines litter the canvas, shooting out diagonally from solid blocks of color, or tracing their own shapes—squares, columns, angled triangles—against the blue-grey and tan grounds.

Two floors above Bolotowsky's, in the third-floor day room, Joseph Rugolo's mural took a different tack (**fig. 1.30–1.33**). Of the four circular murals at the Hospital, it retains the most persistent ties to representation: semi-abstracted buildings, flags, boats, and fishing lines suggest a busy wharf. The forms cluster into informal "scenes," from, at left, a fish hanging on a dock, to waterside buildings, to, at the far right, an arrangement of buoys, scaffolding, and boardwalk around open water. In the narrow space between the door and the window, the upper part of a ship's mast rises jauntily upward. Containing a good deal of variety, the composition relies for coherence on an underlying structure of large, repeating diamond shapes, wide near the mural's centerline and tapering at the top and bottom, their edges formed by sails, angled roofs, and patches of sky and water.

¹¹² Troy, *Neo-Plasticism in America*.

Rugolo also employs a recurring motif of a wriggling line, first in the form of a fishing line and then, throughout the canvas, as rope, anchor chain, flapping banner, or just the line itself, looping over the colored ground. The mural bears comparison with works by Stuart Davis and, especially, Francis Criss, both of whom used color and abstraction to treat the modern city (and its wharves) in similar ways. A 1942 sketch for the mural shows the degree to which Rugolo abstracted elements in the final work, removing details like fish eyes and hints of depth. Rugolo may have also toned down the vibrant colors of the sketch in the final work, but this is difficult to assess given the condition of the mural's surface. In any event, yellows, blues, oranges, and purples were used for major color areas. Although Rugolo was employed, on and off, by the FAP throughout the 1930s (and completed more representational murals, like his *Mural of Sports* for Roosevelt High School), there is some evidence to suggest that he was invited back to the FAP in 1941 specifically for the Hospital project.¹¹³

Albert Swinden's mural was installed on the ward's top floor, one floor above Rugolo's (**fig. 1.34–1.37**). If at Williamsburg, Swinden had made use of geometric blocks that mirrored the beams and wall sections, at the Hospital he took advantage of the long expanse to emphasize horizontality, especially in the long bands that stretch across the mural's entire surface. Yet Swinden did not abandon the rectangular organization from Williamsburg altogether. A series of block-like rectangles recur across the mural; five punctuate the long space to the left of the door. These blocks, themselves made up of smaller rectangles, bands, and curving lines, introduce a syncopated rhythm into the

¹¹³ See Rugolo's General Services Administration Transcript of Employment and his answers to Francis V. O'Connor's 1968 questionnaire, AAA, Francis V. O'Connor Papers (hereafter FVOC), box 4, folder 32.

dominant horizontal thrust. Swinden employs subtle shifts in alignment and angle to do this: directly to the left of the door, for example, a block of white and dark rectangles is threaded through by three horizontal bands that shift register, ever so slightly, as they continue through the blocks on either side (see **fig. 1.36**). Furthermore, within the block, Swinden angles the edge of one of the rectangles, turning it into a parallelogram—or perhaps suggesting a tilted square, with its left side obscured. These cuts and jumps in alignment repeat throughout the mural, creating dynamic disruptions and ambiguities about overlap and depth. Although organic forms are more pervasive in Swinden’s Hospital mural than his Williamsburg one, they are more expertly integrated into the larger geometric order, appearing as frequent loops and tangles rather than discrete objects. Swinden’s mural is particularly sensitive to the spatial particulars of the room: rectangles repeat the shapes of the door and windows, while the long bands echo the handrail below the mural’s lower lip. Bright colors—turquoise, deep blue, red—jump out from more subdued areas of gray, white, and tan.

Dane Chanase had completed several murals on the New York FAP by the time of the 1942 commission. His mural at the Hospital takes up the theme of abstraction and music, a fairly common topic in the history of abstract painting (**fig. 1.38–1.41**).

Abstracted instruments and devices—harp, accordion, keyboard, sheet music, drums, guitar, microphone—form the basic elements of the work. Like Swinden’s, it employs a dominant horizontal thrust, here using a set of sinuous sound waves that flicker in and out across the composition. Changing in tone from light to dark, these stacks of waves rise and fall in height, drifting upwards in the left portion of the mural (with a hint of a wave at the far left corner, another by the piano, and another near the guitar) before falling and

rising again on the other side of the door. Such stripes help to unify the canvas as a whole, and set up a regular, flowing movement—as though dictated by the ticking metronome pictured near the window. As in Rugolo’s work, Chanase’s mural shows an increasing process of abstraction: gone are the delineated figures of harpists from an earlier sketch, along with what appears to have been a concert scene at the far right with a couple seated at a table. In their place in the final version are, at left, a schematic profile of a single musician and, at right, the silhouettes of vases and wine bottles. Chanase’s mural is the only one of the four no longer extant. The lack of any extant sketches by Chanase further prevents us from understanding the mural’s color scheme.

Together, the four Hospital murals display a greater variety of style than the Williamsburg suite. Two of the painters, Rugolo and Chanase, were not members of the AAA, and their designs show different influences and directions—a useful reminder of the diversity of abstract painting in 1930s and 1940s New York. This greater tolerance for different artistic styles in one mural ensemble may be due, in part, to the FAP’s learning curve: never again was a program as ambitious as the one initially devised for Williamsburg, with twelve different artists, attempted. Perhaps Burgoyne Diller was more concerned at this point with merely securing and completing mural commissions, rather than with their overall coherence, especially as the arts programs was dismantled in 1939–43. Yet it is also true that the particular spaces chosen for the murals at the Hospital made some of these issues of harmony and coherence less pressing. Each day room was very much its own, self-sufficient space, and the murals were only visible from within them (and, in the case of Bolotowsky’s, from outside on the terrace). The combination of the murals’ length and hemispheric installation in some ways resolved the tensions

around architectural integration discussed earlier. The murals created immersive spaces that bent to the dictates of the rooms, and yet little to no actual collaboration with the architect was required to accomplish this.

The hospital was an important municipal site in the economy of New Deal art, both because it conformed to the FAP brief to partner with tax-supported institutions and because it fit within the larger progressive interest in sites of healing and reform. There was also a growing interest in the healing function of art itself. The FAP's Art Teaching division frequented hospitals and housing projects and touted the benefits of art-making for children, the sick, and various marginal populations. "Art and Psychopathology," an exhibition of work by Bellevue Hospital psychiatric patients, was installed in the Project's community art centers in 1938 and proved incredibly popular.¹¹⁴ It was not just the making of art that was invested with a therapeutic function, however: viewing and being surrounded by art was also discussed in this way. The use of Project art in hospitals by superintendent Dr. Robert E. Plunkett, a "leading advocate of the therapeutic value of art," was having, according to Audrey McMahon, "a wide spread effect in the hospital world."¹¹⁵ An article on hospital murals in 1938 noted that "many authorities, such as medical superintendents of hospitals, psychiatrists, social workers and others" saw the installation of murals as "beneficial."¹¹⁶ The FAP itself concurred. In its 1938 mural

¹¹⁴ The exhibition opened at the Harlem Community Art Center in October, and moved to the Queensboro Community Art Center the following month. On the exhibition and the associated symposia, see the weekly letters of November 3 and November 18, 1938, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC91. See also the file "Art and Psychotherapy" in AAA, FVOC, box 1, folder 6.

¹¹⁵ Dr. Plunkett was the General Superintendent of the Tubercular Hospital in the New York State Department of Health. See weekly letter, July 24-30, 1938, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90.

¹¹⁶ "Circus Murals Cheer Children In L.I. Hospital," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 24, 1938, A11.

exhibition, it defined “therapeutic” as one of the mural’s four main functions—that is, one of four ways in which it could “serve the community.”¹¹⁷

Can we imagine the murals at the Chronic Diseases Hospital fulfilling such functions? Certainly, they enlivened the spaces in which they were installed and brought a bright and variegated surface to what would otherwise have been plain white walls. Other hospital murals, especially those for children, were more emphatic about their role as therapy through entertainment or narrative. Mother Goose rhymes and circus scenes were a popular subject for children’s wards. Yet officials also spoke of the therapeutic effects of design elements more specifically. A hospital psychiatrist, for example, noted that he was a “firm believer in the direct effect of color and design on the sub-normal person,” while muralist Esther Levine argued that a “semi-abstract,” “psycho-plastic” mural was the best choice for installation at Bellevue Hospital.¹¹⁸ While neither of these statements, with their emphasis on psychiatric patients, is perfectly adaptable to the murals at the Chronic Diseases Hospital, they do show that abstract elements like line, color, and shape were legible within a broadly therapeutic conception of the mural’s role. Others took a more scientific approach to such questions. A 1942 article on “color-therapy” in institutional architecture discussed color’s “therapeutic values in creating harmonious, healing atmospheres,” and urged further empirical study.¹¹⁹ Its profile of sanitarium patients is a fair portrait of many of the Chronic Diseases patients, as well: “resident continuously for periods ranging from a few months to several years,” such

¹¹⁷ See photographs of the exhibition in NA, 69-ANM. The exhibition is discussed at greater length below.

¹¹⁸ Dr. Karl Bowman quoted in “Circus Murals Cheer Children In L.I. Hospital,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 24, 1938, A11; Esther Levine, “A Mural in a Mental Hospital Created with Therapeutic Consideration,” unpublished typescript, September 18, 1940, AAA, FVOC, box 1, folder 6.

¹¹⁹ Frank J. Blank, “The Scientific Use of Color,” *Pencil Points* (February 1942): 117-20; 117.

patients “stay in specific interiors, usually occupying one and the same room, a constant surrounding to which friends and relatives come.” The “treatment value of the surrounding” is thus “of paramount importance, being the medium for establishing the harmonious, restful atmosphere required for complete recovery.”¹²⁰

The therapeutic discourse around art brings us, once again, to the issue of the art’s audience. Just who were the Chronic Diseases murals intended for? In her essay on the “psycho-plastic” mural for psychiatric patients, Levine criticizes the existing murals at Bellevue Hospital, which she believes “have been created only for the visitor and not the patient.”¹²¹ Bolotowsky echoes some of these concerns in a one-page statement he submitted to the city’s Art Commission. Although all four artists submitted sketches and an official application to the Commission, Bolotowsky was the only one to include an artist’s statement. Titled “An Abstract Mural for the Chronic Disease Hospital, Welfare Island,” it is worth quoting in full:

The style of this mural is non-objective. The shapes in it are geometrical. Non-objective style I consider the best for a chronic disease hospital.

For a patient who knows that he is going to be confined in a hospital for a long time, a mural with subject matter dealing with the outside world might prove to be irritating and saddening. On the other hand, subject matter dealing with medicine and surgery might cause him to dwell too long and too often on his illness. Consequently, the most suited design for a hospital mural should contain no definite subject matter, but should be generally decorative and soothing in its line and color.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Levine, “A Mural in a Mental Hospital Created with Therapeutic Consideration.”

Since straight lines are the most restful things to contemplate, this mural is composed of straight lines and geometric shapes.

The day room of this hospital is circular in shape. It is a very unusually beautiful room. However, its roundness might give some patients a feeling of being welled in and fenced off from the rest of the world. Therefore in the mural, I have sought to create a feeling of a free open space. The shapes of doors and windows all around the room have been woven into the design of the mural. Thus, the day room, its architecture and its mural, form one plastic unit. The continuity of the mural, due to the fact that I did not resort to any artificial breaking up of the wall space into small panels, gives the room an air of peace and restfulness. The patient may enjoy the subdued colors with some emotion but with no unrest.

I believe that the Chronic Disease Hospital should have a mural in its day room as modern and progressive as the structure of the building and as the medical science of its staff.¹²²

There are a number of points to note here. First is Bolotowsky's awareness of the "modern and progressive" nature of the institution and its building: Goldwater and Rosenfield's approach to patient care and hospital design demanded, in his view, an equally "modern" approach to wall painting. Second, the statement indicates an artist deeply concerned with the appropriateness of art for its site. Bolotowsky has clearly meditated on the space of the day room and how his mural would relate to it; he understands that the "continuity of the mural" is one of its most impressive features, and

¹²² Ilya Bolotowsky, "An Abstract Mural for the Chronic Disease Hospital, Welfare Island," ca. 1940–42, ACNY, submission 6717, exhibit 2034-BW, certificate 6611.

thus strives to employ forms moving across it rather than dividing it into “artificial” sections. Further, the “shapes of doors and windows all around the room have been woven into the design of the mural,” a strategy that is equally true in Swinden’s mural three stories overhead, with its floating rectangular blocks. The text is one of Bolotowsky’s most explicit defenses of abstraction unframed and integrated into its space; as he writes, “the day room, its architecture and its mural, form one plastic unit.”

For Bolotowsky, these spatial and compositional concerns are intimately tied up with patient experience. He strives to keep the room “open” in feel, and to construct an artwork that will inspire “emotion” while still tending toward “peace and restfulness.” Examples from the outside world or that focus on medical history would only prove depressing or irritating to viewers. It is possible that Bolotowsky’s reasoning is in part strategic, as he tries to convince a relatively conservative Art Commission panel that an abstract mural belongs in this building. Yet we have some evidence that abstraction was, in fact, embraced by the Commission and the Hospital for precisely the reasons Bolotowsky lays out. A photomural by Byron Browne had previously been installed in Day Room B-11, and was removed to make way for Bolotowsky’s abstraction: featuring active shots of tennis players leaping across the court, the mural is a far cry from the serene composition of Bolotowsky’s planes and lines (**fig. 1.42**).¹²³ It was also, according to an interview Bolotowsky gave many years later, too salacious for the patients: faced with images of women in short tennis skirts, the patients became “unbearable and boorish

¹²³ For documentation regarding the Browne photomural, see AAA, FVOC, box 2, folder 2. Photomurals by Hananiah Harari (formerly Richard Goldman), also on the theme of sports, were likely installed around the same time. See “Photomurals Placed in Hospital,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1941, 19. A photo of the Harari mural is in NA, ANM, box 3.

to the nurses, try[ing] to pinch them and poke at them,” and the mural “became full of obscene holes and scratches.”¹²⁴ From this perspective, abstraction’s soothing and unworldly characteristics make it not just therapeutic but explicitly sedative, a means of controlling unruly desires. We can also note in this context the progression toward increasing abstraction in the murals of Rugolo and, especially, Chanase. While there are no records of why their earlier sketches were rejected by the Commission, both of these artists embraced a more rigorous abstraction in their final designs. Furthermore, there were plans to decorate several more rooms in the Hospital, all with abstract murals by Bolotowsky.¹²⁵ Given these factors, it is not far-fetched to imagine that the Hospital staff felt, as Bolotowsky wrote in a 1941 letter, “quite fond” of the abstract wall paintings.¹²⁶

Whether the murals had the effects imagined by Bolotowsky is difficult to know. Many years later, Rugolo stated that his mural had been well received by both patients and the hospital administration.¹²⁷ Hilla Rebay visited Bolotowsky’s mural shortly after it was installed, and reported that it was being “greatly enjoyed” by patients who benefited from “the stimulus and uplift of this form of creative art.”¹²⁸ As a supporter of the artist’s

¹²⁴ Ilya Bolotowsky, interview with Sandra Kraskin, 1978, quoted in Kraskin, “Ilya Bolotowsky,” 95. On this anecdote, see also Bengelsdorf Browne, “American Abstract Artists,” 234.

¹²⁵ Bolotowsky submitted designs to the Art Commission for murals in Day Room C-22, Day Room D-31, and Staff Dining Room no. 239. These were never realized, likely because of the end of the FAP in 1943. See Kraskin, “Ilya Bolotowsky,” 94-110, and illustrations 2-12, 2-14, 2-20, and 2-23.

¹²⁶ Ilya Bolotowsky to Hilla Rebay, December 1941, quoted in Kraskin, 102, 352 n23. Bolotowsky is referring specifically to “Dr. Bloom” (probably Otto I. Bloom), whom he calls the “head doctor.” Only Bolotowsky’s mural was installed at this point.

¹²⁷ Joseph Rugolo, curatorial files, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Painting Record 75.70.6, 1975.

¹²⁸ Rebay quoted in “News Items in Brief—the Last Word,” *Art News* 40.18 (January 1-14, 1942): 20 and in “Non-Objective Murals,” *Art Digest* (January 1, 1942): 31.

work, however, she was far from biased.¹²⁹ In any event, we can best understand the murals' potential when we view them, as Bolotowsky seems to have done, in the context of the Hospital's patient-centered philosophy. As noted earlier, the building's architecture was profoundly informed by what was, in the early 1940s, a radical approach to patient care. The architect Rosenfield put equal importance on building operations as on the emotional needs of patients. A chronic hospital's "site should be as open as possible, with pleasant views," he wrote; in day rooms, "Maximum window area is requisite [...] One day room per nursing unit is required, located to a good view."¹³⁰ Even the height of chronic hospitals should be conceived differently: "About 50% of chronic patients are ambulant," he wrote; "hence, for accessibility to grounds, ward buildings should be low," ideally two or four stories.¹³¹ Rosenfield envisioned a chronic disease hospital that not only supported cutting-edge research, but was also accessible, light-filled, and pleasant for its inhabitants (**fig. 1.43**). The murals clad the walls of what was essentially a social space for patients and their visitors, where they would be surrounded, on one side, by views of the river and the Queens skyline and, on the other, by a colorful symphony of abstract forms.

The four abstract murals in the day rooms of the Chronic Diseases Hospital were both like and unlike the Williamsburg murals of three years earlier. Functionally, they were, like their predecessors, installed in spaces of socializing and congregation. Yet

¹²⁹ Bolotowsky was at this time a recipient of a scholarship from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Non-Objective Art, which Rebay managed.

¹³⁰ Isadore Rosenfield, "General Chronic Hospitals," *Architectural Record* (August 1938): 87-96; 88. The hospital on Welfare Island is discussed on page 95. See also by Rosenfield, in the same issue, "Chronic Hospitals," 86.

¹³¹ Isadore Rosenfield, "General Chronic Hospitals," 87.

their purpose there was understood somewhat differently, in more explicitly therapeutic terms. Visually, both mural suites aimed for integration with their architectural environments. Yet this was accomplished by very different means in each. At Williamsburg, artists used forms that echoed the simple geometries of the rectilinear rooms, blending with—and even disappearing into—the architecture. At the Hospital, the circular day rooms transformed the visual-spatial problem. While the murals still alluded to their architectural surroundings (most notably Swinden’s and Bolotowsky’s), they were less dependent on such allusions for their success. They also, although subsumed into the architecture, were not subordinate to it in the same way. Rosenfield’s circular day rooms, in addition to providing views and common space for patients, provided an excellent framework for abstract wall painting, a space where it could be both consonant with its surround and yet retain its aesthetic identity.

The Exhibition Mural: “Murals for the Community” at the Federal Art Gallery (1938)

The preceding case studies have discussed murals as deeply embedded in their architectural and social spaces. Such an inquiry allows us to examine, with greater specificity, the much-vaunted “public” with which the mural engaged. Any discussion of the abstract mural’s public, however, must also consider its exhibition public. Long before final versions of murals made their way to housing projects and hospitals, other versions—sketches, three-dimensional models, detail studies—circulated through the FAP’s extensive array of exhibition sites. If sketches and models were not available, photographs of installed murals might be shown on a gallery’s wall, or the mural itself

might be displayed there before arriving at its final destination. The tendency to ignore the New Deal mural's exhibition circuit—to regard it, as most scholars have done, as incidental to the mural's meaning and reception—is misguided. FAP exhibitions were a crucial place in which the public art culture of the New Deal was enacted and tested. They were, furthermore, sites that occasioned critical discussion of the possibilities and limits of abstract murals in particular.

Critics themselves spilled a good deal of ink on why murals could *not* be properly experienced in such settings. Cahill listed murals as the first reason that “No complete picture of the [...] Federal Art Project can be given in a museum exhibition,”¹³² and a reviewer in *Art Front* noted how murals are “not susceptible to exhibition purposes.”¹³³ And yet, in an important way, this was not true. Murals *were* experienced, seen, and commented on in exhibitions, and they attracted an enormous amount of critical attention through such displays. New York's Federal Art Gallery opened in December 1935 with a mural exhibition, and went on to prominently feature murals in, among other shows, “Murals for the Community” (May 24–June 16, 1938) and the “Four Unit” exhibition of murals, paintings, graphics, and sculpture (October 21–November 11, 1938).¹³⁴ The FAP also highlighted mural work in other exhibition spaces, including the major show “New Horizons in American Art” (September 14–October 12, 1936), organized by Cahill and Dorothy Miller at MoMA; its sequel, “Frontiers of American Art” at the de Young

¹³² *New Horizons in American Art*, 40.

¹³³ Elizabeth Noble, “New Horizons,” *Art Front* (September 1936): 7-9; 8.

¹³⁴ New York's was the first Federal Art Gallery in the country. The opening mural exhibition ran from December 27, 1935 through January 11, 1936 and included, among abstract mural painters, Eric Mose and Arshile Gorky. Murals were represented by “color and black-and-white sketches for mural designs, cartoons and detail panels” (“Art in a Democracy,” brochure for a Federal One event on June 7, 1938, 33, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90, frame 1468 ff).

Museum in San Francisco (April–October, 1939); and in the WPA building at the New York World’s Fair in 1939–40, among others.

Of crucial importance for exhibitions of murals was how to make them palpable for viewers. How could galleries and museums circumvent some of the difficulties that Cahill was doubtless thinking of when he deemed the museum exhibition a poor place for showing the mural? Whenever possible, exhibitions stressed the mural’s architectural and spatial dimension, displaying cartoons and fully rendered studies that included motifs like arches and doorways. At the 1936 “New Horizons” show at MoMA, photographs and models further enhanced this architectural effect. Eric Mose’s industrial abstraction *Power*, already installed at Samuel Gompers High School in New York, was represented at the museum by a detailed maquette showing the relation of the two mural panels to the interior design. The displays of other abstract murals, like Arshile Gorky’s for Newark Airport and the murals for the Williamsburg Housing Projects, combined an array of objects. The Williamsburg murals were displayed as a number of mural studies; a “chart” and plan of the complex, with the mural locations indicated; and a “Model showing one housing unit with murals by Stuart Davis and Paul Kelpé.”¹³⁵ Interestingly, the three-dimensional models in “New Horizons”—there were seven installed in the show—were disproportionately allotted to abstract murals.¹³⁶ This may reflect the nature of abstract

¹³⁵ Master Checklist, *New Horizons in American Art*, 1936, MoMA Archives, http://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/archives/ExhMasterChecklists/MoMAExh_0052_MasterChecklist.pdf. Images of the Davis-Kelpé model have not been found. A few installation photographs of the show are in MoMA’s Museum Archives Image Database, but none show the abstract mural projects.

¹³⁶ Abstract murals made up only three of the thirty mural projects in the exhibition, and yet all of these were displayed with architectural models. Among the twenty-seven representational mural projects, only four models were included.

muralism, which, without its architectural framework, ran the risk of seeming without function or meaning.

A remarkable series of extant photographs brings to life another major mural exhibition, the Federal Art Gallery's "Murals for the Community" in the spring of 1938 (**fig. 1.44–1.52**). Opening a full two years after "New Horizons in American Art" at MoMA, the exhibition was a great success. It attracted over a thousand visitors in its first two weeks,¹³⁷ and the *New Yorker* declared it "unquestionably one of the most successful the gallery has put on so far."¹³⁸ The dynamic installation included angled, freestanding walls down the main corridor, each devoted to a particular mural project, which was represented by relevant compositional sketches, detail studies, photographs, or the mural itself. Elsewhere in the gallery, murals were displayed on permanent walls and along waist-high display cases.

Photographs from the opening show a lively and engaged audience: artists, administrators, and general viewers mingle among the murals, looking at artwork, sipping coffee, and speaking with one another. Muralist Philip Evergood gave a brief talk to the assembled visitors that night, and a gallery symposium two days later addressed "Mural Painting in America" with abstractionists Balcomb Greene and Arshile Gorky, among

¹³⁷ 548 visitors attended in the first week, and 515 in the second. McMahon to Edwards, weekly letters, June 2 and June 8, 1938, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90, frames 1119 ff and 1180 ff. Weekly attendance at the Federal Art Gallery was often around 200 people per week, but tended to increase to 400-500 people in the first week of a new exhibition.

¹³⁸ Robert Coates, "Abstractionists, Muralists, and Retrospectives," *New Yorker*, June 11, 1938, 59-61; 60.

others, as speakers.¹³⁹ As the events and the surviving photographs attest, the exhibition was a deeply social—and educative—experience. In the words of one review,

The exhibition, [...] with top-notch installation of a type of painting difficult to appraise when not placed in the surroundings for which it has been designed, gives the public a chance to see the vigorous and imaginative character which mural painting is developing under intelligent Government guidance. With sketches, drawings and paintings which show the various steps in making a mural, with enlarged photographs and small shadow boxes lighted from within and seen through ‘portholes,’ it is as contemporary in feeling as the morning newspaper, and takes the spectator into its confidence in an informative manner, appropriate to the social character of mural painting.¹⁴⁰

This “informative” manner extended beyond the individual murals to the exhibition as a whole, which took as its task not just the showing of mural art, but also the stimulating of further understanding and appreciation among the public. Murals could serve “community needs,” the gallery’s signage instructed, along four main routes: documentary, therapeutic, decorative, and “propagandic” (**fig. 1.47**).¹⁴¹ The “documentary” function included “historic” and “scientific” murals, perhaps works like Edward Laning’s immigration murals for Ellis Island. The “therapeutic” category

¹³⁹ The other symposium participants were muralists Alexander Alland, Lucienne Bloch, James Grunbaum, Helen West Heller, Harold Lehman, and Max Spivak. 313 people attended. See McMahon to Edwards, weekly letter, June 2, 1938, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90, frame 1119 ff.

¹⁴⁰ Jeannette Low, “New Murals for U.S. Communities. Walls Socialized by WPA Artists,” *Art News* 36.36 (June 4, 1938): 15, 19; 15.

¹⁴¹ In the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition, “documentary” was changed to “educational.” See Federal Art Project of New York, “Murals for the Community,” pamphlet, 1938, AAA, HCP, Series 8, digitized microfilm, reel 5295, frames 1045-1062.

included both “sedative” and “stimulant” functions, while “decorative” murals referred to those that were either “abstract” (such as the Williamsburg murals) or “fanciful” (likely encompassing the murals by Max Spivak and Ruth Gikow for children’s spaces).

The discourse around the show emphasized what I have been calling the public art culture of the New Deal, and the mural’s particular role in inculcating that culture.

“Opening new vistas to the artist,” the exhibition literature noted, “the Project has also given the people of New York an affirmation of art’s function in the community, and its role in their everyday life.” It continued, “Schools, libraries and colleges, armories, courthouses and airports, and hospitals, penal and welfare institutions and low cost housing developments have been the recipients of WPA Federal Art Project murals.”¹⁴² Such institutions worked in concert with the exhibition to strengthen the mural’s penetration into the community, centralizing (in the exhibition) and dispersing (at the sites) the artwork. Nothing captures this dynamic better than the exhibition pamphlet produced for the show. Bearing the exhibition title and the Gallery’s Manhattan address on the cover, it also featured, inside, a map of existing FAP murals throughout the city’s five boroughs (**fig. 1.48**). Visitors were encouraged to seek out such murals in person, or, at the very least, to expand their mental map of where art existed in New York. Federal Art Galleries like the one in New York thus became distribution hubs: places where in-process and completed murals could be seen (and even requested for FAP shows in other locations¹⁴³), where the accomplishments thus far could be assessed, and where the values of a community-based public art culture could be both experienced and advocated.

¹⁴² Federal Art Project of New York, “Murals for the Community.”

¹⁴³ McMahon, “A General View,” 65.

The exhibition mural, of course, was not invented in the 1930s: finished presentation drawings had long been exhibited at institutions like the Architectural League of New York or through the National Society of Mural Painters. And, as this dissertation will trace in subsequent chapters, the mural continued to feature in galleries and museums in the coming decades, often in a more emphatically commercial context. In New Deal New York, the exhibition served as a social and didactic venue for experiencing murals.

Mural exhibitions like this one also raised with particular urgency the question of abstraction, and whether or not it suited the mural form. Abstract works at the exhibition included Gorky's Newark Airport murals, Harari's *Abstract Decoration* for the Central Nurses' Home on Welfare Island, and the suite of Williamsburg murals, which had an entirely different character in their exhibited form (**fig. 1.49–1.52**). Their installation included three full-size murals, none of which would ever be installed in the Houses: Stuart Davis's *Swing Landscape*, Francis Criss's *Flag by Crane*, and an unidentified abstraction, likely an earlier version of the mural by Greene, no longer extant and heretofore unknown as part of the Williamsburg suite (**fig. 1.51–1.52**). Also included were seven smaller studies for Williamsburg works, by Balcomb Greene, Ilya Bolotowsky, Byron Browne, George McNeil, and Willem de Kooning, among others.¹⁴⁴ Only Bolotowsky's appears close in form to the mural eventually installed. Critics used the presence of the murals to consider the possibilities for abstract muralism more broadly. Writing for *Art News*, Jeannette Low's review wondered if "abstract painting is

¹⁴⁴ This list of Williamsburg artists is derived from contemporary newspaper coverage as well as the archival photographs in NA, 69-ANM.

perhaps going to find its most grateful milieu on the walls of public buildings and not in frames in domestic interiors.”¹⁴⁵

Times critic Jewell made similar observations, devoting over a quarter of his review to the question of wall-scale abstraction. “Abstract design,” he wrote, “though not equipped to prod us into social consciousness or agitate against war, may yet seem frequently more sociable, more at peace with itself and its environment, when filling a wall than when bounded by a frame.” By his account, even abstract easel paintings suggested mural purposes: “much recent American non-objective art of the easel type,” he wrote, “has nursed in embryo the ampler phrase that befits a wall.” Perhaps the mural, he proposed, would finally realize “our non-objective artists’ long muffled search for métier—but not until the rhythms have learned cohesively to flow or monumentally to build.” As the final caveat implies, Jewell was not yet impressed with the results of American abstract muralism. After deriding the parade of “Amorphous shapes or kidney-shaped blobs (American homage to Miro) floating with aimless detachment,” he turned to the Williamsburg sketches in particular:

While all this may not with exactitude apply to the color sketches of Ilya Bolotowsky, Byron Browne, George McNeil and others (I can’t swear offhand that any one of them betrays discipleship to art’s floating kidney school), at the same time the non-objective mural exploits left me unimpressed. A half uneasy feeling attaches to even Arshile Gorky’s abstract panels for the Newark Airport.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Low, “New Murals for U.S. Communities,” 19.

¹⁴⁶ Jewell, “Commentary on Murals,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1938, 117.

This was typical of Jewell's writing on abstract murals, and in fact on murals in general, during the decade: he found them always promising and exciting for future development, and yet never quite realizing their potential.

In the fall of 1939, a reader wrote in to the *Times* in response to one of Jewell's columns. His letter is useful because it synthesizes two of Jewell's ongoing concerns—murals and abstract art—and because it adds another voice in favor of what *Time* magazine had called “architectural painting.” The letter, on the “question of the mural and its function,” wondered if beaux-arts style murals could ever, in the “restless atmosphere of a modern office building [...] command the attention they deserve or even have an indirect effect of psychological benefit?” It goes on to consider the nature of modern architecture, and the kind of decoration it demands:

In the past, wall paintings and architecture were often intermingled to the point where structural character was completely lost. Today we tend in the opposite direction—we express structure and use it as an element of decoration. This might indicate that murals, while preserving their possible functions—i.e., to form a suggestive background, or even an area of direct interest—should be subordinate to the architecture. If this is the case, does it not appear that all requirements can be most harmoniously fulfilled by murals of abstract or nonrepresentational design?¹⁴⁷

Coming down firmly on the side of the abstraction, the letter neatly summarizes several of the issues that abstract muralists faced in the 1930s and the ensuing decades. Murals could demand different levels of attention, forming a “suggestive background,” as it seems they did at Williamsburg and the Hospital, or acting as an “area of direct interest,”

¹⁴⁷ W.H. Radford, “Letter to the Art Editor,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1939, 138.

which some of the Hospital murals may also have done. Yet in either case, they had to remain “subordinate to the architecture” if they were to be successful.

A close reading of the Williamsburg and Hospital works suggests that abstract murals tended, more than others produced by the FAP, to abandon visual claims to grandiosity and monumentality. They insinuated themselves into their spaces more subtly and carefully. They blended with beams and intersected smoothly with ceiling and floor planes. They resonated with the modernist visual language of clean, precise, often unadorned walls. The Williamsburg murals and the murals at the Chronic Diseases Hospital were particularly effective in terms of this spatial and architectural coherence. Where some murals tended to look like large paintings once installed, those at Williamsburg and at the Hospital aligned themselves against the walls, windows, and baseboards in far more integral ways. If the FAP’s distribution process worked against such integration—by conceiving of each mural as a stand-alone assignment for artist wages and public allocation—several artists and administrators still worked toward these goals. In some cases, as at the Chronic Diseases Hospital, the architectural layout offered particularly well-suited spaces for such intervention. If some muralists translated the beaux-arts ideals of permanence and monumentality into a modern, New Deal idiom (for example, in heroic scenes of labor or grand local histories), this remained strikingly untrue for those muralists working in abstraction. Pursuing a more integrated, environmental effect, they faced problems common to their predecessors in European avant-garde circles, and, indeed, to their heirs—American artists of the 1940s and 1950s who would continue to struggle with the potential invisibility of their work, subsumed into the architectural whole.

In making artworks that were both subtler and more integral to their spaces, the abstract muralists of the 1930s and early 1940s embraced the idea that abstraction could be part of the experiential fabric of daily life. The mural division advocated attending to the “needs of the people whose everyday life will be in[f]luenced and affected by the color, design and subject”; these must “be given the same consideration and careful attention by the artist that he gives to the interior plan and the purpose of the building for which he creates his design.”¹⁴⁸ Murals, in other words, had to account for the daily experiences of their users in ways that other forms of the New Deal’s public art culture (paintings, graphics) did not. Abstract artists were particularly sensitive to these questions. As we have seen, Bolotowsky, Diller, and Greene—as well as others not directly linked to the Williamsburg and Hospital projects, like Hananiah Harari—contemplated the daily experience of the tenants and patients inhabiting the buildings they painted for. They imagined abstract surrounds that would be, alternately, relaxing, politicized, cultural, and therapeutic for their denizens. Their designs did not puncture daily life—calling attention to specific visual scenes or narratives—but rather sought to exist with it, to clad the surfaces in which it took place and thus enter far more intimately into the viewer’s understanding.

Several of the AAA painters gave voice to this idea in a letter to *Art Front* in October 1937. Protesting Hilla von Rebay’s spiritualist and esoteric conception of abstraction, they wrote:

¹⁴⁸ “Art in Democracy,” brochure for a Federal One event on June 7, 1938, AAA, WPA-FAP, reel DC90, frame 1468 ff.

It is our very definite belief that abstract art forms are not separated from life, but on the contrary are great realities, manifestations of a search into the world about one's self, having basis in living actuality, made by artists who walk the earth, who see colors (which are realities), squares (which are realities, not some spiritual mystery), tactile surfaces, resistant materials, movement.¹⁴⁹

They concluded with a statement, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that could serve as a guiding principle for the abstract murals of the New Deal: "Abstract art does not end in a private chapel," they wrote. "Its positive identification with life has brought a profound change in our environment and in our lives."¹⁵⁰ Common rooms in housing projects and hospitals, not private chapels, were the proper location for abstract art.

Abstract artists on the New York FAP also painted murals for schools, airports, prisons, and municipal buildings, and their works deserve new scholarly treatment. The methods that I have used here for analyzing the abstract murals in the Williamsburg Houses, the Chronic Diseases Hospital, and the New York exhibition circuit could be productively applied to these other works. In my reading, I have put primary importance on how and where the works were installed, their relationship to the architecture, the institutional and social character of the buildings, and the reception that can be gleaned from archival sources. Such an approach may disrupt existing canons. For example, my discussion of the Williamsburg murals deals only glancingly with Stuart Davis's *Swing Landscape*, perhaps one of the most well-known modernist New Deal artworks. Yet discussing *Swing Landscape* as though it were an actual part of the Houses—an approach

¹⁴⁹ Harari et al., "Letter to the Editors," 21.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

that, implicitly or explicitly, informs most accounts of the mural group—obscures the ambitious coordination of the murals with one another and with the architectural features of the Houses. In particular, the abstract murals by Eric Mose for Samuel Gompers High School (1936); Arshile Gorky for the Newark Airport Administration Building (1936-7); Lucienne Bloch for the music room of George Washington High School (1938); Byron Browne, Stuart Davis, Louis Schanker, and Hans Van Wicht for the WNYC Radio Studios in the Municipal Building (1939); Ruth Reeves for Andrew Jackson High School (1941); James Brooks for the Marine Terminal at La Guardia Airport (1942); and Jean Xceron for the Rikers Island chapel (1942) would benefit from new readings that are architecturally sensitive and informed by archival evidence.

The publics and the public spaces encountered in the ensuing chapters will diverge quite notably from the New Deal public culture discussed thus far. If a combination of philosophical pragmatism (embodied by Cahill and Dewey) and operational logistics helped maintain the social, communitarian spirit of the FAP, these coexisted with, and were followed by, other publics in which murals intervened. Often, these publics were explicitly commercial or economic in nature, and deeply imbricated with mass media for their reach. At the World's Fair of 1939–40, discussed in the next chapter, the abstract mural—painted examples, but also those forged in modern materials like plastic and metal, or with motorized and illuminated parts—played a role in the fluid and dynamic space of popular culture.

CHAPTER 2

ABSTRACT MURALS AND MASS CULTURE AT THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR, 1939–40

The public culture of the New Deal—and its civic sites, housing projects and hospitals—was not the only context for which painters of the 1930s unframed their abstractions. They also envisioned their murals unframed within the public space of popular culture. During the previous several decades, technological and economic changes in the United States had allowed for a boom in new mass cultural forms, like moving pictures and radio, as well as an expanded consumer consciousness that altered not just shopping habits but Americans' visual and spatial engagement with the world around them.¹⁵¹ If the mural could attain something of the energy and the dynamism of mass culture, it could perhaps transform art's audience, leaving behind the elite and sequestered spaces of the museum for the fluid and raucous spaces of the street, the fair, or the department store. Bold applications of modern design in advertising, billboards, and exhibition display pointed to new ways that abstraction might remake the landscape, ways that were often ephemeral but nevertheless large-scale, environmental, and intimately integrated into consumers' daily lives.

Perhaps no single event was more emblematic of these changes in American culture than the New York World's Fair of 1939–40, an expo that topped a decade of

¹⁵¹ On these developments, see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985); Neil Harris, *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990); and Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993).

increasingly commercialized and consumer-oriented Fairs (**fig. 2.1**). Corporate exhibits, advertising, and industrial design played an increasingly large role at the Fairs of the 1930s, shaping the visitor experience. Larger than any preceding expo, the 1939–40 Fair in New York grew out of diverse impulses: to reinvigorate local and regional industry in the face of the Great Depression; to instruct and educate the masses in a new, organic form of citizen education; to sell a vision of modern life—and the commodities necessary for it—to a new generation of would-be consumers.¹⁵² The Fair’s built environment reflected these various impulses. It was one of the first Fairs where the pavilions of private corporations, like General Motors’ spectacular Futurama display, were main attractions, matching or even exceeding the popularity of the Fair’s own pavilions and those of foreign nations. A series of seven “focal exhibits,” sponsored by the Fair’s Committee on Theme and spread out among the grounds, gave lessons in democracy, technology, and modern life, showing different dimensions of the World of Tomorrow—the Fair’s official theme. Other, older notions of public space also shaped the Fair’s appearance. Over a hundred official murals and sculpture, commissioned by the Fair, were painted on the facades of stucco buildings and located among fountains and tree-lined boulevards, many in a synthetic idiom that blended beaux-arts classicism and Art

¹⁵² The scholarship on the 1939 Fair is voluminous. For an overview, see Helen Harrison, ed., *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World’s Fair 1939/1940* (New York: Queens Museum and New York University, 1980); Stanley Appelbaum and Richard Wurts, *The New York World’s Fair, 1939/1940 in 155 Photographs* (New York: Dover, 1977); and Herbert Rolfes, Mel Lerner, and Larry Zim, *The World of Tomorrow: The 1939 New York World’s Fair* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). On the competing impulses animating the Fair, see also Pieter van Wesemael, “New York World’s Fair, or ‘Building the World of Tomorrow’ (1935-1939/40-1941)” in *Architecture of Instruction and Delight: A Socio-Historical Analysis of World Exhibitions as a Didactic Phenomenon (1798-1851-1970)*, 443-558 (Rotterdam: 010, 2001). On the Fair’s role in eliciting a new level of consumer consciousness, see Terry Smith, “Funfair Futurama: A Consuming Spectacle,” in *Making the Modern*, 405-22.

Deco style. Elsewhere, fairgoers reveled in what Lewis Mumford called the “splendid riot” of amusement rides, pageant shows, and nocturnal fireworks and light displays.¹⁵³

Modern art at the Fair, like the expo itself, betrayed a diversity of styles. In the Medicine and Public Health building, members of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) contributed four studies in geometric abstraction, layering together architectonic shapes, floating organic forms, and, in two cases, references to the building’s theme of scientific progress. Painted offsite on canvas, the murals were affixed to hanging ceiling partitions and suspended above displays on heart disease, milk pasteurization, and other advances in medical science. Over the entrance to the Chrysler Motors building, Henry Billings experimented with a very different form of abstraction, using acetate, cellophane, and polarized light to put a modern twist on the stained glass window. For Billings and others, the industrial materials of the modern world were a fitting complement to abstraction. In the focal exhibit for the Communications building, Stuart Davis’s gigantic, 136-foot mural—designed by the artist and painted directly on the wall by union labor—played an integral role in a coordinated light and moving pictures show. All of these abstract murals, in different ways, were in dialogue with vigorous and often exhilarating currents outside the realm of fine art.

The diversity of art at the Fair, and the resulting differences in viewer address and engagement, has not always been well grasped in the art historical literature.¹⁵⁴ A

¹⁵³ Lewis Mumford, “The Skyline in Flushing: West is East,” *New Yorker*, June 17, 1939, 38-46; 38.

¹⁵⁴ On art at the Fair, see Jody Patterson, “Modernism and Murals at the 1939 New York World’s Fair,” *American Art* 24.2 (Summer 2010): 50-73; Helen Harrison, “Stuart Davis’s *World of Tomorrow*,” *American Art* 9.3 (Autumn 1995): 96-100; and, on art at the 1930s Fairs more broadly, Neil Harris, “Old Wine in New Bottles: Masterpieces Come to the Fairs,” in *Designing Tomorrow: America’s World’s Fairs of the 1930s*, eds. Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo, 41-55 (New Haven, CT: National Building Museum and Yale University, 2010).

common tendency has been to see Fair art (including murals) on a spectrum from conservative to modern, presenting the latter as a valiant but embattled minority. At least one example from the Fair's history seems to bear this out: a minor controversy erupted among Fair planners in late 1937 over two of the Fair's official murals, which had been assigned to painters from "'non-objective' or 'abstract'" schools.¹⁵⁵ Yet closer inspection complicates the picture. In some cases, radically non-objective art occasioned no controversy at all. Other sites, especially those pavilions dealing with modern technologies and materials, welcomed or even demanded large-scale abstraction. Given the labyrinthine nature of the Fair's bureaucracy—with its intersecting layers of the official Fair, private renters, contractors and subcontractors, alliances with institutions like the American Health Association and the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—the presence of abstraction in Fair murals was rarely a simple question of modern versus conservative trends in art. More importantly, merely tracking the avant-garde status of murals prevents a more nuanced study of what abstraction offered to viewers taking in the Fair's sights. How did abstraction enliven the particular buildings and exhibits in which it was found? What, if anything, did it communicate? How was it tied up in larger issues of technology, modern life, and mass entertainment?

In this chapter, I look at three case studies—the suite of four murals at the Medicine and Public Health building; industrial murals by Henry Billings and Eric Mose; and Stuart Davis's *History of Communication*—to elucidate three ways in which abstraction entered the mass cultural space of the 1939–40 Fair. There were many other

¹⁵⁵ Stephen Voorhees, Chairman of the New York World's Fair Board of Design, "A Statement on Mural Decoration," December 4, 1937 (New York Public Library, New York World's Fair 1939 and 1940 Incorporated Records, box 192, folder 16).

examples of modern and abstract murals at the expo. Limiting this discussion to a relatively small selection allows for a deeper investigation not only of patronage and working process (who paid for and approved the works? how were the murals' formal themes developed?), but also the spatial and architectural experience of them, often misunderstood by scholars. How were these murals sited? What kinds of pathways and signage affected the flow of visitors past them? How popular were the buildings in which the murals were housed, and did they remain open for the Fair's second, 1940 season? In answering such questions, I restore these murals to the architectural matrices and social experiences in which they were first encountered.

Murals or Posters? Abstraction and Design in the Medicine and Public Health Building

The suite of four murals by the AAA, hung at ceiling level in the Medicine and Public Health building, constitutes some of the most rigorously abstract muralism at the Fair (**fig. 2.2–2.5**). As in the murals at the Williamsburg Houses and the Chronic Diseases Hospital, the murals at the Fair, by Ilya Bolotowsky, Byron Browne, Louis Schanker, and Balcomb Greene, reflect the artists' evolution of an abstraction pioneered by Europeans such as Piet Mondrian, Fernand Léger, and Joan Miró. Yet the distance between their rigorously abstract murals and the mass cultural space of the Fair is not as great as it may first appear. Both the siting of the murals and certain of their formal motifs brought them into dialogue not only with the building's exhibits on medical science, but also with the visual language of Fair posters and pavilion displays more broadly. Intentionally or by accident, they wove themselves into the didactics and graphic style of Fair exhibition.

Discussing them in this context allows for several new insights. First, it allows us to meaningfully differentiate these murals from others by the same artists that were experienced in very different spaces, the basement-level social rooms of public housing and the therapeutic arenas of hospitals. Second, by correcting previous misreadings of the siting of the murals in the building, it restores a sense of the spatial logic in which they were encountered. Finally, it paints a picture of the particular difficulties of the mural in a space like the World's Fair, where it competed with a host of more spectacular examples, from industrial murals to posters, banners, flags, and large-scale exhibition elements.

The route of the four abstract murals to the Fair was somewhat convoluted. Once again, the Federal Art Project (FAP) and Burgoyne Diller were involved. In late 1937 and throughout the following year, the WPA was discussing how to play a role at the Fair. Their plans would eventually culminate in a WPA building, dedicated to showing the agency's myriad activities in employing Americans and creating new public works.¹⁵⁶ They would also commission murals by artists on the WPA's FAP, using these to decorate not only the WPA building itself but several others around the Fair. Around the same time, the Fair's Committee of Medicine and Public Health approached Audrey McMahon, regional head of the New York FAP, about the possibility of including FAP work in the health exhibit it was then planning.¹⁵⁷ Likely through the interceding of Diller, the four abstract artists were selected for the building's murals. By July of 1938,

¹⁵⁶ For a first-hand account of the WPA's role at the Fair, see Olive Lyford Gavert, "The WPA Federal Art Project and the World's Fair, 1939-1940," in *The New Deal Art Projects*, 247-67 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1972).

¹⁵⁷ See correspondence between McMahon, H.A. Flanigan, John Hogan, and Stephen Voorhees, New York Public Library Manuscript Division (hereafter NYPL), New York World's Fair 1939 and 1940 Incorporated Records (hereafter NYWF), box 193, folder 14.

Bolotowsky, Browne, Schanker, and Greene had produced initial sketches for the murals, and preliminary locations had been chosen for them in the building.¹⁵⁸ In January of 1939, the Design Board officially approved the four murals “as presented by Mr. Diller,”¹⁵⁹ and by the end of March, one month before the Fair’s opening, at least one (and probably all) of the murals had been completed.¹⁶⁰ The murals were installed in the building in the final week of April.¹⁶¹

The abstract murals were hung high above the exhibits, installed on the outer faces of two hanging ceiling partitions (**fig. 2.6**).¹⁶² Running along the inside of these same partitions was another FAP mural, by Abraham Lishinsky and Irving Block, this one depicting *The History of Medicine* in a realist, narrative style. The abstract murals’ placement here, above the building’s central corridor, was a later decision: initial sketches from 1938 show them sited on a peripheral wall, at the northern end of the exhibition hall. The change in location put them above a greater amount of foot traffic. Fairgoers who entered through the Hall of Man (a popular stop in the building that faced the busy Theme Center) would have encountered the murals by Bolotowsky and Browne

¹⁵⁸ The Federal Art Project’s Photography Division photographed initial sketches for the murals, with site plans, on July 20, 1938 (AAA, FAPPD, box 3, folders 8 and 44 and box 9, folder 25). Prints of these photographs are also included in the bound book “Work for the World’s Fair by the Federal Art Project of New York City,” undated, ca. 1939-40, NA, 69-AN, box 20, folder 863.

¹⁵⁹ Stephen Voorhees to Chief Engineer and Director of Construction, January 16, 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 193, folder 14.

¹⁶⁰ Bolotowsky’s finished mural was photographed in studio on March 27, 1939 (AAA, FAPPD, box 3, folder 8).

¹⁶¹ McMahon to Edwards, weekly letter, May 5, 1939 (FAP, AAA, reel DC91).

¹⁶² My reading of the murals’ placement, which differs from that of other scholars, is based on the on-site photographs of May 4, 1939 along with ground plans for the exhibitor pavilions. For the latter, see the floor plan of September 6, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 205, folder 10; and *Man and His Health: A Guide to the Medical and Public Health Exhibits at the New York World’s Fair 1939, Together with Information on the Conservation of Health and the Preservation of Life* (New York: Exposition Publications for the American Museum of Health, 1939), 30-31.

as they headed toward the central walkway, and anyone crossing from one end to the other of the building, or heading to the main doors that faced the flag-lined Avenue of Patriots, would have passed below them. This arrangement also made it possible, even likely, that a fairgoer would see only two of the murals rather than all four of them, as they no longer occupied one, continuous sight line.

This pairing of the murals—two on each partition—would also have affected the viewer's understanding of them. Taking them in, a visitor would have seen neither a stand-alone painting nor a series of four cladding the wall. Rather, from any one viewpoint, a pair of murals would have been visible, balanced like pendants at either end of the partition, each filling the rectangle of space where the ceiling and adjoining partitions met. Although distinct from one another (they were physically separated by several feet of white wall), the murals in each pair were also clearly related, occupying the same amount of space and the same architectural niche at each end. Looking at the two murals together, one is struck by how much they stand out from the surrounding space: they lack not only the representational content of the narrative mural behind them but also its hints of depth or modeling. Popping off the blank surrounding walls, the mural pairs look much like the other bold graphics that decorated the Fair, the posters, banners, and flags that announced a building's theme or lined boulevards like the Avenue of Patriots.

Bolotowsky's and Browne's murals balanced one another on the northern partition. Bolotowsky's shows a debt once again to Miró: anvil- and amoeboid-like shapes, thin lines, figure-eights, and floating rectangles and triangles are distributed across the canvas (2.2). While in other works Bolotowsky often included upright,

anchoring forms (as in the Williamsburg mural), or grounding slabs that indicate orientation, the World's Fair mural generally lacks such markers. Instead, the shapes appear to float in space. Two pencil-thin lines, extending across the lower portion of the mural, suggest something of a pediment or base, yet they read more like the other lines angled across the surface than as stable horizontal ground. It is perhaps this non-hierarchical arrangement, along with the almost square-like proportions, that gives the mural its particularly decorative quality. Lacking the weight of the long, rectangular Williamsburg mural, or the immersive effect of the hospital mural, Bolotowsky's forms take on a more whimsical and playful tone.¹⁶³

Bolotowsky later recalled that he made some attempts to fit the mural, thematically, to its site: as he developed the composition through several versions, he claimed, "I put some bacterial-like shapes here and there and made it more decorative. I sort of sensed the mural must belong in the building."¹⁶⁴ Such attempts are far more explicit in the mural that hung at the other end of the partition, by Byron Browne (**fig. 2.3**). In Browne's mural, sectioned into two main compositional units, the dominating motifs are abstracted from microscopes. Lenses, focusing wheels, an eye-piece, and a curving handle form the building blocks for a geometric interplay of different shapes, all elaborated from the formal theme of the microscope—a process reflected in the mural's original title, *Improvisation*.¹⁶⁵ On the right-hand side, the microscope is seen in profile,

¹⁶³ For a different reading of Bolotowsky's relationship to Miró, see Kraskin, "Ilya Bolotowsky," 72.

¹⁶⁴ Bolotowsky, quoted in Kraskin, "Ilya Bolotowsky," 70.

¹⁶⁵ The four murals were all labeled *Abstraction* in May 1939 photographs, and have been known by those names since. However, in an internal progress report, McMahon lists the titles as *Abstraction* (Greene), *Improvisation* (Browne), and *Abstraction—Non-Objective* (Bolotowsky); Schanker's mural is not mentioned. McMahon to Edwards, weekly letter, April 6, 1939 (FAP, AAA, reel DC91).

with an organic, germ-like form tilted up on the viewing plate. On the left, Browne abstracts the microscope into a more purely formal play of vertical bars, with the rounded tip of the lens protruding just beyond the instrument's base.

The mural is in keeping with other work that Browne was producing at this time, compositions of irregularly curved and angled abstract forms. (Browne produced two such sketches for the Williamsburg Houses, neither of which was realized, and a completed mural for the WNYC Radio Studios, in a more geometric style.) Yet unframed and tucked away along the ceiling partition, Browne's arrangement of forms becomes less clearly an abstract painting and more a punctuation mark in a larger architectural ensemble, a bit of visual interest to enliven an otherwise plain wall. Indeed, whether by choice or coincidence, an explicit echo of its central motif would have been visible to viewers a few feet away at the exhibitor pavilion on milk pasteurization, where a blown-up microscope and vats of milk sat on either side of a Louis Pasteur poster (**fig. 2.7**). Browne's painting could thus read quite clearly as exhibition signage, an abstracted, modernist version of the visual didactics spread throughout the space.

Like the pairing of Bolotowsky and Browne, the southern ceiling partition also coupled murals with different degrees of abstraction: one, a semi-abstract painting with recognizable forms by Louis Schanker, and the other, an entirely non-objective painting by Balcomb Greene. Schanker's arrangement of overlapping planes included references to the theme of medical science and public health: microbes twist on the surface, although Schanker consciously abstracted several of these compared to his earlier studies. The most overt reference to the exhibit's theme was in the silhouetted head in the lower right, which serves as a symbol of man and his inquiry into the scientific realm. Like

Browne's abstracted microscope that was echoed in the photomural a few feet away, this form would also have resonated throughout the Fair. Man (and sometimes woman), often rendered transparently or in outline, recurred throughout the Fair's health exhibits, in displays on cancer, circulation of the blood, and in the adjacent Hall of Man. In such displays, the abstracted form of man's head or body was a symbolic stand-in for the inhabitant of the World of Tomorrow.

Balcomb Greene's mural, the bookend to Schanker's, underwent the greatest changes of any of the four installed (**fig. 2.4**). While sketches photographed in July 1938 show fairly minor differences for Bolotowsky, Browne, and Schanker, Greene's is an entirely different composition. Instead of the two trapezoidal forms he eventually settled on, his earlier sketch shows a long, rectangular mass connecting two ovals, each turned at a different angle (**fig. 2.8**). The only elements that he seems to have retained from this sketch are the delineation of a separate ground below the figures, and the use of a thin, rudder-like form amidst the planar abstract shapes. Greene settled on the new design sometime in late 1938 or early 1939: a small, extant painting now entitled *Blue World* shows the exact composition of the final work, and is visible, along with the in-process mural, in a studio photograph from February 1939 (**fig. 2.9–2.10**).

Much of Greene's other work from around this time also explores the two-part composition of geometric shapes, often dividing the canvas or masonite in two, and using trapezoids or irregularly rounded and cropped rectangles in various arrangement. As in these paintings, the mural contrasts dynamism and stasis: here, a slightly tilted form on the right, and the differing angles of the stacked trapezoids, impart a subtle sense of motion to the otherwise static composition. Greene admired Mondrian, recording at least

one visit to the older artist's studio in his journal, and he seems to have been particularly interested in how the painter explored architectural and spatial relationships in the hanging of paintings and squares of primary colors on his walls.¹⁶⁶ The mural's limited palette is perhaps also due to the influence of Mondrian, although instead of the primary colors Greene confines himself to blue, black, red, gray, and white.

The four murals by the AAA share certain spatial features with unframed abstraction in European modernist circles. The small abstractions by Léger, briefly discussed in the previous chapter, were similarly tucked into an architectural matrix without any frame or marker to preserve their autonomous status. Anna Vallye has termed Léger's approach to wall painting in the 1920s as a form of "mural easel painting," and the same could be said of the four works at the Fair, rendered on canvas for ease of transport and installation.¹⁶⁷ The vein of muralism explored in the Bauhaus Wall Painting Workshop in the 1920s also employed abstraction, but tended to make greater use of architectural media such as wood and plaster. Artists Willi Baumeister, Herbert Bayer, and Oskar Schlemmer used geometric and humanoid shapes in their wall designs, and located them in places of transit and passage, like stairwells and interior walls (**fig. 2.11–2.12**).¹⁶⁸ The four murals at the Fair's Medicine building faced issues similar to abstract murals in Europe. As Vallye's "mural easel" terminology suggests, the particular status of such abstractions was unclear: were they mural paintings, integral to

¹⁶⁶ Balcomb Greene, typed journal entry, February 5, 1942, AAA, Balcomb and Gertrude Greene Papers, box 1, folder 25.

¹⁶⁷ Anna Vallye, ed., *Léger: Modern Art and the Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2013), 37.

¹⁶⁸ For an overview of these and related Bauhaus works, see Thümmel, "Die Werkstatt für Wandmalerei" and Chametzky, "From *Werkbund* to *Entartung*."

the spaces they decorated? Or did their canvas support and portability put them in a different category? The integration of abstract surfaces into architecture was a potentially threatening prospect, dissolving and making subservient, even anonymous, the painting itself. Many years later, Bolotowsky's memory of the murals in the space suggests such a fate: "very few people would look up [at them]," he recalled in 1978. "They would come in there and look at various examples of cancerous cells and such exciting things and go out like cattle [...] I know because I watched them."¹⁶⁹

Contemporary viewers of the four murals generally tried to resolve (or perhaps circumvent) such tensions by placing them in the category of design or decoration. The publicity text produced by the WPA's Division of Information noted that the murals served "to give color and design relief to the severity of the walls,"¹⁷⁰ while the Medicine and Public Health guidebook called them merely "four purely decorative panels," in contrast to the "descriptive murals" by Block and Lishinsky.¹⁷¹ The most extensive treatment of the mural suite was by art critic Elizabeth McCausland, who published a piece on the Fair's FAP murals six months before opening day. The article describes the "large realistic panels on the history of medicine" by Block and Lishinsky before turning to the four murals planned by the AAA painters:

¹⁶⁹ Bolotowsky, interview with Sandra Kraskin, 1978, quoted in Kraskin, "Ilya Bolotowsky," 69.

¹⁷⁰ WPA, Division of Information, untitled description on recto of photograph, ca. May 1939 (collection of Helen Harrison).

¹⁷¹ *Man and His Health: A Guide to the Medical and Public Health Exhibits at the New York World's Fair 1939, Together with Information on the Conservation of Health and the Preservation of Life* (New York: Exposition Publications for the American Museum of Health, 1939), 86. This is the only reference to the murals in the book, and the four artists are not named. By contrast, Block and Lishinsky's mural was credited and discussed in detail. The *Official Guidebook: New York World's Fair, 1939* (New York: Exposition Publications, 1939) left out the abstract murals entirely.

The four abstractions of Shanker [sic], Greene, Bolotowsky, and Browne, also oil on canvas, will be uniform in size, 10 by 16 feet over-door panels, and are designed to perform the function of decorative visual spots in an interior filled with concrete realistic exhibits. Thus the visitor will come into the main entrance hall, see the large murals [by Block and Lishinsky], study them as closely as he chooses and then turn into auxiliary galleries where he will experience the psychological relief of seeing large areas of color which do not demand close attention but which afford an uncomplicated sensuous pleasure.¹⁷²

McCausland's description appears to presume their earlier layout, with the works placed in what she calls "auxiliary galleries," actually a single wall off the main corridor. She may also have been looking at Greene's earlier composition rather than the final one he settled on. Nevertheless, her comments are useful. She downplays any connection to the science imagery around them, positioning them *against* the "concrete," "realistic" exhibits below. Whereas such booths, with their health statistics and diagrams, ask to be pored over in detail or considered intellectually, the abstract murals were of a "sensuous" and "psychological" nature, areas of "relief" amidst the didactics. Scholars have tended to read such assessments as slights, a reduction of vanguard modernism to mere decoration. But McCausland's notion of decoration is a profoundly aesthetic one. She claims a role for the four murals in the realm of pure psychological enjoyment, a sensuous play of forms upon the viewer.

The four murals, however, were not as distinct from the exhibition space as McCausland wants to claim. Indeed, I would propose another analogy: more than pure,

¹⁷² Elizabeth McCausland, "Murals from the Federal Art Project," *Parnassus* 10.7 (December 1938): 8.

sensuous abstraction or the abstractions of European counterparts like Léger and Baumeister, the Fair murals are akin to graphic, moveable media like posters. They reference, both overtly and more subtly, the themes of scientific progress with which the exhibition's design components (booths, photomurals, blown-up statistics) were concerned. Tucked into the corners of the partitions, they do not engage with the architectural matrix in the extended or substantive way that de Stijl or Bauhaus artists attempted—turning the corners, say, or centered over architectural elements like doors, pillars, or the curving wall of a stairwell. Rather, they appear as visually striking banners or posters, above the fray and clearly detachable from the larger architectural shell.

Such consonances go beyond just the murals' placement and allusion to scientific themes. The murals also share more generally in the language of graphic design. Their smooth surfaces, sharp delineation of different areas, and the reduction of recognizable objects into abstracted arrangements of forms parallel the striking and stylish compositions then debuting in posters, magazines, and other visuals both in and outside the Fair (**fig. 2.13–2.15**). Greene's extremely reduced palette even suggests the sharp registration of lithographic color areas. Greene achieved this effect not through lithography, of course, but through another commercial technique, the use of stencils and airbrushing, as we can see in the studio photograph of Greene at work. The use of arrows, tilted and overlapping planes, and directional lines throughout the murals (emanating, in Schanker, like energy waves from a particle) similarly suggest the flair of modern posters, especially those dedicated to the Fair's themes of technological optimism and modern scientific processes.

The consonance of the four murals with poster design and usage raises important questions about the function and scope of the mural in an age not only of reproductive technology but of new speeds in the movement of goods, people, and building projects. It is not just that objects like posters held a strong appeal for modern artists. Nor is it simply a question of a shared inheritance, as some of the abstract painters themselves would elucidate: Greene, for example, in an essay for one of the AAA yearbooks, celebrated that species of “abstract art which has begun by clarifying the applied arts of architecture, poster and typographical design, furniture and even machine construction.”¹⁷³ More importantly, the poster—cheap to print, easy to multiply, and designed for obsolescence—was a competitor for space and attention, and a particularly useful one for an ephemeral project like a World’s Fair. As museums in the 1930s increasingly accepted the poster as an art form, they often invoked the same, ancient lineage—the cave paintings of early man—that proponents of the mural charted for wall painting. In the catalogue accompanying the Franklin Institute’s 1937 *New Poster* exhibition, for example, Christophe Brinton urged readers back to “the caves of Altamira in Northern Spain, and Font-de-Gaume in Southern France [...] Here is the true poster.”¹⁷⁴ How could the abstract mural compete in this new landscape? Ought it to remain in the realm of pure art, something like McCausland’s “decorative visual spots”? Or ought it to take on the energies and logic of the poster—and risk becoming lost amid the array of photomurals, banners, and large-scale statistics?

¹⁷³ Greene, “Expression as Production,” 29.

¹⁷⁴ Christophe Brinton, “The Poster in Time and Space,” in *New Poster: International Exposition of Design in Outdoor Advertising* (Philadelphia: Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania, 1937), n.p.

Telling in this regard is the attention paid to the four murals by designers rather than art critics. Besides McCausland, who wrote about the murals the winter before the Fair's opening, the only other critical mention ran as a short nod in *A Design Student's Guide to the New York World's Fair*, a pamphlet compiled by students of the Laboratory School of Industrial Design and published by *P/M* magazine.¹⁷⁵ The publication was intended, as its foreword stated, for people "seriously interested in fresh ideas in architecture, industrial design, display and similar fields." Billing itself as "a specialized and selective Baedeker" for the design-conscious, it skipped over both the more old-fashioned pavilions, as well as those it denigrated as "pseudo-modern fantasies."¹⁷⁶ At the Medicine and Public Health building, the realist mural by Block and Lishinsky, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not catch the editors' eye. Rather, they commended the "decorative panels on physics phenomena," the "Science panels on glass," and the "Architectonic lighting," as well as the four murals by the AAA group. The publication also made a strange, if telling, mistake in listing the artists, naming the muralists as Bolotowsky, Greene, Schanker, and Alexei Brodovitch—substituting for Byron Browne the graphic designer, then five years into his legendary tenure as art director at *Harper's Bazaar*.¹⁷⁷

The four abstract murals in the Medicine and Public Health building were both like and unlike the mass-produced posters and signage that paneled the Fair and appeared

¹⁷⁵ The Laboratory School of Industrial Design was the outgrowth of the FAP's Design Laboratory, which operated with federal funding from December 1935 to June 1937. After its funding was cut, it ceased to be part of the New Deal projects and merged with the CIO-affiliated Federation of Artists, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians (FAECT). See Karen Bearor, *Irene Rice Pereira: Her Paintings and Philosophy* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1993), 67-68.

¹⁷⁶ Laboratory School of Industrial Design, *A Design Student's Guide to the New York World's Fair* (New York: Laboratory School of Industrial Design and *P/M* Magazine, 1939), "Foreword," n.p.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, "1. Official World's Fair," n.p.

in other media. They were part of a large if somewhat ad hoc collection of flat visual images commanding attention, the striking magazine covers and big-format illustrations that dominated exhibition booths. They shared in the design language of many of these images, and even restated specific motifs—germs, microscopes, the human head—that ran through the building’s exhibition and the Fair at large. But the murals were also unlike such imagery. They were executed in oil on canvas, rather than printed photomechanically or lithographically. They lacked the lettering and numbers that turned visuals into didactics and advertisements, not to mention the all-important trademark. They were also generally resistant to a reading of medical betterment or scientific progress, to which many of the other visual images surrounding the Fair subscribed. (Schanker’s comes the closest to emulating this message, but even here, the lack of textual or graphic marks intimating such a narrative is noticeable.) The four murals in the Medicine building remain suspended in between the worlds of abstraction and design, of fine art and ephemeral mass culture.

Industrial Abstraction: Murals and Modern Industry

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the abstract murals in the Medicine building was the array of spectacular and sophisticated visuals that clad the Fair at large. As Neil Harris writes, at the 1939 Fair, “Huge photomontages, movies, and abstract illustrations enhanced the power of the objects under display [...] Overhead mirrors and fluid structures, sophisticated neon lighting, and ambulatory stages and auditoria were

exploited imaginatively.”¹⁷⁸ Throughout the Fair, dozens of what I will call industrial murals followed the opposite tack of the murals in the Medicine building. Eschewing the conventional medium of paint for the emphatically modern textures and technologies of plastics, steel, glass, light, and motorized parts, these murals embraced the entertainment and spectacle values of showmanship and exhibition design while promoting the Fair’s ideology of technological advancement. As the Fair eagerly proclaimed in a press release:

More than thirty of the Fair’s exhibitors have called upon artists, for the most part muralists and sculptors, to aid them in communicating with Fair visitors [...] There are mural decorations in mosaic, hammered steel, Polaroid, and phosphorescent paint; there are sculptures in synthetic stone and transparent Plexiglas.¹⁷⁹

While some of these works have received attention from cultural and design historians, they have largely escaped the attention of art historians—perhaps, in part, because of their location somewhere between fine art and entertainment. Yet the industrial murals constitute one of the most popular forms of abstract art at the Fair, and thus deserve attention. They were also presented in the same publicity materials, and covered in the same reviews, as their painted, “fine-art” counterparts. Most importantly, they fulfilled a similar function in the Fair’s landscape: like painted murals, they were a means of cladding, beautifying, and explaining the World of Tomorrow to its visitors. I

¹⁷⁸ Such strategies were increasingly popular in the Fairs of the 1930s, and reached new heights in 1939. See Neil Harris, “Museums, Merchandising, and Popular Taste: The Struggle for Influence,” in Ian M. G. Quimby, *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, 140-74 (New York: W.W. Norton for the Winterthur Museum, 1978), 159. On Fair design in the 1930s generally, see also Lisa D. Schrenk, ““Industry Applies”: Corporate Marketing at A Century of Progress,” in *Designing Tomorrow*, 23-40.

¹⁷⁹ New York World’s Fair Department of Feature Publicity, “Art and Industry at the New York World’s Fair,” undated, ca. 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 1884, folder 9. For more examples of such murals, see *ibid.*, “Art in Industry: Index to Signed Art in Privately Owned Buildings at the New York World’s Fair,” undated, ca. 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 1884, folder 9 and *ibid.*, “Plastics at the New York World’s Fair,” undated, ca. 1939, NYPL NYWF, box 1884, folder 7.

discuss three such murals here—two by Henry Billings, and an unrealized one by Eric Mose—that appealed to viewers both as fairground attractions and as meditations on the complexity of modern industry.¹⁸⁰

Henry Billings was a well-established muralist by 1939, and he managed to secure multiple commissions at the Fair, most of them in paint. Yet in a design for the Chrysler Motors building, he conceived a “mural window” in a decidedly experimental vein.¹⁸¹ The work is lost, but we can see its color, texture, and general appearance in an array of extant photographs (**fig. 2.16–2.20**). Placed directly over the main entrance to the pavilion, Billings’s mural used acetate, cellophane, and a polarizing filter to create a semi-abstract composition that merged the industrial with the cosmic. In the mural, gears, a speedometer, an engine diagram, and a head-on view of a car were spliced together with a comet, star, and planet, the entire surface overlaid with a decorative scheme of circles and cones. Intersecting with and framing the auto parts and celestial forms, these abstract shapes suggested a realm of elegant if complex physics phenomena, from planetary rotations to gravitational pull to mathematical formulae.

The most eye-catching aspect of Billings’s industrial mural was its use of polarized light. The Polaroid Company had patented polarized filters several years earlier, for use in three-dimensional movies (an example of which was on view inside the building) and in glare-reducing windshields and car mirrors.¹⁸² In Billings’s mural, the

¹⁸⁰ I thank Paul M. Van Dort for his assistance in locating new photographs of the two murals by Henry Billings, and David Knowles for his generosity in sharing them with me.

¹⁸¹ For one of the few readings in secondary scholarship of Billings’s mural, see Helen Harrison, “The Fair Perceived: Color and Light as Elements in Design and Planning,” in *Dawn of a New Day*, 43-55.

¹⁸² The 3-D movie, *In Tune with Tomorrow* (Loucks and Norling studios, 1939) showed a stop-animation of a Chrysler car being assembled without human intervention. On this and Polaroid’s early patents for car

polaroid material is there not to demonstrate such uses, but rather for visual effect: by shining white lights through a mix of moving and stationary polaroid discs behind the mural's surface, the piece produced a "constant shift of pure prismatic colors of great intensity."¹⁸³ The polaroid filter also gave the abstract design an "illusion of motion," as the lights seemed to shimmer behind the window.¹⁸⁴ Press releases by the Chrysler Corporation and the Fair stressed the spectacle of the "flashing Polaroid Mural,"¹⁸⁵ as well as the sheer novelty and technological prowess that it signified. Here was a "remarkable substance,"¹⁸⁶ "one of the first uses on such a scale of Polaroid,"¹⁸⁷ in which nature's own color spectrum, "never before [...] artificially produced in a mural designed by man,"¹⁸⁸ was given glorious expression.

Despite its vaunted effects, problems of cost and logistics plagued Billings's mural. As was the case with other industrial murals, the artist's desire for experimentation with new materials and technologies outpaced the actual capability. At the Chrysler Motors building, such problems were amplified by ongoing debates about who owned and was responsible for the mural's engineering and operating costs. The mural was originally commissioned by the Fair, when the building it graced was still the

windshields, see Ray Zone, *Stereoscopic Cinema and the Origins of 3-D Film, 1838-1952* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 149-59.

¹⁸³ Chrysler Corporation, "From Butterflies to a Mural," undated, ca. 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 381, folder 4.

¹⁸⁴ Department of Feature Publicity, "Plastics at the Fair."

¹⁸⁵ Chrysler Corporation, "On the 'Must' List of Educators," undated, ca. 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 381, folder 4.

¹⁸⁶ Chrysler Corporation, "From Butterflies to a Mural," NYPL, NYWF, box 381, folder 4.

¹⁸⁷ Chrysler Corporation, "For the Use of Guides at the New York World's Fair 1939," undated, ca. 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 381, folder 4.

¹⁸⁸ Chrysler Corporation, "From Butterflies to a Mural," NYPL, NYWF, box 381, folder 4.

under the Fair's jurisdiction as the Transportation building. In December 1938, the Fair rented the building to Chrysler.¹⁸⁹ This meant that a mural initially conceived as a thematic, non-corporate display now sat as the crowning artistic work on a private company's building. Perhaps wary of getting too far off message, Chrysler suggested adding their corporate lettering to the mural. But the Fair's Board of Design, which retained final approval for all art at the Fair, strenuously objected:

[we have] reached the conclusion that any inclusion of the words CHRSYLER MOTORS or other lettering would definitely reduce not only the artistic values of the mural but the architectural values of the entire façade. It is our conviction that display lettering in this decoration changes it from mural art to billboard art—if such there be.¹⁹⁰

Chrysler relented on this point, but the dispute is emblematic of the difficult space that murals occupied at the Fair. A flat, colorful expanse on a building's façade could as easily be an advertisement as a form of artistic decoration. The sites that both laid claim to were primary positions in which to assume a public character, and from which to address the public itself. For corporations like Chrysler, the Fair's was a public of consumers, defined not just by its buying power but by a whole range of psychological mechanisms on which increasingly sophisticated advertising and packaging strategies operated. For the Fair's Board of Design, by contrast, the mural still spoke to a public of

¹⁸⁹ New York World's Fair Executive Order No. 169, "Y-1 (Motor Transportation Building)," December 14, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 381, folder 5.

¹⁹⁰ Stephen Voorhees, Chairman of the Board of Design, to C. A. Esslinger, Exhibit Manager, Chrysler Motors, December 17, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 215, folder 12.

individuals able to absorb the edifying lessons of sophisticated art—a province in which billboards had no place.

For many artists and viewers, however, the mural played a role somewhere between these two extremes. The language of advertising and the billboard might even be the mural's best chance at becoming truly modern. In a review in the *New Yorker*, Lewis Mumford expressed his general dislike for what he saw as the bland and outdated artistic program of the Fair. But he made exception for those few murals that were “frankly designed as [...] elementary public signboard[s], modest in aesthetic pretensions but easy to read.” The prospects for painting in architecture looked dim, he mused; but “For poster art, for signboard art, there is still a place in modern architecture.”¹⁹¹ Billings might have agreed. Not only was he willing to experiment with materials and styles closer to the world of industrial design than mural painting, but the question of corporate lettering was not nearly so vexing for him. Although evidently uninvolved in the dispute over Chrysler's logo, he advocated later on for including Polaroid and its affiliated manufacturer, the Burchell Company, as co-signatories on the mural. Billings's design for the three-name signature (which listed Billings, Burchell, and Polaroid) even made use of Polaroid's logo, two overlapping circles that echoed the basic arrangement of circles and cones in the work.¹⁹² Billings seems to have embraced “billboard art” as a positive direction for the mural, especially in a setting such as the Fair.

¹⁹¹ Mumford, “The Skyline in Flushing,” 44.

¹⁹² Burchell Products was the “authorized consultant for the use of Polaroid in color, sign and display application.” Billings wanted to include the two companies as co-signatories since Burchell's “help and technical knowledge” was essential in making the sign, while the Polaroid Company “made a real reduction in the price of their material.” See letter and drawing from Henry Billings to Stephen Voorhees, Chairman of the Board of Design, April 19, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 215, folder 12.

Another industrial mural that utilized light and a translucent support deserves mention here. Although ultimately not executed, Eric Mose's mural for the Hall of Industrial Science: Chemicals and Plastics¹⁹³ was, like Billings', conceived as a flat, translucent surface, parallel to the building façade and made of ostentatiously modern materials (**fig. 2.21–2.22**). Originally designed in collaboration with sculptor José Ruiz de Rivera, the mural used paint, aluminum, transparent and frosted glass, and the new plastic material Lucite. Unlike Billings's piece high on the Chrysler building façade, Mose's mural was sited at ground level, acting more as an entrance structure than a window or billboard. In keeping with the building's theme, Mose chose as the main motifs the atom, "as symbolic of the chemist's unit," and the color spectrum, "as symbolic of the elements from which plastic materials are compounded," although he was careful to stress these as formal devices "arbitrarily arranged for decorative reasons," rather than scientifically accurate depictions.¹⁹⁴

In a preliminary color sketch and a pair of three-dimensional models (which survive in photographs), we can see the mural's composition, which the artist balanced into two parts. In the final, larger maquette (**fig. 2.22**), these consist of a planetary model of the atom, with spheres orbiting a central nucleus, on the left; and, at right, a triangular beam of light that is refracted through a tilted, triangular prism into six colored rays, made of Lucite. The rays and triangles are raised in relief, while the atom assumes a full three dimensions, its orbital pathways tracing a loop into and out of the glass plane. On a

¹⁹³ Originally titled the Chemicals and Plastics building, the name was changed to Hall of Industrial Science: Chemicals and Plastics in November 1938, although it was usually referred to without the subtitle. See "Change of Designation – Q-7," November 1, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 205, folder 3.

¹⁹⁴ Eric Mose, quoted in New York World's Fair Department of Feature Publicity, "4. Chemicals and Plastics Building," undated, ca. 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 192, folder 16.

formal level, the mural's surface reads as a series of triangles in varying textures and opacities, from the colored rods at the far right, to the frosted prism, to the two, more opaque triangles that meet at the center. In a statement, Mose described the mural's aim as "a decoration which organized itself as a monument of plastic forms and colors in space, related to the plane of the glass, so as to achieve a maximum decorative effect, with a minimum of obstruction to the transparency of the glass wall."¹⁹⁵ The statement, and other texts by the Fair, also emphasize the newness and modernity of the mural's materials, which included "spun aluminum" and "aluminum tubes with satin finish" in the atom, and, for the light rays, Lucite, "a plastic material now available which is crystal clear in a variety of brilliant transparent colors."¹⁹⁶ As in Billings's mural for Chrysler, Mose also used lighting effects. The artist envisioned bright lights—installed inside a rainbow-colored metal column—projecting illumination into the colored Lucite rods, creating "a glow of colors ranging from red to violet" on the triangular prism. "The lights," he continued, "can alternate to create a movement of colors in the prism, which is frosted so as to hold the colors on the surface. On the glass and between the rods, lighter tints of color will be applied."¹⁹⁷ Like Billings's Polaroid window for Chrysler, Mose's mural celebrated the sheer beauty and novelty of industrial materials, and offered abstraction as the most compelling language in which to do so. Furthermore, its abstract elements speak the language of science. Even beyond the explicit symbolic references to the color spectrum and the atom, the composition—with its sequential triangles and

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

refracted diagonal lines—suggests transmission and transmutation, the processes of cause, effect, and metamorphosis that chemistry and other sciences describe.

Mose's industrial mural was never executed as conceived. The expenses and logistics involved in pulling off the proper effect proved too much, and the Board of Design, after preliminary approval, ultimately balked at the \$10,000 estimate for its completion.¹⁹⁸ Instead, Mose executed a far more traditional mural in the building's entryway. Painted directly onto the wall, the new composition maintained the atom model, now superimposed over a Bunsen burner, but added stylized depictions of natural resources (sun, water, coal, and tar) and of plastic products (a bolt of rayon cloth).¹⁹⁹ Similar problems plagued other industrial murals at the Fair. Billings's Polaroid window was taken down from the Chrysler Motors building after the Fair's first season, in part because needed adjustments and ongoing operational costs proved too expensive.²⁰⁰

Indeed, the most successful of the industrial murals at the Fair was so in part because it was backed entirely by private industry. Unlike Mose's Lucite and glass panel, which was an official Fair mural and thus subject to a relatively meager budget; and

¹⁹⁸ For the Board of Design's approval of the mural as originally conceived, see Stephen Voorhees to Executive Committee, May 13, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 217, folder 4. Debate over the mural's cost occurred in October 1938. By the end of December, it appears that Mose's old mural had been scrapped, and plans for a new one begun; see Ernest Peixotto to Eric Mose, December 20, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 217, folder 4.

¹⁹⁹ The final fate of Mose's mural does not seem to have registered at all levels. The Fair's *Official Guidebook* still described the old, glass and Lucite plan, although this was changed in the second, 1940 edition (New York: Exposition Publications, 1939, 149). The earlier version of the mural was also remembered by a Fair staffer thirty years later, perhaps because she had seen the maquette but not the final mural as installed in the entryway. See Gavert, "The WPA Federal Art Project and the World's Fair, 1939–1940," 257.

²⁰⁰ Conversations about needed changes to Billings's Polaroid mural, which included illumination, painting, and wiring, began in June 1939 and continued through the end of the Fair's 1939 season; at one point, staff considered moving the mural inside the Chrysler Motors building as a stand-alone exhibit. The mural was removed from the building in February 1940, during the Fair's off-season. See correspondence in NYPL, NYWF, box 381, folders 3 and 4.

unlike Billings's Polaroid mural, a constant point of contention between Chrysler and the Fair; another mural by Billings enjoyed the full support of Ford Motors.²⁰¹ Billings's gigantic, 70-foot tall "animated" mural sat at the end of the entrance hall to the Ford pavilion (**fig. 2.23–2.24**).²⁰² Larger-than-life gears, made of painted wood, revolved at the ensemble's base, while a pair of pistons at the center moved slowly back and forth, topped by an eight-cylinder engine block, through which cylinders moved up and down. These abstract machine parts served not only as dynamic, eye-catching devices, but also as synecdochic stand-ins for the complexity and power of automobiles and of modern industry at large. A press release touted the mural's magical ability to transport viewers: "The impression the spectator receives is that of being actually inside the motor of an automobile."²⁰³

Visitors concurred: the dominant note in reviews was one of wonder. In a survey of exhibition techniques at the Fair, staff from New York's Museum of Science and Industry declared that the "mechanical mural [...] arrested attention by its sheer size and its strange arrangement of rhythmically-moving parts which conveyed an impression of

²⁰¹ Another likely factor in its success was its use of existing materials and technologies (motors, painted wood) rather than cutting-edge ones (polarized light, Lucite rods).

²⁰² Henry Billings's Ford mural is briefly discussed in Richard Guy Wilson et al., *The Machine Age in America, 1918-1941* (New York: Brooklyn Museum and Abrams, 1986), as well as in Roland Marchand, "The Designers Go to the Fair: Walter Dorwin Teague and the Professionalization of Corporate Industrial Exhibits, 1933-1940," *Design Issues* 8.1 (Autumn 1991): 4-17. Marchand, however, attributes the mural's program almost entirely to Walter Dorwin Teague, referring to Billings only once, as the "mural's creator" (14).

²⁰³ New York World's Fair Department of Feature Publicity, "Art and Industry at the New York World's Fair," undated, ca. 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 1884, folder 9.

power.”²⁰⁴ In his write-up of Fair murals, art critic Forbes Watson credited both the moving parts and the formal arrangement itself with inspiring awe:

These moving [gears and pistons] are part of the formal design created out of different portions of the motor made to the scale of the decoration. Immensively [sic] effective, the device does more than arouse curiosity. It excites something of the wonder that one feels in watching motors in action.²⁰⁵

Here and elsewhere, writers emphasized the feelings of awe elicited by the piece: the complexity and abstraction of the arrangement was at once beautiful and thrilling, a decorative success that intimated the power of the machine age.

On the walls around the relief elements, Billings painted scenes of auto manufacturing based on Ford’s River Rouge plant, orchestrating conveyor belts, spindles, stamping presses, and abstracted tools into a complex symphony of overlapping parts and shifts in scale. The X of a giant crossbeam, topped by protruding smokestacks, crowned the ensemble, more than a little reminiscent of Charles Sheeler’s famous photomural *Industry* (1932).²⁰⁶ Billings thus provided glimpses of the engine’s manufacturing process in and around the parts of the engine itself, locking the rhythmic, moving elements into a dizzyingly large and complex system. Notably, there are no people in this system—or, more properly, no labor. With the exception of an excerpted eye and hand on either side of the piston shaft, the manufacturing process, like the continuous movement of the

²⁰⁴ *Exhibition Techniques: A Summary of Exhibition Practice, Based on Surveys Conducted at the New York and San Francisco World’s Fairs of 1939* (New York: New York Museum of Science and Industry, 1940), 90.

²⁰⁵ Forbes Watson, “Murals at the New York Fair,” *Magazine of Art* (May 1939): 282-85, 318-19; 319.

²⁰⁶ Made for the Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 exhibition “Murals by American Painters and Photographers,” *Industry* combined three existing photographs by Sheeler, including the iconic *Criss-Crossed Conveyors* (1927).

engine itself, appears self-sustaining. As if to emphasize the universal nature of the whirring engine and the factory that produced it, Billings added physics equations, like Newton's second law of motion, to the mural.

Billings was not alone in using abstraction—and in particular, a machine-based abstraction taking its cues from technology and new materials—to diagram the complexities of science and industry. Across the Fair, in ways both subtle and overt, muralists and exhibit designers used abstraction as a means to make difficult and complex ideas palpable and clear. Francis V. O'Connor has noted that modern and abstract art was relatively rare at the 1939 Fair, with one important exception: in “architecture and industrial products,” such idioms “seemed practical, orderly, modern, and therefore, justifiable.”²⁰⁷ Works by Billings and Mose allow us to extend O'Connor's insight further. It was not just that abstract art appeared “orderly” and therefore “justifiable” in certain settings. Rather, machine abstractions constituted an extraordinarily compelling condensation of both the products and techniques of modern industry. They elevated such products to the level of fairground attraction, exploiting the particular properties of light, texture, color, and movement offered by plastics, polaroid, and motors. At the same time, in the abstracted planets, engines, atoms, and color refractions, such murals mapped out the larger processes behind these products. Vast, microscopic, or complex systems were made visible and concrete in diagrams and intersecting geometries. Whether or not such diagrams were accurate, they gave the illusion of totality perceived, a brush with the cosmic and profound forces directing

²⁰⁷ Francis V. O'Connor, “The Usable Future: The Role of Fantasy in the Promotion of a Consumer Society for Art,” in *Dawn of a New Day*, 57–71.

modern life. Abstraction, in this sense, was *the* language of the Fair. Like the dominating shapes of the Trylon and Perisphere at the Fair's center (**fig. 2.1**), the industrial murals offered a vision of modern industry perfected, at once spectacular and scientific, seductive and rational.

The murals by Billings and Mose expand our sense of how and where abstraction was used at the Fair. For many artists and viewers, abstraction was perfectly congruent with entertainment and spectacle, especially when the context was the advancing discoveries of science and industry. Moreover, large-scale abstraction was able to intimate, with impressive succinctness and immediacy, the contours of a complex modern world. The works also change our understanding of the function and role of the mural more broadly at the Fair. Abstract murals like those by the AAA were not just competing with more traditional, representational murals. Their nearest competitors, in fact, were not artworks at all, but rather the spectacular and dynamic surface decorations that clad the Fair, from murals that moved and emitted light to billboards, photomurals, and exhibit spaces. Many murals, even those executed in traditional media such as paint on canvas, ceased to read as fine art in such contexts, subsumed into the broader visual didactics and presentations of their exhibits.

Multimedia Mural: Stuart Davis's *History of Communication*

Stuart Davis's mural in the Fair's Communications building constitutes a marriage of the two mural types discussed thus far in this chapter (**fig. 2.25**). On the one hand, like the murals of Billings and Mose, it formed part of a kinetic, multimedia environment, explicitly designed to entertain visitors. Complete with animated walls, projected sound

and images, and a twelve-minute, scripted scenario, the large forecourt of the building was transformed by industrial designer Donald Deskey into an immersive exhibition space on the history of communications, with Davis's enormous mural installed along one wall. On the other hand, Davis himself was, like the members of the AAA, committed to a rigorous and sophisticated theory of abstraction in art. He eschewed the general trend of New Deal muralism, as well as much Mexican muralism, for its traditional style, advocating instead for an abstraction related to the spatial and cultural experience of the modern, urban world—an abstraction that, like Léger in France, Davis deemed a form of “realism,” and that frequently incorporated signage, text, and other representational elements. Davis's mural, set within Deskey's exhibition environment, offers one of the most explicit attempts to position the mural itself as a form of mass entertainment.

Davis's mural is lost to us, and no unobstructed photographs of the installation survive. Yet we can be fairly sure of its composition from an extant photostat, made by reversing the black and white areas of Davis's final sketch for the mural. Davis submitted the photostat to the Fair's Board of Design for approval,²⁰⁸ and it is likely that the same design was used in scaling up the work for transfer to the wall; the few passages legible in photographs of the exhibition show forms identical to the ones in the photostat (**fig. 2.26–2.27**). Like Billings and Mose, Davis presents abstraction as the language of modernity, science, and industry, using lines, circles, squiggles, and hatchmarks to form

²⁰⁸ See NYPL, NYWF, box 2385, folder 5. See also the card for Stuart Davis in the Central Files Index, which notes “Photostat of Mural Recd 8/8/40” (NYPL, NYWF, Central Files Index, http://worldsfair.nypl.org/search/show_card/37846).

the contours of recognizable objects—abstracted communications tools—as well as a more general sense of movement and dynamism.

Understanding the details of Deskey's exhibit will help to situate the Davis mural in the context of embodied and spatial viewing. Deskey was one of seven industrial designers hired by the Fair's Theme Committee to design and execute the focal exhibits, a series of seven exhibitions, spread throughout the Fair, that together aimed to give a picture of the World of Tomorrow. Like the other "focals," as they were known, Deskey's exhibition was meant to act as a thematic, non-commercial introduction to the zone it was placed in—in his case, to the Communications and Business Systems zone. Prominently located in the Communications building itself, Deskey's exhibit occupied the entire entrance hall, a double-story space of nearly 5,000 square feet that served as the main access point to the rest of the building (**fig. 2.28**). In a short article for the trade journal *Business Screen*, Deskey laid out his thoughts on exhibition design in light of the upcoming Fair. "The New York World's Fair of 1939," he predicted,

will [...] set a new high for exhibit technique. Static product display will yield place to the super colossal feature attraction. Manufacturers and industries are alert to the necessity of exhibits that possess consummate showmanship. The industrial designer, long schooled in the technique of product design, display and exploitation, has welcomed Exhibit Design as a new field in which he can utilize his experience and imagination.²⁰⁹

In particular, Deskey called for the role of the motion picture in such displays. If "the use of the sound film alone in a standard theatre setting is nothing new to the visitor," its

²⁰⁹ Donald Deskey, "Industrial Showmanship in '39," *Business Screen* 1.2 (1938): 17.

integration into a larger display certainly was: “as an instrument for the visualization of ideas, [the film] is being incorporated into more elaborate mechanical devices; stage presentations for industry with the motion picture as an integral part.”²¹⁰

All of these factors, from mechanical devices to motion pictures, are apparent in Deskey’s ultimate design (**fig. 2.29–2.30**). Although budget and technological issues would prevent its full realization, Deskey conceived the exhibit as, in the words of a press release,

a great hall sunk in darkness but for a fluorescent mural covering the entire left wall. [...] Dominating the entire hall [...] a twenty foot head of Man, modeled of plastic and stainless steel, is suspended in midair above the upturned faces of the throng. At the extreme far end of the hall a thirty foot rubber globe of the world, similarly hung, rotates in space.

On the wall across from Davis’s mural (which was painted in white after plans for fluorescent paint and UV lighting proved too expensive), the design called for seven “montage” panels, made from photographic images and printed onto wooden, animated parts. Deskey envisioned these panels incorporated into the narrative of the projected film:

As [the stainless steel head of] Man speaks, the symbols for the seven major instruments of communication—postal service, printed word, telegraph, telephone, motion picture, radio and television—materialize on a plastic disc in front of man, and their image is projected in the form of a shadow on the revolving globe [at the other end of the hall]. Simultaneously—as the visitors’ attention is directed by flicks

²¹⁰ Ibid.

of lights running along a maze of wires in an intricate series of eighty synchronizations—montage panels corresponding to each symbol light up on the right wall.²¹¹

The exhibit thus pulled different spatial areas—the ceiling’s flickering wires, the mural in calligraphic white, the montage panels lighting up on the northwest wall, the picture on the hanging globe—into one, coordinated symphony of sight and sound. Deskey commissioned Ralph Steiner to make the film, and George Antheil to write the musical score that would play throughout.²¹² Deskey was not the only one to call for a new and dynamic exhibit design at the Fair. This trend—toward exhibit spaces geared to the mobile consumer, rather than to the passive spectator—characterized the fairs of the 1930s as a whole, and the 1939 Fair especially.

Davis’s mural stretched almost the entire length of the hall’s southeast wall, installed directly over the main doors about ten feet off the ground. As with the Medicine building murals, it is unclear when exactly Davis received the commission. Deskey had envisioned a “historical panel” or “mural” on the southeast wall of the space from the very beginning: his early blueprints from spring 1938 include it,²¹³ and he mentions it in his pitch to the Communications Advisory Board a few months later, in October.²¹⁴ Yet Davis’s name is not associated with the project until the very end of the year, when he

²¹¹ New York World’s Fair Department of Feature Publicity, “Communications in the World of Tomorrow: Focal Show,” press release, December 24, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 5.

²¹² Board of Design, “Contracts to be let [...],” December 31, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 5. Deskey also considered Virgil Thompson for the musical score; see untitled exhibit scenario, undated, ca. 1938-39, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 4.

²¹³ Office of Donald Deskey, blueprint no. 561-7, May 2, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 6.

²¹⁴ “Minutes of the Meeting on the Advisory Committee on Communications,” October 20, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 4.

was approved as a subcontractor on December 30, 1938.²¹⁵ By January 1939, Davis was making notes and sketches for the piece, compiling lists of communications technologies and inventions, and planning out the mural's composition.²¹⁶ In March, Davis's final design was approved by the Board of Design for execution,²¹⁷ and in April he visited the fairgrounds and saw the mural being painted (union restrictions prevented him from painting it himself).²¹⁸ It is likely that the obstructed, on-site photographs date to this visit.

Like Deskey's exhibit as a whole, the mural takes up the theme of communications technology. Reading from right to left, as the installation of the piece would have encouraged visitors to do, Davis's mural shows a roughly chronological sequence of communication tools, both nature- and machine-based. A seashell, hands deploying sign language, and block letters cede in the second quarter of the work to a Gutenberg printing press, semaphore poles and flags, a vibrating telegraph machine, and an upright phonograph. Moving further to the left, a tall utility pole stretches up to a carrier pigeon and down to postal deliveries and a printed newspaper. In the last third of the mural there emerge an electric grid, microphone, telephone, radio tube, studio camera, television iconoscope tube, and, as a final bookend, a curling strip of film stock. Progress in communications, Davis implies in the mural, has greatly accelerated, with

²¹⁵ Board of Design, "Contracts to be let [...]," December 31, 1938, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 5.

²¹⁶ Davis's notes and sketches from January 1939 are reprinted as "Mural for the Hall of Communications, New York World's Fair (Working Notes and Diagrams) (1939)," in *Stuart Davis*, ed. Diane Kelder, 71-91 (New York: Preager, 1971). Further notes related to the Fair appear in the Harvard Art Museum Archives (hereafter HAM), Stuart Davis Papers (hereafter SDP), reel 2, December 1938.

²¹⁷ For the approval of Davis's final design, see Frances Poel to Donald Deskey, March 15, 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 6.

²¹⁸ Other artists solved this problem by joining the union or by painting the works off-site and then transporting them to the Fair, as in the case of the Medicine and Public Health building.

modern inventions vastly outweighing their earlier counterparts. Several millennia of spoken and written human communication—everything preceding the printing press—are squeezed into a space of about 45 feet, the same length given over to the last fifty years of inventions in broadcast radio, film, and television.

Yet Davis's mural tells a somewhat different story than Deskey's multimedia exhibit. More than progress per se, or even particular technologies, Davis's mural foregrounds the human sensory apparatus itself. The artist places four symbols of the human senses as signposts throughout the busy mural: an ear (hearing) and hand (touch) sit near the center, a spiral at upper right symbolizes the human voice, and an eye is shrunk inside an iconoscope tube at left (sight). The structuring nature of these symbols becomes clearer when we look at Davis's preparatory sketches, in which a similar series of eye, hand, ear, and mouth constitutes the underlying armature (**fig. 2.31**). In the finished mural, Davis presents these sense organs as the building blocks of communication, transmitters and receivers of information on which later technology, from seashells to telephones to writing, all build. "The story of the historical development of the means of communication," Davis writes in his notes for the project, "is the story of the mechanical and electrical objectification [of] the human eye, ear, voice, and bodily motion."²¹⁹

That Davis conceived the senses as key to the history of communications is also apparent in the way he knits them into the larger technological field of the mural. Lines indicating sound waves, entering the ear at the mural's center, double as electrical wires wrapping around a telegraph pole, and are echoed in the lines emanating from the sound

²¹⁹ Stuart Davis, January 8, 1939, in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, 71. Brackets in Kelder.

spiral in the upper right corner. The large hand signifying touch sits beside two smaller hands actively engaged in communication, signing the letter N. Perhaps most striking of all is Davis's compression of the eye—which still occupies a large place in his penultimate sketch (**fig. 2.32**)—into a small oval almost hidden inside an iconoscope tube. In part, this is a witty play on current terminology: Davis litters his notes with references to the “electric eye,” a common term for the selenium-coated plates that were used in the iconoscope television that RCA debuted at the Fair.²²⁰ But it is also a considered statement on the relationship between human and mechanical sensory intake. The human sense organs are not just the origins of present-day communications technology; they are also its continuing analogies, objects that, like printing presses and telegraphs, turn the ephemeral and the conceptual into material, concrete communication.

Davis's history, then, is less a visualization of Deskey's World of Tomorrow than it is a drama about the “mechanical objectification of the human Eye, Ear, Voice, and Hand.”²²¹ There is a clear analogy between the objectification that Davis sees in communications history and the objectification in his own theory of abstraction—a process of concretization into visual, material units. Davis's understanding of drawing, the central technology in this graphic mural, also brings the abstract and the real together. As he notes in a 1940 journal entry, “Nothing is more Abstract than a line and nothing is

²²⁰ Davis in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, 72, 76.

²²¹ Davis, January 8, 1939, in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, 73. Davis returns to the idea of “objectification” several times in his notes for the mural. The mural should be “composed of the forms of the various apparati which constitute this objectification”; the mural's subject is those “objective forms associated with the mechanical extension of the senses of sight, hearing, and voice of man” (Davis, January 8-9, 1939, in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, 71, 81).

more Real and Concrete.”²²² The overarching theme of objectification is echoed throughout the mural’s style, in particular its use of line: devices emerge with startling clarity even as they are abstracted back into a linear network of formal patterning. The white marks—contrasted against not just the pitch-black ground but the darkened space of the exhibit hall—jump out like neon writing, as though dramatizing the moment of thought become visible. Initial plans to use fluorescent paint would have made the quasi-electric gleam of Davis’s white marks even more dramatic. In one note, Davis specifies, “The design must be placed on this huge space as though it were a sketch on a sheet of typewriting paper.”²²³ We might also think of film roll or the ticker tape of commercial news (both of which Davis cites in his notes on communications tools): a visual script unfurling across a long, horizontal space, but magnified for a collective audience of viewers.

How Deskey’s and Davis’s stories of communication fit together—one, a triumphant tale of progress; the other, a meditation on the mechanical objectification of the human senses—is difficult to say. Was Davis’s linear, abstract mural at home in the multimedia spectacle of Deskey’s exhibit? Certainly the painter responded to the scale and proportions of the exhibit. *History of Communication* is not only the vastest of Davis’s murals (you would need nine *Swing Landscapes* to attain the same length), it is also emphatically horizontal, with a height to length ratio of 1:3. The mural cannot be taken in in one glance or from one viewing position: the viewer must move his or her body along the space to see its different passages. Furthermore, stretching from end to

²²² Stuart Davis, untitled entry, 1940, quoted in Karen Wilkin, *Stuart Davis (1892-1964): Black and White* (New York: Salandar-O’Reilly Galleries, 1985).

²²³ Davis, January 10, 1939, in Kelder, *Stuart Davis*, 82.

end of the hall—it filled all but two feet on either side—and from the top of the doorway up to the ceiling, the mural would have seemed to constitute the entire wall, wrapping the visitor up in its giant, unfurling script. Like Deskey’s exhibit as a whole, Davis’s mural aims for something approaching an immersive experience for the viewer.

That Davis was thinking of the mural in newly spatial and architectural terms is also suggested in some of his notes from around 1939–40. A good mural, he muses in one of them, “doesn’t say, ‘Workers’ of the world unite’; it doesn’t say, ‘Pasteur’s theory had many beneficial results for the human race’; and it doesn’t say, ‘Buy Camel cigarettes’; it merely says, ‘Look, here is a unique configuration of color-space.’” A configuration of color-space (Davis’s term for “form”²²⁴) is worthwhile because “Everybody moves around in it 24 hours a day. It is everybodies [sic] property and nearly everyone enjoys it.”²²⁵ He concludes the four-page note by aligning abstract murals with contemporary design: “Today with modern architecture, simpler spaces, fluorescent lighting, rapid communication in all fields, [an] abstract art of real order is the most appropriate decoration for a wall in many cases.”²²⁶

Such resonances between the mural and the exhibit notwithstanding, the mural ultimately cultivates a very different kind of attention than Deskey’s synchronized light and film show. In its long, ribbon-like expanse, it invites a sustained, if meandering, viewing, a style further encouraged by the continual vacillation between representational and abstract passages. While certain instruments are immediately recognizable and pull

²²⁴ On Davis’s “color-space” terminology, see John R. Lane, “Color-Space Theory,” in *Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory*, 41–46 (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1978).

²²⁵ Stuart Davis, untitled notes (“A wall is to keep the weather...”), undated, 1–2, HAM, SDP, reel 2.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

one's gaze in, others—like the phonograph near the center, for example—ask to be puzzled through, or else dissolve swiftly into their abstract component parts (here, a circle overlapping a bulb-like oval). Similarly, the mural's wending white lines carve out ambiguous areas of space that appear now as ground (a chalkboard surface), and now as shapes in their own right: a wound-up black coil at the upper right; a palpable diamond of space delineated by the wire of the semaphore flags and the edge of a printed sheet of paper. The mural elicits a visual style that is both focused and ambient, directed to a decoding or reading of the surface at the same time that it relaxes into a more dispersive mode. Deskey's aim, by contrast, is to awe and overwhelm the senses, not to pull them in or activate them. Compared to the flat and open expanse of the mural, there is a hierarchy to the elements of Deskey's exhibit, and an outside force—the narrative of the film, the coordinated lighting cues—directs where and when the visitor casts her attention.

Perhaps the real question is whether Davis's mural would have been able to compete in such a setting. Would the spectacular entertainment of the exhibit have allowed the slower, more ambient pace of the mural to emerge? One press release seems to have anticipated this problem, indicating that the mural's chief role would come *in between* showings of the film: "The show [...] will be continuous except for brief intermissions which will permit the audience to inspect the huge mural and the models of tomorrows' spectacular devices."²²⁷ In the end, the question may not have mattered too much—or at least, it may not have been staged quite so dramatically in the Communications building. Deskey's exhibition never reached the levels of "consummate

²²⁷ New York World's Fair Department of Press, News Release no. 588, Jan 8, 193, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 4.

showmanship” that he had envisioned. As was the case with the industrial murals of Billings and Mose, technical difficulties led to budget overruns: the exhibition faced persistent problems with acoustics, light bleed from the entrance doors, and synchronization of the many different elements.²²⁸ The exhibition opened late, in the first or second week of July, two months after the Fair itself opened, and was shut down by the Board of Directors by the end of the month.²²⁹ We know that Davis’s mural was complete and visible when reviewers for the *Design Student’s Guide* toured the grounds (they noted the “Huge amusing mural in white on black by Stuart Davis”²³⁰), likely sometime in April, and that the exhibit hall remained open even when the exhibit itself was not in operation. Yet it is unclear how many visitors were entering the space in those months. By August, companies renting space in the building were asking if “additional lights” could be placed in the ceiling of the exhibit, to encourage people “entering the remainder of the building from the Court of Communications.”²³¹

²²⁸ Focal exhibit supervisor J.H. Messineo voiced a characteristic assessment when he wrote in an internal memo, “The sound film is poorly produced and recorded and the room conditions very unsatisfactory for good sound. With the above conditions I do not believe the exhibit will be understandable” (“Memo: Communication Focal Exhibit,” July 12, 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 5). Five days later, Warren E. Murray noted that “A great deal must be done to this exhibit before it would be of any interest to the public” (“Regarding Proposition to Change Focal Exhibit in R-2,” July 19, 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 5).

²²⁹ The Communications Focal Exhibit was most likely in operation from July 13-21, 1939, although it may have opened earlier, on July 3, or closed later, at the end of the month. After June inspections noted the exhibit not yet up and running, the focal received approval on July 3 for a three-week trial period. However, the authorization form indicates July 13 as the actual start date of operations. The Board of Directors voted to discontinue the focal exhibit’s operation on or shortly before July 21; it may have ceased operation that day, or it may have been allowed to continue for the rest of its three-week trial period. See correspondence among Leslie Baker, C. L. Lee, Gerald Wendt, Philip McConnell, A. K. Morgan, Robert Kohn, Stephen Voorhees, Egmont Arens, and J.H. Messineo, June-August 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 273, folder 16 and box 180, folders 4 and 5.

²³⁰ *A Design Student’s Guide*, n.p.

²³¹ Leslie Baker, “Communications Building R-2,” August 2, 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 4.

Most likely, Davis's mural remained on view for the entire 1939 season, from April through October, though without the darkened space and projected film that Deskey had envisioned.²³² Davis himself made a passing reference to the mural on a radio broadcast in August: when the announcer noted that the painter had made a mural back in 1932 for Radio City Hall, Davis made sure to interject: "yes, and also I don't want to forget the one I did this year, in the World's Fair, in the Communications Building."²³³ Yet its fate after this point is uncertain. When the Fair reopened for the 1940 season, the Communications Building was re-themed in an attempt to increase visitorship, which had been lower than expected across the Fair.²³⁴ Rechristened the Maritime, Transport, and Communications building, the entrance hall formerly devoted to Deskey's focal exhibit now featured a display by the United States Coast Guard. Whether or not Davis's mural remained on the southeast wall is unknown.

As these three case studies make clear, painters possessed a real interest in inserting large-scale abstraction into spaces of popular culture. The municipal sites of housing projects and hospitals, discussed in Chapter 1, were attractive because they suggested real and sustained gathering places for the city's inhabitants: sites of dwelling and recovery within the larger urban ecosystem. At the Fair, by contrast, the murals entered a space

²³² At least one Fair staffer, however, floated the idea of covering up the entrance hall's walls with monk's cloth; see W.E. Murray, "Focal Exhibit in R-2," July 14, 1939, NYPL, NYWF, box 180, folder 5.

²³³ Stuart Davis speaking with Ezra Mackintosh at the "Dedication of WNYC Studio Murals," August 2, 1939, WNYC Studios, New York (NYC Municipal Archives WNYC Collection, WNYC archives ID 5828, municipal archives ID LT3995). Digitized by the NEH Preservation Project at <http://www.wnyc.org/story/215721-stuart-davis/>

²³⁴ The new theme for the building was widely covered in the press. On the formulation and implementation of the new theme by the Fair, see NYPL, NYWF, box 171, folder 4 and box 180, folder 4.

that was decidedly ephemeral. None of the murals discussed in this chapter have survived; all were destroyed at the close of the Fair (or, in some cases, earlier). Nor was this just a question of bad luck: almost all of the Fair buildings erected were designed as temporary structures, needed only for the duration of the Fair's two seasons. The character of Fair experience—fluid, mobile, sensory, and quick-changing—was similarly ephemeral. Abstract murals at the Fair, by dint of context and siting, and also through their own formal and material innovations, took on the energies of this world. The four murals in the Medicine and Public Health building pursued a rigorous abstraction at the same time that their motifs and style were reminiscent of Fair posters. Industrial murals acted as demonstration pieces for the new technologies of modern life, using motion and light to capture visitor attention. And Stuart Davis's *History of Communication* mural was only one component in a spectacular, multimedia exhibition.

As we have seen, art's blending with the vigorous, riotous world of the Fair could also be perceived as dangerous. Murals found themselves as just one among a sea of surface decorations, all competing for the eyeballs of the Fair's public. In the end, the real problem may have been that these murals, despite their scale, were too small and too isolated to make a serious bid for attention. The most successful events at the Fair were total environments with scripted scenarios, like the Theme Center's Democracy or General Motors' Futurama (**fig. 2.33**). These included a variety of mechanisms to control visitor experience: carefully piped audio to relay the narrative, fixed viewing locations, seats that moved the viewers in time with the script.²³⁵ Murals, by contrast, remained

²³⁵ On the Futurama exhibit, see Christina Cogdell, "The Futurama Recontextualized: Norman Bel Geddes's Eugenic 'World of Tomorrow,'" *American Quarterly* 52.2 (June 2000): 193-245; Roland

dependent, to some degree, on the viewer's willing, sustained engagement. Visitors had to actually *look* at them, and continue to explore them: thus we see Bolotowsky worrying about the fairgoers who came into the Medicine building "like cattle" and then left, never glancing up to the hanging panels. Although they incorporated strategies from industrial design and advertising, the murals still demanded an engagement quite different from that of the passive spectator.²³⁶

The murals by Stuart Davis, Henry Billings, Eric Mose, and the American Abstract Artists were not the only large-scale abstractions at the Fair. For example, Fernand Léger's monumental *The City of Light*, rising up three stories on the façade of the Con Edison building, offers another fascinating instance of advertising and mural art blending together. Building on Léger's previous murals for fairs and expos in Europe, the work is clearly stamped with the Consolidated Edison name; in its scale and format, it approaches the "billboard art" that the Fair's Design Board had found so distasteful in the Chrysler commission by Billings. Arshile Gorky's mural for the Aviation building, unfolding in two registers over a stairwell, has often been noted by scholars but rarely discussed in its architectural or exhibition context. Did Gorky's assemblage of abstracted wings, propellers, and landing gear function in a manner akin to Byron Browne's abstracted microscope in the Medicine and Public Health building, in between muralism and poster design? Did it read as abstract art to its visitors, or as lively decoration?

Marchand, "The Designers Go to the Fair II: Norman Bel Geddes, the General Motors 'Futurama,' and the Visit to the Factory Transformed," *Design Issues* 1.2 (Spring 1992): 22-40; Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2001); and Smith, "Funfair Futurama" in *Making the Modern*.

²³⁶ On the subject of immersive exhibition spaces and viewer agency—and the repercussions for the democratic subject—see Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia & American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013).

Façade murals by Martha Axley, Willem de Kooning, Lyonel Feininger, Louis Ferstadt, Phillip Guston, Michael Loew, and others used varying degrees of abstraction and realism in communicating the nature of their buildings to onlookers. Further scholarship is needed on these murals, as well as on the many exhibits—at the Met Life, RCA, U.S. Steel, Westinghouse, and other pavilions—whose interior design brought them into close visual resonance with abstract art.

CHAPTER 3

ABSTRACTION AND DECORATION: JACKSON POLLOCK'S MURALS FOR THE HOME

In the fall of 1943—three years after the World's Fair came down, and one year after the murals of Joseph Rugolo, Albert Swinden, and Dane Chanase were installed in the Chronic Diseases Hospital—Jackson Pollock completed his largest and most ambitious painting to date. In both its title (*Mural*) and location (installed flush along a hallway wall), the painting took up problems familiar to the American Abstract Artists (AAA) and the Fair muralists in the preceding years. Unfurling over nearly twenty feet, it proposed, like them, to unframe and monumentalize abstraction, and to site it deeply within the architectural matrix—in Pollock's case, reaching to the ceiling and baseboard moldings and across the entire length of the wall in question. In doing so, Pollock staged a familiar tension between the mural as a bounded and separate artwork (with all the attendant suggestions of autonomous art) and the mural as an immersive, all-encompassing space, swallowing up the viewer.

If Pollock's mural addressed familiar spatial problems, it did so in a different location than those of the AAA or Fair muralists discussed thus far. Art dealer Peggy Guggenheim commissioned the mural for the lobby of her Manhattan townhouse, where she installed it in the fall of 1943. Perched just beyond the lobby door, at the threshold of the street, the mural ushered passers-through into the domestic context of the home, drawing them down the hallway and toward the elevator that accessed Guggenheim's residence. Murals would continue to engage Pollock throughout the decade, often in ways that involved the home. In 1950, he realized *Mural on Indian Red Ground* for Marcel

Breuer's Geller House in Long Island, and in 1949 he collaborated with architect Peter Blake on a mural project deeply influenced by the design and landscape of the suburban home. Pollock's interest in muralism has received extensive scholarly treatment, often as part of a broader discussion of scale and space in the artist's large drip paintings. Yet this scholarship has failed to comment on a striking fact: the murals' imbrication with a domestic setting. From the 1943 *Mural* for Guggenheim's hallway to the 1950 *Mural* in the Gellers' dining room to the 1949 project with Blake, Pollock's murals found both their patronage and their essential context within the wartime and postwar American home. It is no coincidence that these were the very years in which the single-family home assumed a new cultural importance for the middle and upper-middle classes in the United States.

Pollock was by no means the first to negotiate this nexus of domesticity and abstraction. The private home had been a privileged site for crafting abstract interiors since the nineteenth century, through the innovations of the Arts and Crafts movement and Aestheticism. Art patrons in the early twentieth-century United States were similarly intrigued by the possibility of abstract interiors in their homes. Businessman Edwin R. Campbell provided Kandinsky with one of his first mural projects, in 1914, in a suite of four canvases commissioned for the rounded entryway of his Park Avenue apartment.²³⁷ Other patrons used abstract environments to set the mood for aesthetic activities, like music and art viewing. Lizzie Bliss commissioned a cubist and abstract mural from

²³⁷ On the paintings for Campbell, see Magdalena Dabrowski, "Vasily Kandinsky: The Campbell Commission," *MoMA 2.9* (November 1999): 2-5; and Bibiana Obler, *Intimate Collaborations: Kandinsky and Münter, Arp and Taeuber* (New Haven: Yale University, 2014), 60-62. For a reconstruction of the works in situ, see John Elderfield et al., *ModernStarts: People, Places, Things* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 185.

Arthur B. Davies in 1914 for her New York music room, an upstairs space where she brought visitors to see her modern art collection.²³⁸ Duncan Phillips, a longtime admirer of the abstract, lyrical paintings of Augustus Vincent Tack, commissioned a series from the artist for the music room of his Washington, D.C. townhome in 1928-31.²³⁹

If this chapter is about Pollock's engagement with the mural in the 1940s, it is also about the domestic mural more broadly, about how abstraction, when unframed for the home, offered its viewers new scales of intimacy and leisure. Even more so than their public counterparts, domestic murals made utopian claims about their ability to shape the inhabitant at a profoundly personal level, in the confines of her own dwelling and through the routines of daily life. I begin with a brief discussion of several murals from circa 1940 by painters affiliated with the AAA group, which has constituted a major thread of this dissertation so far. These mural projects—by Fernand Léger, George L. K. Morris, Suzy Frelinghuysen, and architect Paul Nelson—indicate some of the formal and architectural possibilities for domestic abstraction, as well as important issues regarding patronage, art and daily life, and exhibition display. I turn next to Pollock's three mural projects, designed both for urban apartment buildings (the 1943 *Mural* for Guggenheim) and for spaces on the suburban periphery. As I show, changes in home ownership, the cultural

²³⁸ On the Davies mural, see Bennard B. Perlman, *The Lives, Loves, and Art of Arthur B. Davies* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), 258-61; and Emily Gephart, "A Dreamer and A Painter: Visualizing the Unconscious in the Work of Arthur B. Davies, 1890-1920" (Ph.D. thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014).

²³⁹ Music rooms would remain an appropriate site for abstract murals into the 1950s, when Alma Morgenthau commissioned Norman Lewis to paint *Small Orchestra*, a "semi-abstract organization of small forms" in her "music shed" at the Lattingtown Harbor Estates ("From Yaddo and Boston," newspaper clipping, unknown publication, AAA, Norman Lewis Papers). The mural is now lost. My thanks to John Ott for this reference and to Andrianna Campbell for further information about the mural.

valuation of the American single-family house, and the exploding art market all altered the terms on which domestic abstraction could be produced and experienced. Pollock's abstract murals engaged with familiar questions of domesticity, decoration, and leisure, but were inflected by very different conditions than those of his abstract predecessors.

Domestic Abstraction, ca. 1940

Even as the Federal Art Project (FAP) and World's Fair provided important "public" contexts for the abstract painters of the 1930s and 1940s—one civic and governmental, the other commercial—a desire to site abstraction within the home persisted. One artist who pursued murals in both kinds of spaces was Fernand Léger. Léger had sought mural commissions in the States for several years during the 1930s, briefly leading an abortive mural project for the FAP in New York and submitting designs for a cinematic mural at Radio City Music Hall. When he finally completed his first mural in this country, in 1939, it was for the Fifth Avenue triplex of Nelson Rockefeller. In the mural, Léger combined organic and mechanical forms in a large area of wall above the living room fireplace on the unit's lower floor (**fig. 3.1**). Reaching almost to the ceiling, the mural was surrounded by the rococo frame of the room's rich wood paneling, designed by Wallace K. Harrison, the apartment's architect.²⁴⁰ The living room ensemble—like the apartment as a whole—sought a balance between the modern and the luxurious: "the wood paneling and furniture," in the words of a Rockefeller catalogue, aim to be "modern

²⁴⁰ Rockefeller hired Harrison to design the apartment, which dates from 1926, when he acquired it in the 1930s.

in their simplicity, but reflecting the richness and warmth of the Louis XV period.”²⁴¹

Léger’s abstraction here served as a sensual component of the luxurious interior, its colorful abstraction coming into formal play with the surrounding furnishings as well as the examples of modern art hung on the walls.

According to Rockefeller, Léger painted the mural onsite in the apartment: “I used to watch Léger with fascination as he painted and the details of the mural unfolded,” he recalled. “After he had finished, we liked it so much that we persuaded him to do additional murals for the circular stairwell and hallways.”²⁴² If the fireplace mural created a dynamic rhythm of abstraction in a relatively discrete area, this second set of murals by Léger spilled out across the wall in a sinuous, curving stream. Using a similar visual vocabulary as the fireplace design—plant-like forms, branching lines, irregularly shaped perforations—the mural filled the circular wall of a gray marble staircase designed by Harrison to connect two of the apartment’s levels (**fig. 3.2**). Cladding the half-circle of wall at the top of the stairs, Léger’s abstractions flowed down along the stairwell and out into the hallway. Like the work that Guggenheim would commission from Pollock four years later, these murals occupied a transitional space between public foyer and domestic residence, although in a somewhat more isolated and exclusive context: having taken the building elevator to the unit’s main floor, the visitor would arrive in the gallery; from

²⁴¹ *The Nelson Rockefeller Collection* (New York: The Nelson Rockefeller Collection, Inc., 1978), n.p.

²⁴² Nelson A. Rockefeller, “Introduction,” in *The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection: Masterpieces of Modern Art*, 12-19 (New York: Hudson Hills, 1981), 16. See also, in this volume, Alfred Barr, Jr., “On Nelson Rockefeller and Modern Art,” 20-26.

here, Harrison's staircase, and Léger's dancing forms, would beckon him up to the more private spaces of the upper levels.²⁴³

A student and friend of Léger's, AAA co-founder George L.K. Morris, was, like his teacher, able to realize full-scale murals for a private house.²⁴⁴ In Morris's case, however, the house was his own. Along with his wife Suzy Frelinghuysen—both members of the so-called "Park Avenue Cubists,"²⁴⁵ a coterie of wealthy abstract painters—Morris decorated the walls of their second home in the Berkshires, an International Style edifice built in 1941.²⁴⁶ As in Léger's murals for the Rockefeller apartment, Frelinghuysen and Morris gravitated toward the fireplace and the stairwell as appropriate sites for abstract painting. Morris's pair of colorful murals, incorporating inlaid glass panels, were balanced on either side of the living room fireplace, while his relief marble carving sat directly above the mantel (**fig. 3.3**). As in the Rockefeller apartment, the murals were intended as part of a larger ensemble of art and design, set in a cream-yellow wall and interspersed with the Picassos and Légers that the couple collected, along with furniture pieces by Paul Frankl, Donald Deskey, and others. In the

²⁴³ My reading of the apartment's organization is based on the accounts given in Victoria Newhouse, *Wallace K. Harrison, Architect* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989) and Andrew Alpern, *Luxury Apartment Houses of Manhattan: An Illustrated History* (New York: Dover, 1992). Simon Willmoth differs in his account, placing the fireplace mural on the apartment's upper level. Willmoth also suggests that Léger painted the murals offsite at a studio. See Willmoth, "Léger and America," in *Fernand Léger: The Later Years*, 43-54 (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1987).

²⁴⁴ Morris studied with Léger and Amadée Ozenfant on his spring trips to Paris in 1929 and 1930. He remained close friends with Léger for many years. On Morris, Frelinghuysen, and their circle, see Debra Bricker Balken et al., *The Park Avenue Cubists: Gallatin, Morris, Frelinghuysen, and Shaw* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 2002).

²⁴⁵ The other members of this informal group were A.E. Gallatin, director of the Museum of Living Art, and Charles Shaw. See Balken et al., *The Park Avenue Cubists*.

²⁴⁶ Designed by John Butler Swann, the house was connected to an existing modernist structure, the 1930 artist's studio that Morris commissioned from Boston architect George Sanderson. The 1930 building was the first International Style structure erected in New England. My thanks to Kinney Frelinghuysen for showing me the murals by Morris and Frelinghuysen and answering my questions.

dining room, Frelinghuysen orchestrated the entire space by painting the walls a dusky blue, and creating three frescoes in ultramarine blues and purples along the main wall over the fireplace (**fig. 3.4**). The fireplace's brass surround and andirons added golden accents to the blue symphony, accents that played off of the pleated brass sheeting incorporated into the murals. Yet the most striking mural was undoubtedly Morris's design in yellow, red, blue, and black that climbed the wall of the spiral staircase in the entrance foyer, and whose shapes gracefully echoed the black tendrils of the bannister (**fig. 3.5**). Frelinghuysen and Morris used the walls of their modernist house to craft their own modernist vision, one that merged abstract painting with a luxurious domestic life.

One final design for domestic abstraction deserves mention here, the murals by Léger and Joan Miró that formed an integral part of Paul Nelson's Suspended House project (**fig. 3.6**). Designed by the French-American architect in 1938, the project was an essay in Nelson's ongoing exploration of how to both make use of and tame the powers of technology: here, prefabricated rooms were "suspended" from the edifice's steel exoskeleton, able to be changed out or moved around by inhabitants. In the main space of the house, however—the space that surrounded the suspended bedrooms and dining room—was what Nelson called a "free area remaining which is not the product of the machine. This can be furnished and decorated, used and enjoyed, with absolute freedom."²⁴⁷ This space of "absolute freedom" featured a ramp that led the dweller up to

²⁴⁷ Paul Nelson, *Researching for a New Standard of Living* (New York: Revere, Copper, and Brass, 1942), 6. On the Suspended House, see Terence Riley and Joseph Abram, eds., *The Filter of Reason: Work of Paul Nelson* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990); Andrew Michael Shanken, *194X: Architecture, Planning, and Consumer Culture on the American Home Front* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 83-84; and Peter Olshavsky, "La Maison Suspendue: Imaginary Solutions for an Everyday Domestic Machine," in *Designing the French Interior: The Modern Home and Mass Media*, eds. Anca I. Lasc, Georgina Downey, and Mark Taylor, 71-80 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

the cell-like rooms and was outfitted with the abstract designs of Léger and Miró, and with sculpture by Hans Arp.²⁴⁸ The machine, according to Nelson, thus “frees the individual and enables him to shape his surroundings according to his needs and desires. In this way it accentuates the individual and opens before all of us wholly new opportunities for self-enrichment in our homes.”²⁴⁹ One art critic, viewing the model when it was shown at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York, put the duality even more starkly: “[T]here is indisputable value [...] in the concept that utilitarian space should be reduced in order to create surplus space for collective enjoyment—combining the idea of the house as a ‘machine to live in’ and as a ‘poem’ to be enjoyed.”²⁵⁰

Nelson’s Suspended House makes explicit one of the underlying premises connecting abstraction and the home, their shared claim on a space of leisure. Both seemed, in different ways, capable of rejecting the instrumentality that infected the world of commerce outside. As Joyce Henri Robinson writes, “For the world-weary *homme d'affaires* [of the nineteenth century], the proper domestic interior embodied an ambiance of restful leisure (*otium*), visually and emotionally providing a retreat from the world of business (*negotium*).”²⁵¹ It was precisely these values of respite and leisure that painters like Maurice Denis and Henri Matisse—drawing on a long tradition of the decorative in France—would call upon in defending modern painting at the turn of the twentieth

²⁴⁸ The model, exhibited in New York in 1938, was destroyed later that year. Nelson subsequently made a second model—extant and in the collection of MoMA—again collaborating with Léger and Miró but including sculpture by Alexander Calder rather than Arp.

²⁴⁹ Nelson, *Researching for a New Standard of Living*, 8.

²⁵⁰ M.B., “The Suspended House by Paul Nelson; Leger’s Recent Gouaches,” *Art News* (October 29, 1938): 15.

²⁵¹ Joyce Henri Robinson, “Hi Honey, I’m Home: Weary (Neurasthenic) Businessmen and the Formation of a Serenely Modern Aesthetic,” in *Not at Home: The Suppression of the Domestic in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed, 98-112 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 112.

century, often with metaphors explicitly taken from the interior. In Matisse's famous phrasing, he sought "an art of balance, of purity and serenity [...] which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters [...] a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue."²⁵² In the 1930s and 1940s, abstraction—freed from the burdens of representation and playing directly upon the sensory apparatus of the viewer—retained powerful associations with freedom, privacy, and pleasure, for both critics and proponents. Meyer Schapiro would famously critique abstraction on these grounds, as the "fantasy of a passive spectator, [in which] colors and shapes are disengaged from objects,"²⁵³ while Clement Greenberg would defend Matisse's coloristic "hedonism" for its very capacity to provide pleasure in a "positivist age of bourgeois industrialism."²⁵⁴ In presenting his abstract-clad interior as a space for "enjoyment," "absolute freedom," and "enrichment," Nelson offered an update of the French decorative interior for the citizen of the machine age. With "utilitarian" space reduced, the "poetry" of life could flourish. The murals at the Rockefeller apartment and the Frelinghuysen-Morris House participated in a similar aesthetic enrichment, their material qualities—colorful motifs, brass pleating, inlaid glass—harmonizing with the wood paneling and marble flooring of their respective interiors.

²⁵² Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter" [1908], in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam, 37-43 (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 42.

²⁵³ Meyer Schapiro, "The Social Bases of Art," *Proceedings at the First Artists' Congress Against War and Fascism* (New York, 1936). Schapiro continues this line of argument, although with less invective, in "On the Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly* 1:1 (January-March 1937): 77-98.

²⁵⁴ John O'Brian, "Greenberg's Matisse and the Problem of Avant-Garde Hedonism," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut, 144-71 (Cambridge: MIT, 1990), 153.

The Suspended House is apposite not only for its use of abstraction in outfitting spaces of domestic leisure. It also, in its ties to the exhibition circuit and to consumer desire more broadly, foreshadows themes that will be pervasive across this and the following chapter. Exhibited as a model at Pierre Matisse along with Léger's gouaches, the Suspended House met its audience within the context of a commercial gallery—an event we will see echoed in the presentation of Pollock's *Mural* of 1943, repeated at Pollock's fall 1949 exhibition, and extended to a range of house models the following year, at Sam Kootz's group show "The Muralist and the Modern Architect." The miniature murals by Léger and Miró, like the murals by Pollock discussed presently, may have been intended for the private sphere of the home. But that sphere was mediated and exhibited through displays in galleries and museums, not to mention in the increasingly extensive press devoted to art, architecture, and lifestyle. The Suspended House was one of many instances in these years in which the space of the home and the gallery overlapped.

The issues facing Léger, Morris, Frelinghuysen, and others in their domestic murals would continue to be relevant in the following decade, even as the look and values of New York's modern art changed profoundly. The reasons for this sea change in abstraction, extensively debated elsewhere, are beyond the scope of this dissertation.²⁵⁵ Suffice it to say, by the early 1940s the careful geometric arrangements of Bolotowsky and Swinden in their hospital murals, or even the lyrical abstractions of Léger for the

²⁵⁵ On this question, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), especially chs. 2 and 3; and Michael Leja, "The Formation of an Avant-Garde in New York," in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, 18-48 (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1993).

Rockefeller apartment, had become an increasingly untenable direction for younger artists. As Greenberg neatly summarized in 1945, “Until recently abstract painting in this country [...] was governed by the structural or formal or ‘physical’ preoccupations that are supposed to exhaust the intentions of cubism and its inheritors. Now there has come a swing back toward ‘poetry’ and ‘imagination.’”²⁵⁶ The temporary exhaustion of a certain mode of abstract painting—it would emerge reinvigorated, especially in mural commissions, in the later 1950s—speaks as much to the presence of exiled Surrealists in New York as it does to the changing concerns (and thus changing visual demands) of the wartime and early postwar eras.²⁵⁷ Despite differences in visual vocabulary and public recognition, abstract painters of the 1940s pursued murals with avid interest, matching, and at times exceeding, the mural ambitions of their Depression-era predecessors.

Jackson Pollock’s *Mural* (1943): Between Violence and Charm

In Spring 1945, Pollock had his second solo exhibition at Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery, where he had been a regular presence since his debut two years before. With typical acumen, Guggenheim had positioned Art of This Century precisely along modern art’s shifting borders, dedicating permanent galleries to both Abstraction and Surrealism. Pollock’s 1945 show featured the artist’s ongoing blend of these strands: heavily painted canvases of shrouded forms and figures, full of mythic resonances and

²⁵⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Art” [1945], in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 29. Greenberg was reviewing here the seminal exhibition “A Problem for Critics” at Howard Putzel’s 67 Gallery, which attempted to name the new current of modern painting.

²⁵⁷ For accounts of the Surrealist influence on American art, see Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde, 1920-1950* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1995); Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge: MIT, 1995); and Isabelle Dervaux, ed., *Surrealism USA* (New York: National Academy Museum: 2005).

layered with abstract scrawls and motifs. Yet the show did not end within the gallery's walls. Alongside the list of Pollock's thirteen displayed paintings, an exhibition pamphlet summoned visitors five blocks east to see a further work. "You are invited," it read, "to view a Mural on March 19, from 3 to 6, at 155 East 61st Street. 1st floor" (**fig. 3.7**).²⁵⁸

Those visitors who did make the trip left the wide commercial corridor of Fifty-Seventh Street for the residential streets of the east Sixties, arriving at the townhouse that had served as Guggenheim's residence for the past year and a half. The nondescript façade of the five-story brownstone would hardly have prepared visitors who stepped inside for *Mural*'s explosive presence, nearly twenty feet of yellows, whites, blues, and pinks unfurling along the right-hand wall (**fig. 3.8–3.10**). Like the easel paintings back at the gallery, *Mural* trafficked in an energetic, even chaotic, vocabulary of paint swirls and layers, and made central use of black line—here, a dark umber that constituted the central armature of upright, figural lines marching across the canvas. Yet unlike the easel paintings, *Mural* was a scalar giant, an expansive surface stretching from viewers' ankles to up above their heads, and running all the way to the end of the wall until it hit a physical stopping point. For viewers entering Guggenheim's lobby, *Mural* would have loomed almost immediately into view, a vibrant and violent abstraction that seemed to constitute the entire right wall just inside the vestibule.

²⁵⁸ "Jackson Pollock," exhibition pamphlet, 1945, AAA, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner Papers (hereafter PK), box 4, folder 13, scanned images 12-14. Reproduced in Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings, and Other Works* (hereafter JPCR) (New Haven: Yale University, 1978), vol. 4, 235.

By the time Guggenheim's March gallery-goers were invited to see *Mural*, it had been holding court in her Eastside entryway for over a year.²⁵⁹ Here it faced its most regular viewers, the inhabitants and visitors at 155 East Sixty-First who passed it daily or weekly on their way to the duplex.²⁶⁰ The townhouse had been carved up into apartments (and merged with units of the neighboring structure) in the 1930s, and the resulting ground floor at 155 was a cross between an apartment lobby and a foyer: it acted as a conduit to the elevator in back (the only access to the duplex on the fourth and fifth floors), but was decorated with ornamental features like a fireplace and crown molding (**fig. 3.11**).²⁶¹ Its width, thirteen and a half feet, also gave it an ambivalent feel, wider than a mere hallway but too small for congregating or setting up much furniture. Guggenheim clearly saw the space as an entrée to her home upstairs. She recounts in her memoir how she and Kenneth Macpherson, her companion and flatmate, "spent hours in bars thinking

²⁵⁹ The contract for *Mural* was signed on July 15, 1943, and the canvas was stretched and in Pollock's studio by the end of the month. It was likely completed and installed in early or mid-November, shortly before or after the opening of Pollock's first solo exhibition, as letters from Pollock to his brother, and from Guggenheim to her friend Emily Coleman, make clear. It was removed from Guggenheim's lobby in late 1946 or early 1947, in advance of its inclusion in MoMA's "Large-Scale Modern Painting" (April 1–May 4, 1947). Older scholarship, including the catalogue raisonné, has generally dated the work later, to 1945. For a defense of the earlier dating and installation, and a detailed chronology, see Yvonne Szafran et al., *Jackson Pollock's Mural: The Transitional Moment* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2014).

²⁶⁰ In addition to Guggenheim, who lived on the fourth floor, the duplex hosted Kenneth Macpherson, on the fifth, and, at various moments, Guggenheim's daughter, Pegeen Vail; Jean Connolly, a close friend, at the time in a relationship with Guggenheim's first husband; and Macpherson's partner, David Larkins. The ranks of these permanent and semi-permanent residents were swelled by those attending dinner and house parties organized by Guggenheim and Macpherson. For firsthand accounts of life in the duplex, see Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: The Informal Memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim* (New York: Dial, 1946), especially Part 7, chs. 2, "Life in the Duplex," and 3, "War in the Duplex"; Jimmy Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), especially "Some Desperate Dances," 209–56; and Virginia M. Dortch, ed., *Peggy Guggenheim and Her Friends* (Milano: Berenice, 1994).

²⁶¹ On the building's changes in the 1930s and other details, see the painstaking research in Francis V. O'Connor, "Jackson Pollock's *Mural* for Peggy Guggenheim: Its Legend, Documentation, and Redefinition of Wall Painting," in *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century*, ed. Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, 151–169 (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2004), especially 157–60 and 166–67, nn25–26. A few key details of O'Connor's account are corrected and amplified in Szafran et al., *Jackson Pollock's Mural*, drawing in particular on research by Angelica Zander Rudenstine from 2003, before the vestibule's remodeling.

about the décor of our new home. There was a large entrance hall from which an elevator took you upstairs [...] We were preoccupied for weeks trying to think of fantastic ways of decorating the entrance hall.”²⁶²

In settling on Pollock’s *Mural*—along with one of David Hare’s sculptures—Guggenheim continued what would be a lifelong pursuit of bringing art into her domestic contexts. Her previous home, a riverside mansion on Beekman Place that she shared with then-husband Max Ernst, was equal parts collection display, informal gallery, and setting for the artistic life that the couple enjoyed at the heart of Surrealist émigré circles. Later residences, from the duplex to her Venice palazzo, similarly blended art and dwelling. Although *Mural* was unprecedented in scale, it was by no means Guggenheim’s only commission of art for her home and person. Yves Tanguy and Alexander Calder had both gifted her jewelry pieces they made, and Calder would soon design an elaborate wire headboard for her bed. In 1960, Guggenheim would commission a different kind of large-scale artwork to mark her home’s entryway, the wire and glass doors by Claire Falkenstein for the Venice palazzo. At the New York duplex in the 1940s, *Mural* and Hare’s sculpture served as the introduction to a series of further art pieces upstairs, all of them helping to mark the particular mix of bohemian vulgarity, cutting-edge taste, and professional ambition that defined Guggenheim’s lifestyle. They also, more specifically, articulated Guggenheim’s role as patron of an emergent *American* avant-garde, rather than just of the European abstractionists and Surrealists whom she had long collected. Howard Putzel, one of her close advisers, may have been the impetus in securing the mural commission for Pollock: according to one author, he was “curious to see whether a

²⁶² Guggenheim, *Out of This Century*, 344.

larger scale would release the force contained in Pollock's smaller painting."²⁶³ Yet the prospect of a large-scale work that would utterly transform the vestibule would have held appeal for Guggenheim, too, who had made her name in New York, in part, on the radical spatial effects produced by Frederick Kiesler's architecture at her gallery.²⁶⁴

Two contemporary accounts of *Mural* give us some purchase on the experience of it in the vestibule. One is the famous photograph by George Karger, taken around 1946 from within the swirls of Hare's sculpture (**fig. 3.12**). Here is Guggenheim, posing and meeting the camera's gaze, and surrounded by her various attributes: Pollock, her discovery, standing a bit to one side, and eyeing her warily; a Lhasa Apso in each arm, the dog breed she would continue to own until the end of her life; Hare's American version of Surrealism, in which she is almost swallowed up; and, behind her, *Mural* itself, its scale at once exhilarating and claustrophobic, filling the entire wall and ninety percent of the frame. The other account is an article by artist and film critic Manny Farber, published just two months after Pollock's 1945 exhibition. Perhaps Farber had seen the show in March and gone, as invited, to view *Mural*; or perhaps he was one of several visitors who sought out *Mural* on its own, and then visited the gallery to peruse other works by the artist. Either way, Farber sets out to defend Pollock on the basis of three works he has recently seen, which he describes as "both masterful and miraculous":

²⁶³ Jacqueline Bograd Weld, *Peggy, the Wayward Guggenheim* (New York: Dutton, 1986), 306. This claim, often repeated in subsequent literature on Pollock and *Mural*, is stated but not sourced in Weld's Guggenheim biography. Putzel's dedication to Pollock, however, is well-documented.

²⁶⁴ On Kiesler's famous designs for the gallery, see Susan Davidson and Philip Rylands, eds., *Peggy Guggenheim and Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2004).

The three paintings include a wild abstraction twenty-six feet long [sic], commissioned by Miss Peggy Guggenheim for the hallway of her home, and two gouache drawings being exhibited at Art of This Century. The mural is voluminously detailed with swirling line and form, painted spontaneously and seemingly without preliminary sketch, and is, I think, an almost incredible success. It is violent in its expression, endlessly fascinating in detail, without superficiality, and so well ordered that it composes the wall in a quiet, contained, buoyant way. Pollock's aim in painting seems to be to express feeling that ranges from pleasant enthusiasm through wildness to explosiveness.²⁶⁵

As Karger's photograph and contemporary reconstructions of the hallway make clear, Farber was encountering *Mural* at relatively close range. At thirteen feet back, or about two-thirds of the painting's length, one cannot quite escape *Mural*'s surrounding embrace; it not only constitutes the wall in front, but fills the horizon of perception. *Mural* would have produced an environmental effect in the hallway that is somewhat lost in viewing it today, its edges stretching down to the floor, up to kiss the double molding at the ceiling, and out on either side until it reached the right-angled corners of adjoining walls. If the result was powerful (we can sense Farber reeling under the impact of the "miraculous" and "almost incredible" painting), it also risked turning *Mural* into background decoration for the quotidian processes of everyday life, the comings and goings of inhabitants and visitors through the hallway. *Mural* might serve, too, as the ground against which more spectacular events were staged, as Karger's photograph—a tableau of Guggenheim's personal and professional ambitions—amply testifies.

²⁶⁵ Manny Farber, "Jackson Pollock," *New Republic*, June 25, 1945, 871-72.

If the problem of decoration is a general one for abstract painting at environmental scale (we can think of Bolotowsky's and Swinden's semicircular murals for the sun rooms at the Chronic Diseases Hospital), *Mural* also reaches toward the decorative in more specific ways. It is insistently, even perversely, repetitive: despite its surface richness, *Mural* employs a limited repertoire of basic, repeating motifs. There are the black verticals, often read as figures, charting the entire length of the canvas; loops and circles that flow off these verticals or appear on their own; arcs and line segments that trace ovoid, protuberant areas of negative space. These are disbursed with steady regularity: although they congest and then thin out in various passages, they ultimately dictate an almost trance-like cadence across the surface. Together with its apparent scale inside the vestibule, the repeating motifs might explain the oft-cited myth that *Mural* was originally too long for the wall, and had to be hacked off at one end upon installation. It is unlikely that this happened (certainly, the canvas shows no sign of being cut²⁶⁶), but the story accurately responds to the painting's repetitive and expansive nature. If, as Farber writes, "each point of the surface in [Pollock's] flat painting is capable of being made a major one and played for maximum effect," then what is the loss of eight inches from one

²⁶⁶ This anecdote was recounted by David Hare in 1979, who said that he and Marcel Duchamp, enlisted to install the work, cut off eight inches from the end (quoted in Weld, *Wayward Guggenheim*, 326). Peggy Guggenheim, in the 1960 and 1979 versions of her memoirs, states that *Mural* was "bigger than the wall it was destined for," but does not mention the canvas being cut (Guggenheim, *Confessions of an Art Addict* [New York: Andre Deutsch, 1960], 107). Technical analysis by the Getty in 2012-13 showed no signs of the canvas being cut. However, as they note, it is possible the canvas was slightly too large for the space, perhaps by about an inch, and that the stretcher frame was adjusted accordingly and the edge of the canvas tucked around the stretcher bar, giving rise to the later story (Szafran et al., *Jackson Pollock's Mural*, 68). Such a theory is supported by Jeffrey Potter's description of the installation: "*Mural* [...] was a little big for the space—and Marcel Duchamp finally installed the work with a frame-maker" (Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* [New York: Putnam, 1985], 76).

side?²⁶⁷ *Mural*, in this story, is less a picture than patterning or wallpaper, a swath of design plunked into the available space, without beginning or end.

Mural is decorative, also, in the way it courts a particular kind of beauty. Despite the vigor and energy of the brushwork, *Mural* has a light and (to quote Farber) “buoyant” feel. One of Farber’s central tactics in the essay is his pairing of this lighter, pleasant side of *Mural* with its more violent face. The wall painting, Farber tells us, is “violent in its expression” but also “quiet, contained, buoyant;” it expresses “pleasant enthusiasm” simultaneously with “wildness” and “explosiveness.” No sooner is one of these pairs invoked than its opposite soon follows: the surface is “laced with relaxed, graceful, swirling lines or violent ones.”²⁶⁸ Pollock’s painting is “thoroughly incautious” but also, strangely, charming: “in a period when it looks as if we are going to be drowned in charm,” Farber tells us, “his painting generally backs up its charm.”²⁶⁹ Both of these poles are evident in Karger’s photograph. If *Mural*’s tangle of brushwork is muscular and vigorous—its layers and scumbles dramatically highlighted in the raking light—it also has a delicate quality, its drips and strokes forming a seductive interlace of arabesques and flourishes.

This duality in *Mural* is, to some degree, typical of Pollock and his mature work, which tends to call up wildly divergent pairs of descriptors (material and ethereal, violent and graceful); in the words of Kirk Varnedoe, “keep[ing] either-or dichotomies at bay

²⁶⁷ Farber, “Jackson Pollock,” 872.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 871.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 872.

may be among Pollock's chief legacies."²⁷⁰ But the duality of violence and charm is also quite specific to the context in which *Mural* was conceived and first experienced. Recent scholarship has interpreted *Mural*'s violence in terms of the pathos of the war years: Pollock painted the work over the summer and fall of 1943, less than a year after the United States' entry into World War II.²⁷¹ While such readings can be overdone, there is more than a kernel of truth here. War suffused the art world of early 1940s New York, from the arrival of European artists (and American expats, like Guggenheim) in flight from the continent to shortages of artist materials and the drafting of young Americans. More generally, the war served as the latest example of the barbarism and tragedy of modern history. Nicolas Calas was not alone among artists when he wondered, in 1939, "How will painting continue and at the same time express the tragedy of our days?"²⁷² The answer to this question, as Michael Leja has demonstrated, was frequently articulated through reference to primitive man, and the seemingly universal forces of terror and spirituality that constituted his world.²⁷³ *Mural* is in dialogue with these themes, especially along the lower edge, where a sequence of tightly packed circles, triangles, and eye-shapes recalls the darkly mythic realm that Pollock painted in works like *Guardians of the Secret* and *Pasiphae* (1943; **fig. 3.13–3.14**). The swaying black verticals, often read as figures, may even suggest a procession, moving across the plinth of forms below.

²⁷⁰ Kirk Varnedoe, "Comet: Jackson Pollock's Life and Work," in *Jackson Pollock*, ed. Varnedoe, 15-85 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 17.

²⁷¹ See, for example, David Anfam, *Jackson Pollock's Mural: Energy Made Visible* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015).

²⁷² Nicolas Calas, "Painting in Paris Is Poetry," *Poetry World* (July-August 1939): 38-44; 43-44.

²⁷³ See Leja, "The Mythmakers and the Primitive: Gottlieb, Newman, Rothko and Still," in *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, 49-119.

Yet perhaps most pertinently, depictions of violence and tragedy formed an integral part of the mural tradition as Pollock understood it. Pollock had admired the modern Mexican muralists since at least 1930, and sought out examples of their work—epochal cycles of history and conquest—in the States.²⁷⁴ More recently, the popular showing of two modern murals in New York would have solidified the form's relationship with modern violence: Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), shown at the Valentine Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1939, and José Clemente Orozco's *Dive Bomber and Tank*, exhibited at MoMA in summer 1940 (**fig. 3.15–3.16**).²⁷⁵ In different ways, these two works suggested that modern painting, when scaled up to the mural's proportions, could effectively depict violence and monumentalize human suffering. In turning to *Mural*, his first mural project since 1933,²⁷⁶ Pollock seems to have carried over the violence and epic narrative in Picasso and Orozco, but in a very different idiom. Pollock's concern may have been less with the violence of modern warfare than the brute, animal violence of the plains; his friend Harry Jackson twice recalled that Pollock envisioned a stampede of wild horses or buffalo surging across *Mural*'s

²⁷⁴ Pollock made a pilgrimage to see José Clemente Orozco's *Prometheus* (1930) outside Los Angeles in 1930, and in 1936 he traveled from New York to Dartmouth to see the artist's *Epic of American Civilization* (1932-4). He surely also knew Orozco's frescoes for the New School in Manhattan. In 1936, Pollock participated in muralist David Alfaro Siqueiro's short-lived but influential Experimental Workshop in New York.

²⁷⁵ Pollock saw *Guernica* at the Valentine Gallery in May 1939, and his sketchbooks from that time show the work's influence on him. The mural was also featured at MoMA's Picasso retrospective that fall. Orozco's *Dive Bomber and Tank* was painted (largely in front of museum visitors) in June 1940, for MoMA's "Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art" exhibition.

²⁷⁶ Along with his brother Charles, Pollock made sketches for a never-realized mural at Greenwich House, a settlement house in New York, in ca. 1930-33; see *JPCR*, vol. 1, no. 8. He also painted more informal murals on the walls of makeshift studios in the 1930s and 1940s; see Francis V. O'Connor, "A Note About Murals," in O'Connor, ed., *JPCR Supplement Number 1* (New York: Pollock-Krasner Foundation, 1995), 52-53.

surface.²⁷⁷ Either way, Pollock was grappling with a mural heritage that prized the monumental depiction of turmoil and strife. As Jackson recalls, Pollock was attracted to the “great figurative mural” tradition, but “felt that the disciplines necessary for realizing such work had been lost to us.” He wanted, according to his friend, “to make Great and Heroic paintings for America. He was painfully aware of not being able to do it the way he wished and he was determined to do it the way he could.”²⁷⁸

Mural absorbs the monumentalizing impulse of Picasso and Orozco in subtle but powerful ways. There is, first of all, its imposing size, larger than any work Pollock had yet done and just five-and-a-half inches short of *Guernica*’s impressive length. The dark, looping lines suggest not only figures, with their attendant narrative associations, but also a plot of change and transformation: reading from right to left—from the doorway to the end of the vestibule wall—the black verticals bend into wilder, arcing versions of themselves, turning from relatively straight uprights into splayed and dancing lines. The composition also possesses a real center, the vaguely heart-shaped area in the middle third of the painting where the black figures rupture and momentarily yield the space to a tangled riot of colors. Two heavily worked lines of bright blue anchor this space. This compositional center helps the work read as a picture or scene rather than just an abstract design. Within the close quarters of the hallway, some of these monumental qualities would have frayed and eroded, the rhythm of repetitive design reasserting itself. Yet they

²⁷⁷ Harry Jackson to Francis V. O’Connor, November 15, 1965, 3-4, quoted in O’Connor, “Jackson Pollock’s *Mural* for Peggy Guggenheim,” 161. Harry Jackson, quoted in Steven W. Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (hereafter Naifeh and Smith) (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 468. According to Naifeh and Smith, Pollock told Peter Busa and Reuben Kadish similar accounts of *Mural*’s genesis; see Naifeh and Smith, 864.

²⁷⁸ Jackson, quoted in O’Connor, “Jackson Pollock’s *Mural* for Peggy Guggenheim,” 161.

still inform its structure, helping to toggle the work between the poles of monumentality and decoration, violence and charm. Despite its abstraction, *Mural* adheres to the scalar and compositional conventions of “Great and Heroic” painting, of muralism with something to narrate.

Guggenheim seems to have been aware of *Mural*’s split allegiances—or at the very least, of the difficult boundary it attempted to navigate. Her 1946 memoir, written while *Mural* was still hanging in the vestibule, describes her quest for something “fantastic” for the hallway’s “décor.” Yet she simultaneously confesses herself

horrificed by [Kenneth Macpherson’s] ideas, which were so frivolous and prewar that I really would have found it difficult to agree with them. In spite of the fact that he was politically left wing, he didn’t seem to realize that a certain highly luxurious pleasure-seeking life was over and no longer fits in with our times.²⁷⁹

Mural, by Guggenheim’s count, had to be both decorative and serious, “fantastic” but not overly “luxurious.” Indeed, we might articulate *Mural*’s brief as consisting precisely in the marriage of ambitious, modern history painting with the visual elements and charm of ambient décor. How, in 1943, might abstract painting, to quote Calas, “express the tragedy of our days?” How might it reconcile the pressures of monumentality—encouraged by a mural tradition that narrated the violence of human history—with the architectural and social pressures of decoration—the environmental effect that surrounded visitors stepping inside Guggenheim’s vestibule? *Mural*’s attempt to satisfy both of these demands may account for the difficulty of fixing the painting’s motile effects in prose. As Farber intuited, *Mural* is constantly shifting before our eyes, the same

²⁷⁹ Guggenheim, *Out of This Century*, 344.

visual forms assuming very different meanings. The black verticals shatter into jagged and curved segments, but also suggest frozen tendrils or curls of paint. Areas of spatter (in vermillion red, stringy pink, and yellow) suggest explosive outbursts and also the evocative dazzle of a fine filigree.

A real understanding of *Mural* can only come by placing it at the juncture of these two contexts, muralism's grand narratives (and the pathos of wartime New York more broadly) and the decorative entrée to an heiress's home. The decorative qualities of *Mural* that I emphasize here have largely been downplayed in the painting's scholarship. A notable exception is Thomas Crow's 1996 essay "Fashioning the New York School," one of the first to read *Mural* in relationship to its patronage. Linking *Mural* to Pollock's later "wall-filling" canvases, and Cecil Beaton's famous use of them in a *Vogue* fashion shoot, Crow argues here that the large scale of Abstract Expressionism was not "an expression of up-to-date conditions of American capitalism" or related foreign-policy needs. Rather, the scale of *Mural*, and its use "as a backdrop for fashionable posing" (witness the Karger photograph), "owes its origins to the needs of an improvised, latter-day court, one modeled on traditional European conceptions of enlightened and self-flattering patronage." Guggenheim's commission of *Mural* in this view stands as "the principal gesture of accommodation by a courtly culture toward its temporary, democratic surroundings"—temporary because Guggenheim would soon leave America and return to her expat existence in Europe.²⁸⁰

²⁸⁰ Thomas Crow, "Fashioning the New York School," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, 39-48 (New Haven: Yale, 1996), 41, 48.

Although a sensitive account of Abstract Expressionism's imbrication with mass culture, Crow's essay ultimately mischaracterizes *Mural*'s social and architectural location. For one, it elides the considerable differences between *Mural* and the later drip canvases of 1947-51. However much Karger's and Beaton's photographs may seem to have in common, they served very different ends. The lessons of Picasso and Orozco—and the mood of wartime New York more broadly—matter profoundly for *Mural*, and in ways that they will not for Pollock's later mural projects. For Guggenheim, *Mural* served as *both* a fashionable backdrop to her bohemian lifestyle *and* an appropriately dark and violent environment for a world rocked by exile, war, and the shockwaves of Surrealism. Excluding that second function—transplanting *Mural* firmly into the postwar years of the drip paintings—means missing the particular set of needs that the work attempted to satisfy.

In stressing the “fashionable posing” done before *Mural*, Crow also loses something of the specificity of the vestibule and its domestic associations. *Mural* is flattened out in Crow's telling: it becomes a screen rather than a wall, and its phenomenological effects—its hulking presence, suggestions of weight, the way it fills a viewer's peripheral vision—fizzle out. Crow notes that *Mural* was not “the first type of art meant to be faced away from by its principal users.”²⁸¹ This is certainly true, as a quick glance at other domestic murals, from the wood-enframed abstractions of Léger to Morris's winding stairwell design, makes clear. But these murals, like Pollock's for Guggenheim, were also meant to be lived with. They were walked around and passed by, sat beside (in the case of Léger) and eaten before (in the case of Frelinghuysen). At the

²⁸¹ Ibid., 48.

townhouse, Pollock's *Mural* created a gauntlet of abstract forms that arriving tenants and guests had to pass in order to get upstairs. Standing sentry there, it enjoyed a remarkably intimate relationship with its viewers, occasioning admiration (from Guggenheim and Farber), scorn (Macpherson by all accounts hated it²⁸²), and, quite probably, indifference: as Megan Luke has written, *Mural* was "a painting seen from the side, almost out of the corner of one's eyes, on the way to elsewhere."²⁸³ If *Mural* could be pressed into service as a fashionable backdrop, it was also part of Guggenheim's lived, inhabited modernism.

A hallmark of Guggenheim's "lived modernism" was the way in which it mingled the spheres of home and professional life. Perhaps no document better testifies to this than the 1945 exhibition pamphlet, where Pollock's easel paintings, on display at Art of This Century, and his mural, inhabiting the Sixty-First Street vestibule, are listed side by side (**fig. 3.7**). It was not just visitors to the 1945 show that sought out *Mural* in situ. Guggenheim recalls James Thrall Soby, then at MoMA, stopping by the townhouse in a rainstorm, hoping to see the monumental painting he had doubtless heard about.²⁸⁴ The timing of Manny Farber's essay, published in late June, likewise indicates a symbiotic and dynamic relationship between townhouse lobby and gallery.²⁸⁵ And in 1947, the

²⁸² Guggenheim, *Out of This Century*, 345. Lee Krasner recalls that Macpherson and his friends even scribbled graffiti on the mural (Krasner quoted in Weld, *Wayward Guggenheim*, 326, and in Dortch, *Peggy Guggenheim and Her Friends*, 109), although the Getty's extensive technical analysis of the work revealed no such evidence (Szafran et al., *Jackson Pollock's Mural*).

²⁸³ Megan R. Luke, "Painting in the Round," *Getty Research Journal* (forthcoming, 2017).

²⁸⁴ Guggenheim, *Out of This Century*, 345.

²⁸⁵ While Farber may have visited the exhibition during the March-April show, both the publication date (late June) and his wording in the essay suggest that he has sought out *Mural* and the two gouaches on his own. This was relatively common practice at Art of This Century, which Guggenheim envisioned as a library and museum in addition to a gallery. In the words of a later *Art News* review, published shortly after Pollock's 1946 show had come down, "All his [Pollock's] paintings are at the gallery and may be seen for the asking" (*Art News* 45 [May 1946]: 63).

brochure for Pollock's final exhibition at Art of This Century once again included *Mural* among the list of exhibited works.²⁸⁶ Guggenheim lived intimately with art, and the informal, artistic nature of her gallery—its porousness to her home and the rest of her life—was part of what carved out her particular niche in the New York art world. In the hands of other gallerists, however, this informal linking of home and exhibition space would take on a more professionalized dimension. The home and its fine-art furnishings have never been immune to exhibition, as seminal examples like the Maison Cubiste at the 1912 Paris Salon d'Automne remind us. In 1940s New York, the home, as both a concept and a set of spatial and decorative tactics, would become a central component in the business strategy of galleries like Sam Kootz and Bertha Schaefer.

“Important Paintings for Spacious Living:” 1940s Domestic Culture and Pollock's *Mural on Indian Red Ground* (1950)

The fine art gallery's turn to the home depended on a number of broad economic and cultural changes, in both the art and housing markets. As early as 1944, the art market's growth was garnering attention in the press: *Art News* ran an article entitled “Who Buys What in the Picture Boom,” which analyzed the “phenomenal acceleration” of contemporary art purchases during the 1943-44 season.²⁸⁷ Significantly, the article stated

²⁸⁶ “Jackson Pollock,” exhibition pamphlet, 1947, AAA, PK, box 4, folder 27, scanned images 12-13. Unlike the 1945 brochure, this one listed *Mural* as though it were one of the works at the gallery and made no mention of Guggenheim's address. This may be merely accidental, but some have postulated that *Mural* was moved to Art of This Century for the show, a few months before its move to MoMA for inclusion in their exhibition. As O'Connor notes, however, there was no wall at Art of This Century that would have been long enough to host the work without tacking it up unstretched and bending it around the corner; see O'Connor, “Jackson Pollock's *Mural* for Peggy Guggenheim,” 169 n58.

²⁸⁷ Aline B. Louchheim, “Who Buys What in the Picture Boom,” *Art News* 43.9 (July 1-31, 1944): 12-14, 23-24. The article was based on interviews with twenty-four galleries dealing in contemporary art, as well as detailed sales figures from seventeen of the establishments.

that about one-third of the season's purchases were by the "new collector" making his first purchase of contemporary art. Unlike the "small group of 'war millionaires'" who drove the art boom of 1916-18, this new collector was of "the upper middle class stratum" (often employed in business, "the professions," or the armed services), and less likely to buy for reasons of "intellectual snobbism" than for a kind of Veblenian "social prestige."²⁸⁸ The upper middle classes, in other words, had discovered a taste for modern art, and now had the money to spend on it.²⁸⁹ The growth of incomes, and of the middle class in particular, would also contribute to the boom in housing in the early postwar years,²⁹⁰ and a concomitant boom in what one scholar has termed the "domestic culture industry," the suite of "Conferences, expositions, lectures, store displays, magazines, and newspapers" covering housing, furnishing, and domestic life.²⁹¹

The housing boom and the popularity of modern art had more in common than just their shared economic berth in a newly affluent middle class. They also converged in more explicit ways, as the home became the preferred matrix in which such art was experienced. In a follow-up article the next season, *Art News* noted how

²⁸⁸ Louchheim, "Who Buys What," 12, 13, 14, 24. The article explicitly mentions Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption.

²⁸⁹ The new taste for modern art was due, according to the article, to a long education campaign on the part of museums and the Federal Art Project. The new collectors now had money to spend on art for a variety of reasons; the article emphasized in particular the surplus purchasing power produced by the twin factors of increased income and wartime shortage of consumer goods. For two different analyses of art collecting in New York at this time, and the middle class's involvement, see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 95-98; and Deirdre Robson, "The Avant-Garde and the On-Guard: Some Influences on the Potential Market for the First Generation Abstract Expressionists in the 1940s and Early 1950s," *Art Journal* 47.3 (1988): 215-221.

²⁹⁰ The growth in postwar housing is, of course, more complex than I have sketched it here. See Gwendolyn Wright, "The New Suburban Expansion and the American Dream," ch. 13 in *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge: MIT, 1983); and David Smiley, "Making the Modified Modern," *Perspecta* 32 (2001): 38-54.

²⁹¹ Smiley, "Making the Modified Modern."

These collectors, both new and old, fall into a pattern of persons buying art ‘to live with,’ not to store in closets or as ‘show horses.’ Some of them, as they acquire more important pictures, relegate less significant purchases to corridors and foyers, but almost all of them like their art around them and buy specifically for that purpose.

There is little ‘collecting’ in the abstract sense.²⁹²

Rather than building a comprehensive collection or selecting choice examples of new art trends, these buyers sought out art “to live with” and to have “around them.” The article went on to paint a picture of the new art’s various, and decidedly domestic, contexts:

“Into the varied kinds of houses and apartments in which such a public lives—into settings of fluorescent lamps and Aalto plywood, into homes furnished with mohair and Grand Rapids chairs, and into carefully planned period rooms—contemporary art has found its way.”²⁹³ Several dealers griped to *Art News* that interior decorators discouraged their clients from buying contemporary art.²⁹⁴ Other galleries, however, responded differently, using the alliance of decorative scheme and modern art to their advantage. Examining how they did so will allow us to better understand the place that Pollock’s second full-scale wall painting, *Mural on Indian Red Ground*, occupied in 1950.

Sam Kootz’s 1946 exhibition “Modern Paintings for a Country Estate: Important Paintings for Spacious Living” is exemplary of these gallery trends (**fig. 3.17**). A former textile converter and advertising man, Kootz was already known to the art world for his books and reviews by the time he opened his New York gallery in 1945. The 1946

²⁹² Aline B. Louchheim, “Second Season of the Picture Boom,” *Art News* 44.10 (August 1-31, 1945): 9-11, 26; 10.

²⁹³ Louchheim, “Second Season,” 10.

²⁹⁴ Louchheim, “Who Buys What,” 24.

exhibition is indicative of Kootz's marketing savvy: it gathered diverse artistic styles, from the colorful, representational modernism of Carl Holty and Romare Bearden to the various abstractions of William Baziotis and Robert Motherwell, under a single rubric. That rubric, moreover, was explicitly designed around the consumer: the prospective buyer, with ample enough means (or at least aspirations) for a "country estate," now in search of "important" painting with which to fill it. In the words of one reviewer, "The title '...for a Country Estate' refers to the size (i.e. very big) of the paintings rather than to any specific, decorative formula or preconception."²⁹⁵

Kootz's exhibition is one of the first times that the growing scale of postwar painting was linked to the home. This development is often overlooked in histories that locate the postwar canvas's expansion firmly in the white cubes of the museum or gallery. If larger walls and rooms were needed for the paintings Kootz's artists were now producing, spaciousness itself was also acquiring its own cultural significance. As Sandy Isenstadt has demonstrated, "spaciousness" became an increasingly desirable element in middle-class housing over the interwar and postwar years, "a powerful form of upward mobility couched in aesthetic terms."²⁹⁶ For Isenstadt, this development revolves in particular around the view, and the ability to bring the "perceptual surplus" of the landscape vista into the house through the picture window and other forms of glazing (**fig. 3.18**).²⁹⁷ The desire for "spacious living," as Kootz cleverly deemed it, extended into

²⁹⁵ "Two Group Exhibits," *Art News* 45.4 (June 1946): 68.

²⁹⁶ Sandy Isenstadt, *The Modern American House: Spaciousness and Middle-Class Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 57.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

the interior of the house, as well, where it could signify everything from modern architecture's open plan to the upper-class status of truly spacious "estates."

Kootz was not the only gallerist to organize his exhibitions around a prospective buyer who was also a home-dweller. If the blurring of fine art and design objects had been underway for some time now at museums, the 1940s saw the arrival of several commercial galleries that linked these fields within the domain of the house in particular. The most successful was the Bertha Schaefer Gallery, which opened in 1944 with a show featuring "contemporary paintings in [a] home setting"—the "first of a series of exhibitions," its brochure claimed, "emphasizing the use of paintings in interior design."²⁹⁸ Schaefer had trained as an interior designer, and her business, Bertha Schaefer Interiors, had operated for several years in New York before she opened her gallery. Three years later, the gallery launched what would become an annual show, "The Modern House Comes Alive," which featured modern houses—presented through "sketches, blueprints, and, in some cases, scale models with landscaping"—along with objects that would complete the interiors—including "color schemes, furniture, fabrics, paintings, sculpture, ceramics and lighting effects [...] for each house" (**fig. 3.19**).²⁹⁹ The array of artists and designers was diverse, but skewed toward modernism; the 1948-49 edition, for example, featured houses by Edward Stone and Reisner & Urbahn; paintings by Marsden Hartley, Lee Krasner, and Alfred Maurer; furniture by Wharton Esherick and

²⁹⁸ "Contemporary Paintings in Home Setting," display ad, *New York Times*, October 15, 1944, X8; "Bertha Schaefer. Interiors, Paintings," exhibition brochure, AAA, Bertha Schaefer Papers and Gallery Records (hereafter BSP), microfilm reel 2129. See also "Exhibition List, 1944-1945," AAA, BSP, reel 2129.

²⁹⁹ Mary Roche, "Exhibit of Homes Will Open Today," *New York Times*, September 18, 1947, 30.

Jens Risom; and sculpture and weavings by Michael Lekakis, Wolfgang Behl, Grete Franke, and Emily Belding.³⁰⁰

In the exhibitions, Schaefer used color to create coherent, beautiful rooms: “The color schemes are tied in with the color themes of the paintings,” a *New York Times* review explained, “and the colors of one area flow into those of the next by scarcely perceptible transitions.” The “yellow and gray” of a dining room, for example, was repeated in the adjacent “informal sitting room,” but with the addition of “cerise, introduced in a Henry Moore print. In the living room the yellow is dropped, but the addition of shades of orchid and mulberry draw the eye to a Siv Holme painting in similar tones above a cerise sofa.”³⁰¹ In these displays, both furniture and artwork were subordinated to the overriding, color-based aesthetic. A week after the *Times* waxed poetic about the show’s color schemes, it ran a longer piece for its Sunday Magazine edition, titled “Background for Living,” in which the reviewer attempted to pin down “the essential ingredient of a modern house.” That ingredient was not to be found in any of the particular features of modernism, she insisted:

Not a flat roof, nor a window wall, nor an open plan—as any modern architect will tell you. Not an outdoor living room nor an indoor built-in garden, as any landscape designer will likewise admit. Neither is it an array of Charles Eames’ chairs, a Picasso on the wall, or a mobile by Calder hung from the ceiling. You may find all of these things in a modern house, or none of them. The real essential, according to the most

³⁰⁰ “The Modern House Comes Alive 1948-49,” exhibition brochure, AAA, BSP, reel 2129.

³⁰¹ Roche, “Exhibit of Homes.”

ardent contemporary designers, is the coordination of all creative efforts to achieve what the modern house really stands for—a more satisfying background for living.³⁰² Schaefer's color-coordinated ensembles of sofas, paintings, and sculpture would not just furnish the home; they would elevate modern living by serving as its “satisfying background.”

That the realization of such a backdrop depended on the “coordination of [...] creative efforts” was an increasingly common trope in the 1940s. In a review of a show at Mortimer Levitt—another midcentury gallery that focused on the blending of fine art and design—art critic Aline B. Louchheim explained that the exhibited “rooms [and] buildings [have not] been ‘built around’ an art object, nor do the fine arts act as decorative appliqué. Rather, the work of painters, sculptors and mosaicists seems to have a meaningful and at times irrevocable relation with the structures themselves.”³⁰³ Throughout the decade, critics like Louchheim emphasized the importance of “irrevocable” relationships between art, architecture, and design, and the necessity of collaboration for achieving them. For one edition of Schaefer's “The Modern House Comes Alive,” architect Peter Blake wrote a short essay entitled “The Interrelated Arts” that declared, “Obviously we do not mean to keep out the other arts, or to use them as mere decorative accents.” But, he added, “the crux, the absolutely essential basis of collaboration, must always be its deliberateness.” For Blake, the “interrelation” of the arts in the modern home assumed an almost moral significance, a way to maintain

³⁰² Mary Roche, “Background for Living,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1947, SM38.

³⁰³ Aline B. Louchheim, “Arts Integrated in Levitt Display,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1948, 10.

architectural integrity and order against “Victorian chaos” and “anarchy.”³⁰⁴ In part, this rhetoric is quite familiar: the muralists of the 1930s also desired collaboration and “interrelation” among the elements of an interior. But we can also detect a newly negative connotation to the word “decorative,” which, for Louchheim and Blake, has come to mean that which is inessential and even trivial to the greater design.

Nothing speaks more compellingly to the arrival in the art world of the modern home—a space of perceptual pleasure, good design, and sophisticated taste—than the “House in the Museum Garden” exhibition at MoMA in 1949. Organized by the museum’s Department of Architecture and Industrial Design, the exhibition brought a full-scale, one-family house, designed by Marcel Breuer, to the museum’s sculpture garden (**fig. 3.20**). The house’s tenure at MoMA, where it welcomed visitors into its living and bedrooms over the course of the summer, testifies to modern architecture’s move away from the “minimum house” as a central concern, and toward, in its place, the middle-class suburban home.³⁰⁵ Estimates for construction cost were included in the Museum bulletin, based on rates in New York’s various suburbs.³⁰⁶ As in the rhetoric around the Kootz exhibition, a prime concern was “spaciousness,” which the Museum bulletin linked explicitly to modernism: “while the interior [...] can [...] be clearly subdivided into different zones of privacy and activity, the house as a whole never loses the

³⁰⁴ Peter Blake, “The Interrelated Arts,” in “The Modern House Comes Alive 1948-49,” exhibition brochure, AAA, BSP, reel 2129.

³⁰⁵ MoMA was explicit about this change in architectural direction. “The House in the Museum Garden,” its bulletin noted, “is not a minimum house. It is a custom-built, architect-designed solution for a middle-income family” in which the man “works in a large city and commutes to a so-called ‘dormitory town’ on its outskirts where he lives with his family” (Peter Blake, “The House in the Museum Garden,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, 16.1 [1949]: n.p.).

³⁰⁶ The version shown in the Museum Garden, with three bedrooms, was estimated at \$27,475 for construction; other versions, with fewer bedrooms and different materials, ranged from \$19,975 to \$25,110.

sense of spaciousness and lightness characteristic of the best in modern architecture.”

Breuer achieved such spaciousness through extensive windows, integrating the outdoors into the living areas, and the striking “butterfly” roof that sloped upwards in two directions from the house’s center. Fittingly for a museum display—and for the prevailing interest in integrating fine art and the domestic interior—the house also included artwork by Hans Arp and Alexander Calder that the bulletin deemed “experiments in relating sculpture and architecture.”³⁰⁷

The modern home, in short, was not only elevated as a space for displaying and viewing modern art; it was also, increasingly, encountered in the same commercial and institutional spaces as fine-art objects. Blueprints, small-scale models, and life-size displays could all be used to put the house itself on exhibit. As presented or implied at Bertha Schaefer, Sam Kootz, and MoMA, the house interior was subsumed under a general logic of aesthetic arrangement, one in which a table lamp, the spaciousness of an open plan, and a modern painting carried equal value.

Pollock’s *Mural on Indian Red Ground* (1950), commissioned for a modernist house by Breuer in suburban Long Island, belongs to this context of modern art for the domestic interior (**fig. 3.21–3.22**).³⁰⁸ Pollock had been seeking mural commissions since the project for Guggenheim, writing in a 1947 fellowship application of his desire “to paint large movable pictures which will function between the easel and mural.” “I believe,” he famously declared, that “the tendency of modern feeling is towards the wall

³⁰⁷ Blake, “The House in the Museum Garden,” n.p.

³⁰⁸ I wish to thank Joseph Geller, who grew up in the Lawrence, Long Island house with the mural, and Tetsuya Oshima, Associate Professor at the Graduate School of Integrated Arts and Sciences, Hiroshima University, for helping me to understand the mural’s original installation and current condition. I also thank Emily Smith for discussing this painting with me and encouraging me to see it in new ways.

picture or mural.”³⁰⁹ Yet convincing patrons to support this modern “tendency” proved difficult. He did not win the fellowship competition, and, despite “persistent talk of mural commissions” in the late 1940s, no further projects materialized.³¹⁰ In the end, Pollock was able to secure his second and final mural commission through the architectural angle of his fall 1949 exhibition. The exhibition was Pollock’s third at the Betty Parsons Gallery, which took him on after Guggenheim’s departure for Europe. Installed by friend and architect Peter Blake, the exhibition emphasized the architectural and spatial dimensions of Pollock’s large drip paintings, which had debuted a year and a half earlier, and which were here presented under the title “Paintings 1949: Murals in Modern Architecture.” In addition to the paintings themselves, Blake designed an architectural model for what he termed an “Ideal Museum” of Pollock’s art (discussed at length below). Blake invited Breuer to see the exhibition and the elder architect, impressed by Pollock’s work, facilitated a mural commission for a house he had recently designed, the Bertram and Phyllis Geller House in Lawrence, Long Island (**fig. 3.23**).

The Gellers represented a different kind of patron from Peggy Guggenheim, and their home a different kind of domestic space from the New York townhouse. Although the Gellers had a long history of valuing modern art and architecture—Geller’s father, Andrew Geller, had hired William Lescaze to design one of his shoe store interiors in the 1920s—they were not participants in a burgeoning avant-garde culture the way that Guggenheim was. For their house in Lawrence, built between 1944 and 1947, Breuer designed a binuclear structure with a slanted, butterfly roof, prefiguring his “House in the

³⁰⁹ Jackson Pollock, “Application for a Guggenheim Fellowship” [1947], reprinted in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau, 135 (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2005).

³¹⁰ Naifeh and Smith, 613.

Museum Garden” project of a few years later. The binuclear design separated daytime and nighttime activities, or public and private ones, into two wings: the northeast wing contained the living and dining rooms for family life and entertaining, while the southwest wing held the private quarters like bedrooms and a children’s playroom. The main entrance led into a hallway at the center of the bifurcated design, and extensive glass walls and a porch integrated inside and outside.

Unlike its predecessor for Guggenheim, *Mural on Indian Red Ground* sat at the heart of the house, in the middle of the northeast wing that served as the Gellers’ living space. Installed on the back of a large birch bookcase designed by Breuer, the work effectively formed one of the walls of the Geller dining room.³¹¹ The freestanding bookcase played a crucial function in the house, separating the living and dining rooms in the northeast wing: on one side, the bookcase’s shelves faced into the living room, with its desk, couch, chairs, and fireplace (**fig. 3.24**); on the other, its birch plywood back (soon to be clad with the Pollock mural) faced the dining table and chairs (**fig. 3.25–3.26**). When installed, Pollock’s rust-red painting with its black, white, yellow, and green drips thus formed one lush surface in a larger circuit of them around the dining room, along with the cabinetry, the sheen of natural wood, and the glazed view of the Long Island landscape outside—or, periodically, the gauzy fabric of translucent sliding curtains that obscured it.

³¹¹ The bookcase was fabricated by Irving and Casson, a Cambridge-based manufacturer with a New York office. For the bookcase cost and materials, see Marcel Breuer to Irving and Casson, July 19 and 25, 1945, Marcel Breuer Digital Archive, Syracuse University Libraries. My thanks to George Marcus for sharing his extensive knowledge of Breuer’s furniture and interiors with me.

Pollock's development of the drip technique gave him a new leverage on the spatial and textural dynamics of mural painting. Even more so than the repeating rhythm of loops in the Guggenheim mural, the drip canvases of 1947 and after seemed to go on forever. As Pollock commented in a 1950 *New Yorker* profile, "There was a reviewer a while back who wrote that my pictures didn't have any beginning or any end. He didn't mean it as a compliment, but it was."³¹² If the implied expansion of the Guggenheim mural was primarily lateral—out as far as the horizontal stretch of hallway would allow—the drip paintings seemed to extend in all directions, with no obvious markers of up or down. Such facts occasioned a renewed bout of charges of decoration. Greenberg, praising the new work of 1948, attempted to forestall such criticisms, writing, "I already hear: 'wallpaper patterns.'"³¹³ Indeed, in a roundtable at MoMA, published in *Life* magazine later that year, Aldous Huxley commented on the drip work *Cathedral* (1947; **fig. 3.27**) that it "raises the question of why it stops when it does. [...] It seems to me like a panel for a wallpaper which is repeated indefinitely around the wall." Sir Leigh Ashton, of the Victoria and Albert, was even less kind, noting that *Cathedral* "would make a most enchanting printed silk."³¹⁴

If the drip paintings could, in theory, be extended forever, in practice Pollock experimented with various strategies for meeting the canvas's borders. *Cathedral*, for one, pushed its tangle of drips up to and over the canvas edge, maintaining a largely consistent density throughout the painting. By contrast, in *Mural on Indian Red Ground*,

³¹² Roueche, "Unframed Space," 16.

³¹³ Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions by Worden Day, Carl Holty, and Jackson Pollock" [1948], in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 201.

³¹⁴ Quoted in Russell W. Davenport and Winthrop Sargeant, "A *Life* Round Table on Modern Art," *Life* (October 11, 1948): 56-70, 75-79; 62.

the paint drips are concentrated in a roughly rectangular area within the canvas. Inside this rectangle, the pours are more or less evenly distributed, congealing around several different nodes; outside, the drips thin out, leaving a three-to-nine-inch border, like a rust-red halo, around the central area of paint. The border is not absolute: several thin and thick pours traverse it all the way to the edge. But it does succeed in setting off the main area of painterly activity. Furthermore, the areas of color—the patches of yellow, sea-green, and silver—along with the long zigzags of black, mostly occur within this central area. More than endless wallpaper, *Mural on Indian Red Ground* suggests a wall hanging or window, visual material with its own frame for organizing its interior. Yet it does not completely lose its suggestions of endlessness, either. Both the pours that sneak across the border, and the facture itself—the work’s endlessly iterative drips—imply repetition. The mural’s attitude toward space is both discrete and coextensive: it seems to seal itself off from and also knit itself into the surrounding world.

How would such spatial thematics have played out in the Gellers’ dining room? No photographs of the mural *in situ* have been found, but we can reconstruct its installation from firsthand recollections, recent photographs of the painting’s support, and the plan and photographs of the Geller house.³¹⁵ Around March 1950, Lee Krasner wrote to a friend that “Jackson has finished his mural (beautiful) & after a long drying period we shall cope with installation.”³¹⁶ The painter and furniture-maker Giorgio Cavallon,

³¹⁵ I have not inspected the painting (currently in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art) in person. My understanding of its installation at the Geller House is based on recent photographs by Tetsuya Oshima, my interview with Joseph Geller (March 15, 2017), and various published accounts by Peter Blake, Naifeh and Smith, Jeffrey Potter, and Caroline Zaleski.

³¹⁶ Lee Krasner to Alfonso Ossorio and Ted Dragon, ca. March 1950, in *JPCR*, vol. 4, no. D83.

possibly by himself or possibly with Pollock, installed the work in July of that year.³¹⁷

The canvas was stretched over a large, 72-by-96-inch birch plywood, its sides folded over and around the board's thin edges (**fig. 3.28**). The backing was then reattached to the bookcase (likely glued to the birch shelves), giving the mural the appearance of being a solid and integral part of the structure, as built-in as the cabinets at the other end of the dining room. There was no frame around *Mural*, which would have floated like a standing block of color, surrounded by open space on all four sides: above, several feet stretched between the mural's top edge and the angled ceiling, while below, the mural rested, with the rest of the bookcase, on three stone feet, raised several inches above the ground (**fig. 3.29**).

This installation would have both emphasized and undermined *Mural*'s autonomous status. On the one hand, *Mural* was given solidity—standing erect in the middle of the room—as well as sufficient space to be viewed. On the other hand, *Mural* was almost wholly identified with the wooden bookcase, a fact that reduced it to functional ends. *Mural* became a wall like other walls: the Gellers would have eaten in front of it, and walked around it to get to the living room. One of the Geller children recalled many years later that they used to “prop bikes and sports gear up against the painting during the daytime.”³¹⁸ Even more troubling for an artist like Pollock, the mural

³¹⁷ The catalogue raisonné states that Pollock and Cavallon installed the work together; see *JPCR*, vol. 2, no. 259. Naifeh and Smith, presumably on the basis of an interview with Giorgio Cavallon, state that Pollock was not involved in the installation; see Naifeh and Smith, 606-7. Joseph Geller, who was nine when the mural arrived, remembers Pollock examining the work in a storage room off the garage before it was installed, but he also acknowledges that Pollock may not have been equipped for the task of installation (interview with author, March 15, 2017).

³¹⁸ Michael Geller, 2005, quoted in Caroline Rob Zaleski, *Long Island Modernism: 1930-1980* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 77.

could be seen as reduced to decorative ends, less a painting than a swath of colorful variety enlivening a standing wooden slab. The work's role as decoration is borne out by several factors, including that the Gellers specifically requested the mural's rust-red color.³¹⁹ Along with the dimensions, this was the only request from the patrons, and it allowed the work to resonate with the interior palette that Breuer had designed. Breuer emphasized the color and surface texture of natural materials throughout the house, in the living room's stone fireplace, the flagstone flooring of the hallway and patio, and the birch wood furniture. Indeed, *Mural on Indian Red Ground* may have functioned, visually, as a reduced version of the stone fireplace several feet behind it in the living room, a parallel plane which likewise stretched horizontally across the room and imparted textural variety to the space.

The resulting color and spatial harmony—layered pours echoing rough stone or wood grain; rust-red paint flush against natural wood—betrays a different attitude to the architectural whole than we saw in the Guggenheim mural. The mural for the New York City vestibule was deeply integrated into its surround, but maintained an explosive, even antagonistic relationship to its space. The Geller mural, by contrast, sought harmony and coherence. What is more, the use of red here was precisely the logic on display at galleries like Bertha Schaefer, where modern painting, like the furniture and upholstery arrayed around it, was chosen for its ability to function within a larger visual symphony. Commissioned for the Geller house, *Mural* was made to match it. Like the Henry Moore

³¹⁹ This fact was remembered later by several figures, including Lee Krasner and Joseph Geller. According to Krasner, the Gellers requested that the red ground be the same as that used for *Number 2, 1949* and *Number 13A, 1948: Arabesque* (JPCR, vol. 2, no. 259). Breuer would have seen *Number 2, 1949* at the fall 1949 show to which Peter Blake invited him.

print at Schaefer introducing a hint of cerise into the sitting room—and playing off the cerise sofa nearby—*Mural* worked with the house and furniture to create a sophisticated and satisfying “background for living.”

The dining room ensemble that *Mural on Indian Red Ground* helped forge lasted less than a decade; the Gellers commissioned a new Long Island house by Breuer in 1955, and sold the Pollock mural a few years later. In that time, it served as a dominating presence in the house, occupying two-thirds of the width of the dining room, and standing only three to five feet from the closest dining room chair.³²⁰ It was, perhaps, too dominating: Phyllis Geller disliked it, although Bertram Geller remained an admirer of the artist’s work.³²¹ For all its attempts at coloristic and textural integration with the space, *Mural on Indian Red Ground* remained a large and loud surface at the very center of the house’s life. If the placement of art in the home always involves trade-offs between aesthetics and livability, large murals like Pollock’s—made for particular locations and not easily dislodged—could be especially difficult. Breuer seems to have solved this dilemma, in future projects, by moving the mural outside. At the Stillman House (1950-53) and the Gagarin House (1956-57), giant murals by Alexander Calder and Costantino Nivola stand on the grounds, limning the edge of a pool or projecting from the edifice’s main mass at a ninety-degree angle (**fig. 3.30–3.31**).³²² Such murals take the premise of

³²⁰ The bookcase stands about five feet from the dining table in the house’s plan. However, the table was for at least a period rotated ninety degrees, as we can see in a photograph of the dining room from 1945, which would have brought it two feet closer to the bookcase behind it.

³²¹ Giorgio Cavallon, quoted in Naifeh and Smith, 607; author interview with Joseph Geller, March 15, 2017.

³²² The murals by Calder and Nivola are examples of the many abstract murals that flourished at suburban homes and beach houses across Long Island in the 1950s and 1960s, and which constitute a rich vein for further study. In contrast to Pollock’s mural at the Geller House, many of these murals were in geometric or

the Geller mural—a freestanding wall of abstraction—and set it free in the larger arena of outdoor space, away from the high-use areas and changing needs of the interior. Another solution, though hardly a practical one, was to exile the inhabitants rather than the murals. Peter Blake and Pollock attempted just such a solution in 1949. Their unbuilt collaboration on an Ideal Museum utilized the visual and decorative codes of the suburban home, but without its quotidian requirements.

Postwar Pastoral: Peter Blake’s “Ideal Museum for Jackson Pollock Paintings” (1949)

By the time he installed Pollock’s fall 1949 show at Parsons, Peter Blake had made several forays into the blending of art and architecture. It was Blake who had written on “The Interrelated Arts” for Bertha Schaefer’s Modern House show of 1948-49, and, as curator in MoMA’s Architecture and Industrial Design department, he had written the bulletin for Marcel Breuer’s House in the Museum Garden exhibition. Deeply impressed by the scale and the feeling of spaciousness in Pollock’s art, which he first saw in 1948, Blake conceived of a utopian project that would emphasize these features, “a large, somewhat abstract ‘exhibit’ of [Pollock’s] work—a kind of ‘Ideal Museum’ in which his paintings were suspended between the earth and the sky, and set between mirrored walls so as to extend into infinity.”³²³ Debuting as a four-by-two-foot model at the 1949 show, Blake’s “Ideal Museum for Jackson Pollock Paintings” reimagined the drip canvases as

biomorphic abstract styles, and were painted by European artists and architects, including Corbusier, Léger, Nivola, and Xanti Schawinsky.

³²³ Peter Blake, *No Place Like Utopia: Modern Architecture and the Company We Kept* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 111.

freestanding walls in a glass-sheathed pavilion, stretching from floor to ceiling and dividing up the internal space of the structure.³²⁴

Photographs of the 1949 exhibition show Pollock and Blake bending over the model to peer at its reflective roof and the small murals and sculptures within (**fig. 3.32–3.33**). The delight in scalar difference would have been compounded by the resonance between the miniature murals and the full-size paintings installed on the gallery's walls, which echoed their poured surfaces. We get a clearer sense of the model's arrangement through images published a few months later, in a brief article by Arthur Drexler in *Interiors* magazine (**fig. 3.34**).³²⁵ As the plan makes evident, Blake has organized eight standing walls around the interior, all but one of which host a Pollock mural; two of the walls sport reflective mirrors, and the central wall holds two Pollocks, one on each face. Further structures include benches; a light well behind one of the walls; a semicircular screen; and three plaster-dipped wire sculptures, specially created by Pollock for the model. The structure is clearly in dialogue with the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose Barcelona Pavilion (1929), Tugendhat House (1930), and, especially, Museum for a Small City project (1942) similarly use freestanding walls in an open plan to create a fluid sense of space. The original model was destroyed sometime in the 1950s, but Blake

³²⁴ On the Ideal Museum, see Eric Lum, "Pollock's Promise: Toward an Abstract Expressionist Architecture," *Assemblage* 39 (1999): 63–93; Elizabeth Langhorne, "Pollock's Dream of a Biocentric Art: The Challenge of His and Peter Blake's Ideal Museum," in *Biocentrism and Modernism*, eds. Oliver A.I. Botar and Isa Wünsche, 227–38 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); and Helen A. Harrison, "Pollock: Blake's 1949 Museum Design," *Art & Architecture Quarterly* (June 2013), online at <http://www.aaqeastend.com/contents/retrospective/issue-1-retrospective/blakes-1949-pollock-museum-design/>. Short but perceptive discussions of the project from an architectural perspective can also be found in Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: Monacelli, 2006), 130–32 and Alastair Gordon, *Weekend Utopia: Modern Living in the Hamptons* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 47–48.

³²⁵ Arthur Drexler, "Unframed space; a museum for Jackson Pollack's [sic] paintings," *Interiors* 109.6 (January 1950): 90–91.

made a second version, in coordination with the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, in 1995 (**fig. 3.35–3.36**). Although this later model exhibits subtle but important differences from the original, it allows contemporary viewers to see a version of the structure in color, in three dimensions, and posed in its intended environment, the space behind Pollock’s house and studio.

Transforming Pollock’s paintings into walls, and setting them within a glass pavilion, allowed Blake to realize what he called a “dream of endless, infinite space in motion.”³²⁶ Blake detected this approach to space not only in modern architecture (“I had a sense,” he writes in one memoir, “of Jackson’s painting being an extraordinarily transparent image, which was very similar to the kind of spatial transparency that architects like Mies and Frank Lloyd Wright were struggling with”³²⁷), but also in the expansive reflections of older spaces, from the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles to Charles Barry’s London Reform Club of 1830, with its “infinite reflection” of facing mirrors.³²⁸ Crucially, Blake also detected it in the landscape of Springs, Long Island, where Pollock lived and worked, and where Blake envisioned the Ideal Museum being located:

when I was working on the model Jackson asked where we were going to build the museum. I said, “Frankly, I think it should be in that landscape behind your house. That’s where all your painting comes from, that landscape.” I was so taken by that view back there with the inlet; and Jackson’s paintings were now enormous—

³²⁶ Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 114.

³²⁷ Peter Blake, “Unframed Space: Working with Pollock on the ‘Ideal Museum,’” *North Atlantic Review* 10 (1998): 29–32; 30.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

eighteen feet by twenty feet, some of them—so expansive, like everything about America.³²⁹

As is evident from Blake's words, the Ideal Museum sits at the intersection of a number of concerns, from muralism and abstract painting to spaciousness, nature, and the landscape view.

The allusions to landscape are everywhere in Blake's project. *The Key*, a Pollock painting from 1946, is the most literal of these: set at the dead center of the model, it depicts a colorful, abstract scene centered on the Accabonac Creek, which ran behind Pollock's house and studio (**fig. 3.37**). The other Pollocks that Blake included—they were sourced from existing exhibition catalogues and magazine articles, and glued to standing supports—tended to suggest landscape in more oblique ways. On the other side of the *The Key*, for example, Blake positioned *Alchemy*, a richly layered pour painting from 1947 (**fig. 3.38**). With its grey ground and interlacing of black, red, orange, yellow, and white drips, the work approximates the motile, shimmering qualities of the natural world, like the play of sun and shadow on water or grass. A similarly motile surface, though more open and lyrical, is added with the inclusion of *Number 1A, 1948*. Indeed, it was the “shimmering” and “luminous” quality of the drip paintings that stood at the heart of Blake's understanding of Pollock, and that ultimately underlie the Ideal Museum project. Blake recounts his first, epiphanic experience visiting Pollock's studio in all of his memoirs, and the adjectives are always the same: the studio is “shining” and light-

³²⁹ Peter Blake, quoted in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, 109.

filled, and the paintings “dazzling,” “luminous,” “translucent,” “shimmering in the sun.”³³⁰ “Going into the studio,” he recalls

was like walking into a palace—it was just glistening with radiant and dazzling colors. And the landscape that you can still see behind the house was very much a part of the paintings. It was almost as impressive and almost as overwhelming as the paintings themselves.³³¹

For Blake, then, Pollock’s canvases instantiated a range of sensorial and phenomenological effects encountered in the natural world. This is due, in part, to their size and emphatic horizontality: Blake notes that the canvases are “clearly the work of someone who understood light and space, and the transparency of the wide, horizontal landscape of the inlets just beyond the little shack.”³³² But it is also due to those visual qualities that have often been noted in Pollock’s poured paintings, their simultaneously particulate and atmospheric effect. Like trees or water in the sun, they “shimmer”; like atmosphere or weather, they obscure and soften our sense of depth. “To look at some of his paintings, to me,” Blake writes, “was like sitting on a dune for hours on end and looking out to sea, at the endless horizon and the shifting waves and clouds and banks of fog.”³³³ In setting the paintings in the transparent structure, and the structure in the open field behind the house and studio, Blake hoped to create material articulations of the ephemeral landscape effects all around them. “[S]uspended between the earth and the

³³⁰ Blake, quoted in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, 94; Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 110.

³³¹ Blake, “Unframed Space,” 29.

³³² Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 111.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 114.

sky,”³³⁴ the murals would act as concrete panels that condensed the expanse of the natural world into their discrete borders, and floated within that same natural world as its continuing analogies.

These effects become clearer when we compare Blake’s museum to its nearest predecessor, Mies’s Museum for a Small City (**fig. 3.39**).³³⁵ Published in the pages of *Architectural Forum*, Mies’s project was part of the journal’s wartime re-envisioning of the postwar city and the civic institutions that would make up its core. Mies’s museum utilizes interior walls in a manner akin to his Barcelona Pavilion, much as Blake’s will do seven years later. It also, like Blake’s, includes artwork: the dominating *Guernica* by Picasso, erected as a freestanding wall, and two sculptures by Aristide Maillol. Mies evokes the natural world around the museum—a key factor in the artworks’ “spatial freedom,” allowing “them to be seen against the surrounding hills”—through collaged strips of foliage and water.³³⁶ Yet unlike in the Ideal Museum, the artworks in Mies’s structure maintain a relationship of contrast to the landscape. Where the foliage is bristling and infinite, *Guernica* is boldly delineated; where the water shimmers and crawls, Maillol cuts a stony profile. Blake’s impulse, on the other hand, is one of integration, not contrast: Pollock’s murals suggest not a separate domain of culture, but a rematerialization of nature itself, and the wire sculptures, with their loops and twists, actively incorporate the surrounding views of painting and nature into their very

³³⁴ Ibid., 111.

³³⁵ On Mies’s project, see Neil Levine, “‘The Significance of Facts’: Mies’s Collages up Close and Personal,” *Assemblage* 37 (1998): 71–101; and Martino Stierli, “Mies Montage,” *AA Files* 61 (2010): 54–72.

³³⁶ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “New Buildings for 194X: Museum,” *Architectural Forum* 78.5 (1943): 83–4; 84.

structure. This integration of painted murals and natural views borders, at times, on full dissolution. Blake writes of having the paintings “under a floating roof with space going through them almost”; he wanted to “see the landscape almost penetrate the paintings, to have a kind of translucent exhibit in which the paintings and the landscape would merge.”³³⁷

The Ideal Museum’s radical intervention lies not only in making paintings into walls—in creating a space where “the painting *is* the architecture,” to quote Drexler’s article³³⁸—but in dissolving those walls into views, in making a series of equivalences between painting, wall, and natural vista. Several paintings are installed not as walls, but in ways that recall glazing: *Summertime: Number 9A* (1948), placed on one side of the light-well, extends like a ribbon window, while *Gothic* (1944) hangs on its support like a window puncturing the wall (**fig. 3.35**). *Number 10, 1949* serves as both space-divider and window-like ribbon, depending on its orientation: in one photograph, it is positioned as a low screen on two legs, while in another it is rotated to sit flush against the structure’s perimeter (see **fig. 3.34**). If the proportions and orientations of these murals suggest window views—their painted interiors like abstracted slices of nature—they also frame and slice the views around them. Pockets of space congeal between the rectilinear edges of the painted panels, presenting excerpts of grass and sky to the viewer (**fig. 3.36**).

³³⁷ Blake, quoted in Potter, *To a Violent Grave*, 104; Blake, “Unframed Space,” 30. The idea of merging landscape and painting is evident as well in Pollock’s *Number 29, 1950*, painted on glass. As Blake recalls, “On another occasion, Jackson and I discussed the possibility of painting on tempered glass so as to make the paint seem suspended in space, with views of the landscape through the painting’s surface and beyond” (Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 118).

³³⁸ Drexler, “Unframed space,” 90.

In this way, the Ideal Museum is a more radical and far-reaching version of the equivalences implied in Pollock's mural in the Geller House, which resonated with other textured surfaces (fieldstone hearth, wooden cabinets) and with the views outside. It is also a more dynamic version: in the Ideal Museum, the central aesthetic device is the seeming transformation from view to painted wall and back, which Blake engineers through the interweaving of painted and landscape views alongside each other, and through the use of mirrors that continually make the putative viewer question which is which. The oscillation between painting and view is apparent in an idea Blake toyed with for another project, his 1954 Pinwheel House in Water Mill, Long Island (**fig. 3.40**). The outside walls of the house were moveable sections that could slide outward, alternately closing the interior up like a box, or opening it to the beachside environment, and Blake had initially wanted to "mount four great big paintings" by Pollock on the sliding walls. This would create a ring of Pollocks when the house was closed, and, when open, exchange the painted environment for a natural one, while leaving the paintings themselves "suspended in the landscape."³³⁹ It is the same substitution of painting for view, and back again, that is at work in the Ideal Museum.

Some scholars have seen in this equivalence of painting and view a "biocentric" modernism, with Blake proposing a Nietzsche-inspired merging of the human subject with the natural world.³⁴⁰ But we should remember the particular social location of nature and spaciousness at midcentury. Isenstadt reminds us that the equivalence that Blake so radically exploited in the Ideal Museum was long underway by 1949. "Art and view have

³³⁹ Blake, "Unframed Space," 32.

³⁴⁰ Langhorne, "Pollock's Dream of a Biocentric Art."

common cause in creating visual diversity and diversion from a room's dimensions," he writes, "and they have therefore long been intertwined."³⁴¹ If it "was a picturesque conceit to make a landscape look like a picture," he notes, "it was a commonplace in the mid-twentieth century to say that one was as good as the other."³⁴² The 1940s exhibitions of the home, from Bertha Schaefer to Breuer's House in the Museum Garden, emphasized the importance of the view through landscaping, window placement, and indoor-outdoor living; to quote Isenstadt once again, "Views [...] were subsumed within a concept of ornament," made equal in importance to "paintings, photomurals, and scenic wallpaper."³⁴³ To place the Ideal Museum in this context is not to minimize Blake's ingenuity, but to remind us that it served as a response to existing cultural desires.

Although nominally a museum, we should understand Blake's project within the broader ambit of the modern home. It was, after all, intended to sit behind the artist's house, and its design suggests a garden pavilion more than an art museum. Most importantly, we gain a better purchase on its themes of landscape, view, and space when we set it alongside examples like the Geller mural, the Pinwheel House, and the spacious "country estate" of Kootz's exhibition. In his study of Long Island modernism, Alastair Gordon demonstrates how the beach house represented a site of bourgeois freedom and leisure as early as the 1930s: "Perhaps it would not be in public housing," he writes, "but in the privately owned vacation house that [architectural] modernism would find its American identity." The Long Island houses of Percival Goodman and others represented

³⁴¹ Isenstadt, *The Modern American House*, 232.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 234.

“a different kind of utopian promise, not one that was designed for the masses, but for affluent individuals who could afford a weekend at the beach.”³⁴⁴ Blake’s Ideal Museum may have been a “dream of endless, infinite space in motion,” but it was also, like the beach houses in Gordon’s study, a dream of personal freedom achieved through the domestic values of spatial expanse and the natural vista.

The Guggenheim mural, the Geller mural, and Blake’s Ideal Museum constitute the three most concrete realizations of Pollock’s mural ambitions, but they were by no means the only projects he pursued. Although the artist’s 1947 Guggenheim application, in which he spoke of his desire “to paint large movable pictures which will function between the easel and mural,” was turned down, other mural opportunities seem to have appeared in 1949, for “a modern home,” and in 1951, as a collaboration with Reeves Lewenthal’s Associated American Artists.³⁴⁵ In the early 1950s, Pollock was in dialogue with architect and friend Tony Smith about murals painted on glass and installed as windows in the clerestory of a modern church Smith was designing.³⁴⁶ Pollock commented more than

³⁴⁴ Gordon, *Weekend Utopia*, 30.

³⁴⁵ On the 1949 project, see Stella Pollock to Frank Pollock, undated letter, postmarked June 26, 1949, in *JPCR*, vol. 4, no. D80; and Naifeh and Smith, 882. On the 1951 project, see Pollock to Alfonso Ossorio and Ted Dragon, June 7 and August 6, 1951, in *JPCR*, vol. 4, nos. D99 and D101. Some scholars have also suggested that Pollock was in touch with Charles and Ray Eames about murals for their Case Study Houses in California, although it is unclear what this is based on; see Naifeh and Smith, 613; and Eileen E. Costello, “Beyond the Easel: The Dissolution of Abstract Expressionist Painting into the Realm of Architecture” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2010), 118-19. Finally, as Ellen G. Landau and Claude Cernuschi have shown, one of Pollock’s paintings—the small *Prism* (1947)—was included in a room setting for Knoll’s 1950 furniture catalogue, most likely through the intervention of Pollock’s friend Herbert Matter. See Ellen G. Landau and Claude Cernuschi, eds. *Pollock Matters* (Boston and Chicago: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College and University of Chicago, 2007), 176.

³⁴⁶ I am following here the reading of this project by Costello, “Beyond the Easel,” 113-27. For different interpretations of this project—which posit not painted glass but rather a hexagonal room or enclosure in which six Pollock paintings served as walls—see E.A. Carmean, Jr., “The Church Project: Pollock’s

once in these years on “wall painting,” as both a personal interest and a general trend in contemporary art,³⁴⁷ and a letter from around this time shows him attempting to work out the logistics of mural commissions with his then-dealer, Betty Parsons.³⁴⁸ When he joined the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1952, the search for mural commissions continued, as a letter from Janis to Pollock—on a possible commission for a twenty-by-fifteen-foot mural for a department store in White Plains, NY—makes evident.³⁴⁹ Had the commission worked out, this would have marked Pollock’s first realized mural for a public, commercial site, and it would have put him in the company of several other Abstract Expressionists working in such contexts, as we will see in the next chapter.

Pollock’s ongoing search for mural commissions was part of a broader preoccupation with space and scale. These twin tropes constitute a central current in the literature on Pollock, and in exploring them scholars have turned to the murals discussed here, as well as to the expansive dimensions of so many of the postwar canvases, the play of surface and depth in the drip paintings at large, and Pollock’s attention to spatial dynamics in gallery installations, as in the famous 1950 exhibition at Parsons (**fig.**

Passion Themes” and Rosalind E. Krauss, “Contra Carmean: The Abstract Pollock,” *Art in America* 70.6 (Summer 1982): 110-22, 123-31, 155.

³⁴⁷ Pollock, 1950, in *JPCR*, vol. 4, nos. D87 and D95. That Pollock was interested in architecture generally and in “putting his work into architectural settings” (Carmean, “The Church Project,” 112) is also attested by several of his friends and acquaintances, including Betty Parsons (Francine du Plessix and Cleve Gray, “Who Was Jackson Pollock?”, interview with Betty Parsons, *Art in America* 55.3 [May-June 1967]: 55); Peter Blake; and Lee Krasner (cited in Carmean, “The Church Project,” 112, 122 n7).

³⁴⁸ Pollock to Betty Parsons, ca. 1948-52, in *JPCR*, vol. 4, no. D78: “Also I want to mention that I am going to try and get some mural commissions thru an agent where I will pay a commission and that I feel it would be unfair for me to pay *two* commissions. I feel it is important for me to broaden my possibilities in this line of development. But any painting shown in your gallery and mural commissions gotten by you—you will receive *your* commission. I hope you will find this satisfactory.—I feel it is the only hope for me to get out of my financial mess, and also to develope [sic] in this direction.”

³⁴⁹ Sidney Janis to Pollock, early 1954, transcribed in O’Connor, “A Note About Murals,” 53.

3.41).³⁵⁰ Yet as I hope has been made clear over the course of this chapter, space itself was not a neutral or empty category. During the years of Pollock's mural production, and in the various sites that his mural projects occupied, space and scale were pressed into service for a range of meanings. In 1943, Pollock's *Mural* for Guggenheim reached for the spatial parameters of monumental history painting, summoning the "Great and Heroic" tradition charted by Orozco and Picasso. It used the gravitas of scale to figure the dark and violent world of 1940s New York, while simultaneously resonating with another register, the decorative imperatives of an art patron's home. By the late 1940s, when Pollock's interest in murals seems to have been rekindled, both painterly scale in general and the mural itself had assumed a more prominent place in the art world. In 1947, MoMA presented "Large-Scale Modern Painting," a show of twentieth-century art of large dimensions, for which Guggenheim lent the Pollock mural from her foyer. Early the next year, Greenberg noted his hope for a new "genre of painting located halfway between the easel and the mural."³⁵¹ If such events helped confirm Pollock in his renewed desire to pursue murals and other large-scale work, the changed meanings of space and spaciousness in the modern home would prove no less crucial for his mural projects of 1949 and 1950. These changed meanings—inflected by modern architecture's open plan, the middle-class desire for spacious and indoor-outdoor living, and the decorative logic at galleries like Schaefer and Kootz—were what made the Geller mural

³⁵⁰ On these questions, see, for example, T.J. Clark, "Pollock's Smallness," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe, 15-31 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999); Clark, "Damned Busy Painting," in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, 809-14 (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2009); and Luke, "Painting in the Round."

³⁵¹ Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment" [1948], in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 195.

and the Ideal Museum legible and attractive to their essential collaborators—to the Gellers as patrons, and to Breuer and Blake as architects.

Part of the appeal of focusing on Pollock's murals, rather than on his large-scale work in general, lies precisely in the way it must take patrons and site into account—that is, the way in which it must move outside of Pollock's own interest in scale, which should constitute a part but by no means the whole of the story. These patrons and early viewers had their own ideas about how abstraction might function in the home. Guggenheim certainly shared something with Nelson Rockefeller in furnishing her vestibule: like the businessman turning to Léger for a stairwell design, Guggenheim sought the richness of abstract decoration, an intimate relationship with modern art, and the transformation of a threshold space that would announce the artistic connections of the dwelling's inhabitants. But the differences from the Rockefeller commission are no less important. Guggenheim, increasingly interested in contemporary American art, sought not just the pleasurable and sensuous play of paint for her foyer, but something explosive that “fit[...] in” with the wartime mood. In giving nearly twenty feet of unbroken wall over for the mural, she helped engineer a very different kind of domestic abstraction, one that utterly dominated its space and strained against its borders. Unlike the lyrical flow of Léger's stairwell mural, or, for that matter, the balanced series of frescoes above the mantels in the Frelinghuysen-Morris house, *Mural* was a confrontation, a colonization of space that squeezed the breathing room out of the hallway.

With the Geller commission in 1950, we are in a different set of parameters again. Painted rust-red to harmonize with the house's palette, *Mural on Indian Red Ground*

blends into its surroundings more than it protests against them. The architectural shell has been transformed, blasted open by Breuer's open plan and flows of space. In this interior, *Mural* assumes its own architectural weight, its attachment to the standing bookcase lending it a solidity that even the giant canvases in the Parsons installation do not attain. In the Ideal Museum model, Blake harnessed this architectural function and multiplied it, peppering the interior with freestanding murals. In making a series of equivalences between murals, mirrors, and views, Blake translated the pastoral values and perceptual codes of domestic suburban living into a wholly aesthetic realm. At the Geller home and the Ideal Museum, the spatial organization is geared to a very different kind of experience—casual, contemporary, decidedly un-aristocratic in its pretensions—than we saw at the Rockefeller apartment or even the Frelinghuysen-Morris house. Pollock's two mural projects at the end of the decade participate in a decorative scheme derived from the leisure approaches of the middle classes, one where space is open, colors harmonious, and landscape and view continually referenced.

At all of these sites, the murals maintain an ongoing, if ambivalent, attraction to the decorative, that category that Greenberg would later deem “the specter that haunts modernist painting.”³⁵² There is the “buoyant” way in which the mural for Guggenheim “composes the wall,” in Farber's phrasing, and the coloristic and textural resonances of the Geller and Ideal Museum murals with landscape views and interior surfaces. Pollock, like other artists of his generation, recoiled from the label of decorative, deeming it below the status of serious art. “The trouble is,” he told Blake at one point during their collaboration, “you think I'm a decorator”; “you think of me as somebody who does

³⁵² Greenberg, “Milton Avery” [1957], in *The Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 43.

wallpaper designs for your buildings.”³⁵³ Pollock’s murals for the home intersected with the decorative in at least two distinct ways. One was through their visual effects: their resolute abstraction and, in particular, their qualities of pattern and repetition. As we saw, the 1943 *Mural* unfurled a series of repeating motifs, black striding verticals with curling, almost vegetal, offshoots, each one echoing the form in front and in back of it. The drip paintings intensified this effect, ensconcing the repetitive unit at an even more molecular level, the drip itself. Such facture was enough, on its own, to call up the decorative, and long had been. The critics who likened *Cathedral* to an “enchanted printed silk” and “wallpaper” were only the latest examples in a decades-long critique of abstraction as a species of wallpaper or textile. In the nineteenth century, Claude Monet and James McNeil Whistler both earned the wallpaper rebuke, and warnings against neckties and carpets were common refrains in the writing on early twentieth-century abstraction.³⁵⁴ The designer Georg Muche made explicit the gendered connotations of such criticisms when he bemoaned how, “In the hands of the women weavers [of the Bauhaus], my alphabet of forms for abstract painting turned into fantasy...I promised myself that I would never...with my own hands weave a single thread.”³⁵⁵ Pollock, like Muche and Kandinsky before him, sought to protect the seriousness of abstraction against the trivialities of the feminine, the decorative, and the domestic.

³⁵³ Pollock quoted in Blake, *No Place Like Utopia*, 113; and in Blake, “Unframed Space,” 29.

³⁵⁴ On Monet and Whistler, see Elissa Aauther, “The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg,” *Oxford Art Journal* 27.3 (2004): 339–364; 349. Among early twentieth-century abstractionists, Wassily Kandinsky warns against pure abstraction becoming like “a necktie or a carpet” in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911); similarly, Paul Klee in 1912 insists that a Robert Delaunay painting is “A creation of plastic life [...] almost as remote from a carpet as a Bach fugue is” (both quoted in Anger, *Paul Klee*, 1, 53).

³⁵⁵ Georg Muche, quoted in Aauther, “Hierarchy of Art and Craft,” 358.

Yet Pollock's murals intersected with decoration in another way, through the basic fact of their spatial positioning. They did not just suggest textiles or cladding for walls; they served as actual cladding. This put them at once into positions of power and irrelevance. Powerfully, they defined the character of the spaces they occupied, a constant presence behind the unfolding human drama. Like architecture itself, they were environmental and world-creating. Yet they were simultaneously pushed to the periphery and subordinated to other systems: to the functional ends of a bookcase or vestibule wall; to the decorative logic of the room or house; and, most damningly, to the commercial sphere through which the consumer goods of the interior and its lifestyle were proffered. Nancy Troy has traced the way in which fine and decorative arts displays in early twentieth-century France, long based on the conventions of the home, became increasingly tainted by the commercial realm, as the rise of the department store offered a competing example of display explicitly geared to consumer culture and the female shopper.³⁵⁶ In 1940s America, a booming domestic culture industry put not just household goods on display, but the spatial logic itself of interior decoration for modern living. Such logic was equally a part of furniture showrooms, *House and Garden* articles, and fine-art galleries like Schaefer and Kootz. The alliance of gallery and home, among other factors, helped make the 1940s interior very different from the one Matisse had invoked, with his armchair metaphor, at the beginning of the century. This new interior was suffused with the markers of consumption and decorative planning; it was a

³⁵⁶ Nancy J. Troy, "Domesticity, Decoration and Consumer Culture: Selling Art and Design in Pre-World War I France," in *Not at Home*, 113-29. See also Troy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*. On the gendering of consumerism, and thus mass culture, as female, see Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986), especially ch. 3, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other."

“background for living,” where that background was carefully selected, shopped for, or commissioned by experts in the field. It embodied a different approach to leisure and pleasure, and far less discomfort at the thought of that leisure being mediated through consumerist and decorative choices.

Looking back in 1965 on the early years of Abstract Expressionism, Robert Motherwell emphasized scale as the New York School’s most important contribution: “The large format,” he asserted, “at one blow, destroyed the century-long tendency of the French to domesticize modern painting, to make it intimate.”³⁵⁷ Yet Motherwell was wrong, on at least two counts. His statement neglects the ambient character of the “large format,” its ability to cloak and surround its viewers, and the resulting sense of closeness, even comfort. As Mark Rothko famously noted, “The reason why I paint large pictures [...] is precisely because I want to be very intimate and very human.”³⁵⁸ It is this ability to function at registers both monumental and intimate, and to switch between them, that has made the abstract mural, throughout this dissertation, simultaneously essential and superfluous to its space, close by and distant, autonomous and integrated. Yet Motherwell was also wrong because he misunderstood the way in which the domestic itself had assumed a new character in 1940s America. The ideal middle-class home had moved from the urban core to the suburban periphery; it had expanded, bringing in the outside world of landscape and outdoor living, not to mention the commercial world of decorating and design. The domestic, in other words, did not require the miniature or the

³⁵⁷ Robert Motherwell, quoted in Max Kozloff, “An Interview with Robert Motherwell,” *Artforum* 4.1 (September 1965): 33-37; 37.

³⁵⁸ Mark Rothko, quoted in “A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture,” *Interiors* 110 (May 1951): 100-05; 104.

portable in order to create spaces of intimacy. Pollock's murals of 1943-50 clad the interior of this changing American home, from its urban bohemian site to its pastoral version on the outskirts of the city.

CHAPTER 4

FROM GALLERY TO OFFICE LOBBY: ABSTRACTION AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE 1950s

In fall 1950, the Sam Kootz Gallery put on a display calculated to appeal to art and architecture enthusiasts alike. Entitled “The Muralist and the Modern Architect,” the exhibition showed a series of abstract murals designed for modern buildings. “The modern painter,” the catalogue declared, “is in constant search of a wall—some large expanse upon which he can employ his imagination and personal technique on a scale uninhibited by the average collector’s limited space.”³⁵⁹ A freestanding mural by William Baziotes, with mysterious black forms against a ground of blue and purple, was used as a space divider in a glass house by Philip Johnson; Robert Motherwell’s Matisse-inspired mural in orange-brown and black was shown as a lobby wall in a school by Walter Gropius (**fig. 4.1–4.4**). Like the Parsons display of the Ideal Museum, the exhibition merged two entities that we normally think of as distinct: the mural, a form of public art, and the gallery, a commercial enterprise. Indeed, as Kootz’s example will make evident, the commercial gallery became an important locus for the display, dissemination, and commissioning of murals in the postwar years.

In this chapter, I return to many of the sites and themes from Chapter 1, looking at murals for schools, community centers, and busy urban lobbies, places where people gathered as groups or communities. Questions about abstraction’s public life, and its unique ability to be integrated with the abstract vocabulary of architecture, continue to be

³⁵⁹ Samuel M. Kootz, “Foreword,” in *The Muralist and the Modern Architect*, exh. cat. (New York: Kootz Gallery, October 3-23, 1950), n.p.

relevant. Yet such questions appear against a very different social and historical landscape. Government arts funding all but disappeared with the end of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1943, and with it, the national cultural horizon in which such art had been experienced. Certain New Deal tropes—for example, art’s integration into community life—would persist, though directed now at smaller, more local levels. Many civic institutions in the 1950s continued to accept the value of public art on their walls, and abstraction appeared an idiom uniquely reflective of the modern age. At the same time, the corporation emerged as a force transforming both public life and the face of the city; from 1947 to 1956, New York’s midtown added more office space than existed in all of Chicago’s main business district—a phenomenon that only accelerated as the 1950s went on.³⁶⁰ On the level of patronage, the private art market was booming. In addition to individual collectors who bought for their homes, as we saw in the previous chapter, the corporation began to play a role here, too, commissioning murals and sculpture and acquiring collections for display and investment return.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of Kootz’s 1950 exhibition, which introduces many of the issues at hand. If Blake’s Ideal Museum, exhibited at Parsons the year before, served as a harbinger, Kootz’s show was the first opportunity for a sustained dialogue between Abstract Expressionism and modern architecture. While the painters talked of scale and public address, the architects spoke of a new “synthesis of the arts” for the modern city, and of a return to the challenges of building monumental civic architecture. At Kootz, and in discussions that continued across the decade, there was a

³⁶⁰ Robert A. M. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: Monacelli, 1995), 170.

marked tendency to subsume private and public commissions alike under the same rubric, and attribute various public values (of democracy, civic life, national and international character) to murals in corporate or private spaces; in other words, the mural, and the blending of art and architecture, became powerful signifiers of publicness itself, regardless of how and where such works were conceived, funded, and viewed. Kootz's exhibition also reveals the crucial role of the gallery in this period, both as a mediating institution for mural commissions and as a space in which particular kinds of consumer habits were inculcated. The chapter then moves on to several abstract murals for public spaces in 1950s New York. Kootz artists Adolph Gottlieb and Hans Hofmann realized full-scale murals in the city, as did other Abstract Expressionists, such as Lee Krasner; for other buildings, architects commissioned the whimsical abstraction of Max Spivak, and the uncompromising, if witty, geometries of Fritz Glarner and Josef Albers. At these sites, abstraction was integrated into the spaces of modern architecture and the fabric of the city in new ways.

“The Muralist and the Modern Architect”: Marketing the Modern Mural at Kootz

Sam Kootz opened his gallery in 1945, showing European masters like Picasso as well as various modern painters and sculptors from the United States, including many of the Abstract Expressionists. Trained as a lawyer, Kootz worked in advertising and as a textiles salesman, while at the same time developing a reputation as an art critic and curator; his first book, *Modern American Painters* (1930), surveyed the field and was accompanied by a show the following year at the Demotte Gallery. From the beginning, Kootz displayed an ad-man's eye for thematic shows that would garner press coverage

and allow him to present his stable of artists in a new light. “Murals for a Country Estate: Important Painting for Spacious Living” (1946), discussed in the previous chapter, was an early example, opening in the gallery’s second year and explicitly marketed to homeowners.

“The Muralist and the Modern Architect” followed in this vein. Kootz explained the genesis of the show a little over a decade later:

In 1949, when I noticed that the painters were creating larger and larger pictures, and were quite obviously anxious for a wall, I decided to go to 6 architects, and to secure from each of these prominent architects a project that they had in their office to which we could contribute sculpture, murals, and mosaics. We then [...] held an exhibition showing the models from the architects and our selections of the architectural problem presented to us.³⁶¹

The artists, four painters and a sculptor, were all working in abstract styles, while the architects were all European modernists, or, in the case of Johnson, an American who studied under them. The list of projects thus reads as an impressive alliance between Kootz’s vanguard painters and famous names in architectural modernism: Motherwell’s mural was designed for a junior high school, erected two years earlier in Attleboro, Massachusetts, by Gropius’s The Architects Collaborative (TAC); murals by Baziotes and Gottlieb were proposed as freestanding walls in a single-family house by Johnson and a Vassar dormitory by Marcel Breuer, respectively; Josep Lluís Sert and Paul Lester Wiener’s plan for a civic center in Chimbote, Peru was to be graced with mosaics by

³⁶¹ Samuel M. Kootz, typescript for a speech delivered at “Artists of the Kootz Gallery,” Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida (April 8–May 6, 1962), AAA, Kootz Gallery Records (hereafter KGR), reel 1320, frame 105.

Hofmann; and, in the one example that involved sculpture, David Hare's winding staircase mediated between the first and second floors of a model of Frederick Kiesler's *Endless House*. None of the murals were ever realized at full scale, and Kootz used models, sketches, and oil paintings to signify each project in the gallery.

As Kootz implies in his statement about visiting the architects' studios, the buildings were already well on their way—and, in several cases, completed—by the time the artists were invited to contribute murals or sculpture.³⁶² This was true for certain of the murals as well: while Motherwell designed a new work for the TAC school, and some of the projects, like the one by Hare and Kiesler, were truly collaborative, both Baziotes and Gottlieb offered up paintings that had already been completed, now dressed up as murals and given an architectural role.³⁶³ As one critic, the *Times*'s Aline B. Louchheim, summarized, "The catalogue's phraseology, saying the architects 'planned projects for the artists' is somewhat ambiguous. The buildings [...] were done before the fact and the architects then designated where in each job they conceived a mural or where they would be willing to have one." Yet Louchheim recognized the importance of the show's overall thrust: "the implied intention in this exhibition is to show how there can be real

³⁶² TAC's schoolhouse opened its doors in 1948; Johnson's model was an early version of his in-progress Wiley House (completed 1952); Breuer's Ferry Dorm, sans mural, was dedicated on Vassar's campus in 1951; Sert and Wiener had shown their Chimbote city plan at the 1949 meeting of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in Bergamo; and Kiesler's *Endless House* was the latest iteration of a project pursued in some form by the architect since 1925 and with increasing intensity in the 1940s. For a history of Kiesler's *Endless House*, see Gerd Zillner, "Frederick Kiesler's *Endless House*. An Attempt to Retrace an Endless Story," in *Endless Kiesler*, ed. Klaus Bollinger and Florian Medicus, 99-168 (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2015).

³⁶³ Baziotes exhibited his *Danse Macabre* (1950) and Gottlieb exhibited *Sounds at Night* (1948), which, according to the *Times* reviewer, "was the architect's choice over another [work] which, though more interesting as a painting *per se*, would have performed this particular function less well" (Aline B. Louchheim, "Architect, Painter—and the Mural: Semi-Abstract Paintings in Current Shows," *New York Times*, October 1, 1950, 117).

integration of the arts.” This intention was one that resonated with ongoing debates in the world of architecture: “Were modern architects,” she asked in the opening to her review, “giving painters and sculptors the opportunities for collaboration they deserved?”³⁶⁴

This question assumed particular importance in the early postwar years: collaboration was valued not only for its own sake, but because it reflected on the state of architecture’s, and society’s, soul. Integrating artworks into buildings was one way to inject something human and artistic to the mechanical and rationalized spaces of modern architecture, that is, to reorient the profession “as an artistic rather than an industrial activity.”³⁶⁵ The fruits of collaboration, moreover, would help bring about a new unity in the built environment, one conducive to community life. In their seminal 1943 text “Nine Points on Monumentality,” Fernand Léger, Sigfried Giedion, and Sert had argued for an architecture that would “represent [the people’s] social and community life” and thus “give more than functional fulfillment”: built spaces, complete with monuments, murals, and sculpture, that would “satisfy the eternal demand of the people for translation of their collective force into symbols.”³⁶⁶ By 1950, collaboration was a leitmotif in architectural discourse, connected to a web of issues about modernity, science, humanism, and the place of the arts in a postwar world. Nearly all the reviews of Kootz’s mural show covered it through the lens of collaboration, debating how and whether the exhibited projects successfully integrated art and architecture. Did painter and architect collaborate sufficiently? And did the final work appear as a coherent whole?

³⁶⁴ Louchheim, “Architect, Painter—and the Mural,” 117.

³⁶⁵ Eric Lum, “Pollock’s Promise,” 63.

³⁶⁶ Fernand Léger, Josep Lluís Sert, and Sigfried Giedion, “Nine Points on Monumentality” [1943], in *Architecture, You and Me; the Diary of a Development*, ed. Sigfried Giedion, 48-51 (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1958) 49.

What was at stake in these questions becomes clearer if we look in greater detail at a few of the exhibited projects. For the TAC school in Attleboro, Motherwell was given a long, curving wall in the lobby (**fig. 4.5**), a two-level space reached by a scissor-ramp just inside the main entrance (**fig. 4.6**).³⁶⁷ The upper-level wall, which Motherwell's design covered in alternating bands of orange-browns, yellows, and black, defined an important locus of the school: as the architects noted, "the lobby (where the mural is indicated) must be the heart of the school and symbolize the activity and life of the students. It is their immediate contact with community groups." The mural would have been faintly visible through the glass façade (**fig. 4.7**) and hovered over students as they ascended the ramp up to the cafeteria (at half-level) and then to the main lobby, on the second floor. It was off of this lobby area that one gained access to classrooms, office space, and the auditorium, which sat directly on the other side of the proposed mural. As the architects pointed out, non-student groups would "use the auditorium and cafeteria for community functions. For this reason the handling of the painting becomes particularly significant."³⁶⁸

For this important, community-oriented space, Motherwell designed a painting with, in his words, a "slow, austere, rigid, but sensual rhythm." He envisioned the painting offering an education in monumental art for the students, who could "become accustomed to being around painting on a large scale, as they would be if they were

³⁶⁷ The building has been substantially changed in the intervening years, but the second-floor lobby space remains. I wish to thank Veronica Learned, principal of Peter Thacher Elementary School in Attleboro, MA, for facilitating my visit to the building and answering my questions about the school.

³⁶⁸ John Harkness and The Architects Collaborative in *The Muralist and the Modern Architect*, n.p.

raised in, say, Italy or Egypt.”³⁶⁹ While many critics admired the mural, comparing it to Matisse and Arp, others questioned its appropriateness for the site. The reviewer for *Interiors* approvingly noted the “varicolored architectural shapes” in the composition, but added, the mural’s “greatest sin is that it belittles the less argumentative architecture of the building itself.”³⁷⁰ Louchheim concurred. Motherwell’s mural “is handsome and arresting; but, one wonders, is it perhaps too insistent? Are these intrinsically large-scale forms or have they just been blown-up? [...] Does it overwhelm the architecture and if so, is it important enough as a painting to justify this domination?”³⁷¹ The critics might have also asked whether the abstract design fulfilled the lofty brief that the TAC architects had articulated in their text. Did it constitute, as they had hoped, “the heart of the school,” and did it effectively “symbolize the activity and life” of its students? Flooding the lobby space with color, and filling the entire supporting wall, Motherwell’s mural would have created an ambient effect, akin to the semicircular murals in the Chronic Diseases Hospital. Yet something more than environmental abstraction or therapeutic color was called for here. Motherwell’s mural also had to condense a set of ideas into meaningful and concrete symbols. One of the unresolved tensions in the Motherwell project is that it strives both for an environmental effect—a long, looping set of black forms on a horizontal wall—and for the precision and resonance of a monument, the capacity to act as “the heart of the school.”

³⁶⁹ Robert Motherwell, “An Experiment in a New Medium,” unpublished typescript, 1951, 5, Robert Motherwell Archives, Dedalus Foundation.

³⁷⁰ “Between Painters and Architects,” *Interiors* 110.4 (November 1950): 12.

³⁷¹ Louchheim, “Architect, Painter—and the Mural,” 117.

Hofmann faced a similar dilemma in his Kootz mural, and it is interesting to compare his response.³⁷² Like Motherwell's mural, Hofmann's mosaic murals (he designed two for Chimbote) were intended for a site freighted with themes of community and public space. Sert and Wiener's plan for the coastal city of Chimbote, Peru was one of several they developed for Latin American countries in the war and postwar years, and it stressed the use of both modern planning and vernacular architectural traditions, like the *paseo* and the public plaza, which they connected to a robust "community life" (**fig. 4.8**).³⁷³ Their plan for the city's civic center included a public square with a church and a tall, slab-like bell tower, for which Hofmann designed a mural in white mosaic punctuated by abstract forms in brilliant colors (**fig. 4.9**). Hofmann's second design was for the stone ground of the plaza itself, also in mosaic. In this composition, Hofmann transcribed and abstracted the aerial plan that Sert and Wiener had drawn up for the city as a whole, converting streets, plaza, and stadium into diagonals, squares, and circles (**fig. 4.10**). With both designs installed, Hofmann's abstract forms would have unfurled both vertically, up the bell tower, and horizontally, across the pavement, and they would have re-stated, in concrete and glistening mosaic, the spatial plan of the city.

Hofmann took other pains to identify the abstract compositions with the city itself. He asked the architects to procure samples of local materials on their next visit, so that he could approximate the city's color and texture in his designs.³⁷⁴ While his bell

³⁷² The Hofmann murals for Chimbote have received a good deal of scholarly attention. See Xavier Costa, ed., *Hans Hofmann: The Chimbote Project. The Synergistic Promise of Modern Art and Urban Architecture* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2004) and Kenneth E. Silver, *Walls of Color: The Murals of Hans Hofmann* (Greenwich, CT: Bruce Museum, 2015).

³⁷³ Josep Lluís Sert and Paul Lester Wiener in *The Muralist and the Modern Architect*, n.p.

³⁷⁴ Hans Hofmann, "Mosaic—II," 2, unpublished notes, AAA, KGR, box 1, folder 34.

tower composition was rigorously abstract—the “shifting color planes,” he observed in his notes, will relate to each other and to the whole much like “the small color areas function in a Mondrian”—he also included a dynamic, tilting motif of interlocking triangles near the center. This, he hoped, would “function symbolically” and “become in time the symbol of the new city.”³⁷⁵ Hofmann’s mosaic designs were by and large the favorite of the Kootz show, lauded by critics. In certain ways, the flat face of the looming bell tower allowed Hofmann to avoid the problems that haunted the Motherwell proposal: the standing rectilinear form lent the mural both solidity and coherence, clearly demarcating it from the surrounding space, and freeing it from the functional demands of doors or windows (both of which Motherwell neglected to provide for in his design). Yet such differences also magnified the monumental function of the standing slab, and Hofmann’s design may have proved insufficiently symbolic for this role. As Eric Mumford has noted, Sert and Wiener’s next project for an urban bell tower featured a very different kind of mural design, eschewing Hofmann’s mix of gestural and geometric abstraction for figural elements like a cross and a human hand.³⁷⁶ Achieving both the dynamic, motile effects of abstraction and the communicative power of monumental symbols was a difficult balance.

Sert expanded on the problems implicit in the Chimbote project in an architecture symposium at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) a few months after the Kootz show. “Today,” he lamented, “we do not have a place where [the arts] can get together—the

³⁷⁵ Hans Hofmann, “Mural—I,” 2, unpublished notes, AAA, KGR, box 1, folder 34.

³⁷⁶ The design, for the Puerto Ordaz church, Venezuela, was featured on the cover of *Architectural Record* in December 1953. See Eric Mumford, “Sert and Hofmann at Chimbote” in *Hans Hofmann*, ed. Costa, 51-75.

agora, the forum, the cathedral square, which were also meeting places and constituted the heart of the city.”³⁷⁷ For Sert and others, a new synthesis of the arts was intimately linked to a renewed public sphere, one where past forms of public gathering—merchants in the agora, politicians in the forum, the faithful in the cathedral square—might once again flourish. The mural thus carried a profound political and social weight in the architecture rhetoric, one that spilled over into discussions of virtually any kind of artistic collaboration: at the MoMA symposium, participants discussed murals for college campuses, the U.N. building, and private houses in the same language of public space and international cooperation. Yet if the synthesis of the arts carried with it lofty ideals, the architects were quick to note the many obstacles to implementation. Painters and architects trained in vastly different ways, the pressures of real estate and construction meant that art was often brought in as an afterthought rather than an integral part of a building, and architecture was increasingly considered a specialized form of technology rather than an art.³⁷⁸

Muralists and architects would continue to tackle these problems, with varying degrees of success, over the next decade. The Kootz exhibition brought greater attention

³⁷⁷ Josep Lluís Sert quoted in “A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture,” *Interiors* 110 (May 1951): 100-05. Phillip Johnson, who chaired the symposium, also spoke on his Kootz collaboration with Bazziotes, which he deemed a failure. For the full transcript of the proceedings, see “Symposium: The Relation of Painting and Sculpture to Architecture,” March 19, 1951, Philip Johnson Papers, 1.22a, MoMA Archives.

³⁷⁸ Such specialization extended to the viewer’s realm as well, as an interesting postscript to the Kootz exhibition makes evident. Motherwell’s large *Mural Fragment*, exhibited as part of the TAC mural project, was lent to the University of Minnesota-Duluth six years later, where it was installed in the Student Center. Yet it occasioned none of the community identification or expression that the architects had hoped. Rather, the borders of specialization were once again enforced: the “proper place for the display of such art,” one aggrieved student noted, “is [the university art] gallery” (Earl Finberg, “Students Object to Non-Objective Art,” *Duluth News-Tribune*, August 16, 1956, 1, 5). There was no room for abstract, modern art in a bustling center of student life.

to the debate, at the same time that it leant a new sense of urgency and optimism to the question of artistic collaboration. On a more concrete level, the exhibition achieved two important results. First, it allowed several artists who had considered muralism purely in a theoretical sense—painters making ever larger canvases and, in Kootz’s phrasing, “quite anxious for a wall”—to actually work within the constraints and possibilities of a site. Second, the exhibition exposed the architects to a new *kind* of abstraction. Breuer already knew and admired Jackson Pollock’s painting as architectural art, through Peter Blake and the Geller commission, but he was something of an exception. The modern architects at Kootz had largely collaborated with European painters to this point, artists like Léger and Joan Miró, or else European-influenced painters from the American Abstract Artists (AAA).³⁷⁹ Kootz’s show was one of the first times that they worked with Abstract Expressionist painters. Such a marriage had been contemplated, in theoretical terms, before, and would continue to inspire critics; in 1951, Jules Langsner envisioned the entire New York School—with its “volatile color,” “sensation,” and “feverish charm”—located in modern buildings. “This kind of painting,” he wrote, “with all its Dionysian delirium, belongs, oddly enough, on the pristine walls of modern architecture. Here is ornamentation, conceived in an idiom of our times, to clothe these often dispirited surfaces.”³⁸⁰ Kootz’s show was the first to give concrete, architectural form to such ideas, and it influenced several architects and builders later in the decade.

³⁷⁹ Indeed, it was the American Abstract Artists that originally commissioned the essays by Léger, Giedion, and Sert that would turn into the “Nine Points on Monumentality.” On the genesis of the essay, see Joan Ockman, “The War Years in America: New York, New Monumentality,” in *Sert, Arquitecto En Nueva York*, ed. Xavier Costa (Barcelona: ACTAR, 1997), 22-45.

³⁸⁰ Jules Langsner, “More About the School of New York,” *Arts and Architecture* (May 1951): 20, 46; 20.

The Kootz exhibition is important also for what it tells us about the market for murals: how, in a period with little to no government funding but growing art audiences, murals were made and sold. Our first clues in this regard lie in the gallery installation itself. Even as the architects and critics stressed the rootedness of the murals—their integration with particular sites—Kootz’s display tended to work in the opposite direction. On the walls of the gallery, the murals were not singular and stable but multiple and shifting: doubling, shrinking and growing, traveling through diverse media. In the installation of the Gottlieb and Baziotes projects, which Kootz grouped together along a single wall, the “murals” existed as paintings—at regular size and with the texture and surface qualities of oil paint—and again as small, photographic copies of the paintings, tucked into the architectural models on the table (**fig. 4.11**). One effect of this display was a sense of the mural’s flexibility across different sites, with the viewer taking in now the four-by-five-foot Gottlieb painting on the wall, now the miniature one inside the model, and now the virtual one, the mural at ceiling-height dimensions inside the Breuer dormitory (**fig. 4.12–4.13**). It would have been a small step to another virtual space, the viewer’s aspirations for his own living room or office, with Gottlieb’s repeating pattern of symbols appropriately sized.

In the Motherwell installation (**fig. 4.14–4.15**), the mural appeared in several places: as a small, ribbon-like frieze, scaled down and executed in ink; as a photographic copy of that sketch, pasted onto the curving wall of the building maquette; and as an eight-by-twelve-foot *Mural Fragment*, a large orange-brown, yellow, and green painting

that Motherwell referred to as a “twelve-foot ‘sample’” of the mural.³⁸¹ The installation feels calculated less to give a sense of the Attleboro project per se than to suggest the range and adaptability of Motherwell’s mural work, which scales up and down and changes proportions and color as needed. In the Hofmann project, on the adjacent wall, the mural is likewise multiple and fragmented (**fig. 4.16**). Hofmann’s sketch for the bell tower sits above the radiator, showing the mural in its entirety. Next to and above it, we see enlarged elements of the composition in three richly hued, vigorously painted panels (**fig. 4.17**): two, in the center of the wall, show the bottom segment of the sketch’s composition, while another, plucked from the upper left register of the sketch, is shunted off to the right. Arrayed along the wall with the photographs and site plans, the painted panels appear like fluid, modular blocks of color, rearrangeable into a Hofmann tapestry. As the painter wrote in his notes, the “entire montage” of the bell tower mural can “be broken down into several parts and remounted.”³⁸²

Kootz’s exhibition strategies here encouraged viewers to look at the murals not as particular projects but as stencils for future, customizable production. Like wallpaper or a modular shelving unit, each mural was endlessly scalable; like color or style changes within a product line, each mural could also be adapted to different needs of shape and appearance. Kootz’s display simultaneously highlighted the unique style of each artist (Motherwell’s hulking black forms, Hofmann’s coloristic intensity, Gottlieb’s shadowy pictographs) and the ways in which those styles could be extended and replicated. Kootz had experimented with modern art as flexible and customizable to the consumer before,

³⁸¹ Motherwell, “An Experiment in a New Medium,” 4.

³⁸² Hofmann, “Mural—I,” 1.

during his decade-long stint in the textile industry. In the 1930s, acting as a textile converter and seller to wholesalers, Kootz commissioned designs from modern painters and photographers like Stuart Davis, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Edward Steichen.³⁸³ A 1938 campaign emphasized the particular appropriateness of abstract art for textiles, suggesting that retailers buy an Arthur Dove pattern for use in summer evening gowns (fig. 4.18).³⁸⁴ Like the textile experiments of the 1930s, the mural exhibition attempted to solve the problem of making the unique and the avant-garde available to the masses—or at least, to a subset of the masses, a mass buying public located in the middle and upper classes with disposable income. The murals occupied a more rarefied realm than the silks: Kootz could not “print” new editions of murals, as he could with textiles. But he could use the gallery as a place to suggest tailored uses to new consumers, and relay such suggestions into further commissions for his artists. The scalar nature of the murals in Kootz’s space set up a dynamic relationship between consumer desire and fulfillment.³⁸⁵

What sorts of consumers was Kootz hoping to attract? We have some evidence that his installation encouraged individual buyers to understand the mural as scalar and reproducible. Katherine Ordway, the heir to the 3M fortune and the first owner of Motherwell’s *Mural Fragment*, had a copy of the work made, with the artist’s and

³⁸³ See, for example, “Original Designs Contributed by Modern Painters and Photographers,” *Women’s Wear Daily* 46.79, April 24, 1933, 9.

³⁸⁴ On an earlier collaboration between abstract art and high-end textiles, see Regina Lee Blaszczyk, “The Colors of Modernism: O’Keeffe, Cheney Brothers, and the Relationship between Art and Industry in the 1920s,” in *Seeing High and Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, ed. Patricia Johnston (Berkeley: University of California, 2006), 228–46.

³⁸⁵ The frankly commercial aspect of Kootz’s show would not have been embraced by the exhibited artists, for whom mass culture represented a threatening force. Britain’s Independent Group (1952–55) makes for an instructive contrast: unlike their predecessors in modern architecture and Abstract Expressionism, its members made mass culture, a lively exhibition scene, and scalable abstraction (in the form of artist-designed wallpapers and textiles) central to their synthesis of art and architecture.

Kootz's permission, in a reflective 3M material called Scotchlite. After showing it at the Whitney, Ordway had the Scotchlite mural installed in her Connecticut garden, alongside the driveway.³⁸⁶ Yet the consumers that responded most effectively to Kootz's mural campaign were architects, whom the gallerist made a concerted effort to court. Two days before the exhibition closed, Kootz wrote to the Architectural League of New York's secretary, detailing plans to send several of the projects over to the League's space in east midtown. Elements from all but the Hare-Kiesler collaboration were included: six paintings by Hofmann, Baziotes, Gottlieb, and Motherwell; the Sert-Wiener plan of the Chimbote project; and "a small model of the Gropius school." The murals were installed in the Main Gallery (or Gallery A) on the League's second floor, and remained on view from October 30 through November 11 under the title "Avant-Garde Murals."³⁸⁷ Securing a second venue for the show at the League allowed Kootz to tap into a network of architects, builders, engineers, and corporate patrons who, whether by suggestion to clients or by direct commission, could help turn his painters from would-be into actual muralists.

Kootz's efforts here were successful. As he himself described this "pioneering effort" a few years later, "The Muralist and the Modern Architect"

created a favorable atmosphere among various architects. Over a period of the last decade, we have had many important associations with architects for murals,

³⁸⁶ Motherwell allowed the copy to be made with the understanding that the replica would not be considered a work by him. See Jack Flam et al., *Robert Motherwell Paintings and Collages: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1941-1991* (New York: Dedalus Foundation, 2012), vol. 2, no. P102; and "A New Art Medium," *Quick* (October 29, 1951): 44. See also "Robert Motherwell's Scotchlite, October 16-November 4, 1951," Whitney Museum of American Art, Frances Mulhall Achilles Library, Exhibition Records.

³⁸⁷ Samuel M. Kootz to Anne Clark, October 21, 1950, AAA, Architectural League of New York Records (hereafter ALNY), box 66, folder 6.

sculpture, and associated problems in office buildings, hotels, temples, monasteries, schools, etc. This has been of great benefit to the artists, as the payment for the commissions have been quite liberal, and in addition, the artist has been provided with a space problem that he could not attempt unless he was subsidized in this fashion.³⁸⁸

Kootz's artists created architectural artwork for new buildings throughout New York, as well as other cities in the Northeast and Midwest. Kootz established particularly fruitful relationships with the firm Kelly and Gruzen, discussed at length below, and with architect Percival Goodman, who was reconceiving the synagogue for postwar America. Through Goodman, several of Kootz's artists became de facto decorators for the modern synagogue: Gottlieb, Motherwell, Herbert Ferber, Helen Frankenthaler, Ibram Lassaw, Seymour Lipton, and Abraham Rattner contributed paintings and sculpture, as well as designs for textiles and liturgical objects, for seven of Goodman's temples across the United States.³⁸⁹

In presiding over these commissions, Kootz continued to use the gallery as a space for marketing the modern mural. He hosted three exhibitions devoted to "art for a synagogue," where he displayed photographs and ground plans of the completed buildings, small-scale models of giant sculptural reliefs, and, when possible, full-scale

³⁸⁸ Samuel M. Kootz, typescript for a speech delivered at "Artists of the Kootz Gallery," Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida (April 8–May 6, 1962), AAA, KGR, reel 1320, frame 105.

³⁸⁹ The temples were the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation; Temple Beth El (Providence); Congregation B'nai Israel (Millburn, NJ); Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple (Cleveland); Temple Beth El (Springfield, MA); Temple Beth El (Gary, IN); and the Temple of Aaron (Saint Paul, MN). On Goodman's synagogues, see "Synagogue Architecture," in Kimberly J. Elman and Angela Giral, eds., *Percival Goodman: Architect, Planner, Teacher, Painter*, 52-110 (New York: Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2001). On modern art for midcentury synagogues, a rich topic that deserves further study, see Janay Jadine Wong, "Synagogue Art of the 1950s: A New Context for Abstraction," *Art Journal* 53.4 (Winter 1994): 37-43.

murals and Torah ark curtains.³⁹⁰ These thematically oriented shows garnered considerable press coverage, in mainstream papers like the *Times* as well as in those devoted to art, architecture, and Jewish life. Once again, Kootz amplified the impact of his mural exhibitions by direct appeal to architects. A flyer with the bold heading “Architects: Attention” was printed along with the exhibition brochure for the 1956 synagogue show, summarizing work completed to date for prominent architects like Breuer, Johnson, and William Lescaze. The flyer emphasized the gallery’s “unique service to creative architects,” and outlined the collaborative process: “We assist in defining the objects required; create a precise budget for the completed works; suggest the artists most appropriate for the objects to be created; carry the entire job through to completion, thus removing all follow-up from the architect’s mind.”³⁹¹ The following year, Kootz issued “An Invitation to Architects and Builders to Commission the Creative Services of Internationally Famous Painters and Sculptors,” a glossy brochure that illustrated completed works in New York office lobbies, described in-process projects, and listed thirteen artists “whose existing work” or whose future “collaboration” were available to interested parties (**fig. 4.19**).³⁹²

Kootz worked with both institutional and corporate patrons on these projects, a fact that mirrors a general trend in postwar art commissions. Broadly civic institutions like synagogues, churches, and schools, organized around particular communities, turned

³⁹⁰ The shows were “Art for a Synagogue,” October 3-20, 1951; “Art for a Synagogue,” May 22-June 6, 1953; and “Art for Two Synagogues,” October 15-27, 1956. See AAA, KGR, box 1, folder 21; box 2, folders 29-30; reel 1319, frames 648-650; and reel 1320, frames 1000 ff.

³⁹¹ Kootz Gallery, “Architects: Attention,” flyer, ca. 1956, AAA, KGR, reel 1319, frame 647.

³⁹² Kootz Gallery, “An Invitation to Architects and Builders to Commission the Creative Services of Internationally Famous Painters and Sculptors,” brochure, ca. 1957-58, AAA, Hans Hofmann papers (hereafter HH), box 2, folder 77.

to mural art as a means of speaking to, and symbolizing, a collective audience. At the same time, and increasingly as the 1950s wore on, private corporations turned to murals as markers of prestige and publicity. Often using the same language of artistic collaboration, institutional and corporate patrons nevertheless wanted different things from abstract painting; they used abstract murals to propose very different ideas about public space, modern society, and art's role within it. In the next two sections, I will look at both kinds of patrons to better understand how murals intervened in the urban fabric. First, I examine two projects by Kootz artists that emerged (albeit indirectly) from the 1950 exhibition. Next, I move beyond Kootz's stable of artists to look at several murals in Manhattan's office buildings. The 1950s represented an unprecedented opportunity for artists to unframe abstraction: available money, interested patrons, and the postwar building boom led to numerous commissions. In order to understand the resulting works, we need to see them not just as products of individual artists or groups—an oil painting translated into a new medium; the telos of large-scale Abstract Expressionism—but as objects that responded to and affected a far wider swath of people, from gallerists to congregations to real estate developers.

Abstraction and Civic Life: Gottlieb and Hofmann

Kootz realized two projects with the architecture firm Kelly and Gruzen, both for civic institutions sited in New York's urban fabric. The first was Adolph Gottlieb's stained-glass façade for the Milton Steinberg House, an educational and administrative annex of

the Park Avenue Synagogue on New York's east side, since destroyed (**fig. 4.20–4.21**).³⁹³ Built adjacent to the Moorish-style synagogue of 1927, Kelly and Gruzen's edifice was a simple but resolutely modernist structure, a rectangular box with a four-story curtain wall, sitting atop a slightly recessed ground floor. Texture and color were added in the warm glow of the stained glass, the grille-like pattern of the windowpanes, and the large wooden doors at street level. The collaboration on the Steinberg House—between an Abstract Expressionist painter and a modernist architect—eminently fulfilled the brief of “The Muralist and the Modern Architect” from four years earlier, pairing Gottlieb's contemporary abstraction with the “large expanse” of a modern wall. Acting as agent for Gottlieb, Sam Kootz drew up a contract with Heinigke and Smith, a stained glass manufacturer, in February 1954, and in August of that year the first stained glass panel was installed on the Eighty-Seventh-Street façade.³⁹⁴

As in his proposed Vassar dormitory mural—the work shown at Kootz in 1950—Gottlieb's project for the Steinberg House was a larger-than-life rectangular work, sited at the threshold between inside and outside. The New York façade accomplished this with considerably more aplomb than the Vassar mural, which, as exhibited in the Kootz model, would have blocked a direct route into the student lounge, standing with its back to the entrance and forcing pedestrian traffic to flow around it.³⁹⁵ At the Steinberg House, the problem of what to do with the back of a standing mural was avoided by making the

³⁹³ The building was torn down in the late 1970s. Gottlieb's panels are extant and in the collection of the Park Avenue Synagogue.

³⁹⁴ Samuel M. Kootz to Heinigke and Smith, February 9, 1954, Adolph Gottlieb Foundation (hereafter AGF); “Steinberg House Mural Set,” *New York Times*, August 24, 1954, 23.

³⁹⁵ The Vassar mural would have stood in between the corridor of the building (which connected the two wings) and the student lounge. In the Kootz model, a rectangle is cut away in the roof to allow visitors to look inside.

mural itself translucent and giving it the architectural function of a glass curtain wall. This introduced new problems, as the work had to act as both an effective façade for pedestrians and an appropriate backdrop for those working and studying inside the building, where, in the words of one writer, the “mysticism” and “beautiful radiance of stained glass was not optically desirable.”³⁹⁶ Gottlieb’s response was to space his brightly colored panels out across the façade’s surface, and interpenetrate them with more lightly tinted glass. In this arrangement, the abstract panels occupied only a third of the façade’s total surface area, with each of the 21 designs repeated four or five times. This solution also allowed the façade to achieve an overall unity—the panels occurring at regular intervals—while still ensuring that daily changes (like opening windows or turning the lights on in different rooms) did not break the surface up into “meaningless fragments.”³⁹⁷

In designing the individual panels, Gottlieb worked within the style he had pioneered in his pictograph paintings of the 1940s, now adapted to the new requirements of architecture and glass. The façade, with its grid of thin mullions, created a rectilinear structure within which to place motifs, much like the painted cells that Gottlieb used in the pictograph canvases (**fig. 4.23**). At the same time, the leaded comes in each pane strongly recalled the artist’s use of thick black line to delineate symbols against a ground of different color areas. The stained glass employed familiar forms from Gottlieb’s pictographic oeuvre (arrows, stars, dots, circles), as well as motifs that referenced Jewish

³⁹⁶ William Schack, “Modern Art in the Synagogue: II,” *Commentary* (February 1956): 152-61; 158.

³⁹⁷ Emily Genauer, “Art and Artists: Wall of Glass,” *New York Herald Tribune*, September 19, 1954. The *New York Times* added, “Furthermore, the opening of windows and the use of the rooms at night would break a single-picture design” (“Old World Traditions Inspired Designers of These Modern Religious Structures,” October 28, 1956, 1, 10).

history and liturgy. While some of these are overt, like the Star of David, others are more obscure: twisting branches reference the tree of life, an abstracted pomegranate, symbol of Rosh Hashanah, recurs in several places, and a panel subdivided into twelve cells suggests the twelve tribes of Israel.³⁹⁸

In an article on modern art for recent synagogues, William Schack praised Gottlieb's Steinberg House design, but expressed reservations precisely about this use of symbolism. "[W]ould a believer respond," he wondered, to the "subtle, involuted" designs that Gottlieb had devised? "If the invented symbols were really symbols," he concluded, "they would be a welcome addition to a fixed inventory, but they are generally motifs having only aesthetic significance: their imputed symbolism is pure rationalization."³⁹⁹ Schack's diagnosis, although directed at the relationship between modern art and religious tradition in particular, can be applied as well to the broader problem of Abstract Expressionism in monumental guise. How could abstraction—particularly a form of abstraction so invested in the contours and moods of subjective experience—be made into a communal and public form? Like Hofmann's "symbol" of the city in the Chimbote mural, and Motherwell's brief to symbolize the activities at the "heart" of the TAC school in Massachusetts, Gottlieb's modified pictographs on a New York street risked illegibility, taking on the scale but not necessarily the communicative capacity of public art. Interestingly, Gottlieb thought the general public more willing to

³⁹⁸ In my reading of the symbols, I am drawing on Gottlieb's notes and diagrams for another work, the 1953 Torah ark curtain for Percival Goodman's Beth El Congregation in Springfield, MA, which uses many of the same motifs (AAA, KGR, box 1, folder 21).

³⁹⁹ Schack, "Modern Art for the Synagogue," 161.

accept his art when rendered in stained glass, in part because it conveyed a richness of medium that compensated for any difficulty in subject matter or meaning.⁴⁰⁰

The tension between private gesture and public symbolism is equally apparent in a second mural that Kootz worked on with the Kelly and Gruzen firm, Hofmann's mosaic for the New York School of Printing on the city's far west side (**fig. 4.24–4.25**).

Completed in 1958, Hofmann's 64-by-11½-foot mural presents a series of geometric arrangements—columns, rectangles, horizontal bars—punctuated by floating shapes. The mural's vocabulary shares much with geometric abstraction from the 1930s: specific forms, like the bulbous red branch at left and a pronged orange shape at far right, recall Miró and Bolotowsky, and the overall composition, pairing architectonic structure with organic motifs, is akin to several of the murals for the Williamsburg Houses. Like the AAA painters of the 1930s, Hofmann here closely integrates the work into the architectural matrix: bands of yellow, red, and black echo the horizontal form of the building. Vertical columns impart a sense of rhythm to the long expanse, while the smaller motifs and squares rhyme with the similarly sized windows punched through the mass above.

In many ways, the school mural is a return to the ideas explored in the unrealized Chimbote design at the Kootz show. There, too, Hofmann had utilized geometric abstraction, invoking Mondrian in his notes, and unfolded his visual drama against a ground of white. Like the Chimbote project, which would have carpeted the ground

⁴⁰⁰ Martin Friedman, interview with Adolph Gottlieb, East Hampton, New York, 1962 (unpublished, AGF). Elsewhere, Gottlieb noted that the façade's utilitarian function, the chance to view it "in its proper context as part of the building," and the "stamp of approval" of the synagogue also contributed to its acceptance (Adolph Gottlieb, "Artist and Society: A Brief Case History," *College Art Journal* 24.2 [Winter 1955]: 96-101).

below pedestrians' feet and the slab of tower rising beside them, the school mural enjoys an intimate relationship with viewers. It is sited on the only part of the building that comes out to meet the sidewalk (the main mass, a block of classrooms, is set back on the lot), and plays an important role in mediating between the institutional scale of the building and the human scale of the street. Attached to the wall, the mural also takes on a more utilitarian and frankly decorative function, freed from some of the symbolizing pressures of the Chimbote tower: this is a decorated wall, not a freestanding monument. Nevertheless, the mural still faces the problem of abstraction's relevancy for public address. This problem is particularly apparent in several passages where the mosaic tesserae mimic swirls of gestural paint, as in an Abstract Expressionist canvas (**fig. 4.27**). A tall column of blue and squares of light blue and green, arranged as though made of brushstrokes, are figured as emblems of personal expression and inward experience, despite the wall's public function and the translation into a different medium.

Hofmann and Gottlieb were not the only painters translating their abstraction into more durable, architectural materials as they moved it from the personal sphere to the realm of public monumentality. Aline B. Saarinen (formerly Louchheim, who covered Kootz's "Muralist and the Modern Architect" for the *Times*), explicitly tied this trend to the new capabilities of modern building, writing, "Twentieth-century technology suggests many new materials and many new means [...] appropriate to building decoration." She glimpsed such development

in mosaic and mosaic-and-concrete combinations; in uses of glass and certain plastics; in stamping and pressing of such metals as aluminum; in the use of glazed

bricks for large wall designs; in the use of porcelain enamel tiles; in the possibilities of neon tubing for three-dimensional or relief sculptures, etc.⁴⁰¹

Saarinensaw this trend as evidence that the “artist’s beret has given way to the welder’s bulging mask,” a merging of the artist’s realm with that of the architect or even engineer. Others, however, read this turn to new materials from an entirely opposite perspective: rather than signifying an embrace of the technological capacity of modern building, such works represented a return to craft. In articles in *Craft Horizons* and in exhibitions at America House (the Studio Craft center founded by Aileen Osborn Webb in 1940), works like Gottlieb’s stained-glass façade were heralded as products of the “designer-craftsman” that could work against, and thus humanize, the rationality of modern building: “The flat straight lines of modern architecture,” the *Times* noted, “can be warmed and accented with proper use of stained glass, ceramics or murals.”⁴⁰² As we will see, these dual readings—abstraction as consonant with modern building, and as contrast to it—remained influential and compelling approaches throughout the decade.

Looking at the two murals by Gottlieb and Hofmann, a number of things are worth noting. The most obvious is the extent of Kootz’s role, and the clout he wielded among art, architecture, and city figures. In order to win the commission at the Printing School for one of his artists, he met with the architects over lunch shortly after they had won the building contract from the city, writing to Hofmann that he “definitely [had] the contract for the Printing Trades School, with permission to use you and David Hare,” and suggested “cutting the size of Hare’s sculpture, so that we may have more money for the

⁴⁰¹ Aline B. Saarinen, “A Challenge in New Materials,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1954, X10.

⁴⁰² “Display Tells Use of Glass Facades,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1955, 30. See also, on Gottlieb, Belle Krasne, “Art in the Crafts,” *Craft Horizons* 15.1 (January-February 1955): 8-9

mosaic, and a bigger mosaic.”⁴⁰³ The letter suggests the considerable leeway that Kootz enjoyed in developing these architectural commissions, as well as his impressive negotiating skills: Hofmann’s fee for the mosaic was \$10,000, a good deal more than the \$1,500 offered Gyorgy Kepes for a tile design in the same building.⁴⁰⁴ Furthermore, the letter gives a glimpse into Kootz’s role in navigating the layers of municipal bureaucracy. He requests Hofmann’s prompt reply, “so that I may immediately present your name to the Board of Education for approval,” and he implies that he will present Hofmann’s sketches to the Art Commission, the board that retained final approval over all art and architecture in city buildings.⁴⁰⁵ Given the conservative reputation of the Art Commission—this was the same board to which Bolotowsky submitted his statement justifying abstraction in a hospital—this was an important, and difficult, job.⁴⁰⁶ Similar boards and authorities would have been involved in the Gottlieb project, where Kootz and Kelly and Gruzen would have had to obtain approval from the building committee, the rabbi, and the congregation.

The two projects also depended on the active interest of architects—not only Kelly and Gruzen, but others who proselytized for the cause of modern art in architecture. It is difficult to imagine Hofmann’s turn to mosaic without the brief for the Chimbote

⁴⁰³ Samuel M. Kootz to Hans Hofmann, August 14, 1956, AAA, HH, box 2, folder 76. The contract was officially awarded to Kelly and Gruzen in 1956, but they had begun drawing up plans as early as 1953; see Silver, *Walls of Color*, 54. According to Barbara Michaels, author of the manuscript *Sam Kootz, Picasso, and the Rise of Abstract Expressionism*, Kootz had known Gruzen since the 1930s. I am grateful to Michaels for sharing her extensive knowledge of Kootz and the gallery with me.

⁴⁰⁴ Kootz kept one-third, or \$6,666.67, of the sum for his commission fee. It seems that neither the Hare sculpture nor the Kepes tile mural were ever completed.

⁴⁰⁵ Samuel M. Kootz to Hans Hofmann, August 14, 1956, AAA, HH, box 2, folder 76.

⁴⁰⁶ Indeed, the board rejected Hofmann’s original submission in April 1957; they approved the final one that September. See Silver, *Walls of Color*, 58-59.

project from Sert and Wiener, themselves active proponents of a new synthesis of the arts. William Lescaze also deserves mention here: he had remained an advocate of art in architecture since the murals for his Williamsburg Houses, and it was through his intervention—as a jury-member for a 1953 stained-glass exhibition—that Gottlieb first experimented with the medium.⁴⁰⁷ As Lescaze explained, the jury for the show invited artists, including Gottlieb, “who had not previously used stained glass but whose work, in the form of painting or another visual art, seemed to demonstrate [...] a potential ability to express themselves through that medium.”⁴⁰⁸ Lescaze urged his fellow architects to follow his lead: just as the architect should “keep himself informed” about building codes and new techniques, “so should he also know what artists are doing, in what medium they are working, which one does what kind of thing, and which one another.” “If,” he concluded, “our artists’ contribution is what I believe we want it to be—an integrated and forceful expression of our civilization—there is only one way for us to obtain it: to create the circumstances which will make it possible for them to work together, to dream together with the architect.”⁴⁰⁹

Finally, the two mural projects, both for buildings with civic functions, illustrate interesting changes and continuities in the American attitude to art in public spaces.

Fundamental differences separate the Gottlieb and Hofmann murals from their predecessors under the Federal Art Project (FAP), in particular with respect to patronage:

⁴⁰⁷ “New Work in Stained Glass by Contemporary Americans” was organized by the American Federation of the Arts and the Stained Glass Association of America, and exhibited at Grace Borgenicht Gallery (September 8-26, 1953) and the Architectural League of New York (October 15–November 15, 1953). For the catalogue and artists’ statements, see AAA, ALNY, box 66, folder 83.

⁴⁰⁸ William Lescaze, “The Arts for and in Buildings,” *Liturgical Arts* 22.2 (February 1954): 49-51; 50.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

the Printing School mural was funded by municipal, not federal, money, and the Steinberg House was supported by the synagogue—that is, without government funds of any kind. And yet the language used by viewers of these postwar murals is strikingly similar to the one that flourished to describe and advocate for public art in the 1930s. Gottlieb’s façade represented, for one critic, “one more step in the march of advanced modern art from its isolated position in museums, galleries and relatively few private homes, toward an integrated community role.”⁴¹⁰ Murals like Hofmann’s, wrote another, were included in schools as “part of the city’s enlightened educational program as well as for esthetic and social reasons,” bringing art to students who had little or no contact with it.⁴¹¹ In an extended discussion of new Jewish community centers, including the Steinberg House, William Schack trumpeted art’s role in language that strongly echoes the public culture discourse of the New Deal: “Does not good art make as strong a foundation for a community center as reinforced concrete?” Art should not be an “esoteric exercise,” but rather “an integral part” of the environment. “To be surrounded by fine works of art that are simply part of the décor and have no narrow didactic intention,” he argues, “can do more good than any amount of classroom instruction.”⁴¹²

This rhetoric suggests that the roles envisioned for art under the FAP continued well into the postwar period, even as the public spaces that hosted such art were far more atomized, detached from the central directing ethos of the federal government. Neither Gottlieb’s façade nor Hofmann’s mosaic were part of a federal project to employ

⁴¹⁰ Genauer, “Art and Artists: Wall of Glass.”

⁴¹¹ “Tokens of Art in City Schools,” *Progressive Architecture* 40.4 (April 1959): 146-51; 147.

⁴¹² William Schack, “Synagogue Art Today: I,” *Commentary* (December 1955): 548-53; 552.

Americans; the communities envisioned by these murals were smaller and more specific, schools and congregations that lacked the national horizon of the New Deal.

Nevertheless, these institutions became important symbols of a renewed, if more dispersed, civic life in the postwar American landscape. In this role, they also became significant sites for, and patrons of, the arts. Abstraction was a compelling, if not entirely unproblematic, choice for such institutions. On the one hand, as noted, its allusions to inward experience and lack of established meanings could make it insufficient to the symbolic requirements of public art. On the other hand, these same qualities imbued abstraction with a generality and emotional appeal that allowed it to signify, albeit in vague terms, grander human or civic values, appropriate to sites like schools, synagogues, churches, and community centers.⁴¹³

Abstraction would also be pressed into service by a different force reshaping postwar public space, the modern corporation. In the decade after World War II, New York created office space at the rate of almost 2 million square feet per year.⁴¹⁴ By the mid-1950s, these new office buildings, especially when they served as company headquarters, included public amenities at ground level, like plazas and large lobbies.

⁴¹³ In this regard, it is interesting to note that, in the United States and Western Europe more broadly, abstraction was particularly popular in postwar international centers and religious spaces—both sites attempting to articulate broader, universal values for the modern world. Abstraction was the language of choice, for example, for art in the United Nations Headquarters in New York and the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. On American churches and synagogues decorated with abstract art, see Emily Genauer, “Works of Faith,” *New York Herald Tribune: This Week Magazine*, May 24, 1953, section 7, 12; “Faith Speaking Through Modern Art,” *Fortune* (December 1953): 123-29; and Robert Bradbury, “The Patron Church,” *Craft Horizons* 17.6 (November 1957): 30-34. For a period overview of art in churches in Europe, see Paul F. Damaz, *Art in European Architecture. Synthèse Des Arts* (New York: Reinhold, 1956), 149-80.

⁴¹⁴ Leonard Wallock, ed., *New York: Culture Capital of the World* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 35.

Art, too, became part of the corporate building's publicity campaign, as did the abstract mural—beginning with Hofmann's 1956 mosaic for the lobby of 711 Third Avenue.

Abstraction and the Modern Office Lobby

In January 1956, as the final girders of Manhattan's Third Avenue elevated line were being cleared away, a nineteen-story office tower by William Lescaze rose along the newly open and airy midtown stretch of Third Avenue. A somewhat awkward variation on Howe and Lescaze's PSFS building in Philadelphia, 711 Third Avenue signaled the definitive arrival of the postwar building boom to the eastside avenue.⁴¹⁵ The lobby also signaled the definitive arrival of postwar art in industry: from the street, tantalizing glimpses of mosaic glistened through the glass façade; inside, the mosaic unfolded into "one of the most unusual murals ever made for a New York skyscraper," "an abstract" by Hans Hofmann surrounding the service core that housed the elevators (**fig. 4.28**).⁴¹⁶ Above the mosaic-wrapped elevators sat a dark blue ceiling, while veined and speckled pink marble covered the walls and floor. The use of color continued on the façade, where the "gleam" of white and blue brick caught critics' attention.⁴¹⁷ "Color and Art Help an Office Lobby," read the headline in *Architectural Forum*, which credited the lobby's

⁴¹⁵ On the building, see Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 425.

⁴¹⁶ Meyer Berger, "Mural in Venetian Glass Mosaic is Installed in Skyscraper," *New York Times*, April 4, 1956, 32. On Hofmann's mural, see Silver, *Walls of Color*; and Tina Dickey, *Color Creates Light: Studies with Hans Hofmann* (Salt Spring Island, B.C.: Trillistar Books, 2011).

⁴¹⁷ Charles Grutzner, "New Gleam Comes Into City Skyline," *New York Times*, March 18, 1956, 122. See also Grutzner, "3rd Ave. Blossoms as El Disappears," *New York Times*, February 2, 1956, 25.

artwork with “lending bright notes to a neighborhood only recently under the shadow of the Third Ave. El.”⁴¹⁸

Hofmann’s was not the first mural for a New York skyscraper. In the 1920s and early 1930s, several architects turned to muralists to complete the lobbies of their Art Deco towers. By June 1930, the *Times* could assert that “the turning point apparently has been reached and the modern architect has begun to seek color for his walls and ceilings.”⁴¹⁹ If in some cases such decoration surrounded the viewer—as in Hildreth Meière’s red and gold mosaic interior for 1 Wall Street (1931)—in others, the mural acted as a focal point, frequently on the ceiling. In office and banking towers, murals by Putnam Brinley, Arthur Covey, and Edward Trumbull struck a balance between abstract patterning and depictions of city history and industry.⁴²⁰ Such works beautified the public and semi-public vestibules and corridors of building lobbies, and earned a level of prestige for their companies.

As corporate construction picked up after the Depression and war years, the office lobby again became an important site for murals. Like Meière and Brinley before them, postwar artists were hired as muralists because of the value and prestige they could add to buildings. Yet the nature of this value, in both financial and cultural terms, was conditioned by a number of changes in postwar art, architecture, and corporate life. If in 1930, the critic for the *Times* could glimpse in Brinley’s Art Deco mural “an entering

⁴¹⁸ “Color and Art Help an Office Building,” *Architectural Forum* (October 1956): 154-5.

⁴¹⁹ Cary, “The Painting on the Wall Moves Toward Modernism.”

⁴²⁰ See, as examples, the lobby murals at 120 Wall Street, the Chrysler Building, the Squibb Building, and the Barclay-Vesey Building (formerly the New York Telephone Company Building).

wedge for purely abstract design in public buildings,”⁴²¹ by the mid-1950s, entering wedges were hardly required: abstraction had reached a level of acceptance and institutionalization in both the art world and popular culture. Furthermore, if publicity had always been part of the calculation behind such commissions, that publicity was now managed through a much more impressive machinery of advertising and public relations. The developers for 711 Third Avenue, William Kaufman and Jack Weiler, put out a pamphlet describing the Hofmann mosaic in their lobby, and held an opening for the mural’s unveiling.⁴²² Corporate buildings, and especially the rate at which they went up throughout the city, also prompted anxieties about mass man and an increasingly technological society, anxieties that influenced how lobby art was seen and understood.

In concluding this chapter, I turn to three further office lobbies decorated with abstract murals during the decade. Like Hofmann’s at 711 Third Avenue, these murals were located in edifices that made use, with varying degrees of sophistication, of a modernist architectural vocabulary deemed suitable for the office building. Furthermore, the buildings themselves all heralded new development, from revitalized Third Avenue, to Sixth Avenue’s building boom, to the skyscraper’s return to lower Manhattan (**fig. 4.29**). The murals by Hofmann, Max Spivak, Lee Krasner, Friz Glarner, and Josef Albers were thus all involved, on the level of patronage and viewership, with the changing geography of capital in early postwar New York. The murals and their viewers responded to this condition in various ways: abstraction was seen in these lobbies as, by turns, a humanizing force in modernism’s skin-and-bones architecture, an analog to speculative

⁴²¹ Cary, “The Painting on the Wall Moves Toward Modernism.”

⁴²² For the pamphlet, see “Preview of Mosaic,” April 18, 1956, AAA, KGR, reel 1320, frames 992 ff.

capital, a resistant force within the mania for explosive growth, and a stylish emblem of the corporate brand.

Max Spivak at 111 West Fortieth Street (1958)

The construction of 111 West Fortieth Street in 1956, a 34-story office tower by Kahn and Jacobs and Sydney Goldstone on Sixth Avenue, was greeted with excitement by city observers: “old Sixth Avenue at long last is coming into its own,” declared the *Times* (fig. 4.30).⁴²³ If the tower heralded the return of new business construction to the midtown section of the avenue (all but halted since the erection of Rockefeller Center during the Depression), it also signaled a shift for a particular sector, New York’s textile industry. Previously clustered around Worth Street in lower Manhattan, the industry began relocating to the midtown Garment District in the 1920s. This relocation picked up steam again in the postwar years, becoming “a leading factor in the emergence” of Sixth Avenue, and earning such names for Fortieth Street as “Worth Street North.”⁴²⁴ The Union Dime Savings Bank, which owned the building lot and leased it for development, had its origins in the textile trade of the nineteenth century, a fact not lost on contemporaries, who commented on the bank “cementing” its “traditional textile ties.”⁴²⁵ The five-story Beaux-Arts edifice that Union Dime had inhabited for the last several decades on the lot was razed, and the bank took up accommodations in the new skyscraper in May 1958.

⁴²³ Maurice Foley, “Avenue of Americas Benefits from Influx of Textile Firms,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1956, R1. On the building, subsequently named 1065 Avenue of the Americas and now 5 Bryant Park, see Stern et al., 396.

⁴²⁴ Foley, “Avenue of Americas Benefits from Influx of Textile Firms,” R1.

⁴²⁵ “Union Dime Cementing Traditional Textile Ties,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1958, 52.

With Union Dime on the ground floor, the new building retained some of its former appearance as a company headquarters. This was reinforced, in architectural terms, with the addition of a large mosaic mural on the façade of the building's entrance loggia (**fig. 4.31**). Set back about fifteen feet from the building's profile, the entryway carves out a sheltered cube of space between Fortieth Street and the building's glass doors, with two columns propping up the overhang. The mural, an impressive work by painter and mosaicist Spivak, fills the entire wall around the doors with a pattern of abstract forms. Black bands at the wall's upper and lower edges originally set the mural off and allowed it to 'float' in space, while, at the left and right ends, reflective stone walls extended the mural horizontally, the abstract forms reflected in the gleaming surface (**fig. 4.32**). The ceiling was clad in a speckled material that echoed the grainy appearance of the mosaic tesserae below. From within the entryway, the mural's palette is a muted beige, close in hue to the building's striped façade of off-white terracotta and brown brick. Viewed from across the street, meanwhile, the mural takes on a more vibrant appearance, a warm, yellowish rectangle of color set back from the sidewalk. The mural, wrote one critic, will "relieve the grayness of the lobby with 250,000 multicolored tesserae."⁴²⁶ Spivak's mosaics generally, wrote another, aim to "bring a sense of joy, vitality and excitement to public place and to humanize the stone and steel of modern living."⁴²⁷

Spivak had completed his first mosaic commission only ten years before, but he was already a leading mosaicist by the time of the Union Dime project, with murals

⁴²⁶ "Popularity of Mosaic Increases in Housing and Business Units," *New York Times*, September 9, 1956, R1.

⁴²⁷ Otis Gage, "Mosaics for the Millions," *Craft Horizons* 15.3 (May-June 1955): 35-37; 37.

installed in public schools, movie theaters, cafes, and hotels in New York and Los Angeles. In his mosaics and paintings, Spivak played freely with both abstraction and representation: in the Fortieth-Street mural, he developed a vocabulary based on the abstracted forms of the textile industry. Like Kootz's artists, Spivak was trained as a painter before working on murals, a fact that critics noted; a profile in *Craft Horizons* praised his ability to solve the "complex architectural problem" ("the physical situation, the cost, the scale, the significance, the harmony with other elements") while still designing with a painter's "sensitivity to the relations of form and color."⁴²⁸ Yet Spivak adopted the identity of muralist in a way that the Abstract Expressionists never did. If in the 1930s and 1940s he associated with various abstract painting groups in New York, by 1948 he was known primarily as a muralist and mosaicist.⁴²⁹ He was far more comfortable with the decorative dimension of mural work, and he regarded the successful mural as deeply embedded in, even subservient to, its architectural matrix: "The artist," he noted, "should consider his work as something which belongs to the architecture [...]. The artist wants a work of art, of course, but he should not consider his work as an independent piece of art."⁴³⁰

Like Hofmann's mural on the school façade, Spivak's mosaic enjoys an intimacy with viewers and pedestrians, in close reach as they walk by or enter the building. This closeness is compounded by the structure of the entryway: not only can a spectator reach

⁴²⁸ Gage, "Mosaics for the Millions, 35.

⁴²⁹ Spivak remains an artist difficult to categorize. More catholic in style than many of his peers, he also moved more freely among various groups, associating with the American Abstract Artists, with several of Arshile Gorky's students, and with the nucleus that became the Abstract Expressionists. He worked on both the mural and easel divisions of the FAP.

⁴³⁰ Max Spivak quoted in Eleanor Bitterman, *Art in Modern Architecture* (New York: Reinhold, 1959), 57.

out and touch the mosaic, but one feels surrounded by it in the semi-enclosure of the space. Beyond the glass doors, the lobby of 111 West Fortieth functions as a passageway, elevators on one side, running the length of the building through to Forty-First Street. In contrast to the lobby's narrow, utilitarian feel, the outdoor entryway, with its vibrant mural and ampler dimensions, thus constitutes a gathering spot, allowing the building's workers as well as passersby to pause for conversation, shelter from the weather, or a cigarette break. What might be a relatively banal entrance becomes, with the addition of the mural, something like a forecourt to the building. Spivak hoped murals like these would provoke a slower and more sustained form of viewing for pedestrians in a fast-paced, image-saturated world. One profile noted how he was "proud to have observed patrons in the lobby of the Calderone Theatre [...] study his abstract mural for as much as fifteen minutes before going in to see the movie."⁴³¹ An article in the *Times* the following year explained that "Mr. Spivak strives for what he calls a revival of impact in design. 'So many pictures, photographs and reproductions are in front of our eyes these days that people just don't look at them,' he says."⁴³²

If Spivak hoped his murals would arrest and re-engage passing spectators, others had more purely financial motivations. The same *Times* article explained how "The mosaic mural is the esthetic lure that builders" are increasingly using, an attractive "replacement for push-button features that are losing their competitive quality in standardization."⁴³³ This tension, between an art of careful attentiveness and a fast-paced

⁴³¹ Gage, "Mosaics for the Millions," 36. The article refers to Spivak's mosaic (1949) in the lobby of William Lescaze's Calderone Theater in Hempstead, Long Island.

⁴³² "Popularity of Mosaic Increases."

⁴³³ Ibid.

business world that was both its patron and its architectural setting, was pervasive in midcentury mural projects. There is a further hint of it in the mural's abstract shapes "inspired by the tools of the textile industry."⁴³⁴ Thin rods and pointed lines suggest needles and spindles, finned shapes and blocky forms evoke cuts of fabric and mannequins, and other forms seem derived from the complex machinery of sewing machines. As the *Times* reported, "Mr. Spivak is occupied with capturing the spirit of the atmosphere, of relating the tile to the particular subject of setting. In the textile building, his mural will [contain forms] symbolic of the spindle and the loom."⁴³⁵ Decorating the façade with such forms gave a historical dimension to what was otherwise a decidedly modern building. Spivak's midtown mural evinces an appreciation for setting and history even as new forces of development were rapidly altering the cityscape and the former ties between labor, capital, and light industry within it.

Lee Krasner at 2 Broadway (1959)

Like other abstract artists of her generation, Krasner worked on the Mural Division of the FAP; studies for two such murals survive, but neither was completed at full scale.⁴³⁶ The artist's first completed mural was realized two decades later, with the support not of government sponsorship but of corporate patronage and the boom in postwar office construction. Krasner's mural, an 86-foot long mosaic designed with her nephew, artist Ronald Stein, was installed over the entryway of 2 Broadway, at the tip of lower

⁴³⁴ "Mosaic Mural Adorns Entrance of New Skyscraper," *New York Times*, October 12, 1958, R14.

⁴³⁵ "Popularity of Mosaic Increases."

⁴³⁶ For extant sketches of Krasner's FAP murals, see Ellen G. Landau, *Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Abrams, 1995), nos. 118-26 and 141-63.

Manhattan, in 1959 (**fig. 4.34**). Like Spivak's mural at 111 West Fortieth Street, Krasner's mural is slightly recessed from the facade and crowns a row of glass doors that lead to the lobby. Yet details of its siting make for a very different experience: installed thirteen feet above the ground, the mural acts more as a banner—eye-catching but far above pedestrians' heads—than a spatial container or environment. In March 1959, as the fabrication of the mosaic was still in process, Krasner and Stein were commissioned to make a second mural for the building's Broad Street entrance, this one a smaller square of mosaic, again sited directly over glass doors to the lobby (**fig. 4.35**). Both mosaics use an unusual approach: rather than cutting the tiles into square, finely cut tesserae, Krasner and Stein had the slabs smashed into irregular, angled pieces. This imparts a subtle texture to the mural, which, like snakeskin or embossed leather, catches the light at myriad angles (**fig. 4.36**). The irregularity of each tessera is mirrored in the larger design, as well, which unfolds as a series of nested, craggy forms.

If the Union Dime tower brought construction back to Sixth Avenue, 2 Broadway played a similar role in lower Manhattan (**fig. 4.37**).⁴³⁷ The former center of New York City's business world, Wall Street lagged far behind midtown in postwar building; by 1952, a commerce magazine predicted that it would soon be nothing more than a "residential backwater."⁴³⁸ This changed in the latter half of the 1950s, with towers like 2 Broadway. Developed by the real estate firm Uris Brothers, 2 Broadway was the archetypal speculative office building, aiming for maximum return on investment. Its

⁴³⁷ Although some new construction began in lower Manhattan in the last half of the 1950s, Stern et al. note that "By virtue of its size, location and the historic preservation issues it raised, the Roth firm's Two Broadway [...] was the most significant postwar building in lower Manhattan up to that time" (Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 170).

⁴³⁸ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 170.

origins lay in a complicated series of transactions and leasebacks stretching back almost a decade. In the early 1950s, the plot, then home to George B. Post's 1884 Produce Exchange building, was eyed by broker Cushman and Wakefield as an ancillary to a separate development deal with RCA Communications. Uris Brothers were eventually brought in as developers, leasing the land rights and demolishing the 1884 structure.⁴³⁹ Uris hired the architecture firm Emery Roth and Sons, a frequent collaborator, after rejecting a design by Kahn, Jacobs, and Lescaze that would have filled less of the plot.⁴⁴⁰ The Roth architects in particular catered to the needs of the "speculative builder-owner" in the postwar years, emphasizing, in the words of a *Business Week* profile, "rentable space" and flexible floor arrangements over "esthetics."⁴⁴¹ As one developer put it, "Roth designs for the client who has to rent his building on the basis of a place to work in, not as a monument to posterity."⁴⁴²

The story behind the commission at 2 Broadway reveals several by now familiar features. The players included a well-known abstract artist, already working at large scale; a building developer, in this case Uris Brothers, happy to take on the extra cost of a commission for the presumed pay-off in media coverage and prestige; and an architect, Emery Roth, with close ties to the business community and an interest in art. (Another Uris and Roth joint venture, a building at 750 Third Avenue, included a relief mural by Kootz artist David Hare in the lobby.) A further crucial fact was the presence of B.H.

⁴³⁹ A more detailed history of the 2 Broadway plot can be found in "A Skyscraper out of a Tangle," *Business Week* 1590, February 20, 1960, 153-156.

⁴⁴⁰ Stern et al., *New York 1960*, 170.

⁴⁴¹ "Architect for Business in a City of Towers," *Business Week* 1722, September 1, 1962, 54-56.

⁴⁴² Quoted in "Architect for Business," 55.

Friedman, vice-president of Uris Brothers and nephew of the company's owners. An arts writer as well as a businessman, Friedman already knew Krasner's work, and he played the central role in overseeing the commission.⁴⁴³ The constellation of artistic interest in scale and abstraction, architectural interest in modern art, and corporate interest in art patronage mirror the conditions underlying the office murals of Hofmann and Spivak.

The architectural press uniformly disliked 2 Broadway. A scathing review by Douglas Haskell in *Architectural Forum* contrasted "high-style" "modern" buildings—like Seagram or Lever House in midtown, or like the Chase Manhattan Bank, designed but not yet completed a few blocks north—with 2 Broadway's ilk, "light, glassy and steely" "workaday money-makers" which were now "invad[ing]" lower Manhattan. Yet 2 Broadway's biggest sin was neither its "quick-return, low-cost" philosophy nor its thoughtless architecture with "acreages of modern 'curtain wall.'"⁴⁴⁴ Rather, it was the way it deployed these at a site of great urban and spatial importance: rather than retreating to a "modest 'background' street," 2 Broadway sat at a point "of climax in the city picture," its bulky form obscuring the "dramatic view of Broadway" visible from the harbor approach to lower Manhattan.⁴⁴⁵ The skyscrapers from finance's previous era at least "had the virtue of [their] defects," Haskell noted. Wall Street's "facades may have been overpretentious but they were composed; the buildings may have been miscast in stone, but the stone was carved and molded to catch the sun."⁴⁴⁶ 2 Broadway was a bulky,

⁴⁴³ Friedman would go on to write one of the first biographies of Jackson Pollock, *Energy Made Visible*, in 1972.

⁴⁴⁴ Douglas Haskell, "Off Tune on Broadway," *Architectural Forum* 110.2 (February 1959): 103-5; 103.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 103-4.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

uncomposed form with little respect for its neighbors or the neighborhood at large. “In view of the criticisms voiced above,” Haskell concluded his article, “it is a pleasure to report that, through the efforts of Uris’s B. H. Friedman, a distinguished mosaic mural by Artists Lee Krasner and Ronald Stein has been installed over the main entrance of the building.”⁴⁴⁷ For Haskell, Krasner’s mural was the saving grace of the building, the one “distinguished” accent on a lowbrow edifice.

If Haskell mentions the mural only in passing, two other critics provided more substantive responses. Leslie Katz, writing for the *Nation*, and B.H. Friedman, writing in *Craft Horizons*, evaluate the mural in nearly identical, but opposite, terms. Both cast the mural in relationship not only to its current building, but to the former Produce Exchange (**fig. 4.38**). And both understand its meaning as intimately bound up with the present conditions of corporate life.

Katz presents 2 Broadway as the perfect symbol of the “rapacious and calloused introversion” that marked American life at midcentury.⁴⁴⁸ “2 Broadway,” he writes, can hardly be called a building. Viewed from Bowling Green, it is more an *installation*, a package, a broad box encased in shiny wrapping, sheer, sharp and gleaming. This striking edifice, though it has a name (a number), presents an essentially anonymous and faceless personality. Its over-all effect is one of unmitigated self-assertion, negating everything in sight but itself—a glittering nonentity.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁴⁸ Leslie Katz, “Obituary for a Building,” *Nation*, July 18, 1959, 37-38; 38.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 37.

The former Produce Exchange building, demolished to make way for 2 Broadway, “gave you a sense of relation to place and moment.”⁴⁵⁰ The new tower, by contrast, had no relation to anything beyond itself: “Designed ‘purely,’ in terms of economic function, it seems to contain the maximum number of floors and space feasible within existing building code requirements.” Strikingly, Katz reads Krasner’s mural as betraying the same impulse:

As a gesture of art and decorative daring, the façade is glorified and enshrined at its entranceway by a large, wide, abstract mosaic, an innocuous arabesque of round and jagged colored shapes, (constructed of fragments of Venetian glass expressly shattered for the purpose). Like the building, this mosaic is committed to nothing beyond the mystique and logic of its own specialized, abstract function as a thing apart, a law unto itself, a disrelation.

Like the building, Krasner’s “pure” abstraction rejects any relationship to site or history. If the Produce Exchange “was built to last, with a consciousness of the past and a respect for the future,” the new tower and its mural symbolize “an age tyrannized by growth, obsolescence, and quick turn-over.” For Katz, Krasner’s mural was a visual analog to the same speculative building frenzy that wrought 2 Broadway itself. “The spirit of liberation” that characterized the best of modernism, Katz laments, has become “the freedom to be trivial” and meaningless.⁴⁵¹

In an extended essay in *Craft Horizons*, published six months before Katz’s diatribe, Friedman offers a glowing evaluation of the mural—unsurprising, given that he

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 38.

helped commission the work and shepherded it through the process. What is surprising, however, is how closely his concerns mirror those of Katz. Like the other writer, Friedman begins with an evocation of the old Produce Exchange, describing it in glowing terms and meditating on the passage of time and the contrast between tradition and modernity. Friedman does not call the new building faceless and superficial, but he does see the need to “contend with, to relieve, to make human” its “out-size, 307-foot blockfront on Broadway.”⁴⁵² Humanizing this mass is uniquely difficult because of the nature of modern materials: “what was lacking,” Friedman writes, “was the interest of the ornamentation and texture of the old red brick [Produce Exchange] and the effects upon it of time itself. For even time, the weathering and ‘character-giving’ friend of undistinguished architecture, cannot help aluminum and glass.”⁴⁵³ Friedman suggests that Krasner’s mural is, if not an outright reference, at least a ghostly echo of the masonry structure that used to occupy the site. Indeed, there is something hard, flinty, and enduring about the mural; its riven, cracked surface suggests an aerial view of terrain or sedimented fossil layers. In the end, Friedman hedges his bets, portraying the mural as both a link with the past and an emblem of the present. The mosaic and cement of the mural will add something “textural,” he writes, but will also “stay young with the building.”⁴⁵⁴

Fritz Glarner and Josef Albers in the Time & Life Building (1960-61)

⁴⁵² B.H. Friedman, “Manhattan Mosaic,” *Craft Horizons* 19.1 (January-February 1959): 26-29; 26.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

Presenting the Time & Life Building to its readers in 1960, *Architectural Forum*—publishing from within the walls of the new structure—described the 47-story tower as a hybrid (**fig. 4.39**). It was not “a posh institutional job with small floors, with architecture honed Seagram-sharp at fancy cost.” But neither was it “a cheap, crowded rental building,” taking up as much of the plot as possible. Rather, the edifice was something new: “In skyscraper society, the Time & Life Building is upper-middle-class.”⁴⁵⁵ Part real estate deal and part headquarters for Rockefeller Center’s best-known media tenant, Time, Inc., the building charted a path between the prestige skyscraper, exemplified by Lever House and Seagram, and speculative towers, exemplified by 2 Broadway. When it was completed in 1959, it stood in relative isolation on the west side of Sixth Avenue, an early monument in the avenue’s building boom that had begun with the Union Dime tower the year before. Over the next decade and a half, that isolation would be decisively undone, with construction turning the middle stretch of Sixth Avenue into a forest of steel-and-glass skyscrapers.

The Time & Life Building was designed by Harrison, Abramowitz, and Harris, with Michael Harris as lead architect, but most accounts give Wallace Harrison the main role in planning the lobby and selecting the art for it. Harrison commissioned two large abstract murals by Fritz Glarner and Josef Albers. As with Hofmann’s mural at 711 Third Avenue, Harrison chose the inner service core of the lobby as the appropriate site for large-scale artwork (**fig. 4.40**). Glarner’s *Relational Painting #88* (1960), a syncopated geometry of columns and rectangles, was placed on the outside of the easternmost elevator bank, forming a wall of the well-trafficked corridor between Fiftieth and Fifty-

⁴⁵⁵ “Two-Purpose Tower,” *Architectural Forum* 113.2 (August 1960): 74-81; 75.

First Streets (**fig. 4.41**). Four elevator rows over, at the lobby's western end, Albers's *Portals* (1961) consisted of two nested squares with mitered edges—an elaboration of the artist's *Homage to the Square* series—in carrara glass and bronze (**fig. 4.42**).⁴⁵⁶ The two murals were not the only instances of abstract patterning in the lobby. Cladding the rest of the elevator banks were steel panels with large round 'buttons' (**fig. 4.43**). On the floor, a wavy terrazzo pattern in gray and white, with stainless steel edging, added a jazzy (and, by several accounts, Latin American) flair to the rectilinear space, spilling out of the lobby to cover the sidewalk and plaza around the building.⁴⁵⁷

Glarner's mural was one of many *Relational Paintings* the artist had made since the 1940s. The Swiss-American artist had joined the AAA group soon after his arrival in New York in 1936, and he became an important advocate of Mondrian, whom he had known since the 1920s, in the United States. (Along with Harry Holtzman, Glarner took the famous 1944 photographs of Mondrian's studio.) The influence of Mondrian, and especially his *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942-3), is evident in the mural's composition of stacked rectangles and its palette of primary colors with grey, white, and black. In a manner akin to Albert Swinden's mural at the Chronic Diseases Hospital, though with less reliance on continuous horizontal lines, Glarner layers and abuts his rectangles to impart a sense of rhythm and lightness to the mural's geometry. Changes in color, both

⁴⁵⁶ As Neal David Benezra notes, this arrangement constitutes a fifth type of the *Homage to the Square* compositions that Albers explored in the late 1950s, in which two different colors alternate in the same concentric square, joined at mitered edges. See Neal David Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers* (New York: Garland, 1985), 79-80.

⁴⁵⁷ The origin of this patterning has been debated, but many see it as a reference to Latin American culture, befitting the "Avenue of the Americas" (as Sixth Avenue was renamed in 1945), period architectural interest in Brazil, and the business interests of both the Rockefellers and Time, Inc. in South America. Possible sources include the sidewalk of the Copacabana Beach in Rio, Oscar Niemeyer's Belo Horizonte restaurant, and Harrison and Abramowitz's own designs for the United Nations building and the Alcoa Building in Pittsburgh.

abrupt and subtle, continually alter one's sense of figure, ground, and direction: two almost identical whites meet at a right angle; what seemed a single gray background comes into focus, in one area, as three distinct (and distinctly colored) shapes; the yellow end of a red beam becomes its own, vertical column. *Architectural Forum* responded to this play of forms, noting the mural "is all primary red, yellow, blue, plus two grays and black and white, cheering but puzzling spectators as a sort of skew-gee Mondrian."⁴⁵⁸

At the other end of the lobby, Albers's mural was more integrated into, even camouflaged within, its architectural site. This was due in large part to its choice of medium: like the maroon ceiling above, made of glass, and the elevator paneling around the corner, made of steel, Albers's *Portals* reject paint and canvas for the materials of building. The consonances between lobby and mural continue in color, texture, and pattern. Echoing the terrazzo floor below, the outer edges of the "portals" alternate stripes of white and beige. Similarly, the four brushed bronze squares at the center of each "portal" echo the directional brushing of the elevator panels, which, as in the mural, alternates between horizontal and vertical. In his study of Albers's architectural sculpture and murals, Neal David Benezra deems the Time & Life works ultimately "disappointing," in large part because of their placement, at the back of the lobby and without the "prominence" of other art.⁴⁵⁹ Yet this mistakes the function that Albers's mural fulfills here. Like Glarner, *Portals* creates a wall, not a prominent focal point, a

⁴⁵⁸ "Two-Purpose Tower," 80.

⁴⁵⁹ Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*, 77, 78.

background for a busy urban lobby. The Time & Life murals are the opposite of monumental; they strive instead for ambience.⁴⁶⁰

The choice of Albers and Glarner reflects Harrison's own artistic taste. Unlike Kelly and Gruzen or Lescaze (or, for that matter, B.H. Friedman), who were open to gestural abstract painters like those from Kootz's stable, Harrison embraced European modernists and the Mondrian-influenced abstraction of the AAA. Harrison had known Albers since the early 1930s, and at midcentury he utilized both artists' work in several of his projects.⁴⁶¹ In the Time & Life lobby, Harrison presents their geometric abstraction in a decidedly stylish context. The lustrous squares and vibrant rectangles of the two murals add a chic, sophisticated flavor to the lobby, much like the terrazzo floor and steel-clad elevators.⁴⁶² More than any other office mural discussed in this chapter, the Time & Life works are coordinated with the personality and brand of the building's lobby at large.⁴⁶³

What did abstraction offer the modern office lobby? An overarching theme was abstraction's ability to add an emotional and human dimension to a rational, steel-and-glass world. Having "created his modular, glass-walled office structures," *Fortune*

⁴⁶⁰ Indeed, the "monumental" work of the Time & Life building is done not in the lobby at all, which serves primarily as a series of passages to move people to the elevators and escalators, but rather in the plaza outside along Sixth Avenue.

⁴⁶¹ Albers's first New York mural was for Harrison's Corning Glass Building; Glarner's murals were installed in Harrison's U.N. Building and in the Rockefeller apartment on Fifth Avenue. On Harrison and Albers, see Benezra, *The Murals and Sculpture of Josef Albers*, 71. On Harrison and Glarner, see Nancy J. Troy, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), 194-97.

⁴⁶² Indeed, one of the rare complaints about the building from period critics was that its lobby was *too* stylish and ostentatious. See, for example, Ada Louise Huxtable, "Some New Skyscrapers and How They Grew," *New York Times*, November 6, 1960, X12.

⁴⁶³ The coordination of lobby with corporate brand continues, to a degree, today. Publicity concerning the lobby's 2016-17 renovation prominently features Glarner's mural, used as a backdrop to young, fashionable office workers. Glarner's palette also forms the basis for the campaign's color scheme (publicity poster, Time & Life lobby, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, December 2016).

magazine noted, the architect has recently “been able to persuade matter-of-fact businessmen of the desirability of warming up the spaces.”⁴⁶⁴ Emily Genauer tracked the same development, but across the cityscape at large:

as our new buildings went up, and our streets took on the look of endless canyons of glittering glass walls and little varying steel grids, with nothing to relieve their bleak monotony or even, in the best examples, to warm their stern perfection, the very human need grew for something more.⁴⁶⁵

That “more” was to be found in abstraction. Ada Louise Huxtable offered one of the more sophisticated arguments at midcentury for abstraction as a means of enriching and enlivening the built environment. “The large scale, the excitement, the explosive color and the intricate, often sensuous, patterns of abstract art,” she wrote in a piece for the *New York Times*, “add congenial richness to the austerity of today’s building forms.”⁴⁶⁶

Such claims represent a shift from the arguments for abstract art in the 1930s, when architects and critics had insisted upon the fundamental similarity between architecture and abstract painting. In 1938, *Time* magazine had written about the Williamsburg murals, “If modern architecture relies on the beauty of abstract forms, why should it not employ, for certain chaste effects, the painting of pure abstractionists?”⁴⁶⁷ By the 1950s, what was wanted was not the “chaste” effect of color planes and floating

⁴⁶⁴ “The Corporate Splurge in Abstract Art,” *Fortune* (April 1960): 138-47; 138. My thanks to Sydney Skelton Simon for bringing this article to my attention, and for sharing her knowledge of midcentury corporate collecting with me.

⁴⁶⁵ Emily Genauer, “Here’s How and Why Business Buys American Art,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 20, 1960.

⁴⁶⁶ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Art with Architecture: New Terms of an Old Alliance,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1959, X20.

⁴⁶⁷ “Architectural Painting,” *Time*, 39.

forms, but something quite different. “The individualized, warmly human touch of the personally created work of art,” Huxtable wrote in another article, “is a natural complement and proper completion for today’s standardized, impersonal construction of mass-produced modular elements.”⁴⁶⁸ The category of “warmly human” abstraction was capacious. *Fortune* magazine touted “action painting and abstract expressionism,” gestural forms of art, but led the article with an illustration of a bright green, geometric Albers painting.⁴⁶⁹ Vibrant color, as well as gesture or texture, could read as warmth and humanity for the modern office. For writers and workers of the day, this was not simply an aesthetic question. It also reflected, and could in turn affect, the soul of the businessman himself. Abstract art could serve as a necessary balm for the “high-pressure, materialistic world of business.”⁴⁷⁰ Or, in the words of *Fortune*, “abstract paintings can [...] provide a sense of emotional release, and may give the beholder a thin grip on humanity in a business-machine world.”⁴⁷¹

In addition to being good for businessmen, abstraction was good for business. Immediately after extolling abstract art’s emotional and human virtues, *Fortune* added, “As a speculative venture, abstract art has proved to be an unexpected bonanza both in prestige and in new business.”⁴⁷² In the words of William Kaufman, the developer who paid for Hofmann’s elevator mural at 711 Third Avenue, “It costs so little to have

⁴⁶⁸ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Art in Architecture 1959,” *Craft Horizons* (January-February 1959): 10-25; 13.

⁴⁶⁹ “Corporate Splurge,” 138.

⁴⁷⁰ Genauer, “Business Buys American Art.”

⁴⁷¹ “Corporate Splurge,” 138.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*

something outstanding, I'm amazed more 'spec' builders don't go in for it."⁴⁷³ Indeed, the mural tended to be a relatively cost-effective venture. At 2 Broadway, Uris paid less than \$30,000—a little over half a percent of the building's purported 40 million dollar cost—for the design and manufacture of Krasner's mural.⁴⁷⁴ Applied to the façade of the building in one, concentrated area, this nod to aesthetics was far less expensive than more pervasive architectural interventions, which could have altered construction schedules and eaten up valuable floor space. It was also more immediately noticeable and commodifiable, a fact that companies like Uris understood: after the mural's completion, Friedman proceeded with an extensive press campaign, sending out releases to the fine art, architecture, and mainstream publications, as well as to curators and directors of the major New York museums.⁴⁷⁵

In fact, it is here—at the juncture between corporate *noblesse oblige* and corporate investment return—that the abstract mural played its most important role for the postwar office tower. In general, the prestige buildings of modern architecture like Seagram and Chase Manhattan Bank devoted money to plazas, open lobbies, and sculpture. Such “extravagant gestures,” in the words of Huxtable, signified a generous spirit on the part of the company, rededicating a portion of the commercial world for public use. Three-dimensional elements, like fountains and sculpture, provided spatial markers within these plazas, at the same time that they emphasized “the most expensive

⁴⁷³ William Kaufman quoted in “Color and Art Help an Office Building,” 154.

⁴⁷⁴ Uris paid \$24,450 for the mural over the front entrance: \$9,000 to the artists and \$15,450 to mosaic fabricator Vincent Foscato. The second, smaller mural cost Uris a further \$5,200. See Friedman to Krasner and Stein, January 27, 1958 and March 16, 1959, AAA, PK, box 8, folders 4 and 5. The *New York Times* reported the building's cost as \$40,000,000 (“Cornerstone Yields a '57-Like View of '82,” June 20 1957, 31).

⁴⁷⁵ B.H. Friedman to Patricia Herald, May 11, 1959, AAA, PK, box 8, folder 5.

urban luxury that money can buy—space” itself.⁴⁷⁶ The abstract mural was not nearly as effective at conjuring up visions of a civic arena gifted to the public by the corporation. What it *was* good at, however, was marking entryways and congregation points without taking up leasable floor space, turning relatively pedestrian or utilitarian facades and lobbies into more attractive versions. It became a favorite choice of buildings further down the prestige ladder—like the speculative office tower and the “upper-middle-class” Time & Life—looking for a quick stamp of aesthetic appeal, publicity, or an interior that communicated the company’s brand. Scalable to architectural need, flexible to the client’s constraints, and marketable to an art-aware audience, abstract lobby murals absorbed many of the lessons that Kootz first exploited in his 1950 exhibition.⁴⁷⁷

Galleries, institutions, and corporations turned to abstraction for a variety of reasons in the postwar years. Their promoters explained abstraction’s appeal in terms of its warmth and humanity, a fact that reflects the age’s anxiety about how technology and mass culture were remaking the modern city. Yet the sites that abstract murals decorated were themselves subsumed under the very logics of consumerism, advertising, and corporate capitalism that provoked such anxieties, and for which abstraction was frequently prescribed as the antidote. My discussion has only scratched the surface of postwar abstract muralism in New York’s public spaces. Much work could be done on

⁴⁷⁶ Ada Louise Huxtable, “The Significance of Our New Skyscrapers,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1960, X13. On abstraction as a language of publicity in postwar urban sculpture, see

⁴⁷⁷ Reinhold Martin’s discussion of the speculative office building, and its competing needs of functional flexibility and organizational integration, is apt here. See Reinhold Martin, *The Organizational Complex: Architecture, Media, and Corporate Space* (Cambridge: MIT, 2003). For an excellent discussion of abstract sculpture as a language of publicity in postwar plazas and office buildings, see Amanda Douberley, “The Corporate Model: Sculpture, Architecture, and the American City, 1946-1975” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2015).

the relationship between publicly-sited abstract murals—those on the lobbies and façades of office towers—and the art within those same buildings. The murals by Mark Rothko and Sam Francis for, respectively, the Seagram building’s Four Seasons Restaurant and Chase Manhattan’s boardroom, suggest readings more in line with the themes of leisure, pleasure, and privacy explored in the domestic murals of Chapter 3. Another important question is how the nascent Studio Craft movement overlapped with and diverged from muralism in these years, a topic I have only touched on briefly.⁴⁷⁸ The return of geometric abstraction, alluded to here in the discussion of the Albers and Glarner murals, also deserves further exploration, as the style would come to dominate mural commissions in the following decade.⁴⁷⁹ Finally, Max Spivak awaits an extended and serious treatment of his corpus. His 1948 mosaic for Riker’s Cafeteria on Broadway (now a Ben and Jerry’s) anticipated by several years the abstract mosaics of Hofmann and Krasner, and his career straddled the worlds of fine art, craft, and design.

⁴⁷⁸ In addition to artists working in mosaic and glass, textile artists earned mural commissions in the postwar period. Jan Yoors, for example, produced both woven and painted works for modern buildings, such as his two-story red and black abstraction for Abraham Geller’s Queens Boulevard Medical Center (1958).

⁴⁷⁹ Ilya Bolotowsky, whose work forms such a central part of this dissertation’s first two chapters, would go on to realize numerous geometric murals in the 1960s and beyond, beginning with his sinuous, ribbon-like mural for Abraham Geller’s Cinema I (1963). That mural—which survived a major building renovation in 1988 but has since been removed or destroyed—shows Bolotowsky returning to the mass cultural engagement that marked his and Stuart Davis’s murals at the 1939 World’s Fair.

CONCLUSION

For close to three decades at midcentury, the abstract mural offered a viable way for modern art to be deeply integrated into the patterns and spaces of daily life. The nature of those spaces varied according to broader social and cultural changes, as well as building type and function. In the institutional buildings of the New Deal, artists and viewers saw abstract murals as consonant with a public art culture that emphasized experience and process over and against the complete, autonomous work sealed off from social life. Serving, variously, as a relaxing backdrop, a politicizing environment, or a therapeutic surround, New Deal abstract murals derived their efficacy, in part, from an experiential art culture that made the environmental abstraction pioneered by de Stijl and other European artists legible to American audiences. During these same years, abstraction was unframed for the pavilions of the New York World's Fair of 1939–40, producing poster-like murals, eye-catching billboards, and spectacular immersive displays. These murals addressed themselves to a mass audience of consumers and fairground visitors, people looking to be entertained and awed by the technological wonders of the World of Tomorrow. In the 1940s home, abstract murals enhanced the sense of pleasure and leisure afforded by the private domestic environment. If, around 1940, abstract painters hewed to relatively conventional format and placement in their domestic murals, Jackson Pollock introduced new approaches: he married the violence of history painting to the charm of décor, in his mural for Guggenheim, and he turned the gestural abstract surface into a freestanding wall in the open-plan house, in his projects at the end of the decade. In the 1950s, artists, critics, and viewers understood public abstraction as “humanizing” the

severity of modern architecture, the anonymity of corporate life, and the drabness of the city. In gracing the entrance areas of buildings, such murals became advertisers for the institutions and companies within, and, in the case of speculative office buildings, a popular means of signifying corporate largesse towards the public.

Despite these changes, across time period and institutional setting, a number of elements remained constant. Collaboration was a frequently frustrated ideal. Painters and architects emphasized how important it was to include murals at the earliest stages of building design; the failure to do so constitutes a leitmotif in period criticism and in the writings of artists and architects themselves. Nevertheless, many abstract murals achieved levels of real integration with their settings, through geometric designs that echoed columns and planes, textural and color similarities, and the use of curved rooms or semi-enclosed spaces. One common strategy was to emphasize, as much as possible, the endless, unframed nature of the mural: Albert Swinden's Williamsburg abstraction, which abutted and followed the shape of a lowered ceiling, left no space between itself and the adjoining walls; Pollock's mural for the Gellers wrapped around the back of its wooden support, so that the entire rectangle was one floating block of color; Spivak's mosaic at 111 West Fortieth Street fills the entrance wall from end to end and top to bottom. Another recurring issue was the problem of abstraction's invisibility. Although the valence of "decoration" changed over the course of the years studied here, both those who embraced the term and those who rejected its seeming triviality struggled with how to make art that was integral but not invisible, that adhered to and enhanced the architectural shell without disappearing into it.

Finally, and strikingly, viewers and critics in these years were perpetually waiting for muralism's true genius to flower. When critic S. Lane Faison noted, in 1953, that Adolph Gottlieb "and other potentially major mural painters of mid-century America" were "now ready for major opportunities" from architects, he was employing almost identical language to that used by E.A. Jewell a quarter of a century earlier, when the older critic had first spoken about the coming mural renaissance.⁴⁸⁰ In 1930, critic Elisabeth Luther Cary was awaiting the moment "when architecture and decoration are more strictly allied," and would yield "purely abstract design in public buildings"; twenty-eight years later, *Architectural Forum* was cheering the "new period of exuberant association" between "modern architecture" and "modern art," which "holds great promise for collaborative works."⁴⁸¹ Muralism's great promise, to remake the built environment into a more enriching one, and to do so in a way that united artists across specializations and for the public good, was a continually deferred one.

These recurring issues speak to fundamental and unresolved tensions regarding art, audience, and public space in the midcentury years. The Harry Holtzman abstract art demonstration, with which I opened Chapter 1, was only one of many attempts by artists to reach new audiences in these years. Art historian Kristina Wilson has studied how the exhibition, for example, was itself a tool for building audiences for modern art, and how competition with and openness to popular culture informed that effort. Concerns about locating a public for art are contemporaneous with concerns about the public more broadly in the United States. A long arc of popular criticism, from Walter Lippmann's

⁴⁸⁰ S. Lane Faison, Jr., "Art," *Nation*, January 10, 1953, 38.

⁴⁸¹ Cary, "The Painting on the Wall Moves Toward Modernism"; "Walls of Art," *Architectural Forum* (August 1958): 94-99; 95.

Public Opinion (1922) through John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), takes up the problem of the public in the modern age. For these and other writers, the rise of mass media, large-scale capitalism, and consumer society meant the dissolution of the public sphere and the blurring of once-distinct public and private activities. All of the cultural spaces within this dissertation are ones in which the boundary between public and private has been blurred, if not obliterated. The New Deal programs expanded government into formerly private arenas, such as employment, health, housing, and culture, to an unprecedented degree, and its institutions were often complex amalgams of public and private funding and ownership. At the Fair of 1939–40, the open grounds were largely given over to corporations, whose pavilions and displays made bids for new consumers amidst the crowds. The ostensibly private spaces of the 1940s home were shaped by, and reproduced in, the commercial spaces of furniture expos, art galleries, magazines, and the like. The postwar corporation created public art and public spaces for passersby, but always under the aegis of corporate brand.

From this perspective, the history of U.S. art from the 1930s through the 1950s does not involve a shift from public to private—a “transition from social to individual scale,” in the words of one art historian⁴⁸²—so much as a series of attempts to locate and engage audience in an age where public and private have lost their former distinctions.

⁴⁸² Francis V. O'Connor, “The 1930s: Notes on the Transition from Social to Individual Scale in the Art of the Depression Era,” in *American Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1913-1933*, eds. Joachimides and Rosenthal, 61-68 (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993). O'Connor develops this argument with specific reference to Pollock in O'Connor, “Jackson Pollock's *Mural* for Peggy Guggenheim.”

The illusions of “audience” and “destination” that Mumford identified in 1935⁴⁸³ were just as seductive in the 1940s and 1950s, because they continued to suggest a world in which public and place went unchallenged by the distorting effects of specialization, bureaucracy, and mass media. Further scholarship is needed to fold the story of abstract art told here into the complex terrain of American social and political history at midcentury.⁴⁸⁴ It may be that abstract muralism, an art which, as I have noted throughout, is adept at switching between monumental and intimate scales, indexes the dissolution of private-public boundaries with particular effectiveness.

I have chosen to end this study at a moment when abstract muralism was both ascendant and in decline. By the end of the 1950s, and with gathering momentum in the 1960s and beyond, abstract art was an exceedingly popular choice for mural commissions. Abstraction had, in a sense, won the battle for large-scale wall-painting that critics such as Jewell, or artists such as Swinden and Bolotowsky, had envisioned thirty years before. At the same time, abstraction had lost, or was losing, its central place within avant-garde art, as other styles, movements, and media—Pop art, neo-Dada, Happenings, collage—better expressed the desires and contradictions of an American consumer society in the throes of great but uneven affluence, rising social discontent, and large-scale urban renewal.⁴⁸⁵ By the mid-1960s, even as patronage was steady and press coverage enthusiastic, abstract murals had ceased to embody many of the utopian hopes,

⁴⁸³ Mumford, “Paints, Palettes, and the Public Wall;” see p. 22.

⁴⁸⁴ For American history that complicates the public-private distinction in the interwar and Cold War eras, see, for example, Williams, *City of Ambition*; and Samuel Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University, 2010).

⁴⁸⁵ For an excellent account of how 1960s art responded to issues of obsolescence, capitalist organization, and urban renewal, see Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York and the Rise of the Postmodern City* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009).

and accompanying frustrations, that made them so compelling to artists, architects, and critics in earlier years.

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