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Harriet W. Fowler

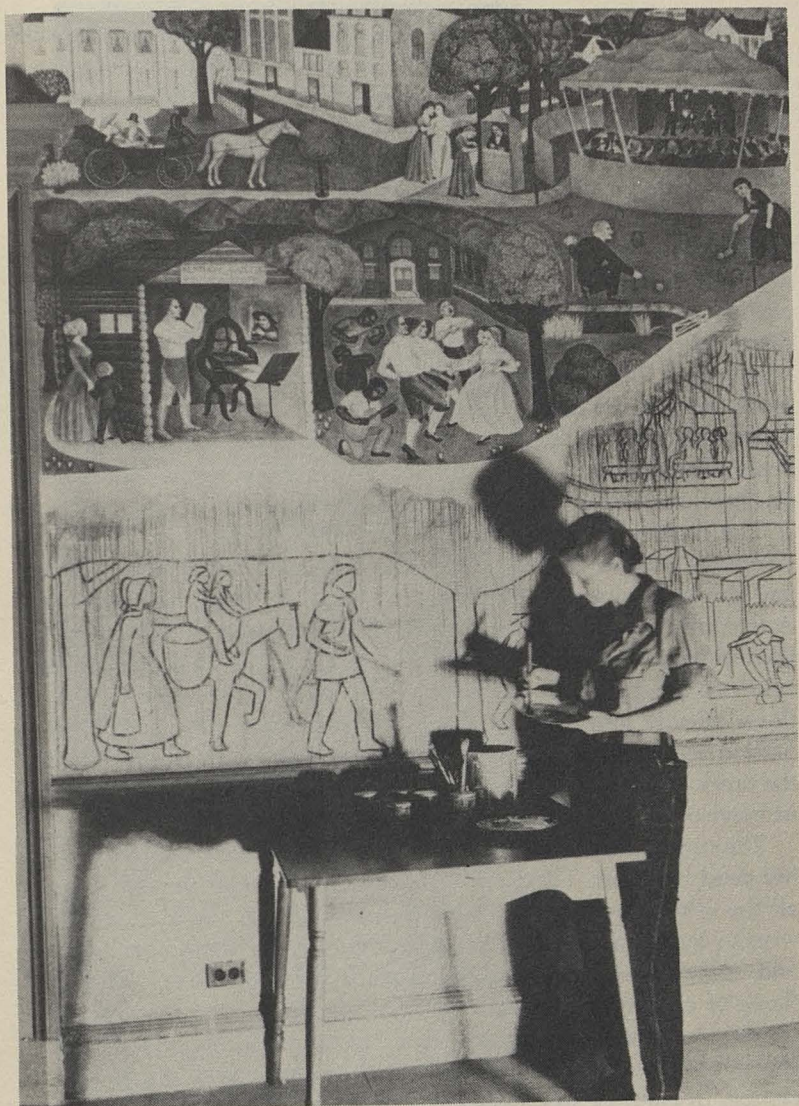
Over fifty years after its creation, the University of Kentucky's Memorial Hall mural, a Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) fresco by Ann Rice O'Hanlon, remains virtually unchanged from the time it was painted. Its colors have not lost their jewel-like tonalities, and its multi-layered composition is still crisply delineated.¹ Completed in 1934 for the PWAP, the mural represents a pictorial history of important central Kentucky events and landmarks. It admirably fulfills the directive of its New Deal sponsors to document "the American Scene," a task which O'Hanlon, a then-recent graduate of the university, adapted to the local scene as she also wove autobiographical and poetic elements into the rich narrative of central Kentucky history. While there are numerous other examples of public art from New Deal projects in the state of Kentucky,² the Memorial Hall mural is one of only forty-two PWAP frescoes in the country.³ The current renewed appreciation of 1930s art aside, the mural is a remarkable technical achievement, offering indisputable evidence that this laborious method of working pigment into properly prepared damp plaster creates a lasting art.⁴ Furthermore, seen in the context of other public art works from the Great Depression, the mural offers some illuminating points of comparison. While O'Hanlon and her fellow New Deal artists shared many of the same concerns in creating murals for the American public, the Memorial Hall work is unusual nonetheless in terms both of style and content.

O'Hanlon was invited to paint the fresco by Edward Rannells, chairman of the Art Department at the university, while she and her husband, Richard,⁵ were visiting in Lexington. Both O'Hanlons had recently completed graduate school at the California School of Fine Art (now the Art Institute of San Francisco) and learned fresco technique during their studies.⁶ The PWAP commissioned the work, along with several others in Lexington,⁷ through Rannells, who was well-known in academic circles and a logical choice to help identify Kentucky artists for federal art projects. The PWAP itself had been established in late 1933 and was funded

through the Civil Works Administration. It was conceived to provide work for artists in the decoration of non-federal buildings and parks. Quality of work was the most important criterion in the awarding of PWAP commissions. When the program ended in June of 1934, 3,749 artists had been employed nationally in the creation of over 15,000 works, including drawings, prints, sculpture, and diverse design projects.⁸ The great success of the program facilitated the establishment of the succeeding relief-based Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), the largest and most comprehensive federal art program of the Great Depression.⁹

In designing the mural, which is located in the Memorial Hall lobby,¹⁰ O'Hanlon was more fortunate than many other artists working on government commissions—they often had to incorporate such architectural obstacles as permanent bulletin boards and several doorways in the middle of their compositions. The Memorial Hall lobby wall (just outside the auditorium) is approximately forty feet long by eight feet high and is interrupted only by two doors. While the building plans do not specifically designate a mural on the lobby wall, O'Hanlon believes that the blank expanse "was obviously meant to be filled with either a mural or tapestry or some sort of decoration."¹¹ Other than the distraction of a chandelier, added in 1969, and occasional temporary signs for various building events, the mural wall is unobstructed for viewers coming in through the building's front doors.

O'Hanlon's first thought in designing the mural was to base her composition on the shape of the state of Kentucky. However, she now recalls that such an idea was "too abstract" for "the people in charge" (i.e., the PWAP administration). She eventually decided to base the design's organization on the golden section,¹² a scheme that the artist felt respected the classic architecture of the building. Another structural plan, of three main sections, is also apparent. Each of these three sections forms a horizontal layer or band. The lowest level, which shows the largest scale figures, focuses on the pioneers in central Kentucky history and their efforts to become established in the territory. The second level shows the progress made by succeeding generations as it depicts advances in education, engineering, science, and medicine. The top level deals with the rewards of progress and civilization: leisure and higher education. At the very top of the mural, a ribbon of curving



*Ann Rice O'Hanlon at work on the Memorial Hall mural, 1934.
(Courtesy of Ann Rice O'Hanlon)*

farmland tucks in behind a building and other scenery. To the side of the left auditorium door, O'Hanlon places a very large-scale male figure holding a hoe; beside the right auditorium door, a female figure stands with a book and a rake in her hand.

In looking at the wilderness level, the viewer is immediately aware of the relentless presence of trees: O'Hanlon's stylized forest seems to march across the lower band, its ballooning canopy punctuating the vertical compositional elements of tree trunks and stockade fences. This dominating forest is at once an architectonic element (much like the stockade fences) and a force to be mastered, to be beaten back by civilization. The four distinct vignettes in this level appear like diorama scenes as the viewer peers through the box of the forest. Furthermore, the dark, vibrant tonalities used here increase the onlooker's sense of claustrophobia and compression. It is as if the upper two-thirds of the mural rests on these pioneer ancestors and their efforts.

The extreme left scene depicts "Westward Expansion." A Kentucky pioneer couple, along with two children, a horse, a dog, and a cow (an improbably beautiful Jersey),¹³ begin the narrative. A trumpet vine in bloom entwines the corner tree; as one of only three flower representations in the entire mural,¹⁴ its presence here confirms the optimism and hope of the early settlers. This scene flows directly into the next story, an anecdote of how the Bryan Station settlers sent out one woman at a time to draw water from the creek to prevent an Indian attack. A warrior with tomahawk in hand observes the woman from behind a tree.

The center section represents a woman bent over the body of her dead husband. These two central figures, larger in scale than all the other mural figures (with the exception of the man and woman by the auditorium doors) symbolize the artist's parents, and, more generally, the sacrifices made by the pioneers. The flame of a flowering redbud glows within the forest, an expression of life's continual regeneration. The last scene in this lower band shows settlers at Harrodsburg working on home building and chores. In contrast to the first three scenes (in which the ever-present forest has pushed the figures into a very shallow frontal space, much like a frieze), this section presents a much deeper pictorial space. The forest wall has been edged back as the settlers become more established.

While the entire lower band can be read in a left-to-right fashion¹⁵ and clearly divides itself into four main blocks of



The central section of the Memorial Hall mural. (Photograph by Jeffrey L. Wagner)

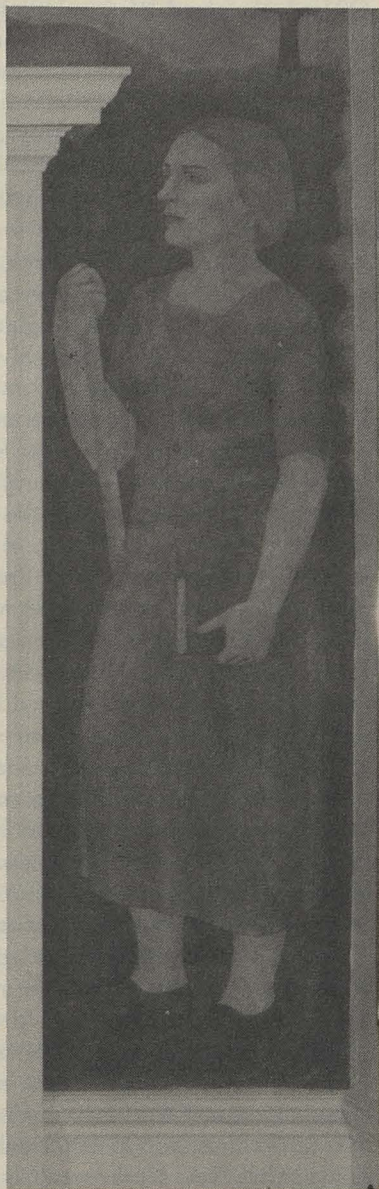
narrative, the upper two-thirds of the mural does not lend itself to such a linear reading. This change in narrative flow is produced by the compositional axes radiating from the central core of the mural. Within this level, O'Hanlon has placed the two chronologically earliest scenes at the extreme left and right of the wall. These are, respectively, John Bradford producing *The Kentucky Gazette* at the first printing press in Kentucky and Dr. Samuel Brown giving the first smallpox inoculation west of the Alleghenies. Between these two historic events, the artist depicts an onrush of civilization and progress in Kentucky: music and dancing, the first one-room schoolhouse in the area, the town tavern, the orrery¹⁶ at the old Sayre School, and an experiment with a model steamboat on Lexington's Town Branch. The real focus here, however, and, indeed, of the entire mural, is the central core of this middle section. It represents four slaves planting tobacco.¹⁷ Bent over their young plants, these profiled figures bring to mind Egyptian friezes as they create an elegiac rhythm across this section. Directly above, an early passenger train in Lexington is shown pulling away from a large crowd of people. The train wheels rest squarely on the backs of the slaves. This entire area forms two interlocking squares, the core of the golden section organization. Two diagonals radiate downward into the wilderness section; above, these diagonals form an apex near the top of the mural at the location of the University of Kentucky's Administration Building. This architectural symbol of civilization and higher education becomes a summation of all the efforts beneath, beginning with the heroism of the artist's ancestors, the endurance of the slaves, and the development of the passenger train. All three built the country.

In addition to the university campus, the upper level includes scenes of the Blue Grass Fair, a chautauqua, a courting couple, the psychology professor Dr. Henry Beaumont playing croquet, the Mary Todd Lincoln House, Loudon House, the Lexington Public Library, Gratz Park, and White Hall. There is even a tiny autobiographical insert of the artist's childhood home on Kentucky Avenue. Behind these scenes of leisure, O'Hanlon places rolling farmland curving between the edge of the wall and the ceiling, its smooth broad contours a counterpoint to the dense forest of the lower level.

At either end of the mural, flanking the auditorium doors, stand the two large-scale figures. On the left is a man based on



Detail of left of mural. (Photograph by Jeffrey L. Wagner)



Detail of right of mural. (Photograph by Jeffrey L. Wagner)

O'Hanlon's friend Wesley Littlefield, a Lexington poet who represents creativity in Lexington at the time the mural was painted. The right figure is a composite of the artist and her mother. Holding a rake and a history book, she represents the productivity and intellectuality of the female as well as her nurturing abilities. O'Hanlon calls these figures the "pulse points" of the mural, the "yin" and "yang" and the "digging" and "smoothing" principles. With proportions dwarfing those of the mural figures, they solve rather cleverly the architectural problem of the auditorium doors. They are also reminiscent of Renaissance donor figures. Just as such figures on the front of a diptych or triptych announced the biblical narrative within, O'Hanlon's giant forms direct our attention from present to past, from 1930s Lexington to the Kentucky of an earlier time.

Seen in the context of other federal art commissions of the early 1930s, the Memorial Hall mural offers some important points of comparison. To begin with, the PWAP itself, the forerunner of the Treasury Department Section of Fine Arts and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), focused on "the American Scene." Artists who were awarded PWAP commissions were asked to make the American land and people their subjects. Frequently the artists documented the local scene, selecting important events from regional history, especially for murals in public spaces. Murals, by their very nature, confront the viewer and demand attention—their sheer size compels one to participate in their narrative. Obviously, subject matter must be appropriate to such a format; history painting, particularly the documentation of local events for specific regional audiences, is a natural choice of subject for the muralist. Throughout the country, PWAP murals abound with the dramatic action of regional heroes.

In contrast to the big-muscled naturalism of many of these 1930s mural figures, O'Hanlon's people and places have a naive, almost primitive look. Their forms retain a flatness and linear quality that evoke early nineteenth-century American wall painting¹⁸ just as they bring to mind the long tradition of quilting in Kentucky. Furthermore, O'Hanlon deliberately avoids the dramatic foreshortening and deep illusionistic space of many other New Deal muralists, whose techniques seemingly catapult the narrative action into the viewer's own space. The Memorial Hall mural is, as already suggested in part, laid out much like a frieze. The overall organizing principle of the work,

however, the golden section, creates unexpected tensions in the mural since it changes the linear rhythm of the three horizontal bands. The other significant rhythmic variation occurs with the two end figures. More fully three-dimensional, more representational, these oversize figures mark a chronological juncture. Based on real-life people from the artist's life, they become doorways to the historical narrative unfolding between them.

All of these deliberate choices, the distortions in scale and perspective, the chronological shifts, and the dominant, complex linear rhythms, produce an overall effect of abstraction. They also reveal an eclecticism on O'Hanlon's part which the artist believes is crucial to the process of making art. She notes that art must be a "synthesis"—it must represent the essential truth of an idea, rather than simply duplicate or record the naturalistic appearance of an object. Obviously sympathetic to the idea of "making" rather than "matching" (to use Gombrich's classic terms¹⁹), O'Hanlon intends to represent a "truth" in each segment of the composition. Combined, these episodic truths form an organic whole. Considering the long process of actually painting the wall, it is not surprising that the mural reveals changes in the artist's attitude and confidence. Working from top to bottom, O'Hanlon shows increasing emphasis and self-assurance in the wilderness section and in the two end figures. These areas indicate a monumentality and strength which is not as evident in the upper sections, where a more decorative, tapestry-like appearance dominates.

What about the medium itself? O'Hanlon's choice of fresco, a remarkably difficult technique, is particularly interesting in the context of other New Deal murals. The fresco method demands the most exacting kind of improvisation: while the artist can control the preliminary cartoons and tracings marked on the wall as well as the plaster mix proportions, there can be no correcting the pigment once it is applied. To work in fresco is to make a total commitment to one's ideas. Here O'Hanlon, like a number of other contemporary artists, was influenced by the work of the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. In the 1920s he, along with his countrymen David Alvaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, revitalized the ancient art of true fresco by creating powerful murals depicting the myths and legends of the Mexican people. The work of these muralists inspired a whole generation of 1930s American artists which then looked to its own history to make a "people's art."

During a period of rich cross-cultural exchange between Mexico and the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s, many of the New Deal artists actually learned fresco technique from these Mexican practitioners.

The effect of the Mexican muralists on young American artists was profound. The Mexican model, combined with the unprecedented federal art patronage of the New Deal programs, gave these young artists not only aesthetic inspiration but the actual means to practice their art for the public. A remarkable optimism and idealism seem to have dominated O'Hanlon and her fellow artists as they worked through this nation's worst economic depression. Such high spirits also enabled many of them to carry out their works in fresco, despite the formidable challenges inherent in the medium.

O'Hanlon has commented that had she been older and wiser when first given the Memorial Hall commission, she would never have attempted such an undertaking. On the night of the mural's completion, she and her husband quietly drove out of town—there was no ceremony or event marking the occasion. She cried, she recalls, for at least twenty miles, thinking about the "terrible thing" she "inflicted on the Lexington community."²⁰ A year later she returned and decided that the mural "wasn't too bad." Over fifty years later, we can consider the astonishing changes that have occurred in the art world since the mural was painted and value in it the work's enduring legacy from the art of Depression America.

NOTES

¹This discussion is based on the author's conversations with Ann O'Hanlon as well as on the artist's public lecture at the University of Kentucky, 6 March 1986. The author is grateful to Mrs. O'Hanlon, Dee Amyx, William Hennessey, and Kim Spence for their assistance with this project.

²See Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984) for a partial listing of numerous New Deal-sponsored public works in the state.

³*Public Works of Art Project Report of the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury to Federal Emergency Relief Administrator, December 8, 1933-June 30, 1934* (Washington, D.C., 1934), p. 7.

⁴True fresco involves the application of pigment, dispersed in a water medium, to freshly laid wet plaster. The drying process might be called an

actual bonding—a chemical reaction occurs in which calcium carbonate is formed as a result of carbon dioxide from the air combining with the calcium hydrate in the wet plaster (see "The Technique of Mural Paintings and their Detachment," by Ugo Procacci, in *The Great Age of Fresco: Giotto to Pontormo* [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1968]). The preparation of the plaster surface is a complex process in true fresco which demands several preliminary layers and the tracing of cartoons or drawings on the next-to-last layer. Because the pigment can only be applied to wet plaster, the process is very time-consuming; any plaster sections that dry before being painted must be chipped off and fresh plaster reapplied. The technique produces a brilliant, nearly indestructible surface (air pollutants are the chief enemy) and is not to be confused with other types of wall painting using, for example, tempera or oil, on dry surfaces. This ancient method of painting was practiced by Minoans in Crete, and there are frescoes at Ajanta, India dating between 200 B.C. and A.D. 600. True fresco enjoyed its greatest flowering in Italy from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

⁵Richard O'Hanlon, the well-known sculptor, taught at the University of California at Berkeley from 1948 to 1974; he died in 1985.

⁶Richard O'Hanlon studied with Diego Rivera when the famous Mexican muralist taught at the school. Rivera left shortly before Ann arrived; she learned the technique from Ray Boynton and completed a mural for the dining room at the school. Richard O'Hanlon's knowledge of the technique was invaluable during the completion of the Lexington mural. Early each morning, he would set up the day's section of wet plaster for Ann to paint.

⁷PWAP records indicate that in addition to Ann O'Hanlon (listed under her maiden name of Rice) and her husband Richard, Clyde E. Foushee, William D. Frazer, and Joy Pride were awarded commissions (*Public Works of Art Project Report*, 65).

⁸*Ibid.*, 7.

⁹Rannells remained an important link with other federal art funding efforts. In 1934 he received a letter from Edward Bruce advising him of the newly-formed Treasury Department's Section in which Bruce warmly praised Rannells's work with the PWAP. Rannells would later select over 160 paintings, drawings, and prints for the University of Kentucky from the WPA/FAP's dispersal in 1943.

¹⁰The building itself was designed in 1929 by Franz C. Warner and W. R. McCornack of Cleveland, Ohio; Robert W. McMeekin of Lexington was the resident architect.

¹¹O'Hanlon adds: "I just happened along at the right time." (Letter to the author, 22 May 1987)

¹²A system of proportions, dating from antiquity and revived in Italian Renaissance architecture projects, based on the division of a line or figure into parts corresponding to the ratio 3:5. The proportion of the smaller part to the larger is equal to that of the larger to the whole.

¹³O'Hanlon commented during her lecture that she had no idea why she would have chosen such an elegant bovine to accompany the Kentucky pioneers.

¹⁴Crocuses appear by the printing press in the second level and tulips are shown by the Mary Todd Lincoln House near the top of the mural; all three floral objects seem appropriate to their corresponding level of civilization.

¹⁵The artist noted in her lecture that it was "very important" for her to begin the sequence of the mural at the left door, an insistence which, of course, confirms our sense of "reading" the lower part of the work.

¹⁶This mechanical model of the solar system has also been referred to as the "Barlow Planetarium" after its Lexington inventor, Thomas H. Barlow; the twelve-foot wide device was completed in 1851.

¹⁷Since the mid-1970s the University Administration has received several complaints alleging racist overtones in the mural, criticisms which are based on O'Hanlon's depiction of blacks in "demeaning, stereotyped" attitudes and roles. These charges seem ironic in view of the fact that the artist's intention throughout the mural was to document the importance of blacks to this nation's development and to point out the unequal social status suffered by black people throughout our national history. For example, the young man hiding in the tree outside the chautauqua tent must hear the debate from this awkward vantage point; the young black children watching the boys fishing are not allowed to fish there themselves; and the young girl buying a ticket to the chautauqua is socially ostracized, since she is an individual of mixed parentage. Like many other New Deal artists, O'Hanlon was extremely aware of the social injustices endured by black people. Some of these artists documented racial injustice in an impassioned, unequivocal way—others, like O'Hanlon, chose a quieter, more subtle method of making their commentaries.

¹⁸See, for example, Clay Lancaster, "Primitive Mural Painter of Kentucky: Alfred Cohen," *American Collector* 17 (December 1948): 6-8, 19.

¹⁹See E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), Bollingen Series xxxv, chapter 9, "The Analysis of Vision in Art," pp. 291 ff.

²⁰The mural was, in fact, received quite well in Lexington despite the artist's misgivings with and exhaustion from the project. A review contributed to the *Lexington Herald-Leader* dated 28 October 1934 enthusiastically notes the mural's historical value, technical achievement, and originality, commenting specifically that "there is no imitation of the Mexican, Rivera, in her (O'Hanlon's) work." The writer concluded by stressing that the painting deserved the "appreciation and recognition of every Lexingtonian."