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NEW DEAL MURALS IN KENTUCKY POST OFFICES

By

Eileen Toutant

B.A., University of Louisville, 1983

M.A., University of Louisville, 1987

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
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for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Fine Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 1999

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A Dissertation Approved on

13 April 1999
(Date)

by the Following Reading Committee:

Will Morgan

Dissertation Director

Thomas Buser

Dario Covi

Jay Kloner

Mary Ellen Rickey

James T. Grubola

Chair, Fine Arts Department
Director, Hite Art Institute

ABSTRACT

This dissertation takes a primarily art historical approach to the murals commissioned from 1934 to 1943 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration. This study is confined to the post office murals created for the Commonwealth of Kentucky under the United States Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts.

Many of these paintings were lost or deliberately destroyed when the program was dismantled. Today most of the remaining murals are dirty and faded and little noticed. Many of the artists have been forgotten.

During the Depression years, however, these paintings contributed to local pride, optimism for the future, stronger patriotism, and a sense of community.

Since then, the murals have been ignored or denigrated as inferior examples of painting. My thesis is that the murals do have artistic significance. Almost every muralist whose work is still in a Kentucky post office had a solid academic training, many of them in Paris, and a good grasp of the fundamentals of painting. Their work is well worth stylistic analysis and preservation as part of our American heritage.

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Copyright permission from the Jesse Stuart Foundation to quote a line in Stuart's Kentucky is My Land.

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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1.	Anchorage. Exterior View of Post Office.	417
2.	Harrodsburg. Exterior View of Post Office.	417
3.	Anchorage. Interior View of Post Office Lobby.	418
4.	Anchorage. Meeting the Train	419
5.	Anchorage. Symbol of Anchorage	419
6.	Berea. Berea Commencement in the Old Days	420
7.	Bowling Green. The Long Hunters Discover Daniel Boone	421
8.	Corbin. The Dark and Bloody Ground	422
9.	Flemingsburg. Crossing to the Battle of Blue Lick	423
10.	Fort Thomas. Generals G.H. Thomas and Philip Sheridan	424
11.	Greenville. Source of Power	425
12.	Hardinsburg. Kentucky Homestead.	426
13.	Harrodsburg. A Settler is Killed by Indians.	427
14.	Harrodsburg. Spreading the News.	427
15.	Harrodsburg. An Arrow Strikes as Prelude to an Attack.	428
16.	Harrodsburg. Seeking Safety in the School.	428
17.	Harrodsburg. Boone Seeking a Truce	429
18.	Harrodsburg. The Return of Daniel Boone.	429
19.	Hickman. Mississippi Packets	430
20.	Hodgenville. Hodgen's Mill	431

Figure	Page
21. Lexington. Daniel Boone's Arrival in Kentucky.	432
22. Lexington. Detail of Daniel Boone	433
23. Louisville. Plan of Gene Snyder Building Lobbies	434
24. Louisville. Ohio River Traffic	435
25. Louisville. Coal Mining.	435
26. Louisville. Agriculture.	436
27. Louisville. Stock Farming.	436
28. Louisville. Fox Hunting.	437
29. Louisville. Horse Racing	437
30. Louisville. Unloading a Railroad Postoffice Car.	438
31. Louisville. City Collection.	438
32. Louisville. The Star Route	439
33. Louisville. Rural Free Delivery.	439
34. Morehead. The Rural Free Delivery (Original Sketch).	440
35. Morehead. The Rural Free Delivery (Mural as Installed)	440
36. Morganfield. Rural Free Delivery (Original Sketch).	441
37. Morganfield. Rural Free Delivery (Mural as Installed)	441
38. Paducah. Interior of Federal Courtroom.	442
39. Paducah. Early Town	443
40. Paducah. River.	443
41. Pineville. Kentucky Mounted Mail Enroute.	444
42. Princeton. Kentucky Tobacco Field	445

Figure	Page
43. Williamsburg. Floating Horses Down the Cumberland River	446
44. Franklin. Tobacco Farming.	447
45. Campbellsville. Agriculture in Kentucky.	448
46. Campbellsville. General Zachary Taylor in the Everglades.	448

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations used in Text and Footnotes:

<u>Abbreviations</u>	<u>Full Meaning</u>
CWA	Civil Works Administration
GSA	General Services Administration
WPA	Works Progress Administration
WPA/FAP	Works Progress Administration Fine Arts Program
PWAP (Treasury)	Public Works of Art Project
The Section (under various titles in different years)	Treasury Section of Fine Art
TRAP (under Section)	Treasury Relief Art Project
NA	National Archives
SL	Signed letter
ASL	Autograph signed letter
TSL	Typed signed letter
DOC	Document

PREFACE

New Deal Murals in Kentucky Post Offices is a study of the murals produced by the United States Treasury's Section of Fine Arts in Kentucky. This body of work represents history on the wall, a picture of our country over half a century ago, but largely ignored today.

Is art a necessity during a depression? There can be a difference of opinion on that question, but it certainly was radical for the United States government to subsidize several art programs during the 1930s when the country was in such desperate straits. All but one of these programs were based on relief and designed to provide jobs for needy artists.

The post office mural and sculpture program called The Section of Fine Arts was different. The emphasis here was on providing tasteful art of good quality to people who had no experience of art at all. President Roosevelt believed in this goal wholeheartedly, and so did the man he chose to head the Section program, Edward Bruce, who said, "All over this great country of ours...there is a desire for beauty, a reaction against the ugliness that surrounds us...a hope to

find an outlet for the creative spirit".¹

Although this program was nationwide, this paper is concerned only with individual murals commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts for Kentucky post offices. However, the Commonwealth provides ample material for study.

The Works Progress Administration also sponsored an art program among its many endeavors, and people in general assumed they were responsible for the post office murals. Most people had never heard of the Section. Even today, if by chance these post office paintings are mentioned, the response is likely to be, "Oh yes, those WPA murals".

The subject of the murals was almost always a scene of the local town--either an incident from its history or a depiction of the daily life of a rural community. If the latter, the citizens insisted on accuracy down to the smallest detail. However, even when the artist fulfilled this task, the mural was factual but idealized. It usually showed the people as they would like to be seen, but it was a small touch of optimism in the bitter times.

By the mid-1940s these murals were largely forgotten. They had lost some of their meaning for the people, and to the art world they were useless anachronisms. Newer styles, such as Abstract Expressionism, centered on the artist and his feelings and contained no subject but colored forms and patterns. Naturally, the popularity of such trends, so

¹ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal (Phila.: Temple Univ. Press, 1984), 31.

different from those of the past, made the murals seem dated and old-fashioned.

With World War II approaching, the Section was shut down and record-keeping suffered. Little is known about many of the artists and their works.

It was not until the late 1960s that the murals were once again brought to notice. By the 1990s they have been studied and written about by several scholars.

Francis Van O'Connor, sometime professor at the University of Maryland and a Research Associate at the Smithsonian Collection of Fine Arts, and now a respected art historian at the National Museum of American Art, was one of the first, principally because he was asked by the federal government to prepare a report on the New Deal murals and sculptures and submit what statistics he could on the programs. He later adapted this report into a book, Federal Support for the Visual Arts; the New Deal and Now. At that time (1969) he wrote that it was very frustrating trying to locate any of the artists.²

Karal Ann Marling, who has taught at Case Western Reserve and Vassar College and is now a professor at the University of Minnesota, has written a book, Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the

² Francis V. O'Connor, Federal Support for the Visual Arts: the New Deal and Now. A report on the New Deal Art Projects in New York City and State with Recommendations for Present-Day Federal Support for the Visual Arts to the National Endowment for the Arts. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1969), 4.

Great Depression. She chooses certain murals as case studies and tries to understand the people's culture, thinking, and values from their reaction to their murals. "It is my central . . . contention, therefore, that questions of art have very little bearing on mural painting in the 1930s."³

Sue Beckham, at one time tutored by Marling, became a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. She wrote a more focused study in her Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction. She states her quest is not about art. She is most interested in the South and its interaction with the federal government and she utilizes the murals as a means to reaching a conclusion.⁴

Barbara Melosh is one of the most recent writers on the subject and considers the government cultural programs from a feminist viewpoint. She is a professor of English and American Studies at George Mason University. In her book, Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater, her range is wider, as she does not restrict herself to murals, but deals with the WPA's theatre program and other aspects of the government's sponsorship. She states that she has seen almost four hundred murals⁵ but

³ Karal Ann Marling, Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 25.

⁴ Sue Bridwell Beckham, Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction (Baton Rouge Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), xvi.

⁵ Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture: Manhood and

lists none in Kentucky. Her book was written in the 1990s and it was even more difficult than O'Connor found it in the 1960s to locate artists or even a trace of some of their work. None could find in the National Archives files a hint of any of the Louisville murals, although I was more fortunate when I suddenly realized one day that those records might be with the Treasury Relief Art Program files, under the auspices of the Section. They were, and copies were mailed to me.

I have visited and photographed each of the Kentucky post office murals that remain, thirty-three in number. I researched in the Archives of American Art and especially at the National Archives, both in Washington, D.C. Additional material was found in books, journal articles, newspaper clippings, and microfilms, but generally, information is extremely hard to come by.

Excellent as the above books are, none takes the art historical view as a primary theme. This is not surprising. Standard histories of art today either ignore the New Deal work completely or make a cursory reference to the fact that they existed. They deserve more.

Other writers have centered on non-artistic factors, and it is true that these murals do represent our history and give insight into the society that produced them. But these paintings are, first of all, art, and not merely

Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 10.

signposts to something else. This statement summarizes Roosevelt's intention.

This dissertation is divided into two major parts; the first consists of chapters which are intended to give a picture of the times and some of the background against which these murals were produced; the second part deals with each individual mural separately, giving information about the artist, the circumstances, and an assessment of the painting itself.

My thesis is that there is much excellence to be found in this work. By using art-historical stylistic analysis to uncover the skills needed to create paintings of good composition, perspective, realistic backgrounds, natural anatomy, reflections of Old Masters' work (which all of the artists who worked in Kentucky studied), I hope to bring out some understanding of their place in the long progression of art. In the best of the murals there is often a mood, an attitude, an atmosphere, which hints at something deeper and renders the work memorable.

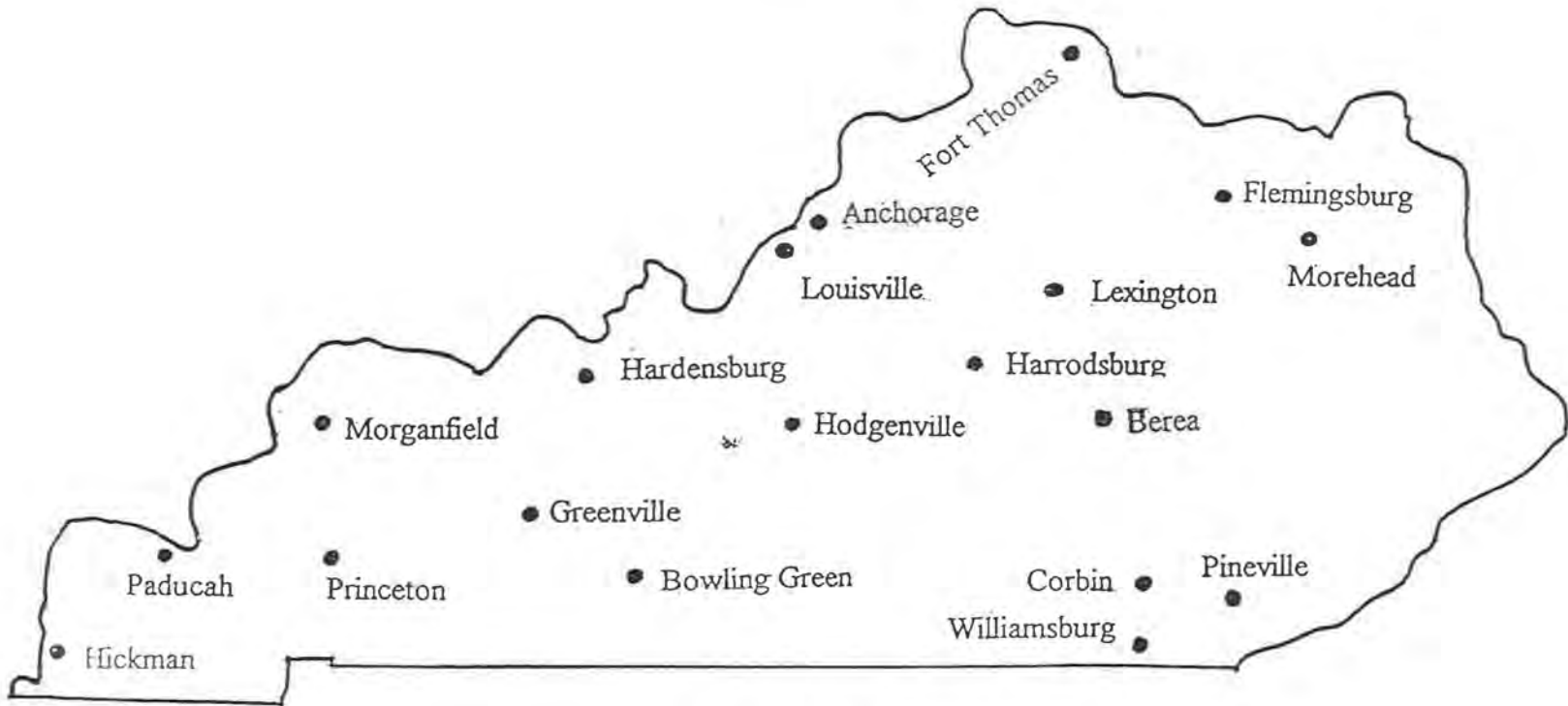
In some Kentucky towns efforts are being made to clean, restore, and save what is still possible to save. It is my hope that more murals will be included in any program of conservation or preservation. These murals are a part of our heritage, and it would be unfortunate if they were to fade gradually away, as they are doing now.

Neither snow nor rain, nor heat,
nor gloom of night stays these
couriers from the swift completion
of their appointed rounds.

-- Inscription, New York
City Post Office,
adapted from Herodotus

Kentucky is . . . the very heart of America.

-- Jesse Stuart
Kentucky is My Land



KENTUCKY
Showing Mural Sites

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	v
KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS.	viii
PREFACE	ix
MAP OF KENTUCKY	xv
<u>BACKGROUND CHAPTERS</u>	
CHAPTER ONE. THE GREAT DEPRESSION	1
CHAPTER TWO. THE GROWTH OF AMERICAN ART	13
CHAPTER THREE. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ART PROGRAMS.	29
CHAPTER FOUR. THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT'S SECTION OF FINE ARTS	43
CHAPTER FIVE. STYLE AND SUBJECT	56
CHAPTER SIX. CULTURAL BACKGROUND.	72
CHAPTER SEVEN. REACTION	103
CHAPTER EIGHT. WORLD WAR II AND THE END OF THE FEDERAL ART PROGRAMS	118
CONCLUSION	131

THE SETTINGS OF THE INDIVIDUAL MURALS

POST OFFICE ARCHITECTURE . . . . .	.144
ANCHORAGE. . . . .	.150
BEREA. . . . .	.162
BOWLING GREEN. . . . .	.176
CORBIN . . . . .	.193
FLEMINGSBURG . . . . .	.204
FORT THOMAS. . . . .	.218
GREENVILLE . . . . .	.230
HARDINSBURG. . . . .	.239
HARRODSBURG . . . . .	.248
HICKMAN. . . . .	.263
HODGENVILLE. . . . .	.274
LEXINGTON. . . . .	.283
LOUISVILLE . . . . .	.299
MOREHEAD. . . . .	.320
MORGANFIELD. . . . .	.330
PADUCAH . . . . .	.340
PINEVILLE. . . . .	.360
PRINCETON. . . . .	.374
WILLIAMSBURG . . . . .	.385
APPENDIX. . . . .	.395
BIBLIOGRAPHY. . . . .	.404
FIGURES . . . . .	.417
VITA . . . . .	.450

BACKGROUND CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

It was not true at all. Prosperity was not just around the corner. After the "Black Friday" stock market crash of October 1929, and the precipitous decline of the economy, Americans clung to the hope that the bad times would be of short duration. However, the Great Depression held the United States captive for the whole decade of the 1930s.

The many murals and other works of art sponsored by the government owe their very existence to the Depression. Although never much concerned with art in the past, the federal government found itself faced with the necessity of providing work for the great number of unemployed, which included artists.

Various art programs were inaugurated for this purpose, and the Post Office murals were created under the Treasury's Section of Fine Arts. The Section, in addition to providing jobs for artists, hoped to encourage optimism, patriotism,

and some experience of art in the people who saw these murals on a regular basis.

It is difficult for us, despite our experience with various recessions, to comprehend the magnitude of the depression and the upheaval it caused. In 1930 alone over one thousand bank failures caused the loss of employment of six million men.¹ By March of 1931 eight million men were unemployed.²

Bread lines were seen, as were hunger marches, and eviction of families, especially farm families with no income at all, courtesy of the merciless drought which destroyed crops over large areas of the country. Relief rolls were hastily established and shelters set up, many of them offering only "Hoover mattresses", that is, newspapers as beds.³

President Herbert Hoover made some efforts to relieve the suffering; for example, in 1932 the Red Cross was authorized to distribute forty million bushels of government wheat among the needy.⁴ But this and other measures were of little avail; the crisis was too overwhelming. Despair was

¹ Sidney Geist, "Prelude: The 1930's," Arts 30 (September 1956): 49.

² Belisario Contreras, Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 21.

³ Ibid., 21

⁴ Belisario Contreras, "The New Deal Treasury Department Art Programs and the American Artist 1933 to 1943" (Ph.D. diss., American University, 1967), 2.

beginning to be the prevailing mood of the citizens, and even revolution was seen as a possibility.

In the 1932 presidential election, Franklin Delano Roosevelt swept in like a fresh breeze. Possibly the most charismatic leader we have ever had, he arrived at the perfect moment. With his chin tilted upward, his insouciant cigarette holder at a jaunty angle, with his energy, his optimism, and, above all, his boundless self-confidence, he rejuvenated the nation.

He didn't waste a day. He began immediately to inaugurate a series of programs designed to provide employment or other type of assistance. One of the first, in 1933, was the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) which granted moneys to the states. That same year came the Public Works Administration Project (PWA), headed by Harold L. Ickes, which dealt with construction work. All the new programs were experimental and some lasted only a short time.

In 1935 the Civil Works Administration (CWA) was set up to improve roads, schools and parks. To head this agency, Roosevelt called on Harry Hopkins who had gained experience under Roosevelt when the latter was a governor of New York. Another of the early programs was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which, despite some criticism, brought improvements to national parks, erected telephone lines, began reforestation. This was Roosevelt's favorite

innovation.⁵ Also in 1935 began the Works Progress Administration (WPA) which became the largest, most varied, and best known innovation of all.

Franklin Roosevelt came from a wealthy, privileged class. He was descended from the Dutch patroons who settled New York, and he had a superior education. In a way, it seems unusual that he had such empathy with the common people and such determination to help them. Perhaps it was an ancestral sense of *noblesse oblige* that underlay this determination, but it was accompanied by a true caring for the people. During his first week in office he began a series of radio "fireside chats" to keep Americans informed of his actions on their behalf, and from the first greeting, "My friends," those listening in their living rooms were in no doubt at all that they really were his friends.

Probably the most lasting effect on the country from the introduction of so many federal relief programs was that it changed the means of solving problems and it changed the people's thinking. Before Roosevelt's administration, there had prevailed a strong sense of self-confidence and independence among the populace in general. Perhaps inheriting some of the spirit of their pioneer forebears, most people depended on themselves and their relatives or neighbors when help was needed. There was no Social Security; there was no unemployment insurance. The laws

⁵ George T. Blakey, Hard Times and New Deal in Kentucky 1929-1939 (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986), 78

which touched them most were those of the state and local communities.

The Depression cast the majority of citizens into poverty or destitution. Independence was useless, and no help could be expected from neighbors in the same situation. The federal relief programs were desperate efforts to keep democracy working and better the people's lives, but they were frankly untried novelties. Roosevelt said in 1932, "It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."⁶ This statement of his is one of many that show his determined character and positive manner.

The very number and varied character of the new programs ensured that individuals were affected in every aspect of their lives. Everything was dealt with--soil erosion, unemployment, housing, poor nutrition, bank closings, agriculture, dams, roads, labor problems, conservation, education--there seemed no end to the multitudinous problems and of the proposed solutions to them. Much good was done and many disasters averted or mitigated. Many individuals were helped and democracy saved.

But during the 1930s, there crept in a significant loss of reliance on individual capabilities. The omnipresent

⁶ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, "New Deal for Public Art," Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context and Controversy, Eds. Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (New York: HarperCollins 1992), 128.

federal programs had the only power even remotely capable of dealing with the problems the country faced. Roosevelt realized this and stated that the people had a right to call on government for aid, and the government had the responsibility to respond.⁷ He was incontrovertibly moved by the people's plight and did his utmost to relieve it. However, as a result, power shifted to a centralized government, and a number of historians have suggested that this period saw the beginning of what might be called the welfare state.

The Depression in Kentucky

Over Kentucky, as over the country, the Depression cast a "pall of frustration and defeat."⁸ At that time, Kentucky was largely a rural area, the only large city being Louisville. The plight of the Appalachian mountain dwellers, the miners, and the small farmers or shareholders was as desperate as that in other states.

The short-lived prosperity after World War I never really penetrated to the isolated regions where most Kentuckians lived. But even that period was better than what the Depression brought.

⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁸ Thomas D. Clark, foreward to The WPA Guide to Kentucky ed. F. Kevin Simon (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996,) xvii; original edition 1939.

In 1931 strikes by coal miners in Harlan were put down by the National Guard, and the county was known as "bloody Harlan."⁹ The federal census showed 29,000 Kentuckians seeking jobs, and that number rose to 42,000 the following year.¹⁰ People in Madisonville were on the edge of starvation.¹¹

Governor Ruby Laffoon carried out the order that Roosevelt had put into effect the day after his inauguration, which proclaimed a bank holiday for the nation.¹² From this point on, the people of the commonwealth increasingly looked to the federal government for relief of all kinds.

Powerful Democrats in Kentucky also held power in Washington. Perhaps the highest of them was Senator Alben Barkley who not only helped to bring Social Security into being but worked just as hard for his own constituents around Paducah, helping to inaugurate the Tennessee Valley Authority project which brought inexpensive power to Kentucky and some other nearby states. He was joined in Congress in this effort by Republicans Fred Vinson and John Sherman Cooper. Robert Worth Bingham of Louisville gave

⁹ Blakey, 12.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹² Ibid., 1.

financial help and editorial support through his newspapers which had a state-wide circulation.¹³

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) proposition for a series of dams was one of the most emotion-provoking proposals. Kentuckians lined up on both sides of the issue. Those in favor pointed out that Paducah was flooded yearly and the dams would prevent this catastrophe, in addition to providing jobs, hydroelectric power, and recreational space. Opposed to this argument was the one that Kentucky mining ventures would be hurt and that good farming land would be destroyed.¹⁴

Fortunately, when the dams were built, it changed the lives of many, Kentuckians being among the greatest beneficiaries. Thanks to the electricity generated and the power lines and telephone poles the CCC provided, homes began filling up with electric lights, radios, and all kinds of appliances unthinkable before. It made the greatest difference to the Appalachian mountain families, who had previously lived in almost complete isolation.

Kentuckians, in general, took umbrage easily. Many Kentuckians were notorious for extremes of temperament--overly genteel or volatile and raring for a fight. The original settlers were Scottish, English, Irish, and Welsh,

¹³ Ibid., 194; 173

¹⁴ Ibid., 132-134.

and in pioneer days the combination may have led to a lack of cooperation and a general atmosphere of resentment.

The Reconstruction period (after the Civil War (or the War Between the States) gave this generalized resentment a focus. Kentucky was a border state. It never actually seceded and, after a brief period of neutrality, became a Union state. However, the loyalties of its citizens were divided between North and South. Senator John Breckinridge, former Vice President of the United States, took a commission in the Confederate Army.¹⁵

The situation found in so many books and films of brother fighting brother was no cliché in Kentucky, but too often the truth. Although George Prentice, publisher of The Louisville Journal, supported the Union, his two sons fought for the Confederacy, and one was killed.¹⁶

The Confederates even set up a capital in Frankfort until chased out by Union armies during inauguration ceremonies.¹⁷ It is an ironic coincidence that Abraham Lincoln, president of the Union, and Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, were both Kentuckians.

After the war, the North treated Kentucky like a Southern state, angered by its lack of total support for the Union cause. Afterward, during the Reconstruction period

¹⁵ Lowell H. Harrison, The Civil War in Kentucky (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁷ Ibid., 48

which followed, the poor treatment intensified, as if Kentucky were a "conquered province."¹⁸

By its attitudes and actions, the North completely alienated Kentuckian citizens so that they adopted a more Southern cast of mind and a total dislike of any form of federal government. Independence and self-reliance, qualities they had always exhibited, became a kind of creed.

How unnatural, then, it was for them to be forced by fate and destitution to turn to the federal government for assistance. For many, however, it was a question of survival. In addition to programs mentioned above, the National Youth Administration (NYA), begun in 1935, provided training and jobs for young men and women which went a long way toward preventing delinquency. When the program was discontinued, the Ahrens Trade School in Louisville was the only Kentucky survivor.¹⁹

Probably the most important legislation to affect Kentucky was the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment and the end of Prohibition. Distilleries in Kentucky had long been noted for production of fine bourbon and other liquors and had been a major source of employment before the amendment. "In Kentucky this return to legal liquor was the most dramatic of all the New Deal efforts to revive the nation's economy."²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

¹⁹ Ibid., 101.

²⁰ Simon, 46.

Kentucky did benefit to a great extent from the President's innovations. The Public Works Administration (PWA) helped the Army Corps of Engineers with river improvements and with construction at Fort Knox, including the vault for the nation's gold supply. Assistance with college buildings and the establishment of a new maximum security prison at La Grange--a replacement for the one in Frankfort ruined by the 1937 flood--were further examples of the benefits of federal help.²¹ It wasn't long before Kentuckians came to rely on the New Deal programs and expect them to go on forever. Their vaunted independence seemed to evaporate. While Kentuckians have not lost their unique traits, they have been absorbed into the prevailing culture to a greater extent than before the 1930s.

The Kentucky Post Office murals, local in subject but exhibiting a philosophy shared by other states, constitute one example of this integration into the national mainstream.

²¹ Simon, 347; also Blakey, 74.

CHAPTER TWO
THE GROWTH OF AMERICAN ART

The United States, having dire problems of its own, adopted an isolationist stance between the two World Wars, and this attitude carried over into the field of art. Only wealthy collectors in large cities had any art available to them. The general public went its way with no knowledge of art except in public buildings. Beyond the eastern seaboard, few were aware that such a thing existed.

The Academic Style

Three major categories dominated painting. One was often called the "Genteel Tradition", and was used liberally in murals for the ostentatious homes being built by the wealthy and used as well in libraries and banks. From America's inception, its art had leaned heavily to realism, but the "Genteel Tradition" was an elaborate style, originating in Europe, and its contents were far from realistic. It continued to flourish in the United States from about 1880 well into the next century.

This Academic style was a blend of French and English Art Nouveau, Art for Art's Sake, and symbolic figures from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. It was well suited to large spaces, and a number of famous American murals were produced.

The most influential mural project of the late nineteenth century was in the Boston Public Library (1887). McKim, Mead, and White were the architects. The building was designed on a simple, symmetrical plan in Renaissance style which does not prepare the visitor for the glorious decorative mural scheme painted by the artist John La Farge on the interior. He had learned his soft and luminous color from the Venetians and made the most of it here.

Almost contemporary and just across Copley Square from the Boston Public Library was Trinity Church whose architect was Henry Hobson Richardson. John La Farge headed a team of muralists to decorate the interior. The team included William Morris Hunt, Edward Burne-Jones, and others. The church itself was designed in a very eclectic style, and the murals not only blend in but emphasize the church's variety and originality. This mural program is impressive and very rich in quality. The colors seem to glow, and the large figures are gracefully posed.

John La Farge had become the foremost muralist and stained glass designer in the country. Even his earlier work such as a mural, The Ascension (1876), for the Church of the Ascension in New York City shows his talent. This

mural shows a surfeit of clouds and rays of heavenly light and exhibits already his command of the brush and his handsome color.

William Morris Hunt painted murals for the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (late 1890s). One of these shows a female figure representing Peace and Prosperity on her throne. An allegorical figure with a lyre is at her left, and another is on her right holding a sapling representing something unclear.

This type of painting had been popular among the nobility of Europe since at least the seventeenth century, and its Baroque charms had little relevance to twentieth-century Americans in general. However, many artists had great technical skills, and the resulting art was dignified and glowing, filled with rich color and striking composition. For a time, it was exactly what the *nouveau riche* wished to see and to sponsor.

During the 1920s, this refined style could almost be called the official American style, since it had the imprimatur of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and, perhaps more important, of The National Academy of Design. This latter institution dominated the art and controlled the artists through their choices for exhibitions and through journal articles.

However, later art historians saw this style as *retardaire*, cold and deadening because of the classical elements and ubiquitous symbolism.

Perhaps the loss of interest in such murals was due to the number of them being created by lesser artists. The characters were often in unlikely positions, as if they were striking dramatic attitudes they intended to maintain forever, and the symmetry was often carried to extremes.

Near the end of the 1920s decade, the academic elements began to seem irrelevant and lacking in appeal. In addition, the symbolism was less and less understood by the public as time went on. Slowly but surely, the Genteel Tradition was coming to an end.

Abstract Art

In 1913 American art lovers received a shock from abroad which caused the traditional paintings to seem even more outmoded. Suddenly, the American public was confronted by the very newest and experimental types of art. The Armory Show, an exhibition held in New York City, in 1913, featured recent works. Approximately two-thirds of the exhibits were entered by American artists, but the exhibit also presented the most avant-garde of European artists, Picasso, Braque, and Matisse among them. Nothing like this had been seen in the United States, which had deliberately cut itself off from foreign influence, and the abstract work in particular caused a sensation. It was thoroughly denounced.

Critics called it "dehumanizing" and "Ellis Island Art". The most indefensible work seemed to be the unusual painting, Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 (1912) by Marcel Duchamp. Although there was a suggestion of a human figure in this painting, it was described as "an explosion in a shingle factory."¹

Thomas Hart Benton, a Regionalist painter, implied that American artists could not deal with an empty pattern.² Benton was likely to have been referring to such European artists as Paul Klee, Vasily Kandinsky, Josef Albers, Jean Arp, Kasimir Malevich, and others who were painting purely non-representational works, composed totally of forms and color, during the decade of the 1910s.

Such works in the Armory show were described by Theodore Roosevelt as "repellent from every standpoint."³ Even worse, The American Federation compared new European artists to "anarchists, bombthrowers, lunatics, depravers."⁴

Abstraction was at first incomprehensible to most Americans, but there were a few artists who had been

¹ Peter Selz, Art in Our Times: A Pictorial History 1890-1980 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1991), 124.

² Benton essay in Barbara Rose, Readings in American Art, 1900-1975, (New York: Praeger Pub.), 89.

³ Theodore Roosevelt, "A Layman's View of an Art Exhibition, 1913," in John W. McCoubrey, American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 191.

⁴ Milton W. Brown, Sam Hunter, et al., American Art New York: Harry N. Abrams, (Second printing 1988), 382.

introduced to the new style by Alfred Stieglitz in his New York art gallery, "291", which had been featuring the new abstract styles since around 1908. Stuart Davis, Max Weber, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe had begun to base their paintings on it.

It is an indication of abstract art's later acceptance that the Museum of Modern Art opened in New York in 1929. However, the abstract style didn't become very popular with the majority of citizens until the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, a new version of it, Abstract Expressionism, "wherein the painting became its own subject" (according to Holger Cahill, Head of the WPA's art program), originated in New York and swept the art world.⁵

Art Deco

Somewhat related to the abstract work, in that it was considered very modern, was Art Deco. It made its appearance in 1925 in France at a now famous exhibition, *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, by which time modernism was a bit more familiar and the public seemed to see it as a sort of bridge between traditional art and totally abstract work.

The style reflected the life of the sophisticated,

⁵ Holger Cahill, New Horizons in American Art, 14 (New York, Museum of Modern Art. Exhibition catalogue, 1936), 14.

pleasure-loving expatriates. It was the time of Jay Gatsby, jazz, and speedy cars. Art Deco used opulent materials and an eclectic mix of styles, but is known mostly for its forms, which are usually simple, stark, streamlined, and with little detail. Designs were pared down to fit Art Deco's minimalist concepts. It embraced clocks, lamps, glass pieces--in fact, it was to a great extent an art of interior decoration.

Art Deco was used for the most part in public buildings because its luxurious effects were unsuitable for homes and probably unaffordable. Although as modern as it could be, it delved into the ancient past for motifs. Art Deco borrowed from Egyptian, Aztec, Gothic, Arabic, and other exotic cultures, using flower patterns, zig-zags, sunbursts with abandon, creating a dazzlingly eclectic style. It also combined the most luxurious materials, like velvet and leather with modern chrome, vinyl, and neon. It was a restless art and, though it was short-lived, people liked it. Art Deco arrived in the United States by the 1930s, and can be seen in museums, ocean liners, and especially in theaters. An outstanding example is New York's Radio City Music Hall in Rockefeller Center (itself a monument to Art Deco) and in the settings for the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films of the early 1930s.

Realism

There was a third style, neither old nor new, but one which had always been the bedrock of American art, and that was Realism. It seemed natural to a practical people to represent in paint what the artist saw. Most folk art here was realistic and usually indigenous to this country. The work of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School in the early nineteenth century specialized in landscape paintings of dramatic beauty. Their works are sometimes termed realistic, but this realism was tempered by romantic lighting and idealistic views.

Somewhat later there were three painters who raised the realistic style to a high point by their skill and insight. One was George Caleb Bingham, who painted scenes of the frontier and the people who carved a living on it by practical means, or by work on the rivers, with all its dangers and rough humor. His boatmen, whether working or playing, are convincingly real, as are his keenly observed scenes of small-town political maneuvering.

Bingham seems to have been open to influences from many sources, as some of his work suggests familiarity with the seventeenth-century French painter, Nicolas Poussin, whose well-observed figures in landscapes inspired more than one artist. Some of Bingham's work is so clear and sunny it brings to mind the contemporary school of Luminism, which featured light that seems to be recognizable as northern American light.

One of Bingham's most haunting and realistic scenes is Fur Traders Descending the Mississippi (1845), showing a man and boy in a small boat in a fogbound atmosphere. Both characters and background emphasize the romance and danger of the frontier's rivers.

Another exemplary artist was the multi-skilled Winslow Homer, a master of many media. His experience with realism came early with his work illustrating scenes from the Civil War, and he never lost this sense of reality. Actually, his early paintings of farm life, such as Snap the Whip (1872) and The Teacher (1871), are as real and absorbing to the viewer as Anne of Green Gables is to a very young girl.

Homer is most noted for his scenes of the ocean. He spent some time on the coast at Northumberland, England, painting the furious storms and the fishermen and families who endured them (such as Life Line, 1884). His use of the brush was almost photographic. Much of his life was spent in Maine, and the realism of his waves, rocks and his dramatic paintings, such as Cannon Rock (1895), are probably the greatest part of his legacy. In watercolors, he portrayed the northern woods and the Caribbean Sea equally well and with much attention to telling details, as in the fascinating Gulf Stream (1899).

The third, and possibly the greatest of these artists was Thomas Eakins. In Paris, he was impressed by Manet's realism and his use of chiaroscuro. He came home to teach at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and became ever

more devoted to the cause of portraying people and events realistically, even to the extent of attending medical classes to study anatomy. This course of action led to his famous work, The Gross Clinic (1895), showing a surgeon operating and explaining the procedure to his students. Many were shocked by the brutal accuracy of the work, but few can forget it. Eakins had a long career and painted many portraits which seem even more realistic than Homer achieved through his use of the brush, since Eakins used photography as an aid. There were people who refused to pose for him, since his penetrating eye seemed to look into the subject's very soul, and his hand put it on canvas. There are some remarkable portraits of women which are devastating in their truthfulness.

However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Gilded Age, as novelist and friend of Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, called it, wealthy Americans had abandoned these early realist painters for elaborate and fanciful art and architecture. It was they who commissioned the pseudo-classical works in the style of the Genteel Tradition.

Is it any wonder that the American artist of the 1920s, stranded between an older, disregarded style, and an intimidating and almost incomprehensible new style, chose to return to what the people of this country had always responded to the most?

Realism made a return at the beginning of the twentieth century, most notably in the school headed by Robert Henri. This group of painters, which included John Sloan, Everett Shinn, George Luks, William Glackens, set down in paint what they saw around them. Henri said that he wanted to show the beauty that can be found in everyday lives.⁶ Being city dwellers, their works centered on office workers, shops, neighborhood gatherings, a cat in a snowy back yard. These artists observed closely what they saw and painted it with detachment, leaving the viewer to his own interpretation. Henri himself had studied at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under Thomas Anschutz, Thomas Eakins's successor, continuing Eakins's tradition, and this circumstance provided a connecting link from the realism of the nineteenth century to that of the twentieth. Actually, artists who studied with Henri said he was more influential as teacher than painter. Student Edward Hopper called Henri his most influential teacher and referred to him as magnetic.⁷

Most of the members of "The Eight", as Henri's group styled itself, had been newspaper artists, and this not only gave them experience in graphic line and observation, but

⁶ Charles C. Alexander, Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth-Century America (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980), 33.

⁷ Bennard Perlman, Robert Henri, His Life and Art (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1991), 55.

made them inclined to paint happenings in the city streets they knew so well.

"The Eight" was an important group, having presented its first challenge to academic painting in its exhibition of 1904. This work became a happy alternative to the entries in the Armory show. Also, Henri urged painters to exhibit nationalism in their work. This theme was picked up and expanded on by the government art projects of the New Deal during the 1930s.

The American Scene

As the twentieth century progressed, so did the people's appreciation of realistic paintings. As the historian of American art, Matthew Baigell, says, "The desire to document the look and feel of the country was a nationwide affair, even before the advent of the government projects in 1933."⁸ A feeling spread through the country that the ground the people stood on was their own, was something precious, and to be celebrated. With Henri's example before them, painters began to do so. These painters lacked leaders; the realism of the era was purely an indigenous movement and came to be known as American Scene Painting. Perhaps it was inevitable that new subjects would be found, since Americans had cut themselves off from

⁸ Matthew Baigell, The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 13.

Europe so thoroughly. Political developments in Europe were becoming more and more ominous by the early 1930s and the United States had no desire to be involved.

At any rate, painters began to show American scenes not far removed from genre. The most popular subjects were local history, local landmarks, folk tales, workers in farm and factory, family scenes. These paintings breathed optimism, which was most unexpected in the midst of the Depression.

The American Scene was a movement of the people and the scenes portrayed were almost all rural ones. It was clear to the people that a realistic style was the most suitable for communicating a message. The message of the people was pride in the country and a vision of the good life, as they saw it.

A restless people, Americans had continued to push the frontier west and now that it had reached its limit at the Pacific's edge, they may have wanted to look back and memorialize their achievements. One painter, Alan Tompkins, said that "the real subject is the atmosphere of mutual trust and friendliness ...that is the essence of life in a democracy."⁹

There are many scenes of settlers moving west to a land of promise, and it is somewhat ironic that another such

⁹ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz (Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal, Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1984), 96.

migration was soon to come, but this time it would be the Oakies, Arkies, and other dispossessed farmers who made the journey with little hope.

Popular as this style was, there were a few dissenters. Jackson Pollock, a well-known Abstract Expressionist painter of the 1950s, better known as an action painter, felt that the idea of an American art was as absurd as an American math or physics.¹⁰ However, it was this down-to-earth style that the Federal government adopted for its art programs and which we see in the post office murals.

Regionalism

The style is not actually distinguishable from the American Scene, except for two factors. It was confined to the central part of the country and refers to its three main practitioners, Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood. Although all had studied in Paris, they turned their backs on Europe to concentrate on American scenes of the Midwest and the plains.

Benton is the best known of these painters, perhaps because of the flamboyance of his work and statements. He either overtly glorified the rural scene or satirized it, sometimes both in one work. The author and scholar,

¹⁰ Richard D. McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 107.

H. W. Janson, claimed that Regionalism was essentially anti-artistic,¹¹ although Benton's writings about his study of the Old Masters seemingly refutes this remark. Also, his work does show affinities with El Greco in his thin, elongated figures, with Michelangelo in his knowledge of anatomy, his use of compositional forms and tendency to Mannerism, and with Tintoretto in the swirling unreality of some of his backgrounds. The kinetic energy and the vigor of his paintings are all his own.

His student, Jackson Pollock, said, "My work with Benton was important as something against which to react very strongly later on."¹² Nevertheless, Pollock based his drip paintings on a grid Benton made out as a teaching aid,¹³ and certainly Pollock's kinetic energy was equal to Benton's own.

Grant Wood found his style when he was in Germany and saw Flemish primitive painting of the fifteenth century. His work does show the same rigid stances of his figures, the unnatural light, the unadorned reality of the faces, but there is a humor in his work that is subtle. His best known work, American Gothic (1930), was a satire on the rural American, although not recognized as such by many people.

¹¹ H. W. Janson, "Benton and Wood, Champions of Regionalism" (Magazine of Art 39, May 1946), 184.

¹² Jackson Pollock, "Two Statements on His Painting, 1944, 1947," in McCoubrey, 212.

¹³ Edward Laning, The Art of Drawing (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), 150.

More direct is his contemporary Daughters of the Revolution, which is a revealing portrait of a type of self-satisfied matron, secure in her pedigree.

Curry is known for his genre scenes, such as a baptism in Kansas, an approaching tornado, a striking painting of John Brown, and other more realistic but handsomely designed works, and for his subtle use of light. Curry felt that fine art was not understood--that painting needed to relate to American life to be really liked.

The American Scene style was a perfect choice for the government art programs. Artists were beginning to realize they didn't have to go abroad for inspiration, that there was an abundant source of it under their feet, that it sprang from the soil and expressed the values of the American people as they really were.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ART PROGRAMS

So many New Deal programs were inaugurated and so well received that they paved the way in the public mind for government art programs also. There might have been some resistance to sponsored art, had it not been for the New Deal predecessors.

Almost all of the New Deal programs were temporary measures. Red tape, criticisms from Congress, changes in titles and sponsoring agencies, disagreements, often affected the longevity of the programs. None of the art programs survived World War II. They were always in a precarious position, from inception to dissolution.

On the question of artists, there was much doubt whether they should be included in government benefits at all, since many did not consider artists as workers. But the head of the Civil Works Administration (CWA), Harry Hopkins, finally said, "Hell! They've got to eat just like other people".¹

¹ Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz. "New Deal for Public Art," 131, FN 8.

George Biddle

Without the influence of this man who instigated the idea, there might not have been any art programs. Biddle was a painter. He was also a classmate of President Roosevelt at Groton and Harvard, and his letter on the subject was given much consideration.

Biddle could claim not only friendship with the president but also the background and influence of a prominent Philadelphia family. Lacking the family disposition to the law, he traveled widely, studied at several European academies and absorbed a great deal from Mary Cassatt's art while in Paris.

In his 1933 letter to Roosevelt, he stated his conviction that art seemed of little importance in the lives of Americans and that the opportunity was at hand to change this situation. He pointed to the government of Mexico which, under President Obregon, had sponsored mural work that dealt with the history of the Mexican people and tended to glorify the government. The best-known of these Mexican artists were José Orozco, David Siquieros, and Diego Rivera.

Biddle felt that bringing similar art to American communities would not only contribute aesthetically to their environment but could express visually the social aims of the New Deal. "I am convinced that our mural art with a little impetus can soon result, for the first time in our history, in a vital national expression".²

²

Francis V. O'Connor, "A History of the New Deal Art

The National Committee of Fine Arts refused to approve any program that was not classical in nature. This body had been established by Congress in 1910 and by the 1930s had become a very high-minded, high-handed, and hidebound institution.

Temporarily stymied, Biddle eventually turned to a Treasury official, Edward Bruce, who not only approved of the idea but devoted the rest of his life to government art programs.

Edward Bruce

There seemed to be general agreement that Bruce was a charismatic character, irresistible when he promoted a civic action he believed in. Drew Pearson, a popular newspaper columnist and radio broadcaster, called him "a natural lobbyist, convivial, handsome, a convincing speaker, a perfect choice to head new programs."³

Bruce was of the ninth generation of a wealthy family. He followed a number of careers and was skilled in all--a lawyer, banker, a former Columbia football star, promoter of trade with China, newspaper editor in the Philippines--and

Projects: 1933 to 1943," in Art for the People: New Deal Murals on Long Island. David Shapiro, ed. Exhibition catalogue. Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, Long Island, New York, November 1-December 31, 1978, 11.

³ Park and Markovitz, "New Deal for Public Art", 135. FN 13.

he had recently joined the United States Treasury as a coin expert, but his first love was painting.

He studied with Maurice Sterne, a highly regarded American artist. In his own work, Bruce featured a direct, balanced approach based on observation. His work was mostly landscape, but even a view of skyscrapers is clear and straightforward, and there seems to be no attempt at interpretation or expression of emotion. He based his art on that of the Renaissance, believing, like Bernard Berenson, that artists like Masaccio, Raphael, and Mantegna showed a world of solid things by use of space and mass in a design of good proportion.⁴

Leo Stein, brother of Gertrude Stein, was captivated by Bruce's work. He felt it appealed to everyone and was more important than that of many of Paris's more noted artists.⁵

Bruce always specified the "American Scene" for art produced under his government auspices. He was referring to scenes familiar to the public or representative of daily life. In this preference, he was inspired by Camille Pissarro who had made the peasants of Aquins, a small village in France, realize the beauty of their surroundings.⁶ "This to me is the essence of the service an artist can render to the people" said Bruce.⁷ It is not

⁴ Contreras , Tradition, 35.

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Contreras, "The New Deal Treasury Department Art Programs " (Ph.D. diss.), 14.

⁷ Ibid.

difficult to see in this statement the fundamental purpose of the Treasury art programs.

The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) 1933-1934

Biddle and Bruce joined in a campaign for an art program and set out to gather funds. They applied to Harold L. Ickes, Public Works administrator, who was agreeable. He arranged for money to be transferred from Hopkins's newly-created Civil Works Administration to the Treasury for that purpose.

In December 1933 Bruce set up a meeting at his home with Frederick A. Delano, President Roosevelt's uncle, as chairman⁸ and invited some influential people, including Eleanor Roosevelt and government officials. No artists or art critics were included, perhaps for fear of favoritism.

Much interest, misunderstanding, and discussion ensued, spurred on by the gregarious Bruce's own interest. Decisions were made. The program was to be titled The Treasury Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). It would be divided into sixteen geographical divisions, each administered by a local chairman and committee. Kentucky was in Region No. 9 under a Mr. Milliken, Director of the Cleveland Art Museum, headquartered in Cleveland, and which included Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky.⁹

⁸ O'Connor, "A History of the New Deal Art Projects", 11.

The committees worked quickly, for only eight days after the meeting, eighty-six artists had received their first checks.¹⁰ The PWAP paid about \$40 a week, and \$25 for the less skilled. The purpose of the program was to provide employment for artists by hiring them to provide new art for buildings supported by taxes. Three thousand artists worked on the project¹¹ and when the PWAP ended in June, 1934, it had completed over five hundred murals, as well as work in other media.¹²

The program was planned to last for only six months since it was experimental and might not be successful. Bruce did all he could to ensure that it was seen as a worthwhile endeavor. He and his technical assistant, Forbes Watson, arranged an exhibit of PWAP work to be held at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. Bruce had been planning this exhibit for some time and publicized it as the greatest art event since the Armory Show of 1913.¹³

Mrs. Roosevelt came to the opening, as did crowds of others, and enthusiasm ran high. The work was found

⁹ John C. Carlisle, A Simple and Vital Design: The Story of the Indiana Post Office Murals (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1995), 2.

¹⁰ Richard D. McKinzie, 12.

¹¹ Forbes Watson, American Painting Today (Washington, D.C., The American Foundation of the Arts, 1939), 19.

¹² Joel H. Bernstein, "The Artist and the Government: The P.W.A.P. in Challenges in American Culture (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1970), 73.

¹³ McKinzie, 29.

attractive, and critics seemed surprised it displayed so little despair, but hope and courage instead. Watson remarked that the Midwest work impressed him as "definitely stronger than the average observer of New York exhibitions would have suspected."¹⁴

The National Academy of Design, however, traditionalists all, made clear their disapproval of the art. Bruce returned an unusually blunt reply: "No government ever made a finer gesture. Get behind it, don't knock it!"¹⁵

With this exception, the PWAP seemed to be appreciated by everyone. Artists were especially grateful for a means of keeping themselves and families alive for the winter. The public in general became more aware that art could be understandable. Archibald MacLeish, a noted writer of the time, felt it was a sort of cultural revolution in which the American audience and artists came face to face for the first time.¹⁶

The artist John Sloan fully approved of what PWAP had done.¹⁷ As a member of "The Eight", a group of realist painters in the early years of the twentieth century, Sloan might be expected to approve of representational work

¹⁴ Watson, 19.

¹⁵ Contreras, "The New Deal Treasury Department Art Programs," 48 FN 19. (diss.)

¹⁶ Harriet W. Fowler. New Deal Art: WPA Works at the University of Kentucky. Exhibition catalogue. University of Kentucky Art Museum, August 25--October 27, 1985, 11.

¹⁷ Contreras, "The New Deal Treasury Department Art Programs and the American Artist", 26 (diss).

reappearing on the scene, yet the public reaction was similar.

While this general approbation lasted, Bruce proposed to the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, that a new program be implemented. The Secretary and Mrs. Morgenthau were genuinely interested in art, and the proposition appealed to them. The new program would be of longer duration and would be called The Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture.

The Treasury Section of Fine Arts

The name was changed to The Treasury Section of Fine Arts in 1938 and was generally known simply as the Section. It was established to secure art of the finest quality for public buildings through much the same type of competition system that PWAP had used.

There was an inherent contradiction in the PWAP program. On one hand it aimed to help unemployed artists and on the other, expected a level of quality which many of them did not possess. Perhaps it was for this reason that in 1935 two new programs were inaugurated. The WPA Fine Arts Program was set up for relief, and the Treasury Section Program was instituted to obtain the best possible art for the general public.

In the previous PWAP, requirements for the artist were need and skill, or as much as could be reasonably expected.

The section, however, put quality above all. Bruce was the head of this program also, and now he was determined to bring to the people the very best art available. It was in no sense a relief program.

Works Progress Administration Fine Arts Program

(WPA/FAP)

In October 1935, the Works Progress Administration was set up and proved to be the largest and most varied of all, the one that people best remember and confuse with all the others.

Holger Cahill was the national director of the WPA/FAP. This program consisted of the Federal Project #1, referred to as the "Federal Four", because of its four divisions which dealt with music, literature, art, and theater. The artistic unit, although its scope was wider, decorated non-federal buildings supported by taxes.

Holger Cahill

A Scot from a peasant family which had settled in Iceland, Cahill was an energetic little man and a graduate of Columbia University. Unlike Bruce, he was open to all experiment, even dabbling in Dada. In time he held a post at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and prepared the exhibition catalogue for the trail-blazing American folk art

exhibit there in 1932, based on Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's collection.

Cahill asked the public to see the difference between this folk art and some of the cheaply made and machine-decorated articles, which were the closest to art that most people saw and they were painful to him as "a fearful clutter of unlovely things" which would lead to degradation of taste.¹⁸ In this he followed in the footsteps of William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and John Ruskin in nineteenth-century England, all of whom deplored the vulgarity of so many mass-produced articles and strove mightily to bring some beauty into the surroundings of the English people.

Cahill had as a goal the union of art and society, an attitude which fit perfectly with our government's desire to integrate art into community life. Cahill was innovative and efficiently administered his program which was the largest and most diversified of the government art projects.

Although the WPA was established for relief, it preserved a good deal of the country's art in all its undertakings. The music component tracked down oral histories and folk songs and recorded them, while the theater unit was very experimental and considered by Congress as more than a bit socialist in its choice of plays and presentations. The literature groups produced, among

¹⁸

Cahill, 19.

other productions, very comprehensive guidebooks to individual states. These guidebooks were a real achievement, documenting, as they did, so much of the history, geography, and even folklore that would probably not have survived otherwise. The Kentucky guidebook has recently been reissued, and its editor finds it striking that so much of Kentucky's rural areas remain the same.¹⁹

The Fine Arts unit alone encompassed easel painting, motion pictures, graphics, murals, art classes and other ventures. The WPA/FAP set up nineteen galleries in the South,²⁰ but none in Kentucky. Some artists were set to work on crafts, weaving and folk art, and teaching them to others, a practice in line with Cahill's desire to make all citizens familiar with art of some kind and, if possible, enable them to create it themselves.

One of the most important products of this WPA program was the Index of American Design, a compilation of drawings illustrating early American design patterns and objects of decoration. Orville Carroll, one of the Section muralists who painted six murals in the Harrodsburg, Kentucky, Post Office, worked on this Index, since many artists worked for more than one government program. This design index, inclusive and meticulous, helped also to make Americans more aware that they did have a past and an artistic tradition.

¹⁹ Simon, ed., xxi.

²⁰ Cahill, 21.

The WPA/FAP, being such a large operation, produced about 2,500 murals. Unlike the Section, it allowed artists a good deal of freedom in their choice of subject and style. The Section artists, from the beginning, were restricted to a style commonly known as the American Scene.

There was little or no rivalry or jealousy among these government programs, as might have been expected, because Bruce and Cahill, whatever their philosophical differences, saw eye to eye on basics and maintained real friendships while working toward the common goal of promoting a true American art.

The Treasury Relief Art Program (TRAP)

In that same year, 1935, still another Treasury art program was set up, the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). The director of this program was Olin Dows.

Olin Dows

All the directors of these programs had studied art and had been painters themselves and, in retrospect, seem to have been ideal choices. Dows, for example, was a Harvard graduate, had studied painting at Yale, and had taught art history at Wesleyan University. Dows was also experienced in the protocol and procedures of government, having worked on PWAP and the Section.

The TRAP program was something of a hybrid; sponsored by the WPA which provided money but administered by the Section. All but ten percent of workers were hired from relief rolls, a stipulation which did not please the TRAP leaders much, since the emphasis was not on quality but employment.

As in the Section, the artists worked on public buildings, but TRAP did have a large relief component, since its funds came from the WPA. Easel painting was by far the major output of the TRAP program. The public buildings TRAP decorated with murals were some (including post offices) which had already been erected but had never had funds with which to provide embellishments. Generally a master artist was engaged to paint a mural, with the help of two or three assistants. This arrangement was advantageous to the primary artist and provided training for the others.²¹

Dows had his problems with radicals, who demanded more jobs, although ninety percent of the program's artists were on relief rolls. An artists' union was created, which held strikes, and invaded government offices in unruly fashion. In his memoirs, Dows still seemed to feel that it was "grotesque to have artists unionized against a government

²¹ The former post office mural project for Louisville was undertaken by TRAP, but it was a major one, requiring ten murals for the large lobby. It was painted by Frank Long, a Kentucky artist, with the help of three assistants. This building is today the Gene Snyder Courthouse in Louisville.

which for the first time in its history was doing something about their profession."²²

The Treasury, ever mindful of quality, may possibly have curtailed the production of murals, finding few artists with experience in mural painting. The program produced a good deal of art but only eighty-nine murals.

Hopes were high for TRAP but there was much confusion and growing uncertainty about world events, and the declining program officially ended in July 1943.

²² Memoir by Dows in Francis V.O'Connor's The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institute Press, 1972), 28.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT'S SECTION OF FINE ARTS

It was totally unprecedented in the United States for the national government to be an art patron, especially on such a scale and especially at a time of such widespread need in other areas.

The PWAP had been a great success as an experiment, scheduled to exist for only six months. After that, all concerned agreed another similar program should be started. The Section of Painting and Sculpture (as it was called for the first few years) retained Edward Bruce as the director, because of his experience and success with the PWAP. Edward Rowan was selected as Assistant director, and Olin Dows, Forbes Watson, Inslee Hopper, and Maria Ealand rounded out the small staff.

Edward Rowan.

This man certainly worked as hard as Bruce to keep the project functioning smoothly. He received his education at Miami University and at Harvard, and spent years as director of a Cedar Rapids, Iowa, art center. He was a watercolorist when he came to the Section. He was also connected with

Grant Wood and his Stone Center colony of artists, a rare privilege. Rowan handled an overwhelming amount of correspondence, to and from artists, government officials, postmasters, and so on, all with some problem to be solved. He alone answered most of the letters from the Section artists, giving them the combined opinions of the staff as to the artist's latest sketch. Rowan was meticulous about detail, careful not to approve any offensive work, and often had the artist paint his sketch over again because he felt the curve of a horse's leg was inaccurate or because of the lack of a pocket in a farmer's overalls. When he felt he could not express what he saw as flaws, he usually said the painting was "not convincing." Criticisms were couched in the most conciliatory manner and interspersed with praise. No matter what the problem was, Rowan never failed in politeness. He often had to offer a derogatory opinion on an artist's work, but he had their interests at heart, and even opened his home to them, giving all the support he could.

Forbes Watson

Watson, the technical director, was one of Bruce's closest advisors. He was a writer for The Brooklyn Eagle and also wrote art criticism and contributed articles on art to various journals. He helped to make the Section and its works better known and also edited the Section's Bulletin, a

publication of great value to artists who wished to hear of the latest projects and what new competitions were proposed.

Olin Dows

Olin Dows was mentioned briefly in the previous chapter but he deserves more of a biography. He was born in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, in 1904, and was a neighbor of Franklin Roosevelt when both lived in New York. After Harvard, Dows studied painting at Yale with Eugene Savage and Edwin Cassius Taylor, and, after that, taught art history at Wesleyan University. From 1935 to 1938 he was head of the Treasury Relief Project (TRAP) but found time to paint two post office murals for TRAP, one at Rhinebeck and one at Hyde Park, both in New York State. During World War II he was sent overseas as an Army engineer.

Maria Ealand was Bruce's niece and served as the office manager. Dows said of her, "She developed real understanding and sympathy for art and artists. She was a magnificent catalyst in keeping the office moving and everyone in it in good spirits".¹ The efficient and pleasant Inslee Hopper rounded out the whole staff.

It was necessary to get the Section started up as soon as possible when the PWAP expired since the new program might be eliminated by Congress before it got under way. There was much confusion and Rowan was busy making up lists of artists and putting them in categories of "good, medium,

¹ Dows in O'Connor (The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs, 32.

bums."²

The Section was fortunate in its staff, since each was not only capable but passionately dedicated to the goal of bringing good quality art to the people in small towns and rural areas, most of whom had never seen a work of art.

Obviously, the Section program was a small one, in terms of personnel and funds. Its headquarters was far from luxurious, being only a barely converted warehouse. The workers preferred to see the bright side, however, pleased that the size of the building gave them storage room for canvases.³

It did help to have powerful backers like the President and Mrs. Roosevelt, Mr. and Mrs. Morgenthau (since he was Secretary of the Treasury), Edward Bruce himself, George Biddle, and the Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, who developed an interest because her daughter was studying Art History. It also helped that all the staff members were artists or writers on art themselves and well qualified to supervise the Section affairs and make judgments on the submissions.

Bruce relates that "the President called me to his office and said in substance...that he wanted the people of this country to find out that art is an enjoyment of life and an enrichment of the spirit; and that he wanted to

² McKinzie, New Deal for Artists, 37.

³ Grace Overmeyer, Government and the Arts (New York: W.W Norton & Co, Inc., 1939), 105.

to see the best contemporary art".⁴ What is striking is that nowhere in the Section's program is there a mention of relief or government assistance to the needy. Of course, the program did give employment to a large number of little-known artists, but the emphasis was all on quality, and this fact was repeated often in the Section Bulletins.

One requirement was that artists paint The American Scene. Foreign subjects were not allowed. The intention was to depict families on the farm or factory workers at their daily labor as a visual depiction of the values stressed by Roosevelt in all his New Deal programs. Thomas Hart Benton seemed to realize this fact when he wrote, "Regionalism...was very largely affirmative of the social explorations of American society and resultant democratic impulses on which President Roosevelt's New Deal was based".⁵

The Competitions

The best source of information on the organization of the Section is their Bulletins, which are clear and concise--a feat in itself, since the rules and regulations were almost byzantine. The system of sixteen regions was retained from the PWAP, and local committees were set up to

⁴ Bulletin of The Treasury Section of Fine Arts, No 22, September 1940, p. 10.

⁵ Marlene and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 158.

judge the entries. Again, they consisted of those in the locality most cognizant of art matters. The local chairman for Kentucky was Louisvillian Adele Brandeis, niece of Louis D. Brandeis, Justice of the Supreme Court.

Selections were chosen by means of a competition, which seemed the optimal method. The Section would announce that a commission was being offered. For a national contest, any artist in the country could submit entries. More often the contest was a regional one, limited to artists within that particular region.

Each artist was asked to submit three-inch sketch, in black and white and in color. The entries were anonymous, simply numbered. A corresponding number with the artist's name was placed in a sealed envelope, so that the local judges had no idea who had painted the sketches, but made a judgment solely on the basis of excellence. They selected one or several and sent them to the Section in Washington, and the final decision was made there.

It was not made hastily, however, and usually took several weeks, during which time the sketches were hung in the lunch room and the staff had ample opportunity to comment. The winning sketch was chosen by a consensus, although no doubt Bruce and Rowan made the final decision, which didn't always correspond to the sketch the local committee favored. This way of judging had a political benefit, also. If an important politician wished to see a relative given a commission, it was easy to simply give him

an entry blank and ask the aspiring artist to enter a sketch.

This method had a drawback, according to some artists, since all the losers had put in a great deal of time and money to no apparent purpose. The Bulletin points out that the best of the entries were saved, and on the basis of these sketches, a commission could be given to a runner-up. This did occur often, especially in the case of small buildings. The Section hoped that in this way a number of beginning or hitherto unknown artists would be brought to public notice and their careers prosper. Watson made it clear in his bulletins that the choices would be made "on the sole basis of quality."⁶

The requirements for artists were somewhat strenuous. The artist was allowed to choose the subject. It was most often the case that the building for which the mural would be painted was some distance away from the artist's home. He or she was advised to visit the town, learn its history, study its occupations, and talk with the citizens, in order to have a clear idea of what to paint. It was seldom a local artist was chosen, simply because there usually was none, especially in small towns.

The artist was to pay for materials and the complete cost of execution and installation and was paid in increments: one-third when the design was accepted, one-third when the work was half done, and the final amount

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Bulletin number 1, March 1, 1935, p.1.

when it was completed and installed and a photograph of it *in situ* sent to the Section. The amount paid varied; at first, it was referred to as "plumber's wages". It was not exactly a fixed rate, depending rather on the size of the work and what time limit was involved. However, an early bulletin stated the established price at from ten dollars to twenty dollars a square foot. As an example, the artist Alois Fabrey painted a mural in the Williamsburg, Kentucky post office, dimensions 12'-0" x 3'-6" (42 square feet), for which he received six hundred seventy dollars.⁷

Social Realism

Little needs to be said about this trend, since it was largely confined to New York City, which had a preponderance of artists. It was not actually a style, but more of a political position which was adopted by a very militant group of artists who eventually formed an Artists' Union to promote a demand for more jobs. Since many of the Union's leaders were Communist Party members, there was a strong Communist influence in the Artists' Union.⁸

The Union magazine, Art Front, was a powerful aid in disseminating social realist ideas and it attracted

⁷ Rowan to Fabrey 28/11/39, NA, TSL.

⁸ Francine Tyler, "Artists respond to the Great Depression and the threat of Fascism: The New York Artists' Union and its magazine, Art Front, 1934-1937" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1991) 3.

well-known artists and writers. Artist Stuart Davis and art critics Meyer Shapiro and Harold Rosenberg were editors at different times. As early as 1933 this group staged riots, forcing the Whitney Museum to close and holding a government official hostage. After the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939, many felt betrayed by the Soviet Union and left the artists group.

There were a number of prominent artists who belonged to this union, among them Ben Shahn, George Grosz, Peter Blume, and Joseph Levine, all of whom occasionally painted for the WPA. Their work tended to be satirical and passionate and often used large figures, clashing colors, and odd angles. The group did not outlast the decade, but much of its art work is still admired and had a definite influence, both here and abroad. Unfortunately, it also re-enforced the public perception that artists were all radicals and a threat to good order.

The Mexican Influence

The work of Diego Rivera and his fellow Mexican artists, José Orozco and David Siqueros, intrigued American artists. President Obregon of Mexico had set up an art program to celebrate his new political regime, and these three artists were the most famous participants. All came to the United States, but it was Rivera whose name was heard in art circles and beyond, both praised and abhorred.

It is not surprising that artists in the United States were fascinated by them; it was the Mexican artists who inspired George Biddle in the first place to make his suggestion to President Roosevelt about government sponsorship of art.

All these artists worked on murals in fresco, or an imitation of fresco, and there is no doubt they inspired a minor renaissance of that medium. Rivera's work appears somewhat primitive, but if examined closely, it shows familiarity with Giotto's Lamentation in one mural's grouping, the two levels of El Greco's The Burial of Count Orgaz in another work, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel triangles, and even Lorenzetti's murals of Good and Bad Government in Siena, on a basic foundation of pre-Columbian sculpture.⁹

Rivera painted several murals in this country, but the one that is remembered best is the very controversial mural painted for Rockefeller Center in New York in 1930, called Man at the Crossroads. Like all his work, it was large, brilliantly colored, and crowded with large, solid figures. It also featured Communist symbols, including a head of Lenin, which Rivera refused to remove. This situation created something of a scandal, and Rockefeller paid and dismissed him, and the mural was destroyed. The whole episode added to the public's fear of "Reds", and bolstered its isolationist attitude.

⁹ Desmond Rockfort, The Murals of Diego Rivera (London: Hayward Gallery, 1987), 25. Exhibition catalogue.

Lucienne Bloch, who painted the post office mural in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, worked as an assistant on Rivera's frescoes and also had some of her photographs printed in Art Front.

Rivera's work was not forgotten by artists, and elements of it were adapted by a number of painters, especially in New York. The Section artists, however, being restricted to the American Scene style, found little opportunity to use any of its features. It is seldom that we can detect in a Treasury-sponsored mural any trace of Rivera.

Section Goals and Methods

As one of the many construction programs initiated by the New Deal, a building boom in post offices occurred, especially in small towns. One provision of this program had always been that one per cent of the total funding was set aside for "embellishments". That money was now diverted to pay for murals, rather than marble and gilt and other richer materials.

This change was a happy circumstance for the Section. It meant a continuing source of funds without begging for them. Congress was always somewhat skeptical of all the New Deal efforts and often critical. The financial arrangement allowed the Section to keep a low profile and minimize interference with its work.

Despite a few complaints from artists who felt their efforts weren't worthwhile if they didn't win, the process did give all an equal chance. Politics were kept out of the judging and a superior work chosen. No well-known name could cause undue influence. The local group advised on its choice, but the Section often thought otherwise and it was the Section who made the choice.

Once a color sketch was approved in Washington, D.C., the artist was obliged to paint his mural as identical to the sketch as possible, a stipulation which could be a drawback for the artist.

The Section was somewhat ahead of its time in employing women artists. There was a general perception in the country that women's painting would be too delicate in color and decorative in form for the broad scope of a mural,¹⁰ but that was not the case. There are three murals painted by women in Kentucky alone, and they are strong depictions of their subjects. Two were of warfare, and the other showed bloodshed. There are no women pictured in their murals.

The Section seemed not to consider the question an issue at all. Artists were treated equally, and over thirty-three per cent of the Section's artists were women.¹¹

¹⁰ Barbara Melosh, Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 220.

¹¹ It is of some interest that at least twenty-seven woman artists who worked for the Section were married to men who also painted Section murals.

(Twenty-five per cent of the WPA artists were women.)

Although the government art was not appreciated by everyone, it did make many converts. For the most part, the Section accomplished what it set out to do--bring some culture to those deprived of it. They were most sincere in this purpose and never deviated from it.

The initial issue of the Section Bulletin gives its general objectives. The first and ostensibly the most important one is "To secure suitable art of the best quality available to the embellishment of public buildings."¹²

¹² Foreward to the first Bulletin of the Section of Fine Arts, 1 March 1935, 3.

CHAPTER FIVE
STYLE AND SUBJECT

The arts in the United States at the beginning of the 1930s were, as we saw in Chapter II, in a time of profound change. The "Genteel Tradition style" was dying out, and the Section wanted no part of it. Edward Bruce said he wished to steer clear of "Greek ladies in cheesecloth, cluttered with scales, lambs, and sheaves of wheat" which were intended to represent the Spirit of America.¹

At the other extreme were the new styles from Europe, Cubism, Futurism, and other abstract forms which to Holger Cahill, Director of the WPA, seemed to be new trends of the time which would not long outlast 1936.² The townspeople who received the murals would not have liked any of it. Their preference was for scenes of their own daily life and history, and these could not be produced without resorting to representational art. Abstraction could hardly represent

¹ Bernstein, 79.

² Cahill, 14.

a people who did not understand it. The concept of art for the masses was becoming ever stronger.

One question that arose early on was the possibility of government propaganda being shown in these murals. Given the government sponsorship, this was a natural concern. President Roosevelt avowed no intention of using art as the totalitarian countries were doing in Europe, but the question persisted throughout the decade of the 1930s.

In Germany, art had become grandiose in its architecture, sculpture, posters, and painting. All were directed toward the one purpose of glorifying the Fatherland and the Führer. A painting by Hermann Otto Hoyer, titled In the Beginning was the Word (1937) shows Hitler haranguing a small group of followers in a dark room. A portrait of Hitler by Heinrich Knirr, of the same year, presents the Führer proudly erect, one hand on a cane, the other on his hip, against a landscape background, bringing to mind many imperial portraits, especially Charles I Dismounted (1635) by Anthony van Dyck, who painted many portraits of Charles I of England and his family.

As architecture was the most imposing art in Germany, sculpture was featured in Russia. Vera Mukhina created Worker and Collective Farm Woman (1939-40) with an exaggeratedly muscular couple holding aloft a hammer and sickle and striding into the wind with great purpose. The two media sometimes combined, as in the final design for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow by B. M. Iofan and others,

thirteen hundred feet high, shaped like a ziggurat, and at its top a statue of Lenin with outstretched arms. It was never built.

The American art was quiet and not meant to rouse passions, whereas totalitarian art had as its aim to make clear to its subjects the power of the state and emphasize the duty of the people to increase it. American policy was to encourage self-help and independence in its murals.

The slowly growing American Scene movement seemed to be the answer, although it was by no means an innovation. Rather, realism expressed the American way of thinking and feeling, and much of the art was the equal of, if not superior to, the Salon art of the French.

In the PWAP program, the Treasury required the American Scene style to be utilized and very strongly encouraged the use of it in the Section work. It bore definite resemblances to the Regionalist style, since it featured recognizable people and large stretches of landscape.

The most prominent Regionalists, Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood, also took for their subject the rural regions of the Middle West and the common activities of the people. Many of these government murals do exhibit traces of Curry in the sweeping fields of grain; there are a few in Kentucky alone which reflect Wood's monumental bust-like figures; and Benton's idiosyncratic methods seemed to touch in some way every painting in America. Each artist put his stamp of originality into the

style of his works, which, unfortunately, cannot be said of some of the government painters. There seems little doubt that more of the Section painters' personalities, philosophies and individual methods of brushwork would have differentiated their work more, except for the Section's insistence on fidelity to the artists' first inspiration in their sketches. As Thomas Hart Benton explained, this stricture doubtless lessened the quality of Section work.

Grant Wood said, "Mural painting is obviously well adapted to government projects, and it is also highly suitable for regional expression."³ Wood was convinced that a true art expression must grow up from the soil itself.⁴

Charles Burchfield is usually considered a Regionalist, but a minor one. His painting is often dreary, haunted, and does not share the ebullient joy in life the others exhibit. Edward Hopper is sometimes mentioned as being a Regionalist, also, especially since he studied with Benton. But there seems to be a depth in his work that puts him outside the category. His use of chiaroscuro is so unusual, the light sometimes dim and sometimes blinding, that it seems clear he is working toward another goal. His work would be unsuitable as murals because of the strong mood of his paintings, the individuality of his people, and his sympathy

³ Grant Wood, Revolt Against the City (Iowa City, Iowa: Clio Press, 1935), 42.

⁴ Alexander, 180.

and understanding, all of which attributes are lacking in many government murals.

Actually, the American Scene was not much of an innovation. American art had always been recognizable and realistic, except possibly for some elaborate portraits in its colonial days, in obvious imitation of English style.

Influence from earlier American days can be traced from the Hudson River School. Nature in its untrammelled state was the main subject for these artists, and Bruce agreed with their leader, Thomas Cole, that nature was to be respected and appreciated as the handiwork of God.⁵

Our three greatest painters in mid-nineteenth century have been mentioned--all very different in approach and method, but all depicting American reality and human emotions: George Caleb Bingham and his penchant for a Poussin style of composition; Winslow Homer who, with his liking for portraying widely differing types of scenes, was easily led to study the unusual Japanese work newly discovered in the West; Thomas Eakins, the most powerful of all, with his strongly dramatic scenes, enhanced by his absorption of the way Velasquez and Rembrandt used chiaroscuro. This sort of adaptation was typical of almost all American artists who studied in Europe. They learned the processes and the techniques but came home to use them on American subjects.

⁵ Contreras, Tradition, 20.

When we consider that the next important painting school was Henri's "The Eight", it is evident that American art had never really deviated from realism of some kind. Most of the paintings of "The Eight" showed ordinary people going about their daily labor, but their scenes were urban and created an impression different from that of the post office murals. Except for this customary difference in subject, many feel that the American Scene style found in the murals was a fulfillment of Henri's ideas.

Bruce was shrewd enough to realize that Americans would appreciate the type of art that would mean something to them, would resonate with details of their own lives. He never expected to make connoisseurs of them but to open their eyes to the wonders of life around them every day.

The Subjects

Among American collectors, historians, and museums, there was, in the 1930s, still little or no interest in American work. Although Old Masters and often pretentious work from abroad brought high prices, the "art establishment", especially on the east coast, ignored it. For these people, art was a status symbol.

The Allegheny frontier had disappeared by this time, but the frontier mentality had not. For many, art did not exist west of the Hudson River. Similarly, art of any kind was still largely an unknown concept to Americans who were

not city dwellers. The Midwest was the great conservative section of the land, and most of the people were farmers of small land holdings. Practical matters took all available energy, money, and time. Their physical isolation probably predisposed them to prefer being isolated from the distant world's crises, as well. These farming folk were in no way like Millet's or Courbet's downtrodden peasants, however. These were independent families, in control of the management of their land and not bound to it, as were many in Europe still.

When it was announced that the government was planning to provide large murals for certain post offices, there was often difficulty in reaching agreement on the project itself and on a subject. Two things militated against enthusiastic acceptance of the murals by the people. They held a conviction that art was a luxury they had done without and could continue to do so. In addition, their longstanding individualism and independence made them suspicious of the central government's largesse. Who knew what the finished product would be? And, in the last analysis, weren't the townspeople paying for this with their own tax money? It seems that there were still divisions of opinion between the people making their living from the land, and big city dwellers and bankers, just as there was in the time of Jefferson and Hamilton.

It took the Section a while to realize that if a community resented such intrusion from federal sources, its

attitude changed when the subject of the mural was their own town and its landmarks. They took a proprietary interest in accuracy and felt a certain pride in the work. Any hesitations about spending money for art were overcome, in most cases.

What would the people like to see decorating their public space? In its Bulletin, the Section gave some suggestions, largely centered on the Postal Service and on local scenes. Nationwide, there was much variety in the murals--from Coney Island to cowboys--the murals usually echoing the background of the section of the country where they were placed.

In the Midwest and the South, little variety could be expected, since most of the inhabitants labored on the same daily tasks--mining, working in tobacco fields, or growing food. Kentucky is one of the places where this situation especially prevailed. The work was hard, and there are few scenes of leisure activities since leisure was hard to come by.

In certain locations there were a number of differences of opinion between the Section and the townspeople, and they were never solved to everyone's satisfaction, but for the most part, the murals added a distinctive note to the town and this recognition was appreciated by the citizens who now felt an added sense of worth.

The task of finding distinguishing features in a town was not always easy for the artist to carry out. In

Doylestown, Pennsylvania, a voluble local historian echoed a common sentiment when he wrote, "The towns of this section are of that general provincial type best described as never having been famous for anything, or given birth to anyone of note...and of which the Post Office is so stationary that any addition from the world outside would create an effervescence of excitement".⁶

Most villages and rural areas also liked to have local legends portrayed. It is true that a fairly large number of immigrants settled the country, and for many years each group adhered to its own legends, folk lore, and customs. Their original countries' methods of working, and even their languages were preferred. But by the 1930s the Midwest, at least, had a more or less homogeneous population. This fact is given credence by the uniform nature of many of the Kentucky murals. Kentucky had, especially in the 1930s, one of the least diverse populations of all the states, consisting of Anglo-Saxon and Scottish-Irish stock, with a few Germans, a fact which caused only slight deviation in folk lore and customs. The degree of similarity in murals is also explained by the fact that most of the murals depict types of work which were endemic to most areas of Kentucky.

Some murals in the South did depict African-Americans, but Hispanics were not plentiful in this region, and Native Americans were shown only in historical scenes, fighting

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Park and Markovitz, Democratic Vistas, 14, FN 10.

against the white man. In fact, depictions of Indians had to be handled carefully. Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, insisted on personal approval. He was sensitive to the way Indians were portrayed, since he wished to have the government on good terms with them.⁸ He had the power to cancel the project and, of course, Congress could do the same, so the Section heads were wise to tread lightly. Any legends or stories shown in Kentucky were those of purely local American origin, but the local aspects were too often filtered through the mind of an artist from another state.

In fact, the artists were almost invariably from some other town or state, which created an added difficulty only too often in obtaining a true picture. They were expected to visit the place where their mural would be hung in order to absorb local atmosphere, but for the most part, they did not, lacking the funds to travel. In these cases, research was confined to libraries and history books, which were unsatisfactory substitutes and could never capture the spirit of a place. To their credit, the artists were usually successful, with a few notable exceptions.

Probably the most popular subjects in any state were history, hometown heroes, and scenes of daily life. These preferences are easy to understand, although some scholars do seem amazed at the lack of pessimism in these murals.

During the Depression, farm people were some of the hardest hit. The people across the nation had drought, dust

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Karal Ann Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, 252.

storms, poverty, and eviction to contend with. Many whole families were uprooted and wandered the roads looking for work. There was no lack of depressing material for the painters' canvases, and scholars might well wonder at the spirit and tenacity with which the people faced life.

The murals show no trace of such traumas but create placid scenes of highly idealized daily life. They appeared to deliberately portray the domestic values of hard work, cooperation, and family togetherness. Whatever the subject, the prevailing mood is always one of optimism. This is what the people wanted.

Local heroes of the past were often portrayed, as a point of local pride, and Daniel Boone was by far the favorite of these in Kentucky. His fame was also world-wide, as evidenced by the seven stanzas in praise of Boone that Byron included in his long poem.⁹ It is surprising that not one postal mural in Kentucky features Abraham Lincoln who was born in the state and could certainly be claimed as Kentucky's own.

Other pictures of the past included daily community life, founding of towns, barnraisings and the subsequent celebrations, and scenes of the Ohio River and its steamboat traffic. Historical subjects were carefully studied for accuracy, and murals were always of events which took place locally.

⁹ George Gordon, Lord Byron, Don Juan, Stanzas LXI-LXVII Asimov's Annotated "Don Juan": Text by Lord Byron (New York, Garden City: Doubleday Co., Inc., 1972), 659-662.

In these facts may lie a dilemma: the accurate scenes spread across a wide canvas can often look like the background for a story, but in none of them is there much of a happening. A photograph can tell a story, or imply one, by the use of the photographer's skill, but the mural painter is somewhat handicapped by the large size of his work area which gives no opportunity for intimate scenes or action. The only possibly valid exception to this situation is the mural in Berea. It gives evidence that the muralist, Frank Long, although portraying a crowd, includes many little vignettes which at least suggest stories.

Since the location of these murals was the post office, and the Section actively urged artists to take up this postal theme, many of them did. The post office was a very familiar place since Benjamin Franklin established a postal system. Farms were by their nature somewhat isolated, and to the farm families, mail was a vital connection to relatives or business concerns. In towns, the post office was usually located in the center of the community and served as a gathering place for the citizens. It was the agora for small communities. Funeral notices, lost and found announcements, weddings, help wanted lists, most wanted lists, and other bits of news were easily caught up on and served as topics of conversation for those gathered in the post office. By the 1930s, too, mail arrived faster because of the innovations of airmail and faster trains.

Judging from the large proportion of scenes from daily life, any mural scene connected to the postal service was a favorite topic. The postman was a hero to almost everyone, especially the Rural Mail Delivery by horse or wagon. Women, too, came in for praise. Kentucky may have been the only place that sent woman mail carriers by mule up into the mountains (the Appalachians) with saddlebags full of books, since isolated families were not always uneducated. In fact, there were two hundred seventy-four of these intrepid postal women, and they were nationally praised.¹⁰

In Kentucky, in addition to the postal theme, the subjects include a battle, several generals, horses being transported by boat, a mid-nineteenth-century scene of well-dressed people meeting a train, and other very individualized topics, with one exception. Machines of any kind are seldom seen. In all the Kentucky murals, there are only two which qualify as acknowledging new inventions. The Anchorage mural is not even of a contemporary scene, but more of a post-Civil War occasion. Meeting the Train is its title, and the whole foreground is taken up by large figures of people arriving and departing. The train itself waits in the background, as if not wishing to intrude (Figure 4).

The second mural is in Greenville and is entitled Source of Power. This has a purely industrial theme, consisting only of a view of a colliery. There are no men present, no workers of any kind, but only a clever blending

¹⁰ Blakey, 63.

of factory buildings. No point of view is forced upon the onlooker, but the serene nature of the work and its title indicates that the power plant is appreciated for what it does (Figure 11).

Nationwide, of course, more such modern scenes were painted, depending on location. In many there is an atmosphere of progress and achievement, with vigorous, hard-working men dealing daily with these powerful forces.

Why are there no more of them in Kentucky? No doubt the answer lies in the fact that the Commonwealth was not a manufacturing region. It's true that modern advances had been made already: the automobile, electricity, films, labor-saving devices, radio (The first Derby broadcast was in 1929). Despite this fact, it is quite believable that Kentuckians had a mistrust of any kind of device over which they hadn't absolute control. Independent as they were, they wished to work in the way to which they were accustomed.

The majority of murals are of rural people sitting on their porches or going about their work. A strong sense of cooperation pervades all such murals and an impression of each person fulfilling a duty. There is little expression on the faces, rather, a patient resignation to doing what must be done is suggested. This type of art cannot be described as revolutionary in any way. No wonder the murals seemed old-fashioned to people of the 1950s, since they depicted what was essentially a nineteenth-century way of

working. However, the similarity of this type of scene, and the lack of emotion portrayed puts the emphasis on a sense of community, cooperation, and a knowledge that all the people need to work together to provide a living for all.

It is noteworthy that in almost all such scenes the whole family does work together. Each member has his task and they seem to be a unit formed for just this work, hard though it may be. The crops being grown are a clear reflection of the rewards to come, and the strong presence of the mother of the family subtly joins in to give a suggestion of fertility, both of land and people.

The old allegorical symbols were almost gone, but in this type of mural, a new symbolism was being created, as slowly father, mother, and child began to represent not only their own family but the families of the whole people which, collectively, make up the nation.

These family scenes are obviously idealized, but this is the way the people saw themselves when their troubles would be over and life would again be normal. So the murals went far beyond decoration to become a source of inspiration.

There were no murals in the state which featured the future. Predictions of the future of the United States were too risky and uncertain to deal with. There were a few innovations already in the people's lives, and there was much ambivalence about what changes they would cause. In the early 1930s especially, it was a subject best left alone

So it can be fairly said that these murals provided nostalgia for the past, an idealization of the present, and a vague hope for the future.

CHAPTER SIX

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Matthew Arnold has defined culture as "the best that has been thought and said".¹ European countries had been settled long enough that their outstanding literature, painting, and music had stood the test of time. The United States was too young a country to have set standards for its cultural achievements or to have developed any means for their dissemination. As the American poet William Carlos Williams wrote to Edward Rowan, assistant head of the Section of Fine Arts, "culture we ain't got much of."²

It was not only a sense of something higher than the pragmatic that was missing, but even a sense of history. America had had no national childhood, according to the philosopher Hippolyte Taine.³ By the 1930s citizens of the United States had had less than two centuries to look back

¹ Alexander, xiv.

² William Carlos Williams to Edward Rowan, 28 August 1934.

³ Alexander, 37, Actually, this remark was first made by the sculptor Horatio Grenough in 1840.

on, a risibly short span in the eyes of Europeans. Distance, injured pride, lack of sympathy with foreign culture, and an uneasy sense that Europe was on the edge of political upheaval, if not something worse, led Americans to avoid becoming involved. All these factors created a deliberate mood of isolationism.

By the late 1920s, however, a sort of restless need had pervaded the country to have an identity of its own in all fields. In painting, the American Scene became popular, and more attention was paid to important events of the past. There was a growing interest in restoration, specifically the Rockefeller-financed remodeling of Williamsburg, Virginia, to approximate its original appearance. Rockefeller's vision of the past was, however, an aristocratic one, not entirely valid. There was awakening interest in re-enactments of battles and famous scenes. This trend continued in all spheres of culture, as the people searched for a "usable past", as the New England writer Van Wyck Brooks termed this goal.⁴ He had coined this phrase during World War I, but it was revived in the minds of many during the 1930s.

To Van Wyck Brooks, an American was a white Anglo-Saxon Bostonian. (He wrote The Flowering of New England in 1936.)

⁴ Francis V. O'Connor, Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project (Greenwich, Conn., New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 20.

But the influx of immigrants and their adaptation to life in the New World qualified them as Americans, also, and this state of affairs emphasized the felt need of many to define the American identity. The native American Indian does not seem to have been included in this assessment.

"Americans as a people notably lack a sense of history".⁵ This situation was slowly changing during the 1930s. The Library of Congress had already been founded in 1928, the National Archives in 1935. About this time there appeared the government-sponsored Archives of American Folk Song and the Archives of American Folk Art. The Whitney Museum of American Art opened in 1929, and the American wing of the New York Metropolitan museum in 1924.

From a concern about history, it was a short step to a consideration of culture. Many felt like the character in William Carlos Williams's novel, In the American Grain, who says that significant art can only arise from knowing one's history and environment, which America did not.⁶ There was little doubt that the people farthest removed from any cultural activity were still those living in the area casually referred to by sophisticates on both coasts today who call it "flyover country".

⁵ John Dos Passos, The Ground We Stand On (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1941), 3.

⁶ Thomas Hart Benton: Chronicler of America's Folk Heritage (New York, Annandale on Hudson: Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Bard College Center, 1984), 15. Exhibition catalogue.

This area, which included Kentucky, was a conservative region, populated by independent people who made their living largely by farming, and who had inherited from their forebears the endurance to battle nature. They were simple people, close to the soil, and dependent only on their own efforts. They were descendants of pioneers and were still very practical, using all their resources to wrest a living from the land, and totally unconcerned with anything aesthetic. There was no time, interest, or energy after more pressing matters were addressed.

Sometimes ridiculed, usually ignored, they and their problems, especially the poverty-stricken in Appalachia, went unheeded. As William Carlos Williams wrote "In two centuries mountain people have changed so little that they are in many ways the typical Americans."⁷

It seems to have been authors and artists of the 1920s especially who deplored these people's lack of opportunities for higher education of every sort, like the novelist Sherwood Anderson who was distressed that there was so little culture in the Midwest.⁸ Grant Wood felt that art was especially vital to the small town dweller and the farmer. Their isolation and rugged individualism caused many of them to be taciturn, if not inarticulate. Wood claimed that art was needed to express their lives for them--lives

⁷ Webster Schott, ed., "The Great American Novel" in Imaginations (New York: New Directions, 1970), 220.

⁸ Alexander, 40.

that were essentially dramatic.⁹

"Culture" was a concept that was never taken seriously by most Americans. There was a longstanding perception that it was a feminine pursuit, especially in writing and art. The very thought of art by women conjured up pictures of ladies engaged in producing mediocre watercolors as a suitable recreation.

Very slowly, from the turn of the twentieth century onward, art began to be taken more seriously, as new printing processes appeared, making possible new illustrations in books and publications of all kinds. Currier and Ives lithographs of typical American scenes had become very common on many household walls since the nineteenth century and continued to be appreciated.

There were other American staples in most rural homes which disseminated ideas and bound many together in the same strains of thought. Godey's Lady's Book, founded in 1830, was a popular magazine which featured engraved plates of the newest fashions. Another pervasive trend was spread by Andrew Jackson Downing, a horticulturist of the mid-nineteenth century, whose books were popular for their landscaping advice and also offered simple designs for wooden cottages with vaguely Gothic decoration. These homes were affordable, efficient, and eminently suitable for Americans of the time. And of course, there was always the

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Wood, 32.

Sears Catalogue. All of these resources were not only interesting but practical.

The attraction to Americana in the 1920s and early 1930s caused more attention to be paid to folk art and classes in various handicrafts. The resulting familiarity with some type of art made many people predisposed to consider it on a wider scale. The New Deal art programs sponsored by the government increased this interest and provided more material for it.

Philosophy

The question of who we were must have occupied many minds. As early as 1837, the New England writer and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a famous essay, "The American Scholar", in which he urged that more attention be paid to America's people and especially their values, which he thought were superior to others'. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe..."¹⁰ He held to the belief that our American values would overcome any inclinations to selfishness and materialism.

William James was a Bostonian philosopher, a Harvard professor, brother of novelist Henry James, and William James had studied art with William Hunt. This philosopher agreed with Emerson, although he was of a more pragmatic, even scientific nature. In fact, he is counted by some

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Alexander, 4.

scholars as one of those whose writings had weakened conventional ideas about thought and behavior. This negative opinion also included James's fellow Harvard professor, George Santayana, a writer and poet.¹¹

In Europe, a strain of Romanticism was creeping into philosophy, especially with the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Sorrows of Young Werther (1774). Daily life and surroundings had been advocated earlier as material for art by Gottfried Lessing (1729-1781) who aroused interest in Shakespeare and in German folk songs.¹² William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England were not only poets but essayists whose writings reached the United States and had some emotional effect. Wordsworth, especially was noted for his thoughtful poems about the farmer, peasant, and more rustic "common man". The philosophy of all these men had its culmination in the work of Hippolyte Taine, a French critic and historian of the mid-nineteenth century.

Taine felt strongly that art developed best in its own social atmosphere and environment. It was clear to him that the artist was bound to be affected by his race, surroundings, and the era in which he lived.¹³ His opinions had a direct result on American painting, since, when he was

¹¹ Ibid., 29

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Matthew Baigell, The American Scene, 40.

in Paris, Thomas Hart Benton read and approved of his works and promoted Taine's theories in his teaching.¹⁴

Holger Cahill, head of the WPA/FAP, the WPA's art program, was intrigued and believed that changes in art drew more force from social environments than most artists were willing to admit.¹⁵ Even among those who agreed, there were questions. Van Wyck Brooks agreed that American culture was in an unhappy state, but wondered whether artists would transform society or did society have to be reformed first?¹⁶ Obviously, this idea of art springing from its own soil was not totally confined to the thinking of Taine, but, as Benton said, he provided a framework for the art of the time.¹⁷

One man built on these ideas and was perhaps the most influential of all in the United States and that was the American John Dewey. He had his most profound influence on American education. John Dewey believed that art was an essential vehicle for human communication. George Biddle, like many of his contemporaries, endorsed Dewey's beliefs.

As a correlation, one of Dewey's maxims was that "art renders men aware of their union with one another".¹⁸ He

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cahill, 9.

¹⁶ Alexander, 37.

¹⁷ Thomas Hart Benton: Chronicler of America's Folk History, 20.

¹⁸ David Shapiro, ed. Art for the People: New Deal Murals on Long Island (Hempstead, Long Island, New York. Hofstra

saw art primarily as a process, not a product and, as an educator, urged inclusion of art into curricula whenever possible.¹⁹ Both Cahill and Edward Bruce, Director of the Section, approved this suggestion, and the Section hoped that the Midwest would be a model for other regions, since it conveyed values on which the nation is built more fully than any.

Comparison with Victorian Morality

There are more similarities to Victorian attitudes in the American reaction to the Depression than may be realized. The crash of the stock market in 1929 produced in the United States, among other things, a new and more sober way of assessing life. The 1920s were seen by many as a period of "moral bankruptcy"²⁰ and the artist Edward Laning strongly deplored what he saw as a drift into "moral suicide."²¹ There began a probably unconscious revival of the type of thought and action which was prevalent during the nineteenth century in England.

In both cases the return to common values and sobriety was a reaction to what had gone before: in England, the

University, Emily Lowe Gallery, 1978), Exhibition catalogue, 2.

¹⁹ Francis O'Connor, Art for the Millions, 33.

²⁰ Melosh, 159.

²¹ Howard E. Wooden, Edward Laning, American Realist 1906-1991: A Retrospective Exhibition (Wichita, Kansas: Wichita Art Museum, 1982), 5. (Laning painted the mural for Bowling Green, Kentucky.)

reign of George IV and the extravagant irresponsibilities of his brothers and friends had tried the patience of the English. The 1837 ascension of eighteen-year-old Victoria to the throne brought about a national dedication to the revival of time-honored values and decent living. In the twentieth-century United States, the excesses of the "Roaring Twenties", the crime, the scandalous way of life of so many, the flouting of Prohibition--all this, when the Depression fell on the country, was swept away and the extreme poverty and misery ushered in by the Depression centered people's minds on what was really good and important. For many, survival was the most important consideration.

For the Victorians, theirs was a changing world in many ways. The Industrial Revolution had altered the nature of work and had thrust many into unhealthy urban situations in factory and home. Family stability was weakened and children were often unprotected. Such conditions were not unknown in America in the next century, as whole farm families were forced to abandon their homesteads because of the drought and seek employment in the cities. The living conditions they found were usually substandard.

The English felt the same ambivalence as did Americans when faced with new improved machines, whether on farm or in factory. Mechanization represented progress but many felt it would be at a human cost. The French revolt of 1830 was still an ominous presence in the minds of the English who

feared a similar uprising with further demands and riots. A century later, some sort of revolt was also considered a possibility in the United States, as unemployment grew and unions (including the Artists' Union) expressed their frustration in riots, strikes, and propaganda.

Concerns went deeper. In the nineteenth century evolutionists had broken up the solid belief in Creation, theologians had begun to reinterpret Scripture itself in unfamiliar ways, and the faith of many was tried to the utmost. Caught between nostalgia and fear of the future, the English muddled through, feeling always that they stood on shifting sands.

No longer possessed of certainty in anything, they clung all the harder to the outward signs of morality as an anchor to prevent complete disintegration of belief. Self-improvement in any form became a passion, and useful means to this end were sought. Art could be a potent didactic force, and so it became, in the thousands of Victorian paintings that melodramatically pointed a moral.

The United States in the 1930s was also facing a *crise de confiance*. "Freud helped to undermine the accepted Victorian standards of American life."²² In addition to

²² Milton W. Brown, American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression (Princeton University Press, 1955), 6.

pressing problems brought about by destitution, Americans determined to reform social values, and here also, art was considered to be one of the best instruments.

Uniformity of opinion on the matter, however, never came to be, since many believed that all art was immoral and not suited to such a purpose.²³ The spectre of dissolute bohemian life among artists in Paris tainted the whole idea of art for them and they didn't think any sort of foreign art would help.²⁴

The growing popularity of the American Scene movement seemed to fill the needs that existed and to express the social values that President Roosevelt championed. It also centered attention on the people's native land. For several reasons, the Treasury art programs strongly urged artists to use the American Scene.

The Section's method of carrying out its program differed in one respect from the Victorian. Although both sought the same general goals, the Section's art held an underlying didactic air and, whatever the subject, was matter-of-fact and devoid of excitement. On the other hand, the Victorian works, although teaching a lesson, often had a story line and were usually melodramatic and extremely sentimental, such as April Love (c. 1852) by Arthur Hughes and any number of similar works by John Everett Millais.

²³ Melosh, Engendering Culture, 206.

²⁴ Baigell, The American Scene, 40.

Although separated in distance, time, and culture, many of these subjects were shared by English and Americans alike. The Section revived the distinctly Victorian type of paintings which clearly exhibited moral values. One illustration of this type is John Everett Millais's Christ in the House of His Parents (1849), but probably the apotheosis was Ford Madox Brown's Work (1863). Almost every variety of work is shown being conscientiously performed by people on an overcrowded canvas. The workers' efforts are obviously meant to be an example, but the painting has none of Soviet Realism's chauvinism or blatant propaganda. The Section murals bring out this theme of work in great numbers, many in Kentucky. They are scenes of farming, especially, work on river boats, mining, and other occupations. It was made clear that any leisure was the result of hard work and was earned, a reward. The strongest example in Kentucky of a respite from labor is the mural in the Berea Post Office which shows a community celebration.

Another shared topic was the family. Victorian paintings used the family to provide lessons, pointing out cruel fathers, faithless wives, seduced and dying maidens, wastrels gambling away their family home, and the like.

Almost every one of the Victorian paintings shows a tableau of family life, whether wealthy or poor, and indicates clearly the family virtues that should be practiced. The Section murals also feature a number of family scenes, with the members usually in harmony with each

other, often working in farm or field together and assisting one another. It's an indication that the painters' goals were the same, if we consider a painting, The Woodsman's Daughter, by Millais (1851) showing a little girl bringing her father lunch in the forest. We know that Edward Rowan, the Section's assistant director, often encouraged artists to include working families as a unit. He specifically urged one artist to show a wife bringing lunch to a husband laboring in a field. They all vindicate Supreme Court Justice Harlan Stone's opinion that the murals provided good lessons, especially that, however simple, life may be beautiful and dignified..²⁵

Is it a coincidence that in a New York theater in the 1930s Helen Hayes presented a wildly popular play titled Victoria Regina? This play took note of Victorian virtues in several ways, such as accurately portraying Prince Albert as a model of honor, and in dialogue such as, "It isn't manners that make the man--it's morals."²⁶

Morality in the Section

Bruce agreed with Robert Henri that art was not just decoration but should have a moral component. Bruce had his hands full ensuring the suitability of every mural. Most of

²⁵ Park and Markovitz, Democratic Vistas, 11.

²⁶ Laurence Housman, Victoria Regina, 1935, in Sixteen Famous British Plays, ed. Bennett A. Cerf and Van H. Cartwell (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, Inc, 1942), 902.

this burden was delegated to his assistant, Edward Rowan, who corresponded constantly with artists and public alike.

Rowan had some close calls, especially with regard to beach scenes. Invariably, there were complaints from the recipients about repulsive characters and indecent clothing. Rowan was often able to prevent such objections by sending a sketch back to an artist with a request for changes. This tactic was usually successful, with a few exceptions. The artist Paul Cadmus gained some notoriety with two of his murals, which seemed innocuous at first sight but, on closer inspection, were found to include lewd features.²⁷

The murals echoed the general moralizing tone of President Roosevelt's speeches, but went even further. As in Victorian England, which equated good drawing with good behavior, a great deal was expected of art in 1930s America. Most art journals exhorted artists to adhere to educational scenes with good taste. This fact seems logical, since many journal articles were written by Forbes Watson of the Section. Today his writings seem hyperbolic and extreme but left no doubt at the time that art should try to offset the indecencies of the world.

Literature

The literature of the time, quite naturally, also reflected the concerns and the mood of the American people. A clear and definite difference, however, could be found

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Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, 252.

between the writings and the murals. Put simply, the novels and essays tended to be pessimistic, whereas the Section murals had as their purpose to boost the morale of the people and to open them up to the experience of art, and so were naturally more hopeful.

The 1930s produced a great many writers whom we recognize today as worth reading, and we realize that this was a classic period of American writing. These writers built on an American foundation of nineteenth-century work by Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and many others. The country was still new and there was much hope of its "manifest destiny."

One of the nineteenth century's most optimistic poets was Walt Whitman, who had an ebullient personality which emerged in his writing. Robert Henri's insight into Whitman's energy and dedication convinced Henri that Whitman would have made an ideal painter.²⁸ He had the necessary qualities--a passionate identification with the whole population of the country and infinite faith in what they could accomplish. Similarly, Ernest Hemingway said that all American literature came from Huckleberry Finn.²⁹

The authors of the 1930s, however, took a very dim view of the situation in the United States. They had lived through World War One and then the Depression, and they were

²⁸ Helen Farr Sloan, Robert Henri, Painter (Delaware Art Museum May 4 to June 24, 1984), 52. Exhibition catalogue.

²⁹ Alexander, 93.

critical of what they felt was the people's lack of integrity and their obsession with unimportant trivialities.

Sinclair Lewis used the Middle West as the setting for most of his novels, which dealt with this theme. Babbitt concerned a small-town businessman who is materialistic in every way, not just in his trade. Lewis has presented him as small-minded, unkind, and boastful, making it clear what he thought of George Babbitt. Another novel by Lewis, Main Street (1930), shows how a small town looks to Carol Kennicott, who has married and moved there. It isn't long before she is overwhelmed by the unfriendliness, the gossip, the lack of anything of a cultural nature, and the stifling atmosphere, which tended to make a crime of any little deviation from its *mores*.

John Steinbeck's novels of the 1930s tended to show the underside of contemporary life in Of Mice and Men, Cannery Row, and the most outstanding of all, The Grapes of Wrath, a heartbreaking account of a dispossessed family with nowhere to turn. The book was realistic to its core, giving the reader a close look at the details of the American Exodus and the desperate Okies who took part in it. Many critics likened this to Uncle Tom's Cabin in its refusal to overlook the wretched condition of so many of the country's people.

The decade of the 1930s was a rich one for novels, despite the generally glum outlook of the authors. Theodore Dreiser won popularity with An American Tragedy, and Maggie, a Girl of the Streets, among others. John Dos Passos in his

novels regretted the hollowness of the past decade, and in his trilogy, U.S.A., promoted patriotism and called for a new and identifiable American culture.

A more hopeful attitude was adopted by a group of writers at Vanderbilt University who called themselves "The Agrarians." They included Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate (Kentuckians), and Cleanth Brooks, who in their book, I'll Take My Stand, told of their regret that the South had lost so much of its culture and had been degraded. Their writings were closest in attitude to the Regionalist painters and perhaps inspired them.

Prime examples of the deterioration of the South and its people and living conditions are rife in novels like Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road and in almost any of William Faulkner's books which contain a good deal of sexual depravity and violence.

One of the earliest works to lament the decline of America and expose the deficiencies and the wasted lives of small-town dwellers was Edgar Lee Masters's Spoon River Anthology (1915). He set forth in an innovative way how individual townspeople failed to live up to the tenets of democratic values propounded by the country's founders; the Jeffersonian vision was failing, according to Masters. It may have helped set the tone of later writings, but the authors of the 1930s had the indications before them. Sherwood Anderson added more examples of small-town failings in his Winesburg, Ohio.

Retrospective tendencies were growing in every phase of popular culture. Historical novels were popular at that time, as were biographies. Perhaps there was a bit of nostalgia in this preference as there was in the historical scenes of many murals. Probably the historical novel read by the most people was Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind. Many of these books took Abraham Lincoln as their protagonist. The most famous is probably Carl Sandburg's multi-volume work. He was as devoted to the memory of Lincoln as Whitman was, without the exuberance. There was poetry, like Stephen Vincent Benet's John Brown's Body, plays such as Abe Lincoln in Illinois, and movies like Young Mr. Lincoln.³⁰ Lincoln in the decade of the 1930s came to represent the best side of the American people and in so doing, became a new symbol.

Kentucky Literature

The Commonwealth produced some excellent writing. An especially affecting novel was Elizabeth Madox Roberts's The Time of Man. Her characters seem archetypal and the distinctive speech of Kentucky farmers is used. The theme is the connection of the living and the dead, and another connection is brought out between the world of mind and of outer order. The heroine learns to see ritual in common

³⁰ No Kentucky murals feature Abraham Lincoln, but there is one post office sculpture which commemorates him: Richard Davis's Signing of the Marriage Contract of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks, 1941, a limestone relief on the Springfield, Kentucky, Post Office.

duties. The family depends on the land for everything, but they have nothing of their own, since they are tenant farmers and are often forced to move and become transients on the road until another tenant vacancy opens up, usually offering poorer living conditions. These changes were true in Kentucky, as elsewhere, since mechanization was allowing large businesses to consolidate. The effect the novel leaves is of crushing inevitability.³¹

James Still's River of Earth (1940) has much the same depiction of a difficult life and a people strong enough to endure it. The title comes from a preacher's sermon, referring to ploughing and asking where this river of earth takes us. The characterizations are convincing, as are the details and accents. This family often has no food, but has sponging relatives. There are no means of communication with other relatives--a letter every three years or so is an event. The stark despair is described in a very matter-of-fact way, a method that increases the effect. We see no such depressing Kentucky murals.

Janice Holt Giles's The Enduring Hills is in much the same vein. It concerns a young man living along the Green River, isolated and having one great ambition--to see Louisville. John Fox, Jr. wrote novels in the 1920s which remained popular for decades, perhaps the best known being

³¹ Elizabeth Madox Roberts wrote at least one other novel which would probably interest Kentuckians since it dealt with the Kentucky flood of 1937. The title is He Sent Forth A Raven.

The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. Another was The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, a Civil War story about an orphan on Pine Mountain whose family was involved in a long-standing feud. On one occasion he found himself "at the summit of the Cumberland foothills and looked over the rolling land with little less of a thrill, doubtless, than the first hunters felt".³² This comparison seems to be validated by Lockwood's mural in Lexington of Daniel Boone discovering this same land.

One feature of these stories was their honesty. No deprivation was glossed over. A parallel can be drawn between Ellen Glasgow's novels and Hamlin Garland's short stories, as both see midwestern farm life as a stern round of drudgery.³³

Probably no Kentucky writer would be considered "great" today, but there is a long list of distinguished men and women who contributed to the literature of the time--during the 1930s the best known, perhaps, were the humorist, Irvin S. Cobb, who good-humoredly satirized his native state, Kentucky; the poet, Jesse Stuart, known to readers nationwide, and many other prominent contributors to literature. The WPA guide book for Kentucky in the 1930s, however, claims that Kentucky's writers have failed to give the state "the epical treatment in literature which it

³² John Fox, Jr., The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 187.

³³ Melosh, 55.

deserves."³⁴ That opinion, however, has not been validated by time.

Connections between Writers and Artists

Edward Rowan wrote to some fifty authors to ask for their opinions on the content of the murals, but the answers were so varied and inconsistent that they were little help.

Individual artists and writers did connect with each other and shared ideas and outlooks. Edward Laning (who painted the mural in the Bowling Green Post Office in Kentucky) grew up in the same town as Edgar Lee Masters, Petersburg, Illinois, and they were great friends.³⁵ Later, Laning included an array of authors when he painted a mural for the New York Public Library. His favorite mural was the one he painted for the National Bank of Petersburg. It included Masters and Abraham Lincoln, who was the original surveyor of the town.³⁶

George Bellows has been compared to Jack London for the vivid, dramatic and sometimes brutal tone of their work.

Vachel Lindsay was an art student of Robert Henri's but art was apparently not an ideal profession for him, since Henri advised Lindsay to be a poet instead, which he did.³⁷

³⁴ Simon, 125.

³⁵ McKinzie, 37.

³⁶ Wooden, 75.

³⁷ Perlman, 60.

It is no coincidence that Sherwood Anderson and Charles Burchfield shared the same gloomy vision of the Midwest.³⁸ Burchfield modeled his dreary empty buildings on those Anderson wrote about in Winesburg, Ohio, and he later illustrated a 1937 edition of Main Street.³⁹

Frank Long, a Kentucky artist, and his family were close to James Whitcomb Riley, "The Hoosier Poet." Perhaps the most unusual connection in these two different disciplines occurred when Olin Dows visited Long to inspect his work for the Section. Dows mentioned that he and Thomas Wolfe were good friends and that Wolfe had based the character of Joel Pierce in Of Time and the River on Dows. Wolfe was, however, something less than kind in his portrayal of Pierce's mother and he satirized Dow's quiet and hesitant way of speaking.⁴⁰

Photography

A word should be said here about photography. Thanks to George Eastman, who had improved cameras in his Rochester, New York, factory, in the nineteenth century, some had "box cameras" for their own use. By the 1930s many Americans owned cameras and found a great deal of amusement in "taking pictures." For more serious work in the

³⁸ Barbara Rose. American Art Since 1900: A Critical History (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 123.

³⁹ Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, The Regionalists (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1976), 77.

⁴⁰ Frank W. Long, Confessions of a Depression Muralist (New York: Columbia, Missouri, Univ. of Missouri Press, 1997), 160.

medium, there was Ansel Adams, who had a long career, but the rural residents were not very likely to see his work.

During the Depression, the Farm Security Administration under Roy Stryker sent photographers to various regions, especially the South, to document the conditions. Stryker was not a photographer himself, but was compiling a file of photos for the government, and he had a meticulous eye.

There were a number of excellent photographers involved in this program, but probably Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans produced the most haunting record of the lives of the destitute. The dust can be seen drifting around the figures who have lost their land and all they had. Sitting in a bare cabin, a whole family gazes at the camera with hopeless eyes that send the message that they expect nothing. It's probable that the photograph most familiar to the public is Lange's Migrant Mother (1936). It was not posed. This family's crops had failed and tires from the car had been sold to buy food for their seven children.⁴¹

The photographers didn't take pictures of grotesques or disabled, but of normal people. The homeless were treated with respect, allowed to choose their own poses. Far from emphasizing helplessness, the photos showed the people's attempts at improving their lot by their own efforts in the form of hand-made plough, furniture, and scenes of school rooms, barely equipped, but the students very serious.

⁴¹ Beaumont Newhall, The History of Photography: From 1838 to the Present Day (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964), 143.

In this they paralleled the many murals that portrayed farming, mining, work on the rivers, and other occupations which went to prove that many were successfully independent.

The FSA, inaugurated in 1937, was disbanded in 1940. Like so many other programs, it became non-essential with war on the horizon. Evans was employed by Fortune magazine and Lange by Life magazine, where Marguerite Bourke-White was already working on her documentary photos. These and other photos such as those of Robert Capa of World War II action, published in Life, were almost the only excellent examples of photography that most people saw.

Sue Beckham claims that many of these documentary scenes were edited to present hopelessness, as opposed to the murals, which gave such a different impression. She considers them propagandistic but gives no specific references for this opinion. "Much scholarly work has been done to show that the scenes in the documentaries of the era were edited to present hopelessness, the opposite of the murals."⁴²

Walker Evans was asked about this possibility at the time but insisted his work was not propaganda or political.⁴³ The photographer Edward Steichen felt there

⁴² Sue Bridwell Beckham, Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), 188.

⁴³ James Guimond, ed., The American Photograph and the American Dream (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991), 143.

was a great distance between the Russian official photographs and the murals.⁴⁴ Roy Stryker (who should have known) said, "To my knowledge, there is no photo in the FSA collection that in any way whatsoever represents an attempt by the photographer to ridicule his subject, to be cute with him, to abuse his privacy, or to present him as a cliché."⁴⁵

Theater

Few people had an opportunity to see plays at all, unless they lived in New York, but a quick look at what was playing in New York shows much the same themes as the murals and novels. A gradual change toward acceptance of American themes in all areas of culture had become very strong during the 1930s.

Serious drama had taken the place of the "well-made" British play of the 1920s, and some of the plays reflected American social concerns. As an outgrowth of Prohibition and a consequence of overwhelming poverty, plays that reflected the gang wars of the time and the living conditions were well received. Examples are Winterset, by Maxwell Anderson, based on the Sacco and Vanzetti case, Waiting for Lefty, by Clifford Odets, Street Scene, by Elmer Rice (which won the 1929 Pulitzer Prize), Dead End, by Sidney Kingsley, showing how a gang of juvenile delinquents were redeemed by

⁴⁴ Ibid. 116.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 120.

government help. In addition, there were a number of provocative, sometimes inflammatory, plays by The Group Theater and the WPA's theater branch, all of which put heavy emphasis on current social injustice, as they saw it.

Such plays could be rather grim, but the theater was committed to presenting serious topics, at least in the early 1930s. The emphasis was still on Americana, and few foreign plays were produced. African-Americans were not neglected, as whole casts of the following plays were composed of them, or at least they had featured roles: Porgy and Bess, with music by George Gershwin, Show Boat, music by Oscar Hammerstein, Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones, starring Paul Robeson, and Green Pastures, which proved to be not only popular but inspirational.

As the Depression seemed set to go on forever, legitimate theater was in decline, and more entertaining plays were offered, especially musicals like Show Boat and Of Thee I Sing, a political parody with music by George Gershwin. Comedies were popular also, such as Life with Father, by Lindsay and Krause, and The Man Who Came to Dinner, by Kaufman and Hart.

The people were weary and too exhausted to concentrate on serious issues. They had enough of their own. So, in the mid-1930s, they were offered The Time of Your Life, by William Saroyan, who captured the basic mood of an ideal America, as Frank Capra did in his movies: unity in diversity, simple good will, endurance--the same homely

virtues seen in the murals. There were also a number of musical comedies starring Ray Bolger, Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante, Ethel Merman--some good, some which should never have seen the light of day.

With intimations of war in the air in the late 1930s, some plays began to be produced with more serious themes, such as Robert Sherwood's Idiot's Delight. As the war spread, other theatrical offerings reflected the drama and tension of the crisis, like Lillian Hellmann's Watch on the Rhine and Robert Sherwood's There Shall Be No Night.

There are two plays which stand out above all others, and they are Abe Lincoln in Illinois, by Robert Sherwood (1939), and Our Town (1938), by Thornton Wilder.

To a people in the act of discovering their identity, the idea of Abraham Lincoln seemed almost a religious one. They saw him as the epitome of goodness, and the play did nothing to dispel this image. Beautifully acted, it presented a many-sided Abe with his cracker-barrel humor and his true deep-seated sorrows. Even today, he is referred to in many speeches, and it seems he has come to represent America in a much deeper way than the image of Uncle Sam.

A truly American event occurred with the opening of Thornton Wilder's Our Town. Nostalgia, hope, and a deep look at humanity produced an almost spiritual effect on all who saw it. Though concerned only with the people in a small town, facing few dramatic traumas and resonating with sincerity, it was not quite the opposite of The Spoon River

Anthology, which was filled with cynicism and despair. Our Town has its dark side, as does any real life, but it radiated hope. The characters in Our Town seem like people known and loved, and many believe it to be the quintessential American drama.

Radio and Film

By the 1930s, the modern miracle of radio was an important feature in almost every home. In addition to bringing the world into people's lives, it drew families closer, as everyone gathered near the radio to hear the "fireside chats" of their President. His encouraging tone and words, as war seemed imminent, bolstered the morale of the country.

Radio also provided a great deal of entertainment, which was a cherished treat for those in rural regions, especially. Most programs centered on comedy--Fred Allen, Amos 'n Andy, Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen. Daytime "soap operas", game shows, and a surprising amount of classical or light classical music were offered. Like the murals, the radio provided a connecting link between communities, as almost all were tuned in to the same programs. Radio can be said to have come as an important element of modern life with the wartime broadcasts of Edward R. Murrow, reporting from London on the German blitz.

In movie theaters also, short subjects like The March of Time gave visual reports on news events and kept people at least somewhat informed.

The strongest influence on culture, however, was film. In 1936 Will Hays, the movie czar who acted as a censor, said, "No medium has contributed more greatly than the film to the maintenance of the public morale."⁴⁶ Very few movies dealt with the problems of the day. Exceptions were the gangster and prison movies like White Heat and Scarface. Even these grim stories were for the people a diversion--a way of escaping for a time the realities of their lives. A great many novels and plays were translated to the screen and were popular, since people already had some familiarity with them. It's possible that they were preferred by those who didn't know how to read or couldn't afford books. Another category seen was historical films, such as The Story of Louis Pasteur, Marie Antoinette, Juarez, and The Life of Emile Zola.

In the 1930s movies meant more to people than before or since.⁴⁷ In the movie audiences, as elsewhere, there was an awakening interest in American history, made clear by the popularity of Young Mr. Lincoln, Northwest Passage, and Drums Along the Mohawk. What did not appeal to them were the dramas centered on Germany's actions, like Hitler's

⁴⁶ Guimond, 105.

⁴⁷ Alexander, 229.

Children, Underground, or The Mortal Storm, which brought little to the box office, although some were excellent.

People preferred make-believe dramas, and many were made, especially about the South--The Old Maid, So Red the Rose, Jezabel, and, of course, Gone with the Wind.

In addition, the people were offered absorbing stories like Kitty Foyle, The Wizard of Oz, King's Row, The Long Voyage Home, The Sea Wolf, Sergeant York, Citizen Kane--there seemed no end to them.

Many movies contained easily identifiable characters, so that people, as they did in the Westerns, soon recognized stereotypes and found some in the murals.

Basically, people went to the movies to be entertained, and it was within the means of most to do so for a small admission price. In the dark theater they could indulge their desire for escapism with comedies, cartoons, musicals, stories, and anything that would provide respite and fortify them for another hard day.

"Movies can transport you to another place in time. And that's magic. . .It's like a dream state."⁴⁸ It is not surprising that the post office murals were generally meaningful, attractive and uplifting to the people who saw them. For what were the murals, after all, but frozen movies?⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Martin Scorsese, Newsweek, 28 September 1998, 77.

⁴⁹ The term "frozen movies" is borrowed from Karal Ann Marling's Wall-to-Wall America. It seems a shame to have such an accurate and felicitous phrase used only once.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REACTION

The Artist

Despite the Section's constant efforts to make the program fair, simple, and rewarding, the various artists involved found plenty not to their liking.

Probably the greatest hardship was the pay; it was too small. Payments were somewhat flexible, but there were two classes of artists, one earning thirty-five dollars a week and the other twenty-five dollars. These payments fluctuated, however, according to the size of the work, the difficulty, and the competence of the artist. It is safe to say that an average payment for a post office mural would be about seven hundred dollars. It was not always easy for an artist, especially one with a family, to subsist on it.

It not only failed to cover necessary living expenses for some, but the commission involved a substantial layout of funds by the artist who was obliged to pay for materials--canvas, paint, and so on. The Section strongly urged that the artist pay a visit

to the site of the proposed mural in order to absorb local atmosphere, and the cost of this trip was also borne by the artist. The pay was in installments, which were often late, and a time limit also added to the pressure.

These problems affected every artist who was awarded a commission. For those who entered a competition and did not win it, the same expenses obtained, and it was possible to lose money, which fact must have cut down on the number of entries.

It often occurred that the townspeople were not pleased with their post office mural, and they were not shy about saying so. Their self-assurance was easily offended. The problem could be with the subject, which might be displeasing to them (as at Paducah and Bowling Green.)¹ Sometimes it seemed the people purposefully tried to find fault of some kind, complaining about the accuracy, size, colors, depiction of characters-- anything, it seemed, could meet with their disapproval in some cases. Townspeople's pride in their little piece of America was sensitively guarded. They were often unreasonable, simply because they didn't really want a realistic view of their town, but an idealized one. They preferred to believe their town was perfect and wanted no intimations to the contrary.

¹ See the individual accounts of these murals in Part Two of this work under the Paducah and Bowling Green entries.

However, it is likely that in some towns, the real objection was not the mural itself, but the fact that the government was intrusive in providing an unasked-for addition to the town, or even that the artist was an outsider--a stranger who could not be expected to hold the town in such high esteem as did its residents.

George Biddle recognized the validity of reservations on the artists' part about the rigid section rules which affected their work. He felt that good painting was being produced but it was rarely an artist's best work because of the restrictions put upon him.² And there were many. Edward Rowan's correspondence with various artists makes clear that he was indefatigable in insuring that the mural in question contained nothing that anyone could possibly object to. His Kentucky letters alone give proof of this.

Some artists agreed with him. Schomer Lichtner, who painted the Hodgenville, Kentucky, mural, wrote Rowan concerning a Detroit mural, "Instead of depicting the sordid surroundings in which they live, I have shown probably the most beautiful thing they see--a snow-laden tree".³

² Belisario Contreras, The New Deal Treasury Department (diss), 347.

³ Park and Markovitz, Democratic Vistas, 15, FN 30.

Lucille Blanch, painter of the Flemingsburg, Kentucky, Post Office mural, must have felt the same, judging from Rowan's response to her choice of subject for a town in Appalachia, "I...concur with you in your attitude about not using the miners and their sufferings and deprivations as the subject. By all means give them a subject...which will turn them to an appreciation of their own landscape and the simple things that surround them".⁴

Rowan had to contend with murals about miners more than once. He approved Fletcher Martin's Mine Rescue for Kellogg, Idaho,--a simple, almost stark depiction of an accident victim being carried on a stretcher by two men, one right, one left, in perfect balance. But the people did not want to be reminded of the hazards that awaited their workers every day and demanded a scene of the founding of the town, instead. Martin's sketch was turned down, and the mural of the miners was replaced by an inferior mural of two men in exaggerated transports of joy at discovering the mine itself.

The people complained about Lucille Blanch's mural for Fort Pierce, Florida. Although everything else was accurate, she had failed to distinguish between the two types of sand on the east and west coasts of Florida.⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Park and Markovitz, Democratic Vistas, 18.

There is no doubt that incidents like these thoroughly exasperated the artists and made their task more difficult.

The red tape generated by any bureaucracy is a sore trial. The preliminary sketch was sent, then the color sketch, and, if approved, photographs were to be sent at certain steps in the process, the last being a view of the installed mural, which had to be finished by a certain date. Also, the restrictions put on Section artists were often galling. Since the finished mural was required to be exactly like the color sketch, there was no chance for creativity or of improving the work as the artist developed it.

Some artists even wished they were eligible for the WPA/FAP, since their rules were more flexible and allowed more freedom of expression. There were drawbacks to the WPA program, too. There was the humiliation of being on relief, and there was a limit to the number of months an artist could be employed.

The Section artist often found himself in the line of fire, either from the citizens or the Section, but much more from the latter. The strict and minute corrections the Section made often had an unfortunate result. Many of the artists developed a method they thought would please, but was not their own. They called it "painting Section", and it involved working in an innocuous style which would not get them into

trouble. Obviously, the resultant art was not the artist's best work, and this was an unhappy situation which no doubt accounts for the rather bland and routine appearance of some murals. Bruce was once heard to lament, "Nobody seems to know how to draw any more."⁶

Thomas Hart Benton never painted a mural for the Section. He was invited several times, but finally wrote to Rowan:

I am going to lay this whole matter frankly before you...I am not myself a completely responsible party in the contract...you feel you have to watch me and pet me along to keep me from running you into...difficulty. I haven't liked this business from the very first. I see that you are doing the best you can...but I can't work under it. The sketches I submitted last year are no good because I didn't feel free when I did them. I don't want to do the job for which they were intended. Just let me out on it and re-award the space.

If you can ever give me a contract in which all responsibility is mine, in which I am completely trusted to do a good job and over which no one but myself has effective rights of approval, I'll work. Otherwise I can't be sure I'll do a real piece of work."⁷

Benton expressed, in his inimitable way, a basic weakness of the Section's program. More than one artist echoed his sentiments when smarting under Rowan's scrutiny.

Of course, it was not all doom and gloom. The

⁶ MCKinzie, 57.

⁷ Francis O'Connor, "A History of the New Deal Art Projects, 15.

most important consideration of all was the fact that an artist had a job. Many Americans did not. Actual money was being earned for living expenses. In fact, it was the only time in their lives that some artists earned any money at all for their art.⁸ Edward Laning, who painted the Bowling Green, Kentucky, Post Office mural, was one of those who enjoyed the whole experience. He felt it an ideal situation: "doing what you want to do and getting paid for it".⁹

It was not only the Section officials who wished to break away from the traditional wall paintings with their dignified but often stultifying images; the artists felt the same. The sculptor, Carl L. Schmitz, who created limestone reliefs for the Covington, Kentucky, Post Office, said: "I think that persons entering the building would get more local pride out of a design having to do with their own activities than a mythological figure which the average man does not even understand...."¹⁰

For the mural painters, also, it was a chance to create a new set of symbols, based on reality and their

⁸ M. M. Bataille, WPA: Federal Arts Project (Provincetown, Mass: Provincetown Art Association and Museum, 1997), 1. Exhibition catalogue.

⁹ Stephen Wallis, "The Federal Art Project: A New Deal for Artists". Art and Antiques (June 1996), 60.

¹⁰ Park and Markovitz, Democratic Vistas, 8.

own observation and which constituted a hopefully acceptable picture of the American people.

The artists liked the Section's emphasis on quality, feeling that it gave them a certain prestige not available to WPA/FAP artists who were hired on the basis of need. Also, with prestige came opportunities to gain individual patrons. For most of the artists, these commissions conferred status on them.

Despite some grumbling about the competitions, Rowan claimed they were valuable because they gave all an equal opportunity and preserved quality.¹¹

New talent did emerge through these murals. Many young painters just beginning their careers were commissioned, and the Section provided another chance for older artists whose careers had flagged. Both these groups benefited. In fact, the government art projects, especially the ones which involved murals, may have preserved the practice of art itself. With the lack of private patrons, it is entirely possible that many skills would have been lost. As it was, these skills were being used and passed on to younger artists.

Probably the most important effect of the Section program on artists themselves was that it effectively ended their isolation. Some people had felt an artist

¹¹ Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 12.

was not even a worker, but he was no longer looked down upon as useless. Once he established rapport with a community and interacted with it, he was usually made welcome and his work valued. Many artists settled in the community they had commemorated.

It was a new and heady experience for many of them to be a part of society. "The spiritual stimulus to them in finding that they were recognized and useful members of the body politic and that the government desired their work has been simply amazing".¹²

Equally important to them was the opportunity to exchange views with other artists. It was exciting to find others who understood their concerns. There grew up a sense of camaraderie which could be compared to the brotherhood of the guilds of the Middle Ages. One artist, working on site or installing his mural, was talking with reporters, post office patrons, watchers on their lunch breaks, explaining his work to school children on field trips, and said that until then he didn't know how lonely he had been all these years.¹³

The Townsfolk

For the Washington, D.C. post office, the artist Reginald Marsh painted a "true" fresco, that is, one

¹² Rowan (no salutation), March 1934, NA, ASL.

¹³ Forbes Watson, American Painting Today, 21.

painted on wet plaster, and he gave an account of the attitudes and conversation of the watchers. He said that when he had mounted the scaffold and had begun on several figures, he was asked when the artist was coming. It seemed an artist was obliged to wear a smock and tam-o-shanter. In all the time he was there, no one asked his name. One man had heard of Michelangelo. Many volunteered to tell him that Cubism angered them. Others felt compelled to announce that they couldn't draw a straight line. Some admitted to liking the "frisco muriel" generally but looked at him with some pity and ventured that he must have been "born that way."¹⁴

These attitudes were just what Bruce hoped to dispel. An introduction to art and an appreciation of the beauty of people's surroundings were his goals, and in many respects, he succeeded. This wakened sense of beauty was also one of President Roosevelt's initial reasons for approving the program.

It seems that there was no middle ground of opinion regarding any mural. It received either delighted acceptance or adamant rejection. If it was liked, the town would often respond with a dedication ceremony, speeches, flags flying, a band playing, and a

¹⁴ The Artist in America (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 174.

general air of celebration.¹⁵ Why were certain murals admired so much by the townspeople? The primary reason was the thrill of seeing themselves seemingly accurately portrayed in such a monumental work. They believed that their place in the history of the country would be thus perpetuated for their progeny.

In addition, the murals were easy to understand. Insofar as the subject allowed, the paintings upheld the values these people lived by. The favorite scenes were those of daily labor which showed the people as they were. At least, this is what the people wanted to believe, but in reality, almost every muralist presented an idealized version, knowing it would be more likely to please.

Many postmasters themselves were flattered to have a prized mural in their care. The government archives hold a number of appreciative letters from various postmasters. One postmaster was unsure at first but wrote that he liked his mural better every time he saw it.¹⁶ Such remarks were typical of the happier cases.

It may be that the greatest point of pride was the simple fact that this was a rare instance of the

¹⁵ Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 27.

¹⁶ Park and Markowitz, "Not by Bread Alone: Post Office Art of the New Deal," (Timeline vol 6, Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Historical Society, 1989), 12.

people's artistic preferences being consulted, and they took full advantage of it.

Nevertheless, a number of murals did not meet with the townspeople's approval, and, indeed, it was only too easy to offend the residents. A mural was flatly turned down by a postmaster in Wisconsin.¹⁷ In Kentucky, the same fate befell a mural painted for the Franklin Post Office, and these are not the only examples. Lucille Blanch found the citizens very picky, as her experience with the Fort Pierce mural, as well as other murals, convinced her.

Bruce and Rowan bent over backward to avoid any inaccuracies, indecencies, or anything at all that could possibly give offense, but the people didn't suffer what they perceived as inappropriate scenes gladly. Nudity, of course, was out of the question, and the least hint of suggestiveness or distortions brought complaints.

Kennebunkport in Maine was graced with a beach mural which caused an uproar. It was called suggestive, repulsive, and worse. A petition was signed, among others, by national literary luminaries, Booth Tarkington and Kenneth Roberts, both of whom had a strong interest in art and didn't want a demoralizing

¹⁷ Belisario Contreras, The New Deal Treasury Department (diss).

work in their town.¹⁸ One of their Congressmen was persuaded to take the petition to Congress. Several Congressmen questioned the artist, who burst into tears. A Maine senator threatened a filibuster.

Rowan was right to tread softly where the government was concerned, and Rowan must have had nerves of steel. The despised mural was taken down and nobody wanted it.

Naturally, such complaints required many revisions (if the mural were salvageable) and it was all a burden on the artist. Warfare scenes were disliked, except for historical battles with Indians, and they could not be too graphic.

Another problem for the people was the position of the mural above the postmaster's office door and just below the ceiling. Quite justifiably, they disliked having to view the work from below and at an angle. This position was not the optimal one for the mural itself, either. It inevitably meant distortion of figures and misrepresentation of spatial levels.

In some towns it was a continuing source of dismay that a stranger, an outsider, would presume to interpret their own lives for them. What did he know? The situation was inevitable, however, since most small towns contained no artist of any sort.

¹⁸ Marling, 252.

In her book, Wall-to-Wall America, Karal Ann Marling discusses at some length a 1930s mystery novel which bears on this post office program. Its title is Octagon House and the author is Phoebe Atwood Taylor.¹⁹ The plot centers about a new mural for a small Cape Cod post office. The protagonist is a likeable rustic named Asey Mayo who has an unending supply of Yankee sayings in New England dialect. The novel itself was meant to be recreational reading, light-hearted and humorous, and the mystery itself is inconsequential, but the main subject and the fact that the mystery is solved by an art historical examination of the mural does show that the public in general was well aware of the program and its good and not-so-good aspects.

In the case related by Atwood, the unveiled mural horrified everyone. Townsfolk simply sat on the floor and looked at it. Asey said, "No living man could describe that mural, and if he could, no one would believe him".

It seems that the artist had caricatured the town's leading citizens in an elaborate Baroque style. The D.A.R. and other ladies' groups complained in a manner very reminiscent of the response to the Paducah, Kentucky, mural.²⁰ One morning the postmaster arrived

¹⁹ Phoebe Atwood Taylor, Octagon House: An Asey Mayo Mystery of Cape Cod (New York: W. W. Norton and Co, Inc., 1937). (Quotations and description are from this book.)

²⁰ Details are given in the Paducah entry in Part Two.

to find the mural covered with red paint. Asked if this were not an outrage, he opined, "Well, yes and no. It's a crime to touch gov'ment property, but I tell you it seems awful good to look around this place without blinkin' and wincin'". The Postmaster decided not to notify Washington about it until the mural was "good and dry and unfixable".

That was fiction, but it is of more than passing interest that an abstract mural in an Okolona, Mississippi, post office was so disliked that it was painted over. Frank Mechau's mural on the Dangers of the Mail outraged townsfolk who agreed it was indecent. They coated it over with red paint, a year before Octagon House was written.²¹ This is an interesting outcome, since it shows that the public was aware of the situation and could enjoy a story that featured it.

On balance, it would seem that the results of the Section's mural program showed the good far outweighing the bad. It seems clear from written testimony that both artists and people were in the main grateful for what it provided. The whole experiment bore out Justice Stone's opinion that, with the murals as a guide, life can be improved and enjoyed.²²

21 Marling, Wall-to-Wall America, 244. .

22 Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 11.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WORLD WAR II AND THE END OF THE FEDERAL ART PROGRAMS

The American Scene style of painting had become increasingly popular in the 1920s and was adopted for the Section's post office murals. It was achieving what the Section wanted, in that it was straightforward, unsentimental, and prosaic. However, as the decade of the 1930s rolled on, there began to be a reaction against this style. The history of art trends has always been one of reaction against the previous popular style, so the incipient change should not be surprising. This reaction continues the pattern.

The rising style was abstract art, which the Section firmly rejected. Various forms of abstract art were not unknown in this country, however, having been introduced in the earlier part of the century in New York and taken up by Stuart Davis who was much influenced by Arshile Gorky. Gorky was a refugee from Turkey who came to America in 1925, bringing Cubist and other abstract interpretations. Joseph Albers, a former Bauhaus instructor, also came and taught his totally abstract color theories at Yale and Black

Mountain College. Hans Hofmann, too, emigrated from Germany to New York in 1932, and became an incredibly influential teacher of the new methods.

Many of the Section artists were aware of these trends and some were interested in them, as their sketches show, including some by Laning, Lockwood, and Folinsbee. The new style might have been stronger in their finished works except for Section restrictions. The constant watch kept by Rowan over the work and the frequent corrections he made suggest that he was manning the barriers against any encroachments of that kind.

The artist Edward Laning stated that he didn't think either of the Roosevelts was at all interested in art.¹ He felt that loyalty to George Biddle was all that prompted them to concern themselves with it. This seems like a harsh and inaccurate statement, when it was clear that Franklin Roosevelt had a strong paternalistic attitude toward the the art programs, that he bought for the White House thirty-four of the paintings displayed in the first Section exhibition, that he was deeply involved with the mural for the Hyde Park Post Office, spending much time overseeing the work, "like the lord of Hyde Park Manor," and that he thought so highly of it that he asked Olin Dows to decorate all four walls.²

¹ Laning, "Memoirs of a WPA Painter", in O'Connor, The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs (Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institute Press, 1972), 90.

² McKinzie, x.

Roosevelt deserves some credit for insisting on murals expressing and encouraging hope. There were some, however, who felt that the realism of the post office scenes was static, formulaic, and that their realism was actually somewhat unreal.

No one was more aware of the deficiencies of some of the murals than Bruce. At the Section's first exhibition at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D. C. in 1936, he was remarkably frank in summarizing criticisms by public and press. These amounted to: overcrowding, design not simple enough, the often poor drawing of human figures. This latter deficiency resulted in an occasional wooden immobility.³ This particular flaw illustrates what Reginald Marsh called "the dead hand".⁴

The contradiction in the Section's aims: to bring good quality art to the people and to give residents a choice in what was depicted, was becoming obvious. The first aim was carried out reasonably well, but by the end, it was the people's preference that dominated.⁵ Only once did the Section become worn down enough to allow one abstract mural for a post office. This was in New London,

³ Overmeyer, 106.

⁴ Edward Laning, The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 21.

⁵ Louisville artist Paul Sample's mural for Westerly, Rhode Island, was deemed inaccurate by the residents and rejected. Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 17. Sample did, however, paint a mural for Warwick, Rhode Island, and three for Redondo Beach, California.

Ohio, by Lloyd Ney, and it was not totally abstract.

It is noticeable, however, that in some finished murals, however representational, there is a suggestion of a geometric division underlying the figures and forming a basis for an abstract work. This tendency is present in Frank Long's murals for Louisville, and in some others, but it is not readily seen without close observation. A hint of abstraction is more obvious in the sketches of most of the artists.

The Treasury's Procurement Division often had to be appeased, and Harold Ickes had the power to cancel the section project entirely. Bruce tried to keep a low profile and hoped the Section would continue almost unnoticed, but by 1939 the Section was no longer under the Treasury but had been transferred to the Federal Works Administration under John Carmody, who apparently had little sympathy for it. The Section heads felt keenly the loss of Morgenthau's interest and help.

Bruce put every ounce of thought and energy he had into making the Section of Fine Arts a permanent unit of the government. He had other plans as well. One of these was to create a National Museum of Living American Artists which would be part of the Smithsonian Institution and complement the proposed new National Gallery on the Mall. A competition was held to choose an architect, and the winner was the father and son team of Eliel and Eero Saarinen. Their modernistic design featured glass, steel, and

concrete. Although it was a handsome design, the crisis of World War II overbalanced it, and the museum was never built.

Bruce wrote, "All the little bureaucrats with whom it is my misfortune to deal have raised up against me and decided that now the world is at war we ought to cut out this art muck".⁶

The columnist Drew Pearson stated that Bruce was resigning,⁷ and it was true that Bruce's health was being damaged by overwork following his stroke in 1937 which left him partially paralyzed. President Roosevelt sent him the following note, typical of FDR's hearty style:

What is all this nonsense about your contemplated resignation? When a fellow turns up in Washington and proves that he can make bricks out of straw, that the bricks are durable and artistic and that nobody else can make them, the President puts a Marine guard around him and does not let him leave. Do be a good fellow and write to Paul Manship that you have been chained to the Government of the United States and cannot get away even if you want to.⁸

Is it possible that Roosevelt felt that the handicapped state of both men created a kind of bond between them?

The Section decided that it needed to be more in the public eye and thus ward off any displeasure from Congress. In 1939 a new contest, a national one, The 48 State Contest, was announced, open to all painters. One small post office

⁶ McKinzie, The New Deal for Artists, 45.

⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸ Contreras, Tradition, 221.

in each state was chosen to have a mural for decoration, and this plan did create a certain amount of interest. Over three thousand artists applied.⁹ Many newspaper articles about it were written, and Life magazine devoted pages to it, under the title This is Moral America for Rural America, along with photographs of each state's mural. William Bunn won the commission for Kentucky and painted a mural for Hickman.

World War II was long in coming, but no one doubted it would arrive. Americans were unsure what to do, although Roosevelt himself had no doubts. If Britain fell, the free world might no longer be free. However, it took the attack on our navy at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on 7 December, 1941 for the United States to energize its might and, with Great Britain and others, form the Allied Forces.

Suddenly, and quite reasonably, with the prospect of armed conflict in the air, the matter of art seemed unimportant to most people. A WPA organizer said in 1941, "the people of Louisville are more interested in defense, at the present time, than in art activities".¹⁰ The first concern was for survival.

Eventually, all New Deal programs were terminated. One of the first to go was the WPA's theatre program which had

⁹ Virginia Mecklenburg, The Public as Patron, 16.

¹⁰ McKinzie, 122.

been a thorn in the side of Congress for some time, since many of its plays were seen as subversive and anti-war.

The Section tried desperately to find some helpful role its artists could play. Many of the painters went into the Armed Forces. Bruce offered help to the Army for camouflage units, but the military had its own trained men. The Navy took a similar position, turning down offers (one by Willem de Kooning) to decorate ships.¹¹ A number of patriotic posters were turned out by Section artists, but in general, all the New Deal projects were superfluous and were all cancelled.

In spite of overriding concerns, Bruce felt that "now is the time if ever that we should keep a little cultural influence going in the world."¹² Few agreed. The Section was completely disbanded in 1943. The post office mural project had been discontinued shortly before that. No new post offices were being built, and the last issue of the Section's bulletin had a drawing of a helmeted soldier on the cover.

The war was what actually pulled the country out of the Depression which had lasted longer than expected. Roosevelt had made massive efforts to relieve the worst of it, but they were not entirely successful. When the war began, there were still ten percent unemployed.¹³

¹¹ Contreras, The New Deal Treasury Department Art Program, 286. (microfilm).

¹² Melosh, 141, FN 14.

The people, thrust into new roles and anxious for their safety and that of their soldiers, had more absorbing concerns. There were objections to spending government money needed for the conduct of the war to put up art in the very place people were urged to buy war bonds.¹⁴

It was only a few writers and government officials who held on doggedly to their vision of the worth of this art in statements like this, in 1939, "The program itself, whose continuance now seems assured, is one of vast significance and of potentialities thrilling to contemplate. On this point there would seem to be little room for difference of opinion".¹⁵ Somerset Maugham, always keenly interested in the government art programs, agreed, feeling that the Section was laying foundations for a great period of American art.¹⁶

Forbes Watson pronounced: "Hitler cannot win the war...unless he becomes the cause of the U. S. Government's cutting down on the buying of art".¹⁷ Bold words like this seem pitiful today, and were not actually very rational even then. Watson seems to have had a very myopic and Panglossian view of the world.

¹³ Park and Markowitz, "New Deal for Public Art". 12.

¹⁴ Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 22.

¹⁵ Overmeyer, 107.

¹⁶ Contreras, "The New Deal Treasury Department Art Program," 345.

¹⁷ Watson, American Painting Today, 23.

At war's end, the American Scene movement had been abandoned. There are a number of reasons for its dismissal. Both non-representational art of many kinds and Surrealism had made inroads in art in the United States.

More important, artists who returned home had been exposed to many global influences and had a wider view of the world and of new trends in art. Also, the small number of practitioners of innovative art in the United States was greatly augmented by the arrival of more European artists, many of them refugees--Yves Tanguy, Amedée Ozenfant, Piet Mondrian, Jacques Lipchitz, André Masson, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Ossip Zadkine, and others, joining Marcel Duchamp, who was already here. Roberto Mattà, Joan Mirò, Max Beckmann, Hans Arp, and Jean Dubuffet arrived a bit later.

We can see clearly today what a great change their work made on the American art scene. American artists could not avoid being influenced by it. Abstract art was at its base, but it was soon developed into Abstract Expressionism and taken over by Americans, especially the "New York School" in the 1950s.

Geist sees the government murals as a prelude to the new abstract styles.¹⁸ At first thought, this is an unlikely concept. Abstract Expressionism seems far removed from the world of the murals, but there may be some unnoticed underlying connections. Harrison provides some

¹⁸ Geist, 56.

justification by her claim that working on the Government programs gave the artists time to develop their skills, and that this work led to the establishment of the New York school.¹⁹

It is possible, too, that the New York School became a close-knit group because, perhaps unconsciously, they wished to recreate the camaraderie they enjoyed on the mural projects. We know how much that meant to them. Ben Shahn remembered how it was. "There was a strange harmony with the time. I was totally involved."²⁰ Burgoyne Diller was another of the enthusiasts: "We had a sense of belonging to something. It was an exciting time."²¹

Jackson Pollock, one of the brightest and most volatile luminaries of the new movement, known for his "drip paintings" where canvas is placed on the floor and paint flung on it in patterns, said that his mural work with Thomas Hart Benton had accustomed him to working with large canvases. Perhaps artistic influences went both ways. The Abstract Expressionist, Hans Hofmann, used a method of painting he called "push and pull," which was considered innovative, but Pollock said that he had learned that long

¹⁹ Helen Harrison, "American Art and the New Deal." Journal of American Studies (vol. 6, December 1972), 296.

²⁰ The Artist in America, 177.

²¹ Ibid., 179.

ago from Benton, who called his method "thrust and counterthrust."²²

For some of this group of artists, however, their reaction to war was so deep as to be inexpressible in a realistic fashion. For them, and for others who wished to suggest the feelings of their inner selves, Abstract Expressionism was the most suitable mode. It is even possible that their non-representational style indicated a certain fear of the future, brought on by the Cold War and the atomic bomb, which apprehension could be shown only in a minimal fashion.

Certainly, few new paintings gave an optimistic impression. Robert Motherwell's many nearly identical canvases, featuring vertical stripes but with titles referring to the Crucifixion and the Spanish War of the 1930s, are anything but cheerful. Mark Rothko's menacing, overhanging cloud shapes grow darker in color with each work up to the point of his death.

Certainly depictions of community and daily life were far from the minds of this group. The "expression" in the name referred to that of the artist alone. And what he expressed was almost always a mood or feeling; if not, then there was a certain ambiguity about it, requiring interpretation. It was then that the art critic came into his own.

²²

Laning, The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh, 12.

The author's hypothesis about the effect of the world situation on the artists gains a bit of credibility when we recall that after the world remained on a steady course for a while, the style changed, the pessimism abated, and Pop Art came into being.

This was Realism *redux*, only this time distorted, satirical, manipulated, and with an edge of humor. It was the time of the comedy, Doctor Strangelove, whose subtitle was How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Is there a connection here? Did such cultural manifestations reflect a more optimistic mood in the country?

And what of the post office murals? They were nearing the end of their run. The Section heads had worked mightily to achieve their goals and felt they had achieved them to a large extent, but the paintings had lost their purpose of morale-building.

Servicemen were returning, eager to make their mark in the brave new world, building homes with the machines and materials developed for naval and military use, easily finding jobs, manufacturing new cars and other goods civilians had gone without for years, anticipating family health from war-related advances in medicine; in short, creating an actual ideal world by using the strength and determination of their forebears, so familiar to them. Americans no longer had any use for the idealized society dreamed about in the murals. They would make a new one.

And the murals? Some of them are still on the walls, dusty, neglected, and deteriorating. But immediately after the war there seemed to be a general frenzy to get rid of Depression art entirely. Few records were kept, but we do know that many easel paintings and murals were burned; some murals were painted over, torn down, given to schools and museums. Some artists never found out where their work went. In more than one instance, the murals were bundled up and sold by the pound for scrap, including works by Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Adolph Gottlieb.²³

Such short-sightedness has deprived us of much material that would be useful in tracing an individual artist's career. More important, these irresponsible actions ensured that history would lack a full understanding of the art of the Depression era and of other historical aspects, as well.

The philosopher John Dewey evidently had no premonitions of the fate of the post office murals only three years after he gave this radio broadcast:

For if you could see for yourselves reproductions of the murals which are now found in public buildings from Maine to the Gulf, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, you would see that the paintings combine the values of the arts which nourish the human spirit with the accomplishments of our past history, which strengthen that legitimate pride which enables one to say, "I am an American citizen." Secretary Morgenthau, Mr. Bruce, may your work go forward to even greater triumphs.²⁴

²³ McKinzie, 124.

²⁴ John Dewey, radio address for NBC Blue Network broadcast, 25 April 1940. Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, unnumbered page.

CONCLUSION

Why was there an obliteration of so much of this art, not only in people's consciousness but in actual fact? Some distribution of the sculpture and easel work was almost inevitable, but why the almost wholesale destruction of murals placed inoffensively on public walls?

The murals were no longer objects of interest. To the few who might notice them, the murals seemed an anachronism and were glanced at with unseeing eyes. When the murals were new, the recipients saw them through the eyes of emotion.

It seemed to Americans that the world, now seemingly safe and at peace, was much more relevant to them than formerly, and an isolationist stance was not only undesirable but impossible. A new era was coming into being--one which was optimistic and secure and needed no emotional support from murals. A new type of art was wanted, and the Abstract Expressionists came increasingly to the fore.

These New Deal programs, which began with great conviction and enthusiasm did, despite all the criticism, in

many ways achieve their objectives. Probably the quality of the art was seldom as high as Bruce had envisioned, but it was better, overall, than might have been expected from such a hasty undertaking. It may have been the artists who benefited most because they were in need. Some became inspired, like Willem de Kooning who painted for the government for only a year but said that it was the critical period when he decided to be a studio artist.¹ And, in addition, the whole country was left more aware and knowledgeable about art than before the programs began.

Although little noticed at the start, the post office program gradually built up a sense of community. Taking off from the theme of the mail connecting the nation through its services by train, truck, air, and horse-drawn cart, the murals themselves proceeded to help each location realize its own identity and to connect with other places. Eventually reaching out farther, the people created from a melting pot of peoples a cohesive national unity which developed into a love of country.

The murals thus not only promoted pride in one particular location but engendered a meaningful solidarity with others, which result must surely have bolstered identification with the country and also contributed to the strength needed to defend it when the war came.

¹ Stephen Wallis, "The Federal Art Project: A New Deal for Artist," Art and Antiques (June 1996): 60.

Another result was the acquiescence of the people to the place of the federal government in their lives. Meant to be a temporary measure, the many New Deal projects accustomed citizens to look to the government for assistance in many phases of their lives, and this attitude has been a lasting one.

"While today this art may seem aesthetically bland and politically innocuous, it was not so at the time."²

It's one measure of the Section artists' overall success that their work has been called the most important mural movement since the days of the Renaissance.³

It is sufficient to say that all (in Kentucky, at least) were capable artists, having a firm understanding of color, proportion, chiaroscuro, perspective, and appropriate scale, as well as an acquaintance with the Old Masters. All Section artists who produced murals for Kentucky were academically trained and all had studied in Europe. The overall high quality of the Kentucky murals cannot be an aberration. Nationwide, these works were taken seriously once and should be again, despite the sixty years of disdain on the part of many critics.

Did the painting style develop from a neo-Classical, Romantic, or Art Deco movement? No. It was purely realism with the unpleasant bits omitted. Comparisons are

² Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, xvii.

³ Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, The Regionalists, New York: Watson-Guption Publications, Inc., 1976), 13.

practically fruitless. It is not even profitable to compare the artists with each other (the Morehead and Morganfield murals, although painted by different artists, are almost interchangeable), and often even murals by the same artist differ dramatically.

Although the artists were prevented from expressing themselves in paint, they did display the sentiments and virtues of America which the Section wanted. Today, the colors are too faded to be certain of their original appearance, but they give a harmonious effect and some of them are still appealing.

Even so, this was an extremely ambitious project and many of these painters were just beginning their careers and most had no experience with murals.

The program was helpful to all its artists, but gave some of them a chance to perfect their skills and go on to higher levels of fame--such as Marsden Hartley, William Gropper, Theodore Roszak, Adolph Gottlieb, Max Weber, Boardman Robinson, Henry Varnum Poor⁴, Reginald Marsh, and John Steuart Curry, to name a few. We are not likely to see such an effort again.

We cannot count on Art History textbooks to provide any information at all. H. W. Janson, quoted earlier on his dislike of the Regionalist painters, includes in his own

⁴ Henry Varnum poor, a distinguished artist, painted a mural for The Louisville Courier-Journal building in Louisville.

textbook one paragraph mentioning the American Scene movement, citing no names, and omits any reference at all to government art programs.⁵ This consignment to oblivion of such an unusual and productive undertaking is typical of most textbooks.

Such murals as remain are dusty and faded, noticed by very few. Time has reduced their effect in every way. Additionally, deterioration is setting in. William Bunn's happy crowded scene of a spring festival in Hamburg, Iowa, has held up badly. Citizens took it down to preserve it but only caused more damage. Ben Shahn's egg tempera mural in the Bronx is flaking and patchy.

In Kentucky, the most noticeable damage is in the six Harrodsburg murals. An attempt was made recently to clean them, but as soon as one was touched, the canvas began to deteriorate.

We are fortunate to have as many murals remaining as we do. There are at present thirty-three in Kentucky. It seemed prudent, if not imperative, to make as complete a record of them as possible, while they are still in existence.

Statistics

During the short period of its existence the art programs under the Treasury brought works of art to over two

⁵ Janson, History of Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1962), 736. Fourth edition 1991.

thousand towns where even the few art teachers that existed had seldom or never seen an original work of art.

Combining Dows statistics with those of other scholars, we have an approximate summing up:⁶

<u>Title</u>	<u>Artists</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>No. of Murals</u>
PWAP	3,700	\$1,312,000	400+
Section	1,400	2,571,000	1,100
TRAP	446	833,784	89

Artists

When the Treasury programs and the WPA/FAP are combined, the following list includes some of the artists who were given their start by the government and went on to successful careers:

Mark Rothko	Henry Varnum Poor
Peter Blume	Philip Evergood
Marguerite Zorach	Robert Motherwell
Louis Slobodkin	John Steuart Curry
Isamu Noguchi	Peter Hurd
John Sloan	Franz Kline
Boardman Robinson	Mark Rothko
Guy Pène du Bois	William Zorach
James Still	Aaron Bohrod
Olin Dows	William Gropper

⁶ Dows' Memoirs in O'Connor, The New Deal Art Projects, 12.

Boris Deutsch	Ad Reinhardt
James Brooks	Paul Cadmus
Isobel Bishop	Moses Soyer
Ben Shahn	Abraham Lishinsky
Reginald Marsh	Mitchell Siporin
Adolph Gottlieb	Avery Johnson
Raphael Soyer	Melvina Hoffman
Chaim Gross	Philip Guston
Marsden Hartley	

No complete records were ever kept, and many artists worked for more than one program, so there is no list that can be considered definitive, but the above one comes close.

These murals are unique. They were a product of desperate times and of a president who would try anything that was likely to be helpful.

Nevertheless, since the demise of Pop Art and the wildly various experiments which followed, we find today signs of Realism making another appearance on the art scene. Printmaker Rockwell Kent is mentioned more favorably than hitherto, and Andrew Wyeth's exhibitions always draw crowds. The realism of Wyeth's textures is one of his great attractions, along with his glowing studies of the effects of light on various materials. There is an echo of Edward Hopper in his light, but Wyeth's is not so stark. It is softer and seems to convey to the viewer an emotion of its own. Hopper is another realist who has always had a large

following and his genre scenes of today are familiar. Even though they often pulse with irony or melancholy and are carefully composed, they are perceived as real.

Andrew Wyeth's father, N. C. Wyeth, has been rehabilitated to a large extent recently, even though he is best known for illustrating childrens' books. A realization is dawning that, in many cases, such paintings can be art. A skill in drawing is the first thing to be learned, and it is interesting to recall that most of Henri's group, "The Eight", who were among the first to bring realism to the twentieth century, began their careers by illustrating books and newspapers, mastering the graphic line which is the basis for all good art. In its most recent issue, The National Geographic Society features the five very large murals painted by N. C. Wyeth for the Society's headquarters in 1926.⁷

Grant Wood, near the end of his career, was still illustrating books. Sinclair Lewis begged him for two years to work on Main Street but Wood was too busy.

Even the work of Winslow Homer, one of the great realists of the nineteenth century, and mentioned earlier, is at present having a retrospective exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. His work is also studied in a thirty-two page article in the December 1998 National Geographic magazine, accompanied by handsome

⁷ The National Geographic, January 1999, unnumbered page.

photographs. One of Homer's works, Lost on the Grand Banks, is the most expensive American painting yet sold.

Microsoft's chairman, Bill Gates, paid over thirty million dollars for it.⁸

A new and unlikely addition to the realists of the 1930s is being studied now with an eye to discover what makes his work so enduring. "Now, there is a name that used to curl any self-respecting art lover's lip; but of late the reputation of old Rockwell himself has been rising."⁹ Even the critic Robert Rosenblum now claims that Norman Rockwell might well become an indispensable part of art history.¹⁰ His scenes are so familiar to almost everyone and his loving attention to detail brings back long-held memories. Spectators seem to find themselves in his paintings just as the townspeople delighted in their own world being portrayed in the murals. Why a revival now? Possibly for the reason it was adopted in the 1930s--nostalgia for a simpler time. It may be that reality is a basic human need.

I have read endless discussions of the social and political implications of these murals, but since they are seldom regarded by scholars as paintings in themselves

⁸ Robert M. Poole, "American Original," National Geographic, December 1998, 72-103.

⁹ Peter Schjeldahl, "Stilled Lives," The New Yorker, 11 January 1999, 90.

¹⁰ Timothy Cahill, "'Normal Norman' gets Recognition he was Denied." The New York Times (reprinted in The Courier Journal 27 December 1998, I14.)

(certainly not with any consistency), I have tried instead to evaluate them from an art historical standpoint.

As a result of my research, I have more respect and appreciation for what was achieved in a difficult time. In Kentucky alone, the number of excellent works, which could never have been painted by second-raters, far outnumber less competent works. For example:

Lexington. Ward Lockwood's portrayal of Daniel Boone is heroic but human and somehow conveys in Boone's silent stance that he is a man of action. This is a striking painting, at once photographic and classically-based.

Anchorage. A totally charming scene, populated by realistic, well-formed, and interesting figures in natural poses. The scene is a panorama of bustling activity, completely controlled by the artist, Loren Fisher. It is a pleasure to look at.

Corbin. A woodland fantasy by Alice Dinneen. Its colors blend so delicately, the painting gives a strong impression of a silent shaded forest, with shafts of light between the trees illuminating the various greens of the woods and highlighting the almost hidden birds and mammals. It is as enchanting as a fairy tale.

Greenville. This is Allen Gould's scene of a colliery, empty of human beings. The Léger-like placement of

geometrically-formed buildings overlapping, the striped materials vertical, horizontal, and diagonal, creating a work both abstract and realistic.

Hickman. This work of William Bunn's won the 48-state competition. The judges' opinion is borne out here in the balanced yet natural position of the steamboats riding on the water, their stark blinding whiteness contrasting to the pitch black of the smoke from all three boats. The added detail of the clarity of their reflections in the placid river forms the lowest section of a tripartite composition.

Louisville. Of Frank Long's ten murals for the court house, one stands out as especially effective. It is a long frieze showing a mine with a number of men wearing helmets with lights. Their headlamps create a ballet of crossing diagonal shafts of light, again real and abstract.

A noted critic of the 1930s, Sadakichi Hartmann, called Frank Long one of the "ten most influential artists in America".¹¹

Works like these should never have been brushed off as worthless. Despite the contempt and ridicule accorded them by some, the Section provided a real service in preserving the people's history and advancing a true American art.

President Franklin Roosevelt thought so. He said,

¹¹ Unsigned review, "At J. B. Speed Memorial Museum, Long's paintings lend modern note", The Courier-Journal, 10 December 1939.

"people are taught that art is something foreign, from another age. But now they have seen in their own towns paintings by their own kind in their own country and about things they know and look at often and have touched and loved."¹²

¹²Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 133.

THE INDIVIDUAL MURALS
AND THEIR SETTINGS

POST OFFICE ARCHITECTURE

In Kentucky there are four court houses which, in the 1930s, served as post offices as well: Louisville, Paducah, Bowling Green, and Lexington. All are still in use as federal court houses and are impressive buildings, constructed of stone and in a neo-classical style.

The great majority of post offices followed the Georgian Revival style which was popular in the United States through the 1920s and 1930s. All those post offices in Kentucky which contain murals are in this style, except for those mentioned above.

There were actually five post office prototype plans and the floor plans varied slightly with the size of building. Which new design would be assigned to a location depended on how high its post office receipts were.¹

The Harrodsburg Post Office was one of the larger ones, having two stories (Figure 2). Concrete steps lead up to the main door. The door has a simple portico on columns, which projects only a little but creates an emphasis on the

¹ James H. Bruns, Great American Post Offices (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1998), 82.

main entrance. The door is flanked by two windows the same height as the door, and all three openings are framed with wide white arches containing a fan light design. Two other arched windows on the first floor have white keystones topping them. The building itself is brick with a string course separating the stories, and there is a shallow cornice at the top, with several other colored bands above it circling the building. This Harrodsburg Post Office is one of the most elaborate, but the Green County Courthouse, Kentucky, is very similar to it.

Rural communities would naturally receive smaller post offices. Typical of this type is the Anchorage Post office. (Figure 1). It is a symmetrical one-story building with a large white door, arched at the top, but featuring no portico or columns. There are two windows on each side of the door which have white cast concrete sills and frames. The roof is low but has a short white cupola rising from it, and the words "United States Post Office" over the door. Such post offices are very attractive, although, when they were being built, some called them the "starved classical" style.

Most post offices are set back a bit from the street, perhaps to accommodate a flagpole, which is always prominent. When possible, the post offices are enhanced by trees around the buildings.

The interior of such small post offices is problematic.

Immediately inside the building stands an angled vestibule to keep out bad weather. A patron enters through a door on the right side of this vestibule and exits on the left side. Of course, the vestibule juts into the narrow lobby space between it and the postal counter across from it which runs the length of the back. This arrangement creates a crowded condition (Figure 3).

So the patron, entering right, faces the door of the postmaster's office on the side wall and, above that, just below the ceiling, is placed a mural. (There were occasional exceptions to the placement of the mural, but this was the standard location.) A person in a hurry could fail to see the painting altogether.

Fewer than fifty of the Section murals were true fresco, painted on plaster. Few artists had the special skills, and an artist's presence would inevitably interfere with post office functions. In addition, the wall would have to be replastered first, which was a considerable expense, and small towns seldom included anyone who knew the technique.²

A mural is flat and it looks it. The wall is an inescapable presence. Murals are difficult for any artist because they need a large theme to justify the space, and the figures should be large and close to the picture plane to be easily seen. Any suggestion of distance is difficult to obtain.

² Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 116.

Finally, the Postmaster's door, flanked by crowded bulletin boards, was not the ideal neighbor for a mural. The door often intruded into the mural space, and artists used various devices to disguise this fact.

The architects had their problems, also. They were reluctant to provide a suitable space for a mural when they were unsure one would be provided. If a mural was planned, they felt it would interfere with their design, decoration, and color.

Bruce wrote, "We are having a hell of a time with the architects in providing mural space. They are dead set against the whole program. Look at the spaces in the plans and see what rotten spaces they are."³

It is true the murals are hard to see. In the lobby, usually six by twelve feet, a viewer must back up almost to the other end to get a full view of the mural, and then it is likely to be partly obscured by the vestibule. The mural's left side is often rather dark, while the right side suffers from the glare from a front window. To add to these difficulties, a hanging light fixture in front of the mural is such an obstruction that many postmasters made arrangements to remove or relocate their lights.

Probably the man most responsible for designing these post offices erected during the 1920s and 1930s was James A. Wetmore, Supervising Architect for the Treasury from 1913 to 1933. He was a noted architect and with his firm, Warren

³

Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 115.

and Wetmore, designed Grand Central Station in New York City. Wetmore had a long, distinguished career, designing every type of building from country club to cottage, from Maine to Florida.

When he retired in 1933, his position was taken by Louis Simon, who had worked for him as head of the Architectural Section of the Supervising Architect's office. Simon was a Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate and, apparently, conservative and conscientious. As Supervising Architect, he oversaw the design and construction of most post offices during the period. He left the Treasury in 1939, but until 1941 he kept designing commercial buildings, homes, and more post offices, from Massachusetts to Alabama.

After World War II, the government didn't erect post offices but leased commercial space. Today the mail delivery goes under the name of U. S. Postal Service, has a board of governors, and the Postmaster General is no longer a member of the president's cabinet.

By the 1950s, automation created changes in the volume the post could handle and the increased speed with which they accomplished their work. Today the service is even more mechanized and computerized.

Post offices are still being built, but most are not recognizable as such. There is no longer any standard design for post offices, but a wide variety can be seen. The architects are taking full advantage of new materials,

and many post offices use steel and glass blocks, but all have one thing in common. There is no room for a mural.

ANCHORAGE POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 4
County: Jefferson
Artist: Loren Fisher
Title: Meeting the Train
Date: 1942
Medium: Oil on linen
Dimensions: 40" H x 145" W

The Artist

Loren Fisher is one of the many artists who worked on the government projects during the Depression but who are completely unknown today. An inventory, undated, by the General Services Administration of the Public Buildings Service has this to say about him: "At this date, I am unable locate any references to this artist. He seems to be completely unknown by those people associated with the Federal Arts Projects of the period"¹

¹ Thomas Combs, Middleton Postmaster, interview by author, 15 August 1996.

Nevertheless, Fisher did have a personal and artistic history which he submitted to the Section. The most important facts are that he was born in Needham, Indiana, in 1913, and studied painting at the John Herron Art Institute in Indiana under its Director, Donald Mattison, and with Henrik Martin Mayer. He also studied with Thomas Hart Benton and learned the basics of watercolor with Elliot O'Hara and Francis Chapin and lithography under Max Kahn.

In 1940 he won the Prix de Rome, a prestigious honor which entitles an artist to a year's study in Rome, but because of World War II, he was unable to travel to Europe. He chose to take the fellowship in America rather than to have it deferred. The fellowship then took the form of a six-month extensive painting tour of North America, during which he covered eight thousand miles. After this productive tour, Mr. Fisher established a studio in New York City in 1941 and continued a successful painting career.²

His Teachers

Elliot O'Hara 1890-1969. After study abroad, he became Director of The Watercolor Gallery in Goose Rocks, Maine. He won many prizes and his work is in a number of collections.

² Loren Fisher, 1942 letter supplying biography to Section, NA, TSD.

Donald Mattison 1905-1975. He studied at Yale with Eugene Savage and at the American Academy in Rome. He won the Prix de Rome in 1928. For the Section, he painted murals at Tripton and Union City, both in Indiana, and was later Director of the Herron Art Institute, Indiana.

Francis Chapin 1899-1965. A specialist in watercolor, he taught at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Henrik Martin Mayer Born 1908. This artist's name is familiar in Kentucky, since he was a New Albany artist and a muralist. He studied at the Manchester Institute and at Yale and won many prizes. For the Treasury art programs he painted murals in the Marine Hospital, Louisville, and in the Lafayette and Aurora Post Offices, both in Indiana. He taught at the Wadsworth Athenaeum and the Herron Art Institute.

Max Kahn Born 1903 in Russia. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago with Gerard Despiau and Antoine Bourdelle, and later taught at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Mr. Fisher received this Anchorage commission as a result of earning an Honorable Mention in a previous competition conducted by the Section of Fine Arts. As mentioned in Part One, non-winners of the Section's competitions who contributed excellent work were very often given a commission for a later project. His sketches for Anchorage appealed to the local selection committee who sent them on to the Section Authorities. They agreed, and Fisher began his work.

The Artist's Description of the Mural

"Arrival of an early evening train at Hobbs Station, (now Anchorage) Kentucky in the 1860s. Businessmen returning from their offices in Louisville, 10 miles away, being greeted by their families and friends.

The railroad, the Louisville and Frankfort (now part of the L & N system), was built in 1847 with Edward D. Hobbs as president. Mr. Hobbs also was the founder of Hobbs Station, and 'Evergreen', his home, shown in the mural, was one of the first built. Anchorage was known as Hobbs Station until Captain James W. Goslee, river mariner, retired in the peaceful community, called his estate "Anchorage" and placed an anchor on the right-of-way of the railroad so that all passersby might know the place was truly an Anchorage. The community gradually took the name Anchorage for its own - in 1871 Mr. Hobbs made a map of the town, labeled it Anchorage, and in 1878 the town was incorporated Anchorage -"³

Description of the Mural

This mural is in the location most often selected for murals, directly over the postmaster's door. (Figure 3). The painting is a long solid rectangle, having no downward extensions at the sides nor intrusions from the door. This fact alone gives it integrity and a sense of coherence. Four groups of figures (three of them very close to the picture plane) are lined up in the foreground. The artist has avoided the effect of a frieze, however, by giving his

³ Loren Fisher to Section supplying requested information, 1942, NA, TSD.

figures a variety of positions and actions and by a perspective carefully worked out. These figures are large, and the whole work is painted in bright cheerful colors.

At left is a white building with shuttered windows and decorative gingerbread carving along the eaves. A central white sign identifies it as Hobbs Station. It is seldom that any writing is seen in a Section mural, since one of its regulations forbade any advertising.

(All of the artists who painted Kentucky post office murals were well trained in the history of art, and it is more than possible that previous artists' work had influenced them. It will be noted when there seems to be a resemblance to a master of a past century.)

At left and slightly behind the foreground figures is an active group of black horse, dog and a young ostler trying to control a second horse. These two horses bring to mind those of two nineteenth-century figures, Théodore Géricault and Rosa Bonheur, both of whom specialized in depicting spirited horses. Next, and close to center, is a group of three figures, a woman introducing a man to another woman. To the right of them, there is a father greeting his daughter. She is seen from the back as she rushes to join hands with her father and he bends towards her. It is apparently her mother, seen from the back and carrying a parasol, to the right of them. She partly conceals an elderly couple conversing, while at the far right stands an odd metal object, explained below.

The train itself appears in the middle distance as if not wishing to intrude, with small figures still alighting from it, while a woman in yellow rushes toward it, waving a handkerchief. In the far distance at right sits a handsome white house on a hill, undoubtedly Mr. Hobbs's home, "Evergreen".

The topmost section of the mural is finished off with dark green tree leaves, white clouds in blue sky, and dark smoke from the engine spreading horizontally across this sky.

The colors are pleasing to the eye and blend with each other well. Peach and gray predominate. The woman at left is in gray with a small gray bonnet, while the woman opposite her wears a gown in two shades of peach, and a feathered peach hat. The little girl wears a blue-grey dress with hair ribbon to match, and the gray dress on the woman farthest right has flounces bordered with a deep rose color which is echoed in her bonnet. This carefully planned coordination gives a serene aspect to the work.

This is the most elaborate painting in Kentucky post offices. Such a well-dressed group appears nowhere else. The dresses are much like those in Gustave Courbet's Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (1856) in their light color and excess of flounces, gloves, and hats with flowers.

There are no distortions in the figures; the positions are natural. There are places where the color change for

shadows on the grass and on the faces seems too abrupt, but overall this is an accomplished work.

The fact that Fisher studied with Henrik Martin Mayer is significant. Mayer had experience with mural painting and was in a position to pass on certain techniques of composition and handling of paint.

Mayer also won Section competitions for murals in several locations, two in Indiana and one in Louisville, Kentucky. The latter consisted of eight panels depicting the early history of the region for the Marine Hospital in Louisville.

One of the Indiana murals was in the Aurora post office and was a river scene titled "Down to the Ferry". This was in 1937, when he was not quite thirty years old. The previous year he completed the first dual panel in Indiana for the Section, "Rural Delivery" and "Sad News" for the post office in Lafayette.⁴ These are especially successful, creating believable figures and an authentic mood of fearful anticipation at what may be in the postman's bag and the subsequent sorrow.

There is a direct comparison between Mayer's mural work and that of his student, Loren Fisher. Fisher seems to have learned well the depiction of solid figures, the naturalness of their gestures, and an effect of far distance by use of

⁴ Descriptive sheet from Still Photo Branch, 1936, NA, TD.

the correct size of figures and objects which lead the viewer's eye into the distance.

Style, Technique and Maintenance

Fisher described his painting method on the Anchorage work: "The mural is painted in oil on pure Irish linen. The design was laid in first with turpentine washes - covering the canvas so that colors and values might be compared from the beginning of actual painting--following the washes, a process of straight painting and glazes--with linseed oil as a medium."⁵ He sent a sample of his canvas, adding that the flat paint on the wall was an ideal base for his planned use of adhesive of white lead and Venice turpentine.

In the same letter, the artist also gives cleaning instructions: use dampened cloth and Ivory soap with very little pressure on mural surface. No varnish was used.

Progression of the Project

Completion of the mural was achieved after the usual long and arduous process required by bureaucracy.

⁵

Fisher to Section supplying information, 1942, NA, D.

It began with a letter stating that a Congressman from Kentucky, Emmet O'Neal, believed that there was much history in Anchorage and it should be studied and included in the mural if possible.⁶

About six months later, Mr. Fisher, then living in New York City, received a letter from Edward Rowan, Assistant Chief of the Section of Fine Arts. Fisher was invited to submit a design for a mural on the basis of competent designs he submitted in the Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, competition. If the design were approved, a contract would be issued.⁷ Fisher was glad to accept.

Fisher would be paid \$700 in increments for execution and installation. He would receive \$150 when the preliminary design was approved, \$225 for full size cartoon, and \$325 when the mural was completed, installed and approved. It was common practice for the Section to issue payments in installments.

Rowan also enclosed blueprints for the building and provided dimensions of the available space, but indicated strongly that Fisher should visit and verify them. The artist didn't anticipate visiting; it is quite possible that he didn't have the funds to do so. Many muralists faced this problem. Rowan did say that if Fisher were unable to accept the commission, he would probably be offered another

⁶ Fourth Assistant Postmaster General, S. W. Purdum, to Honorable W. E. Reynolds, FWA, 21 February, 1940 NA, SL.

⁷ Rowan to Fisher, 16 September 1941, NA, SL.

later. But he included what sounds like a warning by remarking that there were few commissions and many waiting artists.⁸

The time allotted for full completion was eight months. Rowan was quite demanding, as usual. As well as the required color sketch, he wanted "an architectural rendering in one-half-inch scale in color with two-inch white border showing proposed placement of the mural." He wanted strict authenticity on the costumes and the type of train.

Rowan suggested "restudy from nature" of the anatomy of horses. He is troubled especially by the right foreleg of the near horse in the Anchorage mural.⁹

However, when Rowan sent the Postmaster a copy of the sketch, he noted that Mr. Morris found it "perfectly beautiful."¹⁰

The metal object Mr. Fisher included at the far right of his mural is a depiction of an actual structure in front of the post office (Figure 5). Today an added plaque reads:

SYMBOL OF ANCHORAGE

The anchor suspended in a locomotive wheel forms a distinctive symbol for the city of Anchorage, whose heritage was shaped by the twin forces of the river and the railroad. Originally known as Hobbs Station, the town took the name Anchorage when it incorporated in 1878. The anchor belonged to riverboat captain James W. Goslee, who

⁸ Rowan to Fisher, 18 December 1941, NA, SL.

⁹ Rowan to Fisher, n.d., NA, SL.

¹⁰ Penciled note on letter from Rowan to Postmaster Morris, 6 January 1942, NA, SL.

built his estate, "Anchorage", in the 1860s. The locomotive wheel was given by Edward Dorsey Hobbs, founder of Anchorage and president of Louisville and Frankfort Railroad (now CSX Transportation).

This marker is dedicated to their memory.

Presented October, 1990

BY CSX TRANSPORTATION¹¹

The date on the mural is 1942 and it is to be expected that the continuation of the war would have some effect on this commission, and so it did. Selective Service called Fisher up in the draft and, despite deferments, he became part of the U. S. Army, but not before the mural was finished.

Rowan requested the opinion of the then current Postmaster at Anchorage who replied that most of the comments were favorable.¹²

In one respect, this mural is different from any other Treasury work in Kentucky. Almost all interpreted their assigned subject, the "American Scene", by depicting farmers, miners, rivermen, postmen, and other workers. But 1942 being as late a date as it was, U. S. citizens (including artists) were not immune from the influence of novels and films such as The Toy Wife, Jezebel, So Red the Rose, Gone with the Wind, and others, and we see that influence here.

¹¹ Transcribed from plaque in situ in front of Anchorage Post Office 4 April 1997.

¹² Rowan to then current postmaster at Anchorage, Laura Coleman, 17 July 1942, NA, SL.

The intention is apparently to give Anchorage the appearance of a Southern city, with impeccable social manners, behavior, and dress, taking pride in its traditions, yet at the same time having the sophistication to welcome progress in the form of the railroad train. It is a community civilized and comfortably well-off. Does the central figure of the father look suspiciously like Rhett Butler?

It was no coincidence that Gerald O'Hara, proud landowner and horseman, named his mansion Tara, since that was the name of the ancient seat of the High Kings of Ireland. Many settlers in the South were of the aristocracy or aspired to become such in the new land. A family's lineage was important, and genealogy is still a Southern preoccupation for many. Daniel Boone's immediate descendants laid claim to being aristocrats.¹³

Thomas Combs, Middletown Postmaster, has information that the Anchorage Post Office will soon have its status changed. There are plans for it to become a Postal Museum rather than a functioning Post Office.¹⁴

Since the mural will remain in place, it will serve as a major exhibit in this new museum and continue to grace the town of Anchorage.

¹³ Sue Bridwell Beckham, Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 255, FN 18.

¹⁴ Thomas Combs, Middletown Postmaster, interview by author, 15 August 1996.

THE BEREHA POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 6

County: Madison

Artist: Frank W. Long

Title: Berea Commencement in the Old Days

Date: 1940

Medium: Egg tempera on plaster

Dimensions: 5'10" H x 12' W

The Artist

Although born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1906, Frank Weathers Long is usually considered a Kentucky artist, since he painted at least fourteen murals in Kentucky and spent much of his life in Berea. Being a painter had always been his ambition, and at an early age he learned from his father, who decorated theaters and painted stage scenery.

Later, Long received more professional education at The Art Institute of Chicago, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and in the prestigious Julian Academy in Paris.

His first mural commission was from the University of Kentucky in Lexington. He was engaged to paint two murals in the new Margaret King Library, under the Treasury's Public Works of Art Program (PWAP), and these two murals remained his favorites.¹

Another University of Kentucky fresco, painted for Memorial Hall in 1934 by Ann Rice O'Hanlon (also under PWAP), portrays many small scenes from the history of Lexington and is today considered one of the best true frescoes in the country.²

Long couldn't endorse the government's plan to develop a uniquely American style for he doubted this would ever come about.³ Actually, the easel painting he so much preferred to do was excellent work, and at least one of these paintings hangs in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Many of the young government artists were less than happy with their assignments, but the need to earn a living was paramount. For this reason, Long continued to compete

¹ Frank W. Long, Confessions of a Depression Muralist (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1997), 162.

² Harriet Fowler, Director of the University of Kentucky Art Museum, unidentified newspaper clipping, headed "UK graduate's Memorial Hall fresco turned out "'pretty good'".

³ Long never considered himself a muralist. While working on the Louisville murals, he had two assistants, and he was pleased to let them do the preliminary work while he worked on his beloved easel painting. Long, 65.

for government commissions and by the time these ended, he had painted more post office murals than any other artist for the Section.⁴ These murals included Morehead and Louisville, Kentucky; Crawfordsville, Indiana; Drumright, Oklahoma; and Hagerstown, Maryland.

The last chapter in his book, Confessions of a Depression Muralist, is titled "I Make My Final Escape from Mural Painting".⁵ In this chapter he makes his feelings very clear. He accomplished this "escape" by enlisting in the Army and was sworn in at Fort Thomas, Kentucky.

Long's tour of duty was largely served in the Pacific. In the meantime, he had married Laura Whitis, whom he had known for some time. He realized that there would be no more government programs after the war, and for some time the Longs led a rather peripatetic life, looking for a new career.

He studied in New Mexico, learning leatherwork, lapidary techniques, silversmithing, and jewelry design. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board, a federal agency, offered him a position in Alaska, where a daughter, Angela, was born. Since the Alaskan weather proved deleterious to her health, the family moved to various other locations for the agency, including a special assignment to teach arts and crafts to Seminole Indians in Florida.

⁴ Ibid., 199.

⁵ Ibid., 163.

Frank and Laura agreed they had been happier in Berea and the family returned there, where Long devoted himself to writing a book, The Creative Lapidary, 1977, a handbook for craftsmen working with precious stones.

Back in Berea, Long returned to his first love, easel painting. It is indicative of the changed artistic climate in this country that Long's late easel work tended to complex geometric forms and a more colorful palette.⁶ He was in demand as a speaker and always entertained his audiences so well that his talks became great publicity for his paintings.

Description of the Mural

Berea College existed before the town which grew up around it. The college was founded in 1855 for the spiritual and material benefit of young people, by teaching them a trade or a craft which would stand them in good stead in later life.

Commencement Day each year was a long-awaited occasion when people from miles around would come to participate in the attendant festivities. There was little solemnity, as the great day gradually turned into a huge picnic, with horse-trading, refreshments, pistol and knife-swapping, with moonshine readily available. The event grew from 1880 to

⁶ Information partially derived from Harriet Fowler's Afterword to Long's Confessions.

1910, when it was discontinued, having gotten out of hand because of increasing hilarity. This Berea mural was painted in 1940, when Long was first living in Berea. He had rented a studio and hired an assistant, Bert Mullins, who later became a well-known muralist in his own right. This Berea mural, painted in 1938, was created during Long's first period of residence in Berea.

It was seldom that an artist was engaged to paint a mural in his own home town. Small communities didn't, as a rule, have a good resident artist, or any at all. Long's commission for Berea was an exception, and he thoroughly enjoyed working on it, although it was a challenge. This commission provided excitement for Berea residents, and some measure of pride, as well, as they saw the artist working on it with great care every day. It was a novel experience.

The Berea post office was one of those in which a vestibule extends into the lobby, causing a viewer to see the mural from a very short distance if he sees it at first entering. Long therefore decided to present the figures and objects on a small scale. There is a wealth of detail, but the painting is so faded that some of these details are lost, and the effect is of a toned-down brightness, giving an all-over yellow glow.

The scene depicts a crowd of people at the annual outing. There are approximately ninety-eight people, twenty-one horses, and two oxen. In the left foreground a

man is seated, apparently tired, since he holds his shoes in his hand. He wears brown trousers and hat with a blue shirt and a gun protrudes from his belt. He accepts a drink and sandwich from a woman with a picnic basket at her feet. It was a common Southern practice at picnics and similar occasions for young men to bid on the baskets, and the winner was privileged to eat with the young woman who had prepared the basket.

There seems to be no planned composition, but people are scattered all over the mural. The perspective is well done, however, largely by diminution of background figures. If it can be said to have a central figure, it is that of a brown horse, standing rather proudly. The highlights are especially well done on the horse, but there are hardly any on the rider, in blue and white, who turns his head away from the viewer. He is speaking to two women in yellow and green who stand, looking up to him. Behind the horse stand two little boys in dark colors. One is eating a candy cane and holds the candy bag in his hand. The other boy, who is barefoot, is eating a banana, as are several other people in this painting. This gathering was also a banana festival, since that fruit was rare, and some had never heard of it.⁷

Behind the boys is a wagon seen from the back. It is green, and the red wheel juts into the foreground. Chairs

⁷ Long, "This last item--almost unknown at any other time or place during these years--was so popular that the celebration came to be known in the region as 'banana day'", 153.

are set up in the back of the wagon, occupied by three women and one man. The man is in sober colors, but the women seem dressed in their best. With her back to the viewer sits a woman in bright yellow with a rose colored sunbonnet.

Across from her is a young girl with a blue ribbon in her brown hair, and dressed in pale yellow. She holds a fan of the palm leaf type. Next to her is a woman in a white bonnet, holding a baby and with a rather sad expression on her face. The wagon is being pulled by two yoked brown oxen.

At their right stand two men, one with a straw hat, shaking hands, presumably sealing an agreement. This conjecture seems likely, since directly behind them are five men gathered around a horse and examining it, especially its teeth.

Long did not use models but trusted his memory. In this work, he has created likenesses of several of the townspeople. For example, the dulcimer player at far right is John Jacob Niles (born in the Louisville Cabbage Patch), a noted and popular folk singer, composer and concert performer, and very good friend of Long's. A girl sits nearby with her knees up, displaying her ankles, and she wears a red skirt with white ruffle, a blue jacket and hat with a bow. She appears to be singing to Niles's music.

Looking to the left, we see in the middle distance a rectangular lemonade stand which has barrels under its counter, with about a dozen customers and, inside the stand, two workers. There is a young man chatting with customers,

with his hand on hip, black hair and small moustache. Many people thought this a portrait of the artist himself but Long said that if there was a resemblance, it was unintentional.⁸

In front of this stand are a man and woman, he in a rather dark suit and hat, while she wears a white blouse and orange skirt and has blond hair. She leans toward him, trying to entice him to eat a banana, but he stares straight ahead, apparently resisting strongly. Next to them is a little girl in blue and white, also eating a banana, and appearing to be lost.

In the far background are shade trees, tethered horses, another wagon, a picnic lunch spread out on the grass, and a number of small groups in deep discussion.

The only person who seems out of place with the festivity of the scene is a man standing in the left center foreground. He is dressed in shades of black, with a frock coat and a widebrimmed hat. His moustache and beard are also black and he is looking at an open book in his hands. He is actually a symbolic figure, placed there in homage by the artist. He is Reverend John McFee, Jr., who founded Berea College. Far in the distance at top right is a rambling white wooden building called The Tabernacle, where the commencement exercises were held.

⁸ Ibid., 159.

It is a lively scene and must give some of the flavor of those gatherings, yet in later years Long felt the work was inadequate, that he had included too few figures. It gave no sense of the crowds that converged on the campus.⁹ Nevertheless, he was pleased to see how the townspeople praised the mural. It seemed to them a tribute to their college and to their tradition of self-help.

It is a bit surprising that the Berea mural shows such excellence, since we know he was entirely weary of executing murals, which he never liked in the first place.

Since Frank Long had painted so many murals for Kentucky locations, it should be easy to determine his style, but they all differ in fact and in effect. The Berea mural is a *tour de force* which required a good deal of time.

In the 1939 Morehead Post Office mural (Figures 33-34) he shows very few people but has given careful attention to their appearance and, by extension, to their characters, while the anatomy, the proportions, and scale are well done.

By contrast, the Louisville murals are much like each other and consistently show more sturdy figures. When Long was in Paris, he had no interest at all in abstract work, but there is a hint of it in the Louisville work, or at least some stylization.

Of his murals, his favorites remained the first ones he painted--the two for the University of Kentucky library. Ironically, he never painted panels in quite that style

⁹ Ibid.

again. There are two arched panels, titled Work and Recreation, each showing vigorous action, such as a man swinging a hoe, others sawing wood, a couple dancing. The panels are composed of about six small vignettes with no connection to each other, and each is enclosed in a curving, individual background, much like a mandorla.

Although Long had little use for Thomas Hart Benton's work, it is impossible to view these two university murals, Work and Recreation, without being instantly reminded of Benton's free-flowing, undulating trademark line. Long said he could not admire Benton's "literal, almost commercial style" and that all he learned from Benton was how to successfully incorporate separate elements of different scale in his murals.¹⁰

The style of the Berea Post Office mural seems simple but there was no doubt some classical influence on it. Frank Long was familiar with European art of all periods, and it seems that he may have drawn on his memory here. There are echoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Renaissance mural, Good Government in the City (1339) in Long's small-scale figures and the several groups, each involved in a separate activity, spread across the panel in approximately the same way as the Berea work. It may not be extreme to suggest that Fra Angelico's view of Paradise on earth relates to this pure, quiet, staid composition of 1940.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

More modern art may have figured in Long's thoughts as well. The mural does bring to mind Georges Seurat's Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (1886). Even more than in the Lorenzetti fresco, the effect is of groups of two or even three richly dressed figures of small size scattered across the panel, apparently at leisure, and all set against a green and yellow grassy background.

This Berea mural was the only one Long painted directly on plaster. He had wanted to do this, but conditions were never right for it. He was advised now that dry plaster was on the Berea wall and could be used as ground if it were in good condition, and if not, apply more. He covered this with a thin coat of diluted egg yolk before painting. His tempera consisted of one pint egg yolk, one pint dammar varnish and two pints of distilled water. It was done *alla prima*, with no preservative, and his colors (which he ground himself) were mixed fresh every day or so. Long wrote Rowan about cleaning, noting that unvarnished tempera must be cleaned by a dry process only, such as fresh bread, and to use rubber in the dirtiest parts twice a year.¹¹

Progression of the Project

Mary Ela, head of the Art Department at Berea College,

¹¹ Long to Rowan 22 May 1940, NA, TSL.

was asked to be head of the local committee of judges, and recommend the winner to the Section. Mary Ela proved to be a fine choice for committee head. She often discussed work with the artists, sent press releases to a number of newspapers, and held exhibitions of the artists' sketches.

She was concerned about the post office lighting--"the lobby lights hang down in insistent fashion and combined with the in-jutting entry do a good deal of damage to any view of the mural".¹² Of course, this could be said of almost all of the post offices, at least in Kentucky. The lighting problem was usually solved with little effort, such as shortening the chain.

Long went through a rather discouraged period about this time. He owed money, his father had died, his mother was ill, he had lost out on the St. Louis post office mural job, and he thought his work had lost spontaneity, and for this lack he blamed himself. He agreed with Rowan that his figures were too often wooden and his patterns too simplified.¹³ His letter is thoughtful, repentent, and completely literate: "I am afraid that some of the diminution of intensity has been caused by my capitulation to circumstance in the form of an increased financial urgency..."¹⁴

¹² Mary Ela to Rowan 28 April 1939, NA, TSL.

¹³ Long to Rowan 29 April 1940.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Long was an extremely articulate artist, as his letters show, and his command of words and his winning personality must have been the reason for his popularity as a speaker.

Nevertheless, the hint of depression in the previous letter to Rowan did not apply to Berea, he said. "I feel this work is attaining a higher level...probably because its subject matter is full of importance to me".¹⁵

Finally the work was done and it was a decided success. Long patiently explained it to the citizens and he himself learned much from their comments. The local newspaper put a photograph on its front page and gave it three columns of praise.¹⁶ The Courier-Journal in Louisville of the same date also had a color photo spread across the front page. The artist was very much pleased by The Courier-Journal's photograph and felt it gave a fair idea of the mural aside from a lack of clarity due to the small scale of the figures.¹⁷

Frank Long wrote about its documentary and nostalgic value, but "it is to be hoped younger generations will see it also as an artistic recreation of a life that was harsher and simpler, but that contained an essential beauty worthy of an attempt to perpetuate it".¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Citizen, Berea, Madison County, Ky., Thursday 20 June 1940.

¹⁷ Long to Rowan 10 June 1940, NA, TSL.

¹⁸ Long, Word Account of the Berea, Kentucky, mural, n.d.

As of this writing, in 1999, Mr. Long is over ninety years of age and living in Mississippi. According to his wife, many events of his past life and career are no longer clear to him .¹⁹

¹⁹ Mrs. Laura Long, telephone interview by the author, 23 October 1997.

THE BOWLING GREEN POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure:7

County: Warren

Artist: Edward Laning

Title: The Long Hunters Discover Daniel
Boone

Date: 1942

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 13' x 12'5

The Artist

A very innovative painter, Edward Laning worked in a number of styles during his career. Stark realism was his preference at the beginning. For the WPA/FAP art program he painted eight huge murals in the "Aliens' dining room" at Ellis Island in 1937. His theme was the role of immigrants in the industrial development of America. The murals feature large sturdy male figures hard at work, building a railroad. They are in natural poses and Laning has shown his mastery of anatomy and a strong suggestion of movement. Figures bend to their labor naturally and, combined with the lines of the railroad track, also create a curving composition. This

curving device, borrowed from Benton, usually works well on a wall mural.¹

Laning had a good deal of contact with Benton and Rivera and, being a very versatile artist himself, he adapted some of their techniques to his own vision. He admired both these contemporaries. He learned from the past as well, and saw the connection that can be made between past and present through art. He once wrote on a postcard from Venice, "I never realized till now how much Tintoretto owed to Tom Benton"².

Like many another capable artist, Laning felt that the basis of good art was drawing. He wrote a book for students on this subject, which was remarkably clear and sensible.

He quoted Ingres as saying, "Go on drawing for a long time before you think of painting. If one builds on solid foundation, one sleeps untroubled".³

Another of Laning's artist friends was Reginald Marsh who he felt had heeded Ingres's words. Marsh seldom developed his very linear work much beyond a croquis, but his drawing had all the immediacy and life of a croquis. Much at home with words, Laning also wrote a memoir, as well

¹ David Shapiro, Art for the People: New Deal Murals on Long Island Exhibition Catalogue. (Hempstead, Long Island, Emily Lower Gallery, Hofstra University), 8.

² Edward Laning, The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 26.

³ Edward Laning, The Act of Drawing (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York Graphic Society, 1973), 26.

as his book on the principles of drawing, and The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh.

Born in 1906 in Petersburg, Illinois, Laning studied at the Art Institute of Chicago for five years and then at the Art Students League in New York. He was fortunate enough to study under five or six of the most capable artists of the time. He took part in the fighting during World War I, then stayed in Europe and studied at the Académie Ranson with Maurice Denis, but felt he learned little that was helpful. This fact is not surprising, since Denis had a style all his own and his work is recognizable.

Laning began with realism, but during his long career, he experimented with symbolic work which grew from Surrealism. The most unusual of these was a series of paintings on The Passion of Carrie Nation (a Kentuckian), which also had touches of surrealist unreality, and the figures are very small and puppet-like. Despite the unnaturalness, the series is colorful and appealing. His brushwork was tight and clearly contoured, with little detail in these works.

One of his most visible commissions was for the New York Public Library. Carrère and Hastings, the architects, had designed this impressive building in the Beaux-Arts style and left spaces for murals, but the spaces had never been filled. Laning decided on a series depicting The Story of the Recorded Word. The result was considered a striking artistic accomplishment. Again, a change, since the scenes

of famous men and their achievements are natural, and the large figures clearly make their point.

Laning, it transpired, was not finished with work for the New York Public Library; he was commissioned to paint the huge ceiling mural, which had also been left undecorated. Laning's work, titled Prometheus, was a Baroque style extravaganza seen *di sotto in su*, with the hero bringing down fire to man. Here the artist's knowledge of perspective is shown to good advantage.⁴ Laning's brushwork for this work was fluid, soft and sweeping, a departure from his painting styles to date. The mural was unveiled with suitable ceremony by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. In all, Laning had painted thirty-seven murals for this library.

It is difficult to fathom why his reputation is so completely obliterated today. He was not only a good artist but a versatile one. Already he had shown his skill with sturdy workers in realistic settings, then with tiny, clearly delineated figures that told a story in six panels glowing with brightness, and, in another change, Laning's brushwork in the extravaganza of the library dome was fluid, soft, and sweeping, creating another method of working. His art in later years was dark and foreboding, dwelling, in

⁴ The work was commissioned by a library trustee, Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes, lexicographer of Manhattan Island and a trustee of the library. As a wedding present to his wife, he commissioned a double portrait of the two painted by John Singer Sargent, 1897.

the Washington Square series, on the homeless and on fire. He had become very pessimistic, seeing both the world and its inhabitants on a downward trend.

Edward Laning seems to have been a likeable man, despite his later dour outlook and fears for his country. He was sensitive, as shown by the letter of condolence he sent Edward Bruce at the time of Bruce's stroke, expressing his appreciation of the work Bruce was doing for the Section, artists, and people.⁵

For the Section, in addition to the Bowling Green work, he painted a post office mural for Rockingham, North Carolina, titled The Post as a Connecting Thread in Human Life. Later, he became a war correspondent for Life magazine in Africa and Italy, and his paintings of what he saw were published in the magazine.

One of the artist's last works was a sketch of the poet, Edgar Lee Masters, who grew up with Laning in Petersburg, Illinois, and shared his appreciation for all forms of art.⁶ Masters' disillusionment with small-town life was in some ways a verbal equivalent of Laning's late, bleak work.

Laning was so popular that even during the 1930s he had no difficulty securing private commissions, and his quality of work should have insured him a place in American art.

⁵ Contreras, Tradition, 61.

⁶

Edward Laning: Painting and Drawings (New York: Kennedy Galleries, March-April, 1992). Exhibition catalogue.

His Teachers

Boardman Robinson (1876-1952), a Canadian. He studied abroad, largely in Paris at the Académie Julian (where Frank Long studied) and at the School of the Beaux-Arts. Back home, he taught at the Art Students League for ten years and was very popular. He provided murals for Rockefeller Center, as well as eighteen panels for the government's Justice Building, Washington, D.C. He seems to have been attracted to the Spoon River Anthology also, since he illustrated this book, as well as others. He was director of the Colorado Art School, among several other schools. In his work he emphasized movement and structure, not classical form. His work became less and less detailed as abstract work was making its way into the consciousness of American artists. Benton called him an effective teacher who had the rare ability to keep students enthusiastic.⁷

Max Weber He studied at the Académie Julian, as well, but under a different teacher, Henri Laurens. He also organized classes under Henri Matisse in 1908. He had Cubist leanings and was interested in primitive art. A writer also, he published Essays on Art and Cubist Poems.

Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876-1952) He taught at the New York School of Art and his earlier studies were in Europe with Vincent Dumond (who himself had studied with Boulanger, Lefèbvre, and Constant). Miller was important in his day,

⁷ Arnold Blanch and Adolf Dehn, chapter in Albert Christ-Janer, Boardman Robinson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 56.

as evidenced by the inclusion of his work in the pivotal Armory Show of 1913. His paintings were almost exclusively realist, although a few seem to fall short of the mark--in particular one series of three paintings titled Shopping. Each portrays a portly lady, in an early 1930s cloche and coat with heavy collar, making a purchase, and they seem to exhibit no attraction or coherence. The third painting adds two other ladies, one of whom shows her face in the center but there is no obvious place for her body. These works must be an aberration, as he can certainly be termed an important teacher of many realist painters, including Reginald Marsh, Isobel Bishop, George Bellows, and Edward Hopper.

Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975). Probably the most vocal enemy of the modernism of the time, Benton had nevertheless studied in Paris and at one time was somewhat fascinated by Synchronism. This lost its appeal, and he turned to America, for which he seemed to have a great love. He utilized his basic traditional education, even in his often primitive work. It is no small feat to include many details and still give an impression of simplicity, large curving contour lines, and unfailing clarity. He featured American history and folklore in candid fashion. Benton was almost aggressively independent, and today his paintings still attract attention.

John Sloan (1871-1951) Many books have been written about his work, and he deserves this attention. Sloan was

one of Robert Henri's group, "The Eight", who, around 1910 sought to bring back realistic painting to a public who sought only traditional allegorical work, Impressionism, or abstract art. He succeeded. The most famous of Henri's group, Sloan taught at the Art Students League for twelve years and also worked for WPA/FAP and the Section. He was most instrumental in returning the public's interest to familiar realistic work, especially urban scenes, but his paintings were technically so expert and original that he is today considered the greatest of "The Eight". Laning considered him "the best teacher of drawing I ever knew."⁸ It's true that after Henri himself, Sloan was the most able painter of the group. He was observant and soon recorded the little vignettes in the city, particularly in the tenements, but the people in them were never caricatured, but seen with a keen and sympathetic eye.

Description of the Mural

The location of the Bowling Green mural of Laning's is a very unfortunate one. It is painted on the back of the building's front facade. This location ensures that a patron coming in the door will never see it until he is leaving. And then, the lobby being as small as it is, the patron will be too close to get a very clear impression of

⁸ Laning, The Act of Drawing, n.p.

the work. Additionally, a hanging lamp obscures a section of the top half.

The mural covers the whole wall, except for the intrusive front door in the center of the painting which is framed by a wide wooden border. It adds nothing to the effect of the mural to be able to look through the door at its center to the busy street with cars outside. Today, further obstructions exist. A tall metal detector and X-Ray equipment cut off the view and make it impossible to photograph the mural in its entirety.

Five figures are shown, the central one being Daniel Boone. He is located immediately above the door, seemingly resting on it and in brighter color than the rest of the mural. The work is apparently based on a story of the Long Hunters, who were pioneer scouts searching for good locations for a settlement. They heard an unusual sound one day in the woods and eventually found Daniel, stretched out at his ease on a deerskin, gun by his side, powder horn about his shoulder, clad in the usual coonskin cap and suit of deerskin (the authenticity of this clothing is questioned by many). His hands are behind his head, and his mouth open as he sings along with a cardinal perched on a branch opposite him.

The four Long Hunters are creeping up on him, one on the right and below the little promontory on which Daniel lies. This man looks up and clutches his gun. The other three are at left, climbing up at different levels to the

top man who clutches the branches of a tree as he looks through them with some chagrin, it seems, at Daniel.

This work is very dark. It is true Daniel's figure is picked out with more light, but all the rest is almost difficult to make out. There are dark or fairly dark green and brown trees in every area and almost no sky is shown. However, the proportions of the figures are well rendered, and all are in natural positions.

It's probable that the mural looks worse today than when painted. Originally, slabs of marble rose from the floor on both sides, giving a wainscoat effect. The postmaster states that this whole front wall was somewhat damaged at one time, and a local artist repainted the bottom sections. There is now no marble, but the dark green of the picture comes down to the floor. The impasto of this part is very obvious in its thickness and there is little or no delineation of different shades of green. In short, it must have looked better once, although some letters to the Section when it was installed give a different impression. Not everyone was pleased.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

Laning had learned much from his studies in Europe. In fact, it was while he was in front of Rubens's Descent of

Christ from the Cross (1614) that he made up his mind to become a mural painter.⁹

As with many of the other painters, suggestions of the Old Masters can usually be found. In this mural, the figure at lower left, climbing up the rock, has a position very familiar to Michelangelo. His Slaves, the Medici tomb figures, the *ignudi*, all twist in some way, but this man almost repeats the position of the Libyan Sibyl on the Sistine Ceiling.

The heavily wooded background is reminiscent of many of Salvator Rosa's wild landscapes, and the man at top left is parting the bushes to see Daniel very much as the woodsman did in Benton's Persephone.

The most striking comparison can be made with Daniel's position. Many a reclining Venus is pictured in much the same way. Giorgione's Sleeping Venus (1508) has one arm behind her head, the elbow crooked like Daniel's, but even more similar are the two Majas of Goya (1800) who are seen in exactly the same position as Daniel. The reference is hardly appropriate here, but it shows that he knew famous works so well, this borrowed motif may have been in his subconscious. We know he was aware of the Giorgione Venus, since he advised his students to study it.¹⁰

⁹ Howard E. Wooden, Edward Laning, American Realist 1906-1981: A Retrospective Exhibition. (Wichita, Kansas: Wichita Art Museum, 1982), 6.

¹⁰ Laning, The Act of Drawing, 112.

What Laning calls "the lowliest job I had to do" was restoring a mural in an Armenian church. He thought the mural ugly but did his best. When finished, he was given a holy card picturing the mural and he recognized it as a wretched reproduction of Guido Reni's Baptism of Christ. (c. 1613). He said it would have been easier to copy the Reni itself, but not as much fun.¹¹

When this Bowling Green mural was new, it was possible to make out more of the detail and to see that more sky between the trees could be seen, with slight cloudy streaks through it. There were many more highlights as well, in the deerskins, the undersides of leaves, and the lighter twigs and branches of the trees. Laning's touch is sure, and his figures clear, without a strong sense of contouring.

Laning wrote that he used dry pigment. The wall was painted with one coat of oil paint and had recently been replastered. The adhesive he used to install the mural was white lead and Damar varnish (this combination was customary). He used heavy linen canvas with oil priming. Also, the underpainting was in tempera, monochrome in white and gray over warm "imprimatura" painting in oil colors.¹²

Maintenance, as mentioned above, has been less than satisfactory. Laning had suggested it be cleaned with straight oil linseed throughout. "When dirty, use very

¹¹ Laning, "Memoirs of a WPA Painter," 86.

¹² Laning to Rowan 18 June 1941, NA, SL.

light rubbing with a soft cloth moistened with turp, not much. Make sure no color appears on the cloth. No varnish. After a year it could be cleaned, given a light coat of varnish, one part of Damar, two parts of turp, followed when dry by a coat of Weber's Matvar. Subsequent cleanings will remove the Watvar wax film which should then be reapplied.¹³ We have no records of this prescription having been followed but, given the neglect accorded many of these government murals, we have some reason to suspect that it was not.

Progression of the Project

Edward Laning was awarded the commission for this mural for the Bowling Green Post Office and Court House on the basis of competent sketches for the post office mural in San Antonio, Texas. He finished it in eight months and was paid \$1,250.

Laning seemed to like the idea of this Bowling Green project. He wrote Rowan that he was sending two drawings and asked which he liked? Laning had written to several people in the town concerning a subject. He had come across a story in his research about the Long Hunters, the first white men to explore in the Kentucky wilderness. This story was in a biography of Daniel Boone by a John Bakeless. Laning thought it would make "a darned good mural painting", and the incident was near the present site of the town. He

¹³ Laning's instructions to Section, n.d., NSA, SL.

repeated the story for Rowan's benefit, adding that, led by Casper Mansker, a famous woodsman, the hunters arrived back at Green River country about the same time as the Boones. It seems that like many men who live alone, Daniel had a habit of singing or whistling to himself, discordantly.

There were other possibilities for a subject. Laning had considered a game of bowling on the green, from which game the town had derived its name. Also, there was a suggestion from a citizen that he portray the first locomotive to arrive there.¹⁴

Another letter from Laning followed, saying he would like to dispense with a full-size cartoon and work out the forms in underpainting--the usual way he did it, because it was more fresh and lively in this way. He added that he had had two letters, one suggesting it be painted on a different wall (a fine idea) and one from a Mr. William Temple, Vice President of the Kentucky Society of Washington, urging a way be found to enlarge the scope of the project to include several walls and a larger historical theme. Laning wanted Rowan to know that this was not his idea, but there was no money for such a project, anyway.¹⁵

Congressman B. M. Vincent's opinion was that the mural should be large enough to truly depict some of the

¹⁴ Laning to Rowan, n.d., NA, SL.

¹⁵ Laning to Rowan, 18 June 1941, NA, SL.

outstanding historical events of the city and he hoped space for the mural would be increased.¹⁶

The Postmaster wrote, "I know nothing about art but I do know this picture adds a lot to the lobby--we have had some very favorable comments but you just can't please them all. We need another picture to harmonize or set it off, at the other end of lobby".¹⁷

The letters continued. The local college librarian, Mary T. Moore, thought if all those glaring white walls of our post offices could be covered with warm, colorful pictures depicting our history, what a difference! "Too bad this one is placed where it gets so little attention. I suggest the centre light which drops in front of it be replaced by a high fluorescent. Imperative, no?"¹⁸ But, as usual, no money.

After seeing the mural, Miss Moore fired off another letter, this time to Postmaster Sublett. She was upset the Section didn't care to make changes. Boone was never in this country, she said, but allowed he was nearby and the world was getting small.

"Mr. Laning, with no light touch, debunks our Kentucky hero, Daniel Boone. A bird singing happily away, and he lying on a rock on hay which he must have gathered from somewhere--it could never have grown on the crag. A Boone who let

¹⁶ Congressman B. M. Vincent to Rowan, 8 May 1941. NA, ATL.

¹⁷ Postmaster H. W. Sublett to Rowan, 21 January 1942, NA, ATL.

¹⁸ Mary T. Moore, librarian at Western Kentucky State Teachers College, 20 January 1942 to Rowan, NA, ATL.

men slip up close enough to touch him, while he sang on all unaware. Boone--the hero scout--permitted this, according to Mr. Laning. Boone and the Long Hunters sweltering in the heat of a Kentucky summer with fur caps!

Boone, the great hunter, supposed to be always alert to danger, placing his gun with the stock at his feet! Mr. Laning's Boone must have been an intimate friend of the birds--as the enormous Kentucky cardinal on the tree close by is not disturbed by Boone in his song, while its mate, flying to join him, looks to be the size of an aeroplane. Mr. Laning could well spend a little time studying scout traits, hunters' rules for handling guns--and birds.

All these points were brought in newspaper criticisms before, when the original cut was published. Mr. Laning evidently felt that artistic license excused these errors in a realistic picture of Boone. True, the colors are warm and pleasing and the little vane lovely, but Boone and cardinal must be under the spell of Kentucky moonshine. Others have said these things. We should be glad maybe that it's placed in an out-of-the-way wall. It sounds hard, but really the picture has given us a big laugh--and in these somber days, and that is worth the money."¹⁹

Laning wrote that Postmaster Sublett had been fearful of local criticism of the subject matter because there had been earlier objections, but so far as he could determine, most of the townspeople really seemed to like the mural". However, he did want the light changed.²⁰

There was a newspaper article headed "Mural Depicting Boone and the Long Hunters and Painted by Edward Laning placed in Post Office". The reporter stated that patrons gathered to admire it when installed while they warmed up

¹⁹ Mary T. Moore to Postmaster Sublett, n.d. NA, ASL.

²⁰ Laning to Rowan 12 January 1942, NA, SL.

from the bitter cold in the street. The writer, Harry L. Jackson, believed it to be a work of outstanding character which would add to the cultural growth of the city. He described the colors, approved of the subject, but regretted that the mural was not designed for the opposite end of the lobby, as it would have had a much more commanding view and approach for the public. "It looks like an afterthought and is not logical," he wrote.²¹

Eventually, a new post office was built, but the old building was preserved along with the mural it contains. "The post office was located in that building until 1962. The structure now goes under the name of the Federal Building."²²

On May 24, 1997, there was a ceremony in front of this post office, which is now a courthouse. The building was being renamed for the late United States Representative William Natcher, who is remembered for not having missed a roll-call vote in forty years.²³ It is pleasant to think that the site of the mural is held in esteem, and it appears that public opinion now sees the mural on the back of the door as a valued part of the community of Bowling Green.

²¹ H. L. Jackson in The Daily News, Bowling Green, n.d. NA, newspaper column.

²² Judy Myers, Postmaster, to author, 24 February 1997.

²³ The Courier-Journal, 24 May 1997, p. B4.

THE CORBIN POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 8

County: Laurel

Artist: Alice Dinneen

Title: The Dark and Bloody Ground

Date: 1940

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 5' W x 4' H'

The Artist

Alice Dinneen (often misspelled Dineen) was one of the three woman artists who painted murals for Kentucky post offices. She was born in New York City in 1907. She studied at The New York School of Applied Design for Women and then, like so many others, at the Art Students League, also in New York. Her principal teachers were Thomas Furlong, George Bridgman, Max Weber, and Kimon Nicolaides.

Dinneen worked on all three Treasury art programs: the PWAP, the Section, and the TRAP. She modestly stated that she was not represented in any major collections, but that she had sold many paintings to private individuals,¹ The

¹ Dinneen to Forbes Watson, Section of Painting and Sculpture, 25 January 1938. NA, ASL.

statement was made early in her career and her work was later more prominent. She produced another post office mural for the Section in Warrenton, North Carolina in 1938, and painted other works in Carville, Louisiana, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the U. S. Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., this latter being a very important work.

Dinneen had married another painter, Allan Gould (who had graduated from Dartmouth and studied under John Steuart Curry and Homer Boss). Coincidentally, Gould was producing a Section mural in the Greenville, Kentucky, Post Office at the same time as his wife was working in Corbin. This was an unusually fortuitous circumstance for the two artists for practicality's sake, but comparison of the two Kentucky murals shows completely independent work. The murals produced in Kentucky by the husband and wife artists are totally different in subject and style.

Her Teachers

Thomas Furlong. He was a muralist who studied at Washington University, the Art Students League in New York, and later taught at New York City College and Hunter College. He was especially noted for his murals in Brooklyn churches.

George Bridgman. (1864-1943)

Bridgman became an instructor at the Art Students League and wrote several textbooks on anatomical drawing which were widely used globally. He was a New Yorker but had studied abroad with Louis Boulanger and Jean-Léon Gérôme. Thomas Eakins had also studied with Gérôme.

Kimon Nicolaides (1892-1938)

Nicolaides attended Art Students League where he studied with John Sloan and Kenneth H. Miller and then taught at the New York School of Applied Design for Women and the Art Students League. He had an unusual number of prominent students, and Dinneen referred to him as a "good teacher"²

Kentucky was once known as The Dark and Bloody Ground, (a translation of an Indian place name) and there are various reasons given for this appellation. Some believe it refers to skirmishes among Indians and settlers; others think the "bloody ground" was caused by inter-tribal warfare among the Indians over a choice hunting space. Mural historians, Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, elaborate a bit on the latter meaning, saying it refers to "inter-Indian fights over the rich hunting in the woodlands around Corbin, Kentucky."³

² Dinneen to Forbes Watson, 25 January 1938, NA, ASL.

³ Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1984), 35.

Judge Richard Henderson, founder of the Transylvania Land Company, made a treaty with the Cherokee Indians in 1775, the Sycamore Shoals Treaty, granting certain parcels of land to the settlers. Daniel Boone and thirty companions were dispatched immediately to Kentucky to blaze the trail, find the best places to ford the river, and locate a suitable place where the Boonesboro settlement could be founded.⁴

A Cherokee chief at the signing of the treaty told Henderson that the land was indeed dark and bloody, filled with ghosts and dangerous for settlers.⁵ Park followed Dinneen's interpretation, for the most part, as Dinneen had added, "Corbin, Kentucky, is an important center as the Kentucky gateway to the Cumberland region."⁶ It was a hazardous trip over the mountains to the gap which led to more fertile ground, and many families braved Indian attacks and hunger to pave the way, often with Daniel Boone as their guide. The Cumberland became a major route for immigrant families from the east searching for a new home.

⁴ The WPA Guide to Kentucky, F. Kevin Simon, ed. (The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 38. Original edition October 1939.

⁵ John E. Kleber, ed., et al. The Kentucky Encyclopedia (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 253.

⁶ Dinneen to Corbin Postmaster, n.d., NA, ASL.

Description of the Mural

The mural is a forest scene, intentionally dark. It shows flora and fauna exclusively, except for a lone Indian behind a tree at left. He is seen in profile with his long black hair in a braid, and kneeling in an alert stance, watching the deer at far right. It appears very peaceful to a viewer until he notices the two tan deer, one of whom has been hit by an arrow and, with bent foreleg, is falling to the ground, blood streaming from its side.

There seems to be no action in the scene but an impression of stillness. Even the falling deer appears arrested in its movement, and this peaceful effect is heightened by the composition. The center of the mural is a clearing, with only a young tree and a small brook emerging from between rocks, a grouping which accents the space and creates a sense of depth. Woodland creatures of all kinds inhabit the grounds, hardly discernible in the shadows.

The living creatures include a green-spotted turkey with red head, in the left foreground, a small brown beaver close to it, a wolf standing motionless in the opening of a cave far in the background, a bluejay in the center, flying to the right and serving to connect the composition. Hard to see at first, but present on the right are turtle doves, a robin, a raccoon in a tree, and an ochre mountain lion crouching on a rock. Tiger lilies, white birches, and a variety of ferns, vines, and trees complete the scene.

It is an intriguing mural, showing a still moment between one action and another.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

Dinneen has a fine sense of composition, as shown by the way she has balanced the elements here to produce the effect she wanted. She has also created a convincing sense of depth. The sense of quiet is achieved by showing the large center area uninhabited and the story's protagonists, Indian and deer, at the left and right edges. The visual weight of the two deer is offset by the diagonal line of the deer's leg. The lines of the tree trunks are parallel to it, and all lines incline toward the left. The viewer's eye follows them from the right across the almost empty center directly to the figure of the wolf in the black cave entrance, and a line from there leads naturally to the Indian, almost hidden behind a birch tree, creating a low, wide triangle. The perspective and proportions are carefully worked out.

Dinneen has a very delicate manner of painting, seen both in her depiction of forms and her choice of colors. Tans, brown, greens and grays comprise the whole work, except for one bright spot--the small central stream which is a foaming white falling from the rocks and a very pale cobalt as it flows more calmly toward the picture plane. There is no hint of sky. The soft tones, the various shades of green, the constant shifting from deep shadow to a

filtered light all across the canvas give this mural a romantic aspect and a distinction that deserves notice. The mural gives the impression of being a stage set, in the sense that Thomas Cole used his series The Voyage of Life (1840). John Constable's The Hay Wain (1821), comes to mind, in which the very stillness suggests imminent action. The American Indian theme could be seen as a reminder of René de Chateaubriand's Atala, a sentimental novel, which Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson used as inspiration for his painting, The Entombment of Atala (1808). In many ways, Dinneen's work is superior to this overly-emotional painting.

Many possible influences come to mind when considering this intriguing work. Thoughts of Hiawatha or of Diana, the deer-hunting goddess. The shady landscape might be inspired by works of Poussin or Corot. Yet there is more here. It contains an almost magical aura, hinting at the Symbolist Ranson or paintings by Jan Toorop, such as The Young Generation (1892), where the enclosing forest background gives off a mysterious atmosphere.

Dinneen provided information on her method of working, stating first that her medium for colors was turpentine and linseed oil. These she applied directly, covering whenever possible with one coat, modeling at the same time and using just enough medium to work the paint easily. When overpainting was necessary, it was done on dry paint.

As to the care of the mural, Dinneen said that damp washing with cloth and mild white soap, thorough rinsing and drying, would be sufficient. Care should be taken not to rub too hard. "Corbin is a particularly smoky town and the mural will become dirty quickly."⁷

Progress of the Project

Dinneen was invited to submit a sketch for the Corbin Post Office in Laurel County on the basis of competent work performed under the Section. The mural would be installed at one end of the public lobby over the Postmaster's door, the customary location, and her fee for this mural would be \$660.⁸

Her husband, Allan Gould, often answered letters on behalf of himself and his wife. He was concerned that they were temporarily living in California and hoped it wouldn't be necessary to get someone else because she was anxious to do it. He was also surprised Rowan didn't know their address. They had supplied it twice. Rowan was sorry but remarked he had eight thousand artists on his mailing list, implying that strict accuracy couldn't be expected.⁹

⁷ Dinneen on Treasury form requesting this information, n.d.

⁸ Rowan to Dinneen, 14 December 1938. NA, SL

⁹ Gould to Rowan 27 December 1938. Rowan reply is by return mail.

Rowan wrote on receiving the first sketch and said a review by members of Section had found it "a work of some entertainment." He felt that the figure of the Indian in relation to the tree was pretty large and should be set back. Also, the center seemed a little empty with a single beaver, and the doe was a little stilted and toy-like. He asked if the bird were a passenger pigeon and advised that she should authenticate this. Perhaps she might confer with the Postmaster, he suggested.¹⁰

It is to be noted that Edward Rowan, conscientious to the point of fussiness and always full of suggestions for minute changes, never failed to write a kind and courteous letter. He understood the problems of the artists.

Dinneen admitted she had painted the animals from memory and would research them when she was in Kentucky. When her "three inch to one foot scale" color sketch arrived in Washington, Rowan wrote that it was "regarded as a charming work, handsomely unified in composition and color. It has been the source of favorable comments by all who have reviewed the design. Our packer, when bringing in the sketch, said 'You can hear the birds sing,'".¹¹

¹⁰ Rowan to Dinneen 5 May 1939. NA, SL.

¹¹ Rowan to Dinneen 12 August 1939, NA, SL; Dinneen to Rowan, , NA, ASL; Rowan to Dineen 20 November 1939, NA, SL.

There was to be a large exhibition of the sketches for Section murals at the Corcoran Gallery. Apparently there was some confusion over Dinneen's contribution. Rowan suggested including the Corbin color sketch, but another work of Dinneen's must have been substituted, since she wrote Rowan about her disappointment over the omission of the Corbin sketch, which she preferred. She thought it odd, since Mr. Gould's Greenville, Kentucky, sketch, which was displayed, and her Corbin sketch were in the same package. Rowan replied with his regrets and mentioned the difficulties of choosing from several thousand works and hanging some five hundred of them, and he assured her there would be other opportunities.¹²

Dineen seems to have preferred to paint the type of subject as in the Corbin mural and in the same style, since she mentioned that her previous Post Office mural for Warrenton, North Carolina, "is simply a decorative landscape composed of animals in a pasture typical of the locale and arranged in a design suitable to the architecture."¹³

The citizens of Corbin found their own mural much to their liking and private comments were decidedly favorable, according to the Postmaster. "However, one lady stated she approved of the painting but had one objection to it, to-wit: the blood running off the deer from the Indian's

¹² Rowan to Dinneen, 21 September 1939, NA, SL; Dinneen to Rowan, N.D., NA, SL; Rowan to Dinneen, 20 November 1939, NA, SL.

¹³ Dinneen to Forbes Watson, 25 January 1938, NA, ASL.

arrow. She does not like the destruction of wildlife. We suggested the painting was depicting Kentucky in pioneer days when the Red Man roamed hills and valleys and hunted the game and fought unfriendly tribes of Indians."¹⁴

Whether this explanation mollified the lady's concern or not, the mural is still appreciated in its home town. The 1930s post office is now the headquarters of the local Board of Education, but the mural remains in place, although now as a wall decoration in the superintendent's office.

This mural continues to fascinate those who see it. In 1995 it was cleaned, restored, and given a thin frame of a light wood color. In its hazy atmosphere and delicacy of forms, it suggests a scene from poetry. It remains one of the most distinctive and attractive of all the Kentucky murals discussed here.

¹⁴ Postmaster Nathaniel M. Elliott to Section, n.d., NA, SL.

THE FLEMINGSBURG POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 9

County: Fleming

Artist: Lucille Blanch

Title: Crossing to the Battle of Blue Licks

Date: 1942

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 4'0" x 12'0"

The Artist

Lucille Lindquist Blanch contributed a substantial body of work to the period of the 1930s and was fairly well known. From a copy of her resume, provided by her, we learn the following:

She was born 31 December 1895 in Hawley, Minnesota. She studied art at the Minneapolis Art Institute and also at the Art Students League in New York City where Boardman Robinson was one of her teachers, and possibly Thomas Hart Benton, as well.¹

Her first exhibit was in 1923 at Woodstock Galleries in the Woodstock colony, followed the next year by a "one-man"

¹ For information on Robinson and Benton, see the Bowling Green entry.

show at the Whitney Studio Galleries. After winning a silver medal at the San Francisco Art Annual, she went to Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship.

In 1934, the Wanamaker Regional Exhibition awarded her a purchase prize, along with Thomas Hart Benton and Reginald Marsh. This award is an indication of her ability, since these artists were leading Social Realists in the 1930s and whose reputation remains valid today.

Her Teachers

Whether she felt any artistic influence from either of them cannot be easily determined from the Flemingsburg mural. There is perhaps something of Benton in the earth colors and the effect of motion. A study of her oeuvre suggests, however, that she was more influenced by her primary teacher, Boardman Robinson. He also taught Blanch's husband, Arnold Blanch, who says of him that he disliked formulas but emphasized movement and balance of darks and lights. Robinson also used few details but tried to show an emotional content through the shapes of his figures.² It is apparent from this mural that she absorbed some working methods from Robinson, also a muralist.

² Arnold Blanch, chapter in Boardman Robinson by Albert Christ-Janer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 74.

Looking back farther in time, Rosa Bonheur's spirited horses, usually crowded together in action, may have been in her memory, as well as The Battle of San Romano (1445) by Paolo Uccello, who featured in his work battle scenes of men and horses in active combat.

Lucille Blanch taught at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, at the Ringling School of Art, Sarasota, Florida, and exhibited at various shows. In 1939, however, she was lucky to find work with the WPA. A year later she began work for the Treasury's Section of Fine Arts, painting murals in post offices in Fort Pierce, Florida, Appalachia, Virginia, and Flemingsburg. Her husband, Arnold Blanch, also painted murals for the Section, but none in Kentucky.

From her correspondence, Lucille Blanch gives the impression of being so immersed in her painting that other more practical matters were sometimes disregarded. She was, however, sensitive to the feelings of local residents, always soliciting their preferences, insuring authenticity in historical scenes, such as depicting the actual clothing worn by Chief Osceola in her Fort Pierce mural and generally attempting to please both citizens and Section--not always an easy task.

Description of the Mural

This mural, Crossing to the Battle of Blue Licks, is a wide rectangle placed on the post office wall over the lock boxes. The painting has no frame but is recessed into a

shallow inset. It was usually the case that an artist painted a mural in a studio and glued it to the wall in its designated location. Very few murals were true fresco. This mural is not signed or dated, and there is no accompanying plaque to identify it. This is true of almost all of the post office murals. They are seldom identified as to title, artist, or date.

In the foreground of the painting are nine mounted men in buckskins, two wearing gray hats, the others hatless, and one without a shirt. Bedrolls rest behind some saddles, and all riders hold rifles and wear ammunition belts with shoulder straps. The figures are spread across the canvas in the act of crossing a stream. There is a great variety of positions, and a strong sense of motion in the swirling of the water around the horses' feet, in the horses' manes blowing in the wind, and in the animated gestures of the men. Some raise their heads and are apparently shouting. In the central foreground are a soldier whose horse's head is twisted in an attempt to turn back, and another soldier who leans down to grasp the wary horse's bridle and direct him forward.

Centrally located in the middle ground, and the focal point of the mural, is a horseman on a rearing white horse. He has reached the opposite shore and is looking back, shouting and waving his hat to urge his followers onward.

This horseman is centrally placed and higher up on the bank than the others who still flounder in the stream. It

is reasonable to suppose that this figure is Daniel Boone, since he played a large part in the Battle of Blue Licks. He is headed up a hill, at the top of which a band of gesticulating armed Indians wait. Above the rocky ground at the shoreline, this hill rises, green and tree-dotted and slashed with gray here and there. The brushstrokes are obvious in places but the mural gives a very solid look in other areas. There are no definite contour lines but the figures are formed by color.

The mural looks rather dark at a slight distance, the three trees left and the four on the right adding to this impression with their trunks of variegated browns. Their foliage is in various shades of green against a pale blue, gray, and turquoise sky, which is not prominent because of the high hill at center.

The composition gives a compact effect. This may be because of the careful equilibrium of the piece. The riders in the foreground are spread evenly across the canvas, and the viewer sees them all realistically angled as they look up to the leader. There is no sense of imbalance because of the strong focus on this leader in the center, his figure rising almost to the upper edge of the mural. The setting itself lacks any other emphasis, and the Indian warriors are too small to detract from him.

The impression is of a glorious victory in the making, but in fact, it was a major disaster. Frontier Kentucky was always a scene of fighting, and it appeared to become worse

with time. At the date of this battle, 19 August 1782, the Seminoles, Cherokees, and other tribes, who resented the incursion of strangers, became more alarmed as this invasion increased with the advent of surveyors and settlers. Some of the tribes were used by the British to attack independent-minded settlers, and this battle was instigated by an attack on the settlers' homestead.

At a horseshoe bend in the Licking River, the only place that could be forded, three companies crossed, led by Major Levi Todd, Colonel Stephen Tripp, and Colonel Daniel Boone. Since Boone's group was the first to cross, he is undoubtedly the leader depicted here. They were greatly outnumbered by the Indians, many hidden in tall grass. The Indians feinted a withdrawal, and the settlers gave chase, only to find themselves surrounded. (This fact gives credence to the suspicion that the British had some supporting role, since this military maneuver had been used in Europe at least since William the Conqueror deployed it at Hastings.)

Of the one hundred eighty-two men of Kentucky, seventy were viciously killed at this spot close to Flemingsburg. As a result, Boone called on the General Assembly to provide five hundred men to protect the families of Kentucky who by this time had all left their homes and were living in three forts. This battle was devastating for Boone, who knew the area, sensed a trap, and argued against attacking across the Licking River. But he was overruled, and the attack took

place. Among those killed was Boone's twenty-one-year-old son Israel. This battle was the last major one of the Revolution.³

Technique and Maintenance

Blanch gave no particulars about this mural, beyond the fact that she used no underpainting.⁴ She did write to the Postmaster to ascertain the colors of walls and woodwork⁵ and, although surely redecorated over the years, the basic color scheme remains: beige walls with brownish-red marble verticals at intervals, and green stained wood trim, all of which set off the mural admirably.

Progression of the Project

This mural met with more difficulty than most in getting off the ground. There seemed to be no problem at first. The Lions Club spoke for all in expressing to the Honorable C. J. Peoples, Division of Procurement of the Treasury Department, of the general happiness in Flemingsburg at the proposed new decoration.⁶

³ Factual information from Richard L. Blanco, ed., The American Revolution 1775-1783, vol. 1 (New York: Garland Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 123 ff.

⁴ Blanch to Section, 15 September 1942, NA, SL

⁵ Blanch to Postmaster Adams, 7 May 1942, NA, ASL

⁶ Lions Club of Flemingsburg to Honorable C. J. Peoples,

Two private citizens wrote to suggest an artist, a Mrs. Douglas Ewen of Chicago, but a native of Flemingsburg. They felt she was qualified, having studied in Louisville, New York, and abroad, and would be especially suitable, being the great-granddaughter of a Revolutionary War soldier, William Dudley, a settler in Stockton Station, the first fort in Fleming County.⁷

Maria Ealand, the Section's secretary, had a consistent and convenient answer to such suggestions. She would reply that all commissions were by competition, and she would place the suggested artist's name on her list of those to receive announcements, so that he or she might enter. This she did unflinchingly, an action which spared many feelings.⁸

Bruce and Rowan, the heads of Section, decided, however, not to hold a competition for Flemingsburg but instead to offer the commission to a former entrant in a competition for the Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, Post Office, whose work did not win but showed definite promise. This was occasionally done and was not only understood by the artists but welcomed by them, as offering a possible second chance.

Division of Procurement of the Treasury Department, 19 March, 1939, recommending Mrs. Douglas Ewen for commission.

⁷ One of these letters was from Mrs. J. Kidwell Grannis, president of Flemingsburg Garden Club, 19 February 1939.

⁸ Maria Ealand to Flemingsburg correspondents 22 March 1939. These letters in National Archives.

Consequently, Rowan invited Sidney Simon of Pittsburgh to submit a sketch for the Flemingsburg mural, which would carry a payment of \$750 when the mural was completed, and Simon accepted.⁹ Simon had several ideas in mind: Transylvania surveyors buying land from Indians; a contemporary scene of a country store; or Henry Clay electioneering. He chose a title Kentucky Land Purchase from Indian and Contemporary Aspects.¹⁰

The planning was well underway, with tempera on gesso decided on, the method of installation planned to be toggle bolts rather than adhesive, and other details. Simon even revised his sketch, changing the figures and their grouping rather drastically, but it was all in vain. This was in 1941, and Simon found himself drafted.¹¹

This may have been all for the best, as Simon's preliminary sketches for the proposed mural seem to have had no real theme but consisted of a row of unrelated figures--a mother with children, a well-dressed man in a carriage, a surveyor, various types of workers, along with scattered buildings, horses, drying tobacco, etc. No doubt this mural was supposed to be a compendium of scenes from Kentucky life, but the lack of coherent composition does render it inferior to Blanch's design.

⁹ Rowan to Simon, 19 July 1940, NA, SL.

¹⁰ Simon to Rowan, 3 August 1940, NA, ASL.

¹¹ Simon to Rowan, 26 November 1941, NA, SL.

Charles Dietz of Zanesville, Ohio, wrote, asking for work, and he was given the commission on the basis of his entry for the New York World's Fair Federal Building competition.¹² There was little time for planning in this case, since Dietz was drafted less than a month later and left immediately to report to Camp Shelby, Mississippi.¹³

Rowan's letter to the third choice, on the basis of her sketch for the Justice Building in Washington, D.C., Lucille Blanch of Woodstock, New York, is indicative of the temper of the times. He advised her to contact the Postmaster and other prominent citizens on their choices of subjects and also their attitude. He was conscious of conflicting opinions: "We don't want to antagonize the public and there are two schools of thought on this. Some believe all art should be terminated for the duration--others are convinced arts are a stimulus to morale and growing evidence of the things for which we are now at war. If there is any serious objection, let me know."¹⁴

The Postmaster, G. Adams, suggested the Battle of Blue Licks, since the site is only about fifteen miles from Flemingsburg. He claimed the citizens wanted nothing modern but something pertaining to Kentucky history.¹⁵

¹² NA, SL, Rowan to Charles Dietz, 1 January 1942.

¹³ NA, SL, Dietz to Rowan, 17 January 1942.

¹⁴ NA, SL, Rowan to Blanch, n.d.

¹⁵ Postmaster G. Adams to Rowan, n.d., NA, ASL.; Blanch to Rowan, 15 July 1942; Rowan to Blanch, 24 July 1942; Rowan to Blanch, 10 September 1942, NA, SL.

Blanch corroborated his observation, saying they were pleased locally. They wanted Blue Licks and she would love to do a battle scene. "They definitely do not want a contemporary or agricultural subject, which suits me."

Blanch set to work with enthusiasm, submitting three sketches, one of each phase of the battle. Rowan's perfectionism emerges again when he tells Blanch her penmanship is sloppy and she should resubmit her letter.

He was still not entirely pleased when he received the color sketch. "...it distresses me that you have not done more with it at this stage..." He explained that there should be fewer horses and men and that all should be more convincing, especially their positions, which were confusing. "I sincerely hope that you will bring the cartoon to the high standard which we are requiring of other artists under this program."¹⁶ Blanch replied that she was aware of problems with the center white horse but felt she could resolve them later when she had more elbow room.¹⁷

Here she touched on a matter which concerned most of the artists, Thomas Hart Benton being probably the most outspoken about it: the Section's requirement that the final mural adhere strictly to the approved color sketch. Many artists felt that doing so eliminated any possibility of further inspiration. (See Chapter VII, p. 108, for further discussion of this problem.)

¹⁶ Rowan to Blanch, 10 September 1942, NA, ASL

¹⁷ Blanch to Rowan, 15 September 1942, NA, ASL.

Blanch said she knew her work appeared sketchy in initial stages, compared to some others, but this was her own particular way of working and she thought that "when a finished painting leaves my studio it has its own brand of integrity." She writes like a lady who needs no one to defend her. Rowan answered quickly with protestations of good will--"You certainly are aware that I do not feel that your finished work looks amateurish and you know that I regard you as an artist of integrity..." and more similar assurances mixed with advice.

By May, 1943, the work was done and Blanch felt it was her best. She had revised the controversial white horse to make him more realistic. "Color richer and textures meatier than in most of my work," she wrote, "so that I feel it my major accomplishment."¹⁸

Mr. Adams, the Postmaster, approved but found a problem with the project. He wrote Blanch saying he couldn't find a good paper hanger. He needed one for his own house, but no luck, since they were all in service. He didn't want the mural ruined by putting it up badly.¹⁹ Rowan insisted a paper hanger was not the answer. He was writing to the Cincinnati Museum for the name of a craftsman who could do it, because this matter was important.²⁰

¹⁸ Blanch to Rowan, 15 September 1942, NA, SL; Rowan to Blanch, 21 September 1942, NA, SL; Blanch to Rowan, 13 May 1943. NA, ASL.

¹⁹ Postmaster G. Adams to Blanch, n.d.

²⁰ Rowan to Blanch, 4 June, 1943.

Fear of opposition to the mural because of the the current war was much on the mind of Walter Myers, Fourth Assistant Postmaster General. Before installation, he wrote to Postmaster Adams, "In view of the serious war conditions and the urgent need for conservation of not only funds and material, but labor, a frank expression of your views is requested, as to the possibility of unfavorable public reaction to having work of this kind performed and at a time when you are urging your patrons to invest their funds in War securities."²¹

Adams replied that there would likely be some adverse talk, but it had been generally understood that there would be a mural, ever since the building was erected, so perhaps no more comment than usual. He also felt it would be an injustice to Blanch, after all her work, not to install it.²²

Blanch did not wait for permission to ship her mural. She sent an expensive man from Brooklyn to hang it. She hoped this would be all right, but apparently it was not, since Blanch had to pay for it herself. She wrote to ask for her fee, because she was running into debt. She wanted to interview for a job at the Albright School in Buffalo, New York, and couldn't impose on people any more. Rowan

²¹ Walter Myers, Fourth Assistant Postmaster General to Postmaster G. Adams, 15 February 1943, in Flemingsburg Post Office records.

²² Adams to Myers, 18 February 1943, NA. TSL.

answered that the check was in the mail. He professed himself pleased, but she still seemed to irritate him. He wished she showed more care in handling the painting, as it was a miracle that it came through the mail wrapped as it was--practically bent double.²³

The Postmaster appears to have had the last word. He claimed it was splendid, entirely satisfactory, and had received many favorable comments.²⁴

Citizen appreciation and interest continues today, as recreations of the battle are regularly performed. There was also a well-written article on the mural which appeared in a June, 1997, edition of the local newspaper, occasioned by the fact that both Flemingsburg and Fleming County were about to observe birthdays, and the relevance of the mural's subject to local history was noted.²⁵

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²³ Blanch to Rowan, 3 August 1943, NA, SL; Rowan to Blanch, 10 August 1943, NA, SL.

²⁴ NA, SL, Adams to Section, 17 June 1943.

²⁵ Flemingsburg Gazette, Wednesday, June 25, 1997, p. 14.

THE FORT THOMAS POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 10

County: Campbell

Artist: Lucienne Bloch

Title: Generals George H. Thomas
and Philip Sheridan

Date: 1942

Medium: Tempera on Canvas

Dimensions: 12' W x 5' H

The Artist

Lucienne Bloch was the daughter of the noted Swiss composer Ernest Bloch, who was much interested in Impressionism. There was in the early part of the twentieth century a school of Impressionism in music as well as art, and Bloch's tone poems reflected this style in music, as did Debussy's. Lucienne was born in Geneva in 1909 but the family later moved to New York. She studied at the Cleveland School (now Institute) of Art and then in Paris with Antoine Bourdelle and André Lhote.

She began her career as a sculptor but money became scarce during the Depression, so she became an assistant to the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. She worked with him on several major works, including the controversial mural at Rockefeller Center. This large mural was influenced by

Rivera's Marxist beliefs and Rockefeller had it destroyed. Lucienne became one of the more outspoken artists in New York, believing that "the artist is a creature of social responsibility".¹

She had a softer side, brought out by her work on a mural in a New York Women's Detention Center. She chose a children's playground for a subject and Cycles of a Woman's Life for a title, building up her composition on a series of complex figurations that completed a cycle. It was composed of little groups of children playing, and the women at the Center gave them names and made suggestions.

Bloch had to fight to get her ideas approved, since the authorities and psychiatrists felt the whole concept of art in a prison was too highbrow. She felt strongly, however, that an environment of dark color and barred windows needed attractive lines and bright hues, and there's no doubt Bloch brought a bit of sunshine into these women's days.² This reaction is an example of the effect art programs had on people who had had no experience with art in their lives-- they were left with a lasting and pleasing impression.

She married another Rivera assistant, Stephen Dimitroff, and they continued to work together on murals, some of them for the WPA/FAP, and also in other media. She exhibited at the Paris Exposition and the New York World's

¹ Matthew Baigell, Dictionary of American Art (New York: Harper and Row, Icon Editions, 1979), 119.

² Francis V. O'Connor, Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project (Greenwich, Conn., New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), 19.

Fair in 1939 and found time to illustrate ten publications of her father's musical compositions.

Her Teachers

Émile Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929) was a pupil of Rodin but he soon forsook Rodin's impressionistic style for the stylized, contained sculpture of Greek and Gothic times. He preferred large-scale work, such as his Monument to the Resistance of 1870-71 in Montauban and the high-relief friezes on the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

André Lhote (b. 1885). He belonged to the group of Cubist painters around Picasso who did much to change the face of art. In fact, Lhote, like the others, planned the geometric structure of his painting and then superimposed the subject on it. He had a strong sense of color and used few details. Lhote was militarized in World War I and took up painting again after that, but he never changed his own style, even when it had outlived its influence.

Diego Rivera (1886-1957). The Mexican government sponsored Rivera and two other painters to create murals concerning peasant life, Mexican history, and contemporary social protest. He worked in the United States as well, and his politically oriented murals displeased some, but he did inspire a revival of mural painting in this country. He is known as one of the most important and controversial painters of the 1930s.

Description of the Mural

The two large faces are the first things that strike a visitor about the Fort Thomas mural, and the next noticeable fact is the darkness of the colors. The mural seems larger than it is because it has no frame but extends from wall to wall over the Postmaster's door. Centrally located are bust-length views of General Thomas and General Sheridan, flanked by small active scenes.

Who are these men who are so prominently featured here? The figure on the left is General George H. Thomas (1816-1870) for whom the fort was named, as well as the town which grew up around it. He taught at West Point and married a New Yorker.

Thomas was known in his lifetime as "The Rock of Chickamauga" because of his steadfastness in that Tennessee battle in 1863 when others wavered or retreated. He was prominent throughout the war and saw much action in Kentucky, distinguishing himself at the Battle of Perryville, 1862. He and General Philip Sheridan fought side by side at Perryville, as well as at the Battle of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where Sheridan won his second star. Before this, Sheridan had effectively defended Louisville against the Confederate army.

Their friendship was forged even earlier when both played key roles in the Battle of Chattanooga, storming Missionary Ridge to break the rebel line. After the war, Sheridan was named Chief of Staff of the Army, and Thomas

was appointed military governor of Kentucky and Tennessee. Thomas was known to be reserved and controlled. He had been born in Virginia but remained loyal to the Union, and his family never forgave him.³

Thomas, on the left in the mural, is a tall, heavy man with medium brown hair and beard, who gazes outward with a calm and almost visionary expression. Sheridan is seen in three-quarter profile, as he turns intently toward Thomas. Sheridan is shorter, slimmer, with a narrow face, very dark hair and eyebrows, and a drooping moustache. Each general holds an end of a scroll, undoubtedly a battle plan. Each is dressed in uniform of dark Union blue and wears a major general's two stars.

Behind them rises a rather flat, smooth hill in blended tones of blue, almost as dark as the uniforms. It gives the effect of a flattened arch, above which can be seen a wispy white sky, deepening to a menacing cobalt-gray as it rises.

At left, and set back from the picture plane, stands a gnarled and dead tree with truncated branches. Its bark is well rendered in twisting lines of varied browns and sepia. The picturesque blasted tree is a time-worn device, both in painting and literature. It was found useful to Caspar David Friedrich, Joseph Mallord Turner, and the whole Hudson River School. Here it partly obscures a scene of battle and probably acts as a symbol of the equally blasted hopes for peace that preceded the Civil War.

³ The greater part of the material on the generals is from Stewart Sifakis, Who Was Who in the Civil War (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1988).

On the left side of the mural, small figures of men marching forward through tall clumps of grass can be seen from the back, their rifles shouldered and backpacks in place. This is a Confederate unit marching up the hill in rows, the puffs of smoke ahead indicating the location of the front lines. Down the hill charge barely visible Union soldiers, also firing. These soldiers are not differentiated in any way as they move forward like automatons.

On the right of the generals is a scene of Fort Thomas itself at the time the mural was painted. The building we see is a multi-storied red brick with dark gray roofs and a white two-story porch across its front. At the far end is a large square water tower in lighter gray, evidently of stone, and which became a symbol of the fort. Several ranks of soldiers in various shades of khaki are marching toward this building. Larger than those on the left, they also hold rifles and wear backpacks, and the leader carries a waving American flag. However, the helmets are different because these are G.I. Joes of World War II who are training at the fort. Curving around the long hill at right is the gray Ohio river and across from it are rows of Army tanks.

Style, Technique and Maintenance

Lucienne Bloch found the wall in good condition. She

sent a sample of her duck canvas, apologizing for its appearance, explaining it had been chewed and dragged on the floor by her baby.⁴

We do know she used casein tempera paint on this canvas, and tempera is a difficult and demanding medium. Her method of working was to cover the entire surface with a pale wash of the colors. Then she built up from that basis, from the upper left hand corner and worked down as in fresco, finishing a certain area each day.⁵

Bloch was proficient in several media, including true fresco, which is also notoriously difficult. She has here a fine command of her colors, which are shaded by use of darker tones of the same color, and her brush strokes are clearly visible in most areas.

Bloch's use of large figures here is not surprising when the influence of her artistic mentors is considered. Her initial ambition to be a sculptor is in itself indicative of a preference for monumental work. The fact that she studied in France with Antoine Bourdelle, an apprentice to Rodin, gave impetus to this ambition. Bourdelle created a number of busts, and he preferred large-scale work.

When Bloch turned to painting, this tendency to large human figures must surely have been reinforced by her work as assistant to the Mexican artist Diego Rivera. Almost all

⁴ Bloch to Section, 13 April 1942, NA, SL.

⁵ Bloch to Section, March 1942, NA, TD.

his murals contain depictions of outsize humans in crowded spaces.

It is more difficult to see any influence of André Lhote in this Fort Thomas mural. He is noted for his angular, Cubist-style work which showed an extensive use of planes. The Section was not receptive to this early twentieth-century abstract style, which may be one reason it was not used here. But Bloch herself did not appear to have absorbed it, since her other works are also basically realistic. Lhote is quoted as having said his formula was "romantic inspiration and classical technique."⁶ Perhaps Bloch's work can be viewed in this light.

The small scenes on the sides are of a type seldom seen. The original inspiration was in Byzantine art, which was adapted in the West in works such as Bonaventura Berlinghieri's Saint Francis Altarpiece (1235) which features vignettes of Saint Francis's life along the sides of the painting. Bloch became interested in fresco after visiting San Marco monastery in Florence, and it was perhaps there that she encountered such arrangements.

There seems to be an obvious influence closer to home and to the decade--Grant Wood. The frontal figures with the large heads are similar to several of Wood's paintings, such as American Gothic (1930).

⁶ Bernard Dorival. André Lhote Retrospective 1907-1962: Peintures, Aquarelles, Dessins. Exhibition Catalogue. Paris: Artcurial, October-November, 1981.

Progression of the Project

The Treasury Section of Fine Arts selected Lucienne Bloch in 1941 for the Fort Thomas mural commission on the basis of her sketch for the Birmingham, Michigan, competition. She was to receive \$750 for this mural in the usual installments--\$150 when preliminary design was approved, \$250 when a full size cartoon was submitted, and \$350 when the mural was installed and approved. The work was to be completed within eight months time.⁷

Bloch was pleased but shortly wrote to request a delay in starting the project. She had just delivered an eight-pound boy, her third child, and it was not practical for her to visit Fort Thomas just yet. She found it heartbreaking to refuse the work, but hoped for another commission at a later date. Rowan, however, offered to give her extra time and to get in touch with the Postmaster to verify lighting and dimensions for her. (Rowan had three children of his own, which fact may have prompted some sympathy for Bloch.)

Again Bloch was pleased but kept asking intermittently for an assignment in her home town of Flint, Michigan. Rowan insisted there was no such opening.⁸

She wrote him saying her attempts to contact the Postmaster at Fort Thomas had been futile, and she then heard he was very ill and had turned the matter over to the

⁷ Rowan to Bloch, August 1941.

⁸ Various communications August to February, 1942 between Rowan and Bloch, NA, ASL.

Fort Thomas Women's Club for the selection of a subject. Bloch suggested about five subjects and they chose one showing General Sheridan selecting the site for Fort Thomas. She now had to do some reading up on this.⁹

It was then 1942 and Rowan replied that he was glad it was getting going, since there had been much discussion relative to terminating all projects not directly connected with the war effort. He told her he'd asked the Supervising Architect for his opinion of her sketch. The answer was that he liked the general idea well enough but weren't the big heads slightly exaggerated? And Rowan asked if Bloch thought that this criticism was legitimate.¹⁰ The sketch is not extant. (Copies of her sketch do seem to make the heads unduly prominent, but in the finished mural there are no harsh outlines, the use of color softens the effect, and the vignettes flanking the busts cause a blending of the whole).

Her only answer was that she had decided to change the subject and show General Thomas as Sheridan knew him during the period when both were commanding in the Civil War and to show a background of Civil War action. Her iconography was carefully planned, bringing out several connections between people, places and historical periods. "It seems to me more vital in these times of struggle and more appropriate to the present Fort Thomas, which is now a military reservation,

⁹ Bloch to Rowan, 9 February 1942, NA, SL.

¹⁰ Rowan to Bloch, 16 February 1942, NA, SL.

than a lot of formal 1887 clothes during a boring ceremony which the selection of a site probably was".

She continued by saying she wanted to show General Thomas in the mural also, "as it seems he has been sorely neglected, considering what a grand soldier and man he was (a fine facade, too). His weakness was to be modest, so I am showing him with Sheridan rather than alone, studying a war map with the colleague who was, twenty-five years later, to dedicate this fort in his memory."¹¹

In May she sent a color sketch, commenting that the soldiers' helmets were not quite correct because there was now a new type of helmet which she would look up and copy. She went on to say that she feels the connection between the two scenes can be explained in the words of Vice President Henry Wallace in a speech of 8 May 1942, which was not long after the United States entered the war and which she quoted:

"This is a fight between a slave world and a free world. Just as the United States in 1862 could not remain half slave and half free, so in 1942 the world must make its decision for a complete victory one way or the other."¹²

Two newspapers in the vicinity took very favorable notice of the new mural in their columns, as did The Cincinnati Enquirer of 23 August 1942. William A. Eimer,

¹¹ NA, ASL, Bloch to Rowan, 22 February 1942.

¹² Bloch to Rowan, 21 May 1942, NA, ASL.

the Fort Thomas Postmaster, wrote to the Section to inform them of these articles.¹³

There seems to have been a definite feeling of patriotic pride among the citizens because of this mural which belonged to them and which expressed not only their current dedication but a sense of satisfaction at being so much a part of military history through the years.

Fort Thomas and the community have always had a cordial social relationship which remains, and, since the fort is in an attractive setting, it is in use today as a popular tourist location.¹⁴

¹³ William A. Eimer, Postmaster to Section, 23 August 1942, NA, TSL.

¹⁴ Material on the fort was derived chiefly from Bogart, Charles H., The Military Post at Fort Thomas, Kentucky (Self-published and copyrighted, 1985.)

GREENVILLE POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 11

County: Muhlenberg

Artist: Allan Gould

Title: Source of Power

Date: 1940

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 12' W x 4' H

The Artist

Allan Gould was born in New York City on June 17, 1908. After graduating from Dartmouth College, he attended the Art Students League, studying with Homer Boss, John Steuart Curry, and Kernan Nicolaides. He continued painting while working as a furniture and industrial designer, and the painting slowly became a larger part of his artistic output. He married another painter, Alice Dinneen, and at the time he was working on the Greenville mural, she was painting a mural for the Post Office in Corbin, Kentucky. Mr. Gould's other work for the Section includes a mural for the Post Office in Roxboro, North Carolina, Tobacco Harvest, which depicts workers in a field.

His Teachers

Homer Boss (b. 1882).

The Art Students League in New York City was where Gould attended Boss's classes and learned art in a formal setting. Boss was an well-known artist at the time, having exhibited at the Armory Show of 1913. His art education began in Blandford, Maryland, and he went on to study with Robert Henri of "The Eight", and with Thomas Anschutz, one of his followers. In 1912, when he retired from the Art Students League, Henri turned his school over to Boss, who began to take a new direction. He taught the Cubist and Futurist styles he had seen at the Armory Show, and Henri severed his connection with the school.

John Steuart Curry (1897-1946)

Curry was one of the three most important members of the Regionalists, not a group but individual painters who wished to show Americans of what they had to be proud. There was nothing sentimental about the work of any of them. Curry concentrated on Kansas farm scenes and local events, such as a baptism. He makes everyday life look dramatic. He often shows scenes from a distance, such as in his depiction of a tornado heading toward a Kansas farm. In general, the Regionalists tried to apply their vision of some of the new European styles to their native subjects.¹

¹ For information on Kimon Nicolaides, see the Corbin Post Office entry.

Description of the Mural

Mr. Gould was modest in his own description for the Section. He states,

"There is really very little data concerning my mural design for Greenville, Ky. P. O. Greenville is a mining town and the design is made up of appropriate architectural material, gathered from local mines. It is called "Source of Power" - (not too good a title but I could think up no better). There are various sheds and buildings, and a number of coal cars that constitute the entire composition."²

The Section of Fine Arts itself issued a long statement concerning the mural which included more description and emphasized the fact that the welfare and prosperity of much of America rests on the strength of the coal industry.³

The mural, a long horizontal rectangle, is actually rather difficult to see. Placed at the top of the wall over the Postmaster's door on the left side of the lobby, which is the dimmest spot, and painted in dark colors, it requires careful scrutiny.

The scene is indeed a coal mining operation but no particular one. Gould has created a composite of elements from four different mines in Greenville at the time, the Greenville Mine being one of them. Another was the Old Black Diamond Mine, about which Merle Travis wrote his

² NA, ALS, Allan Gould to Forbes Watson, Special Assistant to the Chief, Section of Fine Arts, Federal Works Agency, 5 December 1939.

³ NA, D, Information sheet on Greenville mural by Section of Fine Arts, n.d.

well-known work song, Sixteen Tons.⁴ The artist has combined buildings and objects from the various sites to make a convincing scene. At right is a long building with windows, a higher wing at its end, and three tall thin smoke stacks emitting black smoke which seems to be quickly dispersing. The smoke stacks appear to be tethered to their neighboring buildings by many thin wires. In front are other buildings, the nearest being a small corrugated iron one.

At the center is an oddly shaped building with a protrusion on one side and a slanting roof on one end. This is the tipple, which is unloading coal into a series of railroad bunker cars below by means of a long chute which descends from a small high shed at far left. Among the other buildings and machines is a rather unstable-looking building with a small chimney in the left foreground, where the miners took their rest breaks.⁵

It is almost unsuitable to speak of color here; the whole work is in various tones of blacks and grays, which is perfectly appropriate to the industry. They range from the stark black of the smokestacks to the whitish-grey of the clouds. The tipple is emphasized not only by location but by its two tones of gray.

There are touches of actual color in the dull red brick of the side of a pilastered building in the middle distance at right, a very pale red in the side of the chute facing

⁴

Postmaster Olin Revelette. Greenville, July 1997.

the viewer, and, in a riotous outburst from the artistic soul, a tiny bright red door.

None of this is depressing, however, because it is not, if considered carefully, very realistic. It is interesting to compare it to Gould's preliminary sketch of one mine, his first intention. The sketch is very nearly symmetrical and gives the effect of a station that is part of a toy train set. His final composition is totally different, with the high tipple at center, but at an angle, creating a sense of direction. The building in front of it is set at an opposite angle, setting up an opposition of forces, and the long diagonal of the chute cuts across most of the canvas, making a dynamic focus for the viewer's eye. The whole work is composed of verticals and horizontals of great strength, with a few well-placed intersecting or overlying diagonal segments. The effect is immediate, but it takes some time to realize how cleverly Gould has planned that effect.

In fact, the objects in this painting are so highly stylized, they cause the work to verge on abstraction, more so than any other in Kentucky. Very likely, the teaching of Homer Boss along Cubist lines caused Gould to slant his work in that direction. As noted in Part One, the Section took a dim view of abstract work, but they must have found this mural within their approved bounds.

Style, Technique and Maintenance

Even more than his teachers, the Precisionists seem to have been a major influence on Gould's work. The best known of this group were Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler. Demuth (1897-1946) had studied in Europe and with Thomas Anschutz and at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Back home, it was some time before he adopted Cubist principles. Both these artists were fascinated by machinery and industrial plants. Demuth was inclined to monumental forms, as in his best-known work, My Egypt (1927). It is a painting of a grain silo, looming up like an Egyptian temple. Demuth uses soft, pale colors on the work, which makes the whole painting seem cold. Diagonal lines cross the canvas strongly, much like the Futurists' "lines of force." His goal, apparently, was to make patterns out of reality.

Charles Sheeler was a photographer, and the static and classical nature of his paintings reflects this fact. Sheeler was more meticulous, occasionally including details. There is great stillness in the work of both. In all the barns and factories nothing is ever happening. There is seldom a human figure, and the effect can be melancholy. Sheeler painted a number of works displaying industrial sites and factories in Detroit in the early 1930s. He seemed to feel there was a pattern already existing, and he could show beauty of form in functional objects.

The painter of the Greenville mural, Allan Gould, stated that the work was oil on canvas, of which he sent a sample for the Section's approval. He painted directly on it, modeling each part fully and then repainted when dry. He was trying to obtain rich paint body but without heavy impasto.

He added that his information on the subject came from the local citizens and that he has tried to keep the feeling of his first sketch; also that Miss Dinneen's Corbin in sketch would be sent soon.⁵ Rowan, pleased for once, had no suggestions.

Progression of the Project

Like many other artists, Gould was contacted by the Section on 21 December 1938 and offered the commission on the basis of earlier work. It was to be finished within a year for \$670.⁶

Rowan was surprised that Gould accepted, since he was then teaching in California, but Gould was coming home to summer in the East and would stop in Greenville to talk to the citizens.⁷ Rowan was happy to hear this, as he said he

⁵ NA, ALS, Gould to Rowan, 11 April 1939.

⁶ NA, ALS, Rowan to Gould, 21 December 1938.

⁷ NA, ALS, Gould to Rowan, 11 April 1939.

had found that the local people greatly preferred seeing local references in their murals.⁸

There were a number of government agencies involved in these projects and not all were enthralled by the idea of murals; some held them in fairly low esteem. This is borne out by an inquiry from W. E. Reynolds, Commissioner of Public Buildings of the Federal Works Agency to the Acting Fourth Assistant Postmaster General, F. J. Buckley, in which he inquired whether the mural would in any way interfere with the bulletin boards then in place. He was assured that they would not.⁹ This concern of the government with trivial matters is typical of most of these projects and certainly caused delays in the production of the art.

In reply to Forbes Watson, who wanted to know what the public reaction was, both in Greenville and Corbin, Gould stated that the chief opinion was --"mighty pretty", but a bit baffling to Corbin. "In Greenville, there was a little more interest evinced because there was a somewhat more alert group of individuals who had more pride in their town and their new building."¹⁰

The Greenville Postmaster, R. E. Wallace, said the mural was installed all right as far as he could tell, and

⁸ NA, ASL, Rowan to Gould, 20 April 1939.

⁹ NA, Acting Assistant Postmaster General F. J. Buckley to W. E. Reynolds, Commissioner of Public Buildings, Federal Works Agency, and reply, n.d.

¹⁰ NA, Gould to Watson and Rowan, 14 January 1939.

there had been considerable comment about it, most of it favorable, but not any newspaper articles as yet.¹¹

Greenville was one of those locations where a hanging lamp partially obscured a mural, and a letter from F. M. Cook, assistant Fiscal Manager, to the Postmaster authorized him to have the lamp raised, if the expenditure did not exceed fifteen dollars.¹²

Postmaster Wallace replied that he has had all the lobby lights raised fifteen inches by his custodial force for five cents, but he was not charging the Section.¹³ This gracious gesture didn't dispel all problems, however, but created more red tape, as the original authorization had to be cancelled.

¹¹ NA, SL, Postmaster R. E. Wallace, Greenville, to Rowan, 8 February 1940.

¹² NA, SL, F. M Cook, Assistant Fiscal Manager to Postmaster Wallace, 1 April 1940.

¹³ NA, SL, Postmaster R. E. Wallace to F. M. Cook, 11 April 1940.

THE HARDINBURG POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 12

County: Breckinridge

Artist: Nathaniel Koffman

Title: Kentucky Homestead

Date: 1942

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 10'10" W x 4'4" H

The Artist

Nathaniel Koffman is a difficult artist to trace. He and his work seem to have been entirely forgotten. A few facts can be found, however. Koffman was born 28 September 1910 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He attended a school of industrial art and then the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The Barnes Foundation offered him a scholarship. After this ended, he received his first important commission which was to paint three murals at the Philadelphia Zoological Gardens in 1939. The next commission was this post office mural for Hardinburg, Kentucky.

During World War II, he worked in a munitions plant at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In 1946 he worked his way to South

America on a freighter. The scenes he saw on that continent stimulated his painting, and an exhibition of his work was held in Brazil. Two years later he won a fellowship from the MacDowell Colony, which was a renowned artists' colony, and his residence there coincided with those of Aaron Copland, Martha Graham, and Leonard Bernstein. From then on, after a few small exhibitions, he seems to have dropped out of sight, and his work was never widely known.

Description of the Mural

This painting is an outdoor scene, with activity taking place in front of a barn on the left and a house on the right. Reading left to right, it shows two metal barrels cropped at the left margin. The barn has two windows on the visible side and a silo to right of it. It also has an open doorway through which the viewer can see rows of drying tobacco. In front of it there is a platform on which stands a man in blue overalls, cap, and white shirt. He is bending to receive a stick with leaves hanging from it which another man on the ground is offering him. This man has brown hair, brown trousers, and blue shirt. Behind him there are several rows of tobacco lying on the ground ready to be handed up and also a few on the platform floor, all in green and yellow colors.

Moving to the right a bit, we see a barn with two windows and attached shed in the middle distance. Under the

shed stands a saddled brown horse, being led by a rather indistinct man dressed in blue.

Curiously, this work has no central focus. The action is all to extreme left and right. The middle distance shows a log fence, angled toward the picture plane, and two full trees, slanted left, as if windblown. They stand in high grass which partly obscures a compact little building which may be a school.

At right stands a small house with a porch on which action is taking place. Seated on the porch floor at the left side is a boy in blue overalls and straw hat. A pail is at his feet and he is drinking from a gray cup as he watches the men working. His gaze is actually the only factor which ties the two sides of the mural together. To the boy's right is a porch on which sits a rather elderly man in a fragile-looking wooden chair. He wears a white shirt and dark trousers. He holds himself rigidly and clasps the arms of the chair, as if for support, while he looks soberly, if not critically, to his left where two women are folding a quilt.

The woman closest to the man in the chair has dark hair and a red-orange dress. The woman holding the opposite end of the quilt is seen from the back. She is extremely tall and thin and wears a yellow dress, heavily streaked with red-orange and blue. The quilt itself has a plain backing but the front of it shows a pattern of a pale red and blue with a border.

At far right, behind the women, a brown dog, strongly outlined in black, is in repose. Behind this group, the house front is seen, with a widely framed door and two windows. Climbing vines cover the left side of these windows. The house comprises most of the right background at the top, except for a patch of blue-gray sky above the trees. The general impression is that of hard-working family members at their daily tasks.

The lack of a focal point in the center gives the appearance of dividing the scene into two groups--the men at the left engaged in heavy farm work and the women apparently having just completed stitching a quilt which the old man regards impassively. This obvious distinction between men's and women's work may not have been deliberate. Koffman may only have recorded what he saw.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

Koffman's biography gives no names of any individual teachers who may have guided him. We do know, however, that he had an excellent education in classical art, and it is entirely possible that the women on the porch, especially the woman in yellow and seen from the back, are derived from Renaissance Mannerism, or *la maniera*. Artists such as Pontormo, Rosso, and others featured elongated figures. Parmagianino's Madonna with the Long Neck (1535) shows an impossibly tall and thin woman who, nevertheless, seems completely self-possessed. It was probably Michelangelo who

began this trend with his highly exaggerated figures, both in sculpture and painting. There is little doubt that El Greco brought the idea of elongation to its highest point in most of his works, especially in The Burial of Count Orgaz (1586). Except for this possibility, the technique here seems basically illustrative.

This painting gives a rather dark effect, is somewhat difficult to see, and there is a predominance of blue throughout. The viewer is at a disadvantage here because of the lack of a central character; his attention is constantly pulled to left or right. The painting is unframed but set into the wall and surrounded by a wide white mat, reaching from wall to wall.

The mural is painted in oil on canvas and attached to a wall which was roughened to hold it. The artist stated that he carried work as far as possible in thin transparent glazes. He used some opaque tones to keep things from being too varied in spatial dimensions. He liked to build up light areas so that in drying, the tones become more luminous; otherwise, too much impasto tends to become brittle, in his opinion. He painted the aforesaid three murals for the Philadelphia Zoological Gardens in this manner.¹

Progression of the Project

Nathaniel Koffman in Philadelphia received a letter

¹ Information form filled out by artist, n.d., NA.

from Edward Rowan inviting him to submit a sketch for this location on the basis of his work in another competition. It should be done in eight months and he would be paid \$750.²

This commission was greatly appreciated by Koffman. He visited Hardinsburg and found the Postmaster, Mr. Norton, to be friendly and helpful. He introduced the artist to farm and town people, especially those with interesting occupations. Koffman observed the process of tobacco stripping, sorting of different grades of leaves, and also gathered information from the county agent. He was captivated by the work done for quilting studios by farm women; he found it interesting and beautiful. He wrote that he tried to get much of this in his sketches but found the space to be rather limited for it all.³

He added that he had to concentrate on tobacco processing, since Louisville, the nearest large town, was so important a market center. He explained that the figure on the left is placing the leaves to dry on long sticks. The two women at right are folding a finished quilted spread, one done for marketing and mailing throughout the country. A large part of the hand work was done in Hardinsburg. "I believe I've covered the points of interest to the people themselves. In these times I felt the farm element to be

² Rowan to Koffman, 29 September 1941, NA, STL.

³ Koffman to Rowan 9 January 1941, NA, SL.

the one of greatest importance to the country."⁴ In 1942 Breckenridge County was very rural and some of the residents lived in real poverty.

Rowan replied that it was all very gratifying and the artist had depicted vital subjects. However, these subjects were not yet coordinated in a satisfactory composition. The quality of the sketch was that of a studio manufactured product. The scenes were too arbitrarily set up with a lack of convincing rhythm in the design, and the scale of the figures was uncertain. He urged experiment with different arrangements. Koffman sent two new sketches, one of tobacco only, the other a combination, which Rowan preferred.⁵

Rowan felt there was not much conviction in the center horse. (Lack of conviction was the worst possible fault in Rowan's opinion.) The distant horizon was somewhat empty and might be better correlated with the right and left by trees and more verdant tones.

Additionally, the female on the right seemed unduly elongated; in fact, more conviction was needed in all the figures. "There is a quality of 'Tobacco Road' in the farm house scene which should be avoided. The floor of the porch is in need of restudy and the upper part of the building beyond the man and horse is unconvincing...."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rowan to Koffman 15 January 1942; Koffman to Rowan 4 February 1942, NA, SL., Rowan to Koffman 21 May 1942.

In the documentary photographs taken for the Farm security Administration by Walker Evans and others, the "Tobacco Road" effect is much more prominent. The purpose of the photographs was to show poor rural conditions. The murals, on the other hand, were meant to be optimistic and inspirational, and they steered away from depictions of extreme poverty, ill health, and unemployment.

Rowan went on to say that the horse and figure on wagon were weakly drawn and even the chair carried no conviction. There should be some relationship between the man on the platform and the man reaching up with the tobacco as if they were talking. The work was still too consciously a studio arrangement and he felt Koffman could improve it.

These criticisms appear valid. The horse in the first sketch the artist sent is poorly drawn and hides the man supposed to be leading him. The middle distance to which Rowan refers originally showed a fence enclosing a bare field with one scrawny tree, hardly a sight to draw the eye. These points were corrected, and the two men at the left repositioned to indicate more interaction.

It is interesting to see the change in the farmhouse in the finished version. In the original sketch the facade is made of planks in a state of disrepair, and the porch floor looks warped and too weak for its purpose. The chair does not look solid, either. There are no vines growing up the wall, and the windows and door are enclosed in very thin frames. The artist improved all these defects and

eliminated an open screen door. The only suggestion Koffman seems to have ignored is the figure of the woman farthest right. In the final version, she looks as tall, thin, and awkward as ever.

The mural was not finished on time because Koffman developed a severe infection. However, the mural was installed on 2 November 1942, and the Postmaster wrote, "People like mural very much. All wish to express our thanks...Marshall H. Norton."⁶ More important, and somewhat surprisingly, Rowan, having seen the photograph of the installed work, found it to be excellent. "...completed with commendable vitality and charm."⁷

⁶ Postmaster Norton to Rowan, 2 November 1942, NA, SL.

⁷ Rowan to Koffman, 6 October 1942, NA, TSL.

THE HARRODSBURG POST OFFICE MURALS

Figure: 13. A Settler is Killed by Indians

Figure: 14. Spreading the News

Figure: 15. An Arrow Strikes as Prelude
to an Attack

Figure: 16. Seeking Safety in the School

Figure: 17. Boone Seeking a Truce

Figure: 18. The Return of Daniel Boone

County: Mercer

Artist: Orville Carroll

Date: 1941

Medium: Oil on canvas, backed by wood

Dimensions: 11' W x 3' H, each panel

The Artist

Orville Carroll was a local artist, born 18 February 1912 in New Albany, Indiana. He was a pupil of Fayette Barnum of the Art Center in Louisville. He was fortunate enough to attend the Art Students League school in New York City, where he studied under John Steuart Curry, Isobel Bishop, and John Sloan. He kept up with European trends and

incorporated touches of Impressionism in some of his works. His easel paintings were very popular, but it was as a muralist he made his mark. He completed murals in the Public Library and the Marine Hospital, both in Louisville, Kentucky, and at Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia.¹ For the Section he painted Post Office murals in Batesville, Indiana, and Osceola, Arkansas, as well as Harrodsburg.

He became a painter and illustrator for The Courier-Journal and Times, Louisville, Kentucky, and held a position on the newspaper staff from 1940 to 1946. He continued to create individual paintings unconnected to his newspaper work.

Carroll was the center of a controversy in 1966, when he won a prize of \$500 at an Indiana exhibition for a painting titled Hoosier Baroque. However, a woman from Indianapolis stated that it was identical to John Constable's Flatford Mill from a Lock on the Stour (1811). Carroll turned his prize over to a lawyer until the matter was settled. He admitted to Constable's influence, but claimed he only hoped to make a painting as good as Constable's and did not copy it.²

¹ Henrick Martin Mayer painted the history of Louisville in the Marine Hospital lobby and Carroll's murals were on another floor. Carroll's work is almost completely disintegrated.

² The Courier-Journal article, no author, 20 April, 1966.

Carroll's Teachers

Carroll was fortunate in studying with teachers who were respected artists in their own right.

Isobel Bishop

Bishop belonged to a 1930s school of realism which derived from Robert Henri's vision, but brought up to date. Her setting was New York, and her subject was often the people she saw on the streets. She had an affinity for the shopgirl and her daily life and was able to depict her as she was--almost attractive and usually trading comments with another girl, but both of them worn down by the daily dreariness and boredom of their office lives, and the lack of much that they would like to have and do because of the Depression, but making the best of it all. She seems to have understood this mood and expressed it in her painting methods which were soft and usually pastel in color, but her compositional values were based on the time-honored classic style.

John Steuart Curry Best known as one of the Midwestern Regionalists, painters who included Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. Curry specialized in landscapes of rural America, usually with some human interest, such as farmers rushing to bring in the hay before a threatening storm. His figures were usually small, emphasizing the vast scope of the landscape, and his color was often striking.

John Sloan Perhaps the best known and possibly the best technically of the group called "The Eight", headed by Robert Henri, and which was devoted to realism.³

Description of the Murals

There are six murals in the Harrodsburg Post Office. A study of their placement on the lobby walls leads to a conclusion that they are not hung in the proper order. There is one on the left wall, three in the center over the mail counter, one on the right wall, and one on the back side of this wall and not visible from the lobby. Here they will be arranged and described in an order which makes a more coherent story.

Number 1. A Settler is Killed by Indians. This scene takes place in a clearing in the woods. Central is a man, stretched on the ground, head toward viewer and arms spread out. He wears a yellow shirt and gray trousers. An arrow protrudes from his chest and he is obviously a victim of an Indian's bow. A settler kneels to the left, dressed in gray, and gesturing upward to a Long Hunter who holds his rifle to the side and looks down with concern. To the right of the man on the ground stands another Long Hunter in the usual buckskin suit and coonskin cap. He is in the act of cocking his "Kentucky" rifle, alert to any other possible attack.

³ Fuller information on John Sloan can be found in the entry on the Bowling Green mural. For more on John Steuart Curry, see the Greenville entry.

This central group contains the only figures. They are surrounded by landscape, as a blue river flows from the left foreground and winds out of sight, reappearing in the right middle distance. The rest of the landscape consists of hilly ground in varying shades of brown, dotted in a natural way with trees and dark green bushes. In the far distance stands a low range of pale blue mountain against a grey sky.

Number 2. Spreading the News. This is a scene of two women drawing water from the stream with gray buckets. They are located just to right of center. The stream itself is blue-green with scattered grey rocks. The woman on the right side of the stream, dressed in yellow blouse, white cap and pale green skirt with white highlights is bending over, engaged in her task, but the woman on the left is not. She, dressed in rose, with blue cap, is kneeling but has halted in her work to look up at a Long Hunter, dragging his rifle on the ground, as he looks down at her, apparently giving her the bad news. Another scout stands at his left, rifle over his shoulder and looking about for more signs of danger. He is at the moment bending over to observe something on the ground, perhaps footprints. This group is backed by a wall of long gray stones, piled in layers. It is probable they are placed there to form a rough dam, causing the water to be deeper. As in the first mural, the figures here are surrounded by landscape. The right foreground is dark green, the foliage surrounding a stump. Behind this, in the middle distance, a girl in blue is

approaching the stream. She holds on her shoulders a yoke with two baskets descending from it; no doubt she is coming for water.

The whole left side of the mural shows shadows and various natural objects in a landscape. All six of the murals are outdoor scenes, which makes for a certain harmony and connects the parts of the story.

Number 3. An Arrow Strikes as Prelude to an Attack.

This mural is more active, compositionally and figurally. As in the last one, the figures are placed all together, just to right of center. Farthest left is a woman in yellow dress, with a basket beside her which has a white cloth hanging from it. A child with black hair like her mother's clasps her arms around the mother's neck in fear, while a smaller girl in red crouches on the ground, hanging onto the first girl's skirt as if for protection. A Long Hunter stands in the midst of the group, holding his rifle and gesturing with both hands toward the left, as he looks back toward the remaining figures. These are a small girl in blue with bare feet, clutching the belt of an older girl in paler blue, both seen from the back, Behind them stand two settlers, presumably man and wife, she in red and he, a bearded man, in grey trousers and tan shirt and vest, holds a rifle.

Behind them in the middle distance is a small boy, not as clearly seen, with dark clothing and his hands before his face. Just to the left of the Long Hunter and partially

obscured by him, a woman in blue is kneeling, her hands clasped before her face, as if in prayer or fear. The reason for the agitation is clear and the scout's arms both point to it. In the middle of the roadway at left a long Indian arrow has pierced the soil and is standing upright. Behind this tableau is the stockade, which consists of seven wooden buildings. The road is bordered with grassland, there is a tree stump to right, indicating where the wood came from, and in the right background are hills against a dark blue sky. Dark green shrubs border the road and almost encircle the figures.

Number 4. Seeking Safety in the School. Another darker and larger view of the stockade provides the background for this mural. There are several buildings right, one central, and a stockade fence to left. A small area of treetops and cloudy sky can be seen above it. The scene is inside the stockade, and the central and larger building is a schoolhouse. The most prominent figure, again to the right, is the teacher, with black hair, a brown blouse, blue skirt and white scalloped apron as well as white stockings and heavy, serviceable black shoes. Standing with her weight on one foot and a hand on her hip, she is ringing a metal bell. At far left, there is a door in the fence, and we can see Daniel Boone from the back, either looking out or leaving the fort, probably the latter. He carries his indispensable rifle. A small boy, in brown and blue, also seen from the back, watches him. In the

foreground, beside the boy, is seated a white dog with long ears and a fringed tail. The foreground throughout consists of various uneven patches of green and brown.

The central building, the school, is seen at an angle, showing side and front. A young blond boy in blue approaches the door, holding a small animal, probably a squirrel, by the tail. Next to the open door is a wooden paddle leaning against the building and marked with the letters A B C. A taller boy, all in brown, is entering the framed schoolhouse door with a rifle over his shoulder. Small groups of children stand to left and right of the teacher. On the left is a red-haired girl, about ten years old, seen from the back, wearing a gray dress, white stockings, red socks, and black shoes. She is holding a thin foliated branch--maybe material for a hickory stick? Directly in front of her stands a younger boy in gray shirt and blue pants, with his hands clasped behind his back. To the right of the teacher is another small group. A young boy in blue pants, red shirt and brown cap is standing in front of a taller girl. She has brown hair in pigtails and a mild expression. Her dress is pale orange with a white collar, and she holds a piece of blue material over her arm, perhaps a shawl. Another white dog stands at her feet.

One logically assumes that the teacher is summoning the children to make sure they are all present and safe within the fort. Once again, the focus is just to the right of

center and the landscape colors also the same, making a connecting link.

Number 5. Daniel Boone Seeking a Truce. This panel is the most thinly populated of all and consists mostly of ten large, leaning trees on a bare, brown piece of land which slopes downward to the right. On this land, and seen from the side, are two men, a bit larger than usual, the one in front dressed in a sienna suit and tan leggings, and a black brimmed hat. He carries a pack on his back and holds a rifle with its butt trailing on the ground. The man behind may be Daniel Boone, wearing a buckskin coat in tan, with sienna leggings, a red backpack, coonskin cap, and holding his rifle upright. Both men have powder horns at their belts.

Each man has an arm outstretched in front of him in a friendly gesture, and they appear to be hailing two Indian men who, with their backs toward the picture plane, are about to disappear around the back of the sloping hill. The foremost one is holding an unidentifiable object and the other a bow. Both are dark-skinned, wearing long red loin cloths front and back and have shaved heads with scalp locks, one having two red feathers in his. There is good definition of muscles for such small figures. The right side of the mural is darker than the left, and there is a hilly section of green in the distance. One of the buildings of Fort Harrod is just visible, indicating that all four men are at no great distance from it.

Number 6. The Return of Daniel Boone. Once again the settlers feel free to emerge from the safety of the fort. The figures are spread across the width of the mural. At far left is a dark horse carrying a barely distinguishable rider, almost enclosed by dark green shrubs. Ahead of him, larger and more clearly delineated, Daniel Boone, in brown, rides a tan horse and guides a white horse with bridle and saddle pack. Boone is waving his hand in greeting, as a white dog excitedly welcomes him.

Five figures watch his approach from the right side. The first is a man in a long red coat, blue trousers and black hat, who is waving toward Daniel, while he turns his head to speak to a younger man in grayish buckskin who looks as if he were about to run out and greet Daniel more personally. Next another waving man, rather tall, with gray tunic and black trousers. Lastly a woman with dark hair in a pigtail, wearing a white blouse and long blue skirt and pointing toward Boone, as she bends to direct the attention of a little blond boy in red.

In the middle distance and serving as background for the figures is the stockade fence, angled toward the right foreground, with a large building at the far end. Just behind the bending woman, there is a break in the fence where the door is left wide open. This open door indicates their belief that safety is now assured. A cloudy sky and the customary stretches of ground in green and brown complete the mural.

A logical interpretation of this sequence of murals is the finding of the man slain by an arrow, the news brought to the women near the water, probably urging them to take shelter in the fort, then the group gathered fearfully about Boone, as he points to the arrow near them, indicating that an attack may be imminent. The schoolhouse scene shows the same emotions in another setting, as Daniel leaves to take charge of the situation. The penultimate scene is the pivotal one, and the two men's figures are larger and more significant. There is little doubt that they are not pursuing the Indians but trying to make a friendly agreement. The last scene makes it clear that they have succeeded (at least temporarily) and are being welcomed with relief and joy. Carroll intended a history of this frontier town, which lays claim to being the first settlement in Kentucky, and he has produced it here. At the time this incident took place, some people lived in the stockade and others on farms nearby. The scenes Carroll portrays were no doubt fairly common, since Indian attacks were frequent, and at least once, Fort Harrod was burned to the ground.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

The scenes, all together, despite the theme, present an almost idyllic appearance. This impression is partly due to the attractive, peaceful-looking settings, and to Carroll's

portrayal of human figures. They suggest some works of Daumier, being rather small and heavily contoured, and there is only a minimum of shadowing, giving them all a rather flat effect, perhaps suitable to a tale of the past and certainly fitting for an illustrative project. Each panel is framed in a wide white border, and there is a small square of white wood in each corner.

Some of the murals are fairly dark while others have colors that can be called pastel. This effect may have been intended by Carroll, or the murals may have faded or become coated with pollution. Recently, an attempt was made to clean them, but at the first touch, the canvas began disintegrating. The mural chosen to be cleaned first still shows small patches of white where the picture has disappeared. The attempt at cleaning was abandoned.

Progression of the Project

Edward Rowan of the Section received a letter from Congressman Virgil Chapman of Kentucky asking for murals for the Harrodsburg Post Office. Miss Adele Brandeis suggested Orville Carroll, who had done some work for the Treasury's TRAP program and was now employed on the WPA/FAP.⁴ She remarked that he had painted two murals for TRAP already,

⁴ Adele Brandeis was a niece of Supreme Court Justice Louis E. Brandeis, and the daughter of the Justice's brother Alfred. She was interested and active in every branch of the government's art programs, and judging by her letters, had a fine sense of humor. At the time of the Harrodsburg

and had made intensive study of the pioneer history of Kentucky in connection with his first mural for PWAP and could use his sketches.⁵

When dealing with more than one program, there was always a good deal of red tape involved, which relates to this paper only peripherally. At any rate Mr. Simon said his office had no reservations and endorsed Mr. Carroll.⁶ Louis Simon was the Supervising Architect of the United States Treasury and the designer of all post offices during this period. Carroll sent six sketches, and Mr. C. J. Peoples approved these, but insisted the Section approve the designs.⁷

Rowan approved the sketches and wrote Carroll that he would like to be kept informed. But a suggestion: "it is disturbing to me to have a line of small plants continuing the quite definite line of the tree trunk in the lower left hand section. It can easily be taken care of. Spatial relations of figures and architecture quite convincing."⁸ (He neglected to mention which panel he was discussing.)

murals, she was local director of the WPA/FAP program.

⁵ Thomas C. Parker of WPA/FAP to Rowan, 30 March 1938, NA, TSL.

⁶ Louis Simon, Director of Procurement and Supervising Architect, to Congressman Virgil Chapman, 11 April 1938, NA, TSL.

⁷ Mr. C. J. Peoples of the Section to Thomas C. Parker, Assistant Director of WPA/FAP, n.d., NA, TSL.

⁸ Rowan to Carroll, 30 January 1939, NA, TSL.

Carroll wrote a long letter to Rowan in return, saying the Harrodsburg Womans Club had donated seventy dollars for expenses and he had spent half of that. He knew the work was going slowly, but he was working frantically on illustrations for the WPA Kentucky Guide Book--fifty-two illustrations, others for the Writers Project, as well as posters for the Community Chest. So, he was dismissed from WPA/FAP because he was apparently making too much money and not in dire need. He was not happy about this, since he needed a job, with a baby on the way. He asked for ample time to decently finish the last panel and install them all without such feverish haste.⁹

Rowan was sympathetic, and said he would write to the Women's Club and to Miss Brandeis and he was confident they would understand.¹⁰ It seems that they did.

The Harrodsburg Post Office was built as early as 1932 and designed by William A. Wetmore. "It was far fancier than most structures built between 1932 and 1940, thanks largely to the fact that it was designed and constructed before the full reality of the nation's economic woes set in."¹¹

⁹ Carroll to Rowan, 14 October 1939, NA, SL.

¹⁰ Rowan to Carroll, 20 October 1939, NA, TSL.

¹¹ Bruns, 164.

The Postmasters over the years seem to have been active and innovative. They appear to have determined to make Mercer County the banner county in sending out airmail. They produced much promotional literature on this subject. The first American flown letter known to be in existence is addressed to a former resident of Harrodsburg and was flown from Gallatin, Tennessee in a balloon in 1877. In 1951, however, Harrodsburg was still waiting for an airport and actual air mail.¹²

Note: A marker on the Post Office grounds cites Daniel Boone and Michael Stoner as the first express messengers to the West, sent by Lord Dunmore in 1774. The eight hundred miles from Virginia required sixty-two days.

The Harrodsburg Post Office was established 1794 under the administration of George Washington.

¹²

Informational material from the National Archives, n.d.

THE HICKMAN POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 19

County: Fulton

Artist: William Bunn

Title: Mississippi Packets

Date: 1940

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Dimensions: 12' W x 4'6" H

The Artist

William E. L. Bunn began his career in an unusual way. He was born in Muscatine, Iowa, May 29, 1910. After graduating from the University of Iowa, he made a tour with a bicycle and trailer equipped with a Punch and Judy puppet theater. In this way he gained a first-hand working knowledge of the life and people in rural Iowa and Missouri. On his way he left a trail of portrait drawings of farmers in whose pastures he camped, all along the thousand miles he covered.

After this unusual tour, he returned to the University of Iowa to study art and theatre and spent two years working as assistant to Grant Wood. He was granted Rockefeller,

Carnegie, and Tiffany fellowships at various times. For the section he also painted post office murals in Hamburg, Iowa, Minden, Nebraska, and Dubuque, Iowa. Later in life he became an industrial designer for the Schaeffer Pen Company, Fort Madison, Iowa.

No doubt his proudest achievement was this Hickman mural. In 1939 the Section held a nationwide competition, "The Forty-Eight State Competition," through which it proposed to choose one mural to represent each state. Any artist in the country could submit a design for any state. William Bunn and his Hickman mural were chosen to represent Kentucky. A small picture of each of the forty-eight murals appeared in Life magazine, identified by a small caption. Hickman's read, "William Bunn has struck a popular note with his mural of Mississippi "packers," including the famous J.M.White"¹

His Teacher

Wood himself (1892-1942) studied Design at the University of Iowa and at the Julian Academy in Paris, France. He founded the Stone City Art School in Iowa, was WPA/FAP director for Iowa, and illustrated several novels.

This Hickman mural is unlike any works for which Wood is noted, since it shows none of the obvious subjects,

¹ Life, 4 December, 1939, 12-13.

techniques, and trademarks of Bunn's mentor. It lacks the human element and Wood's keen appraisal of character.

There is present, however, the quietness and the lack of movement. More significant, the mural reflects a strong sense of Wood's meticulousness which Wood had derived from a close study of fifteenth-century German and Flemish painting.²

Other possible influences on Bunn's work include George Caleb Bingham's river scenes which were still popular and often included bright sunlight on a river.

Also, it is likely that Bunn, as an artist, was familiar with the Luminists, the small group on the eastern shore of the United States around the 1860s. In effect, these painters carried on the work of the Hudson River School, but in their own idiom.

Their main interest was in the depiction of light, and seascapes were the specialty of some of these painters. Bunn's work bears a distinct resemblance to Martin J. Heade's in the solid representation of vessels and the accuracy of detail, but without Heade's sense of drama which is so clear in his Approaching Storm: Beach near Newport (1860) with its thunder clouds and eerie light.

This mural of Bunn's resembles more closely the seascapes of John F. Kensett in the sense of stillness in the air, the calm of the water, and the absence of any human

² Beckh, "Tax Payers' Murals, (diss.), 172.

activity. In Kensett's The Shrewsbury River (1859), there are additional resemblances to Bunn's work: the horizontal format, the placid water with sailboats, the reflections, and the almost identical pale blue used for both the sky and the river.

Description of the Mural

Because this mural's reproduction was seen across the nation and thus was known to more than a few citizens of a town on the very western edge of Kentucky, it is worth noting in full Mr. Bunn's account of it in a letter to Forbes Watson:

During the 'Golden Age' of travel on the Mississippi, the pinnacle of steamboat perfection was represented in the famous "J. M. White II". This handsome craft was finished and put into the lower river service in 1878. She was by far the most popular, fastest, and most luxurious boat of her time. Built at a cost three times that of ordinary boats, she was 321 feet long, had 10 boilers, two engines of 43 inches by 11 feet stroke, and water wheels 45 feet in diameter.

There were separate decks, state room section, dining salons, bars and lounges for both the white and negro trade. The boiler deck could accomodate [sic]immense quantities of freight. The "J. M. White II" is unsurpassed in steamboat evolution.

Following the "J. M. White II" in river lore the Harris brothers stand out uniquely as a family of river men. Captain Smith Harris operated several boats in his time, but the most beloved of his crafts was the "Gray Eagle." Compared to the "J. M. White II" she was small but still good sized for upper river traffic. She earned her way because of innate qualities of speed and maneuverability together with the wise and frequently amazing management of Captain Smith Harris.

In the last third of a century almost all freight and passenger traffic has moved by rail. Very recently, however, river packet service for passenger trade has been offered. Barge line shipping has been available for several years already. Among the very few boats that have continued to offer service on the Mississippi [sic] and Ohio Rivers are the sternwheeler "Gray Eagle" and the trim little sidewheeler "City of St. Louis." Passage can again be booked for cruises on these as well as similar other boats from many towns on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers.

It is the fervent prayer of river men that the revival of passenger and the growing barge lines services evidences the long awaited rebirth of life and activity on the midland rivers. This mural tried to picture some of the romance of the early period in early river traffic.³

The Hickman mural was renovated in 1983 and makes a handsome appearance over the Postmaster's door with a wide white beveled border as a heading, matching the white walls below it. Prominent in the center of the mural is a side view of the "J. M White", while to the left is the "Gray Eagle" and in profile at right is the "City of St. Louis." The first two are sidewheelers, the most flamboyant of riverboat styles, and the other, at right, is a sternwheeler, both common types seen on the inland rivers. The present Postmaster, Floyd Cash, feels it might have been appropriate to include another boat called the "City of Hickman." Perhaps the others were better known and more recognizable.

The "J. M. White" is depicted in the most minute detail. It has four decks and a pilot house. The two diagonal planks at the bow are called stages and are lowered

³ Bunn to Watson, 19 February 1940, NA, TSL.

to the shore for disembarking. Slanted stanchions rise from the lower deck to help support the decks above. Also along the lower deck are bits, the rounded projections used to tie the boat to a dock. The pilot house is finished off with a type of Carpenter Gothic trim, sometimes called Steamboat Gothic. There is a lifeboat suspended from the upper deck.

Each boat has a double set of stacks, the smaller set billowing out puffs of white exhaust steam which stand out vividly against the extremely black smoke emitted by the larger set. All the boats are equipped with hogging wires which descend all the way to the hull in order to keep the middle of the boat from sagging. Transverse struts are fastened between each pair of smokestacks for support and are often decorative. Both pairs of stacks on the "J. M. White" are topped by crowns supposed to represent the feathers of an Indian headdress.

Rising from the lower deck at the prow is a grand winding blue staircase with tiny figures of a man talking with a woman in a blue dress. Other figures can be made out standing along the side, silhouettes against the blazing white of the boat.

The other boats are similar, with minor variations. They have only one stage, not two, and three decks rather than four. All three boats fly a company pennant at the forward end and an American flag aft.

The composition is well thought out, the positions of the boats showing each one to advantage. Low hills provide

the only backdrop and the foreground is bare of any incidentals. The mirror-like reflections of the boats in the calm water provide sufficient visual stimulation.

The color is particularly striking, with its stark contrast between the white of the boats and the dense black smoke rising from them and blotting out most of the sky. This smoke trails off into dull red areas of the sky and echoes the red crowns of the largest smokestacks and the red of all three hulls. The hills appear to be a solid green but there is actually much subtle shading employed.

Style and Technique

Bunn was apparently at his best painting river scenes. His first important commission was for a mural in the Dubuque, Iowa, Post Office.⁴ For this he painted a vertical scene of a large frontal view of a sidewheeler. All the details are large and clear, many passengers fill the deck windows, and the whole boat is almost streamlined, as the side wheel covers, the undulating waves and the curving front of the decks blend together. He must have felt it important to keep an emphasis on these boats which were so vital in the life of the Kentucky waterways.

In the Hickman mural, the boats may be stationary in some harbor, or may be underway, but if the latter, they are moving very slowly, since the reflections are so clear. In

⁴ Section Bulletin No. 9, March-May, 1936, p. 22.

the "J. M. White", it is only a breaking wave that indicates where the hull ends and the water begins.

Bunn used the best linen canvas and explained how he worked: "I under paint with oil and cover the painting with as many coats of oil paints as are essential to secure the desired effect."⁵ On this same form he states that he did not varnish the work but suggested that it should have a light coat after drying about a year and he offered to do it at no expense.⁶

Progress of the Project

Referring to the 48-state competition, Rowan advised Bunn that a jury composed of Maurice Sterne, Olin Dows, Edgar Miller, and Henry Varnum Poor⁷ had selected his design for the Hickman Post Office.⁸ Of course, Bunn was delighted at the honor. He said he had a much longer title but was content to shorten it. "I am going to make this the most perfect picture of Mississippi river packets that ever was painted."⁹

⁵ Information form from Section to Bunn, n.d.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Henry Varnum Poor worked for the Section but received no commissions for Kentucky. He did, however, paint a mural in The Courier-Journal building on Broadway, Louisville.

⁸ Rowan to Bunn, 16 October 1939, NA, SL.

⁹ Bunn to Rowan, 16 November 1939, NA, TSL.

Rowan saw the winning design displayed at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D. C. and was impressed by the high quality of painting, especially the reflections in the water. "But [it is] a source of dismay to me you have not been able to achieve to date the same high quality in your design for the Hamburg, Iowa, Post Office mural. Evidently you are a boat painter."¹⁰ Except for this remark, Rowan was unusually sparing in his criticisms of the Hickman project.

Bunn began to get letters from admirers--a flow of letters, as he expressed it. He mentioned one in a letter to the Section:

"One of the correspondents, a niece of Stephen Foster, requested photos of the design because her father and Stephen mention in thier [sic] notes and diaries in the 80s of thier [sic] travels on the "J. M. White."¹¹

Having his work reproduced in Life magazine certainly brought Bunn attention and prestige. Many asked for prints of the mural, which were dutifully sent by Maria Ealand, the Section's secretary and Bruce's niece. Another request was for a glossy of the mural to reproduce in the Kentucky State magazine to accompany a feature on steamboats.¹²

¹⁰ Rowan to Bunn, 24 November 1939, NA, SL.

¹¹ Bunn to Rowan, 15 December 1939, NA, SL.

¹² Letter from G. M. Pedley, Director of State Publicity, to Rowan, from Eddyville, Kentucky, 28 February, 1940, NA.

Rowan continued to marvel at the accurate reflection of the boats in the water. He suggested coordinating the colors with the surroundings, making an architectural unit. "My only suggestion is that the smoke stacks on the front of the "J. M. White" look out of scale with the other two on the ship. Is it intentional? Is it authentic?"¹³

Finally Bunn wrote Rowan that it was installed and well liked by the townspeople who displayed quite a lot of interest. He stated that the Postmaster and staff were cordial and helpful.

"Personally I am quite pleased with this mural because several old-timer river men living in Hickman looked at it, liked it, and pronounced it a good painting. Several of them remember seeing the "J. M. White" back in the 80's, and one of them lost a best friend aboard her when she was destroyed by fire. The subject of this mural is certainly appropriate to the town."¹⁴

There were several letters and articles on the mural in local and near-by city newspapers, praising the work and adding further information, such as the fact that the J. M. White cost \$500,000 to build and it burned in 1887 between Vicksburg and New Orleans. The Postmaster, Henry L. Amberg, wrote to thank the government for such a fine decoration.¹⁵

¹³ Rowan to Bunn, 2 May 1940, NA, SL.

¹⁴ Bunn to Rowan, 8 October 1940, NA, TSL.

¹⁵ Henry L. Amberg, Postmaster, to the Federal Works Agency, 18 October, 1940, NA, TSL.

Possibly the praise that meant most to Bunn was the fact that Bruce bought the sketch of the Hickman mural and hung it in his own private office. That action meant more than words.

THE HODGENVILLE POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 20

County: Larue

Artist: Schomer Lichtner

Title: Hodge's Mill

Date: 1943

Medium: Tempera on canvas

Dimensions: 12' W x 3' H

The Artist

Schomer Lichtner was multi-talented, producing works in graphic design, painting, lithography, and block printing. He was born in Peoria, Illinois, on 18 March 1905. He first studied at the Milwaukee State Teacher's College with Gustave Moeller, then at the Chicago Art Institute, at the National Academy of Design, and at the Art Students League in New York with Boardman Robinson and Oscar Hagan. In addition to his own work, he taught Art History at the University of Wisconsin. He began to gain recognition in the art world by his exhibits and also won several awards.

Lichtner worked for the government in its first art program, the Public Works Art Program (PWAP). For the section he painted murals in post offices at Hamtramck and Detroit, Michigan, and five murals for the post office in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, in addition to the mural in Hodgenville, Kentucky.

His Teachers

Gustave Moeller (1881-1931). Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he studied at the Art Students League in New York City, in Paris, and at the Royal Academy in London. Back home, he taught at the State Teachers' College in Milwaukee and won a large number of exhibition awards.¹

Description of the Mural

This mural is difficult to decipher at first glance. It appears to be a tropical forest, but is meant to be a cornfield. Surely no cornfield could look like this. The mural is over the Postmaster's door, as murals often were, and extends on each side of it part way down the wall. This whole area is filled with light and dark green waving

¹ See the Bowling Green entry for data on Boardman Robinson. No information was found for Oscar Hagan.

forms interspersed with approximately thirty red-winged blackbirds spread across the canvas, some pecking at corn, some appearing smaller as they fly across the sky. There is very little sky, and what can be seen is almost as loosely painted as the vegetation. The sky is a blend of blue and sienna, with many curling white wisps of clouds aggressively painted in sharp or curving strokes.

Although there is no actual resemblance to Vincent van Gogh's Crows in a Corn Field (1890), the subject, the abandoned movement of its features, and the brash handling of the brushwork make the whole scene seem familiar, although much more of a fantasy than the better known work of van Gogh.

At left is one of the larger cornstalks, turned brown and harboring the bird closest to the picture plane. Beneath the stalk are brown leaves and husks which blend into a blue area with a large strand of gray undulating through it. Next a section of dark green, serpentine, looping foliage hides lighter green leaves behind it. None of these "areas" is differentiated in any way. The whole canvas is a mass of undefined vegetation.

Just right of center, the cornfield parts slightly, allowing a larger view of the sky filled with birds. The right side is a variation of the forms and colors on the left. In the foreground are large green leaves with brown veins, and other plants in various greens and blue,

tinged with brown. At the extreme left and right, the mural seems framed by two large plants, so tall they resemble palm trees.

At right, in the middle distance and hardly visible at all, is a mill race of white water, and next to it a millwheel and a very small red brick mill with a blue roof. This is Hodge's mill, which was the basis for the town's name. When it was in operation, the corn from this field was taken to the mill to be ground. The mill was much larger in the original sketch and created more of a focal point to draw the viewer's eye.

This mural is far from realistic but is attractive in its dark manner. It avoids monotony by the vivid, winding and crossing forms which seem in constant motion. The whole painting borders on Surrealism.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

At first sight of this work, Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) comes to mind because of the tropical look of the painting. But this is not a very accurate comparison. In Rousseau's Le Rêve (1910) there is a suggestion of wild and undisciplined vegetation, but the bright color and the sharp edges of fronds and palms and the overall seeming naiveté of the painting causes rejection of that idea.

More similar is Rousseau's In the Jungle (1891) with its lashing trees and windswept grasses, but that, too, fails to connect. There seems to be no artist very much like Lichtner. Who knows what he might have done had the country's circumstances been more conducive to fostering artists in the 1940s?

The top of the Postmaster's door inserts itself into the painting a bit more than in most post offices. A few clever arrangements have been made by some artists to disguise the door intrusion, but they are transparent attempts. They might have felt more reconciled to the situation if they had known that this effect of the sides of a painting hanging down below its base was a common Renaissance custom.

This type of composition was used by Raphael a number of times, notably in his Mass of Bolsena (1512) and his Liberation of St. Peter from Prison (1513), both in the Stanza d'Eliodoro, the Vatican, Rome, and both frescoes having much larger doors to circumvent. Another example is Vittore Carpaccio's Arrival of the Ambassadors of Britain at the Court of Brittany (1495). Perhaps many of the Section painters did know this fact and were simply making a virtue of a necessity.

Lichtner seems always to have painted with a broad brush and to have used heavy impasto, whatever the subject. For the Sheboygan Post Office, his murals are also very dark, one showing Indian life against a deep woods and one

of surveyors, also in the forest. One mural is of two woodcutters at work, their movements full of energy and force and roughly painted, in his usual style. The Lake, the most handsome and the one most similar to Hodgenville's shows a flight of large black and white birds against a dark sky and is very striking.

It seems that Lichtner's intention was to show something pleasing and, if possible, beautiful. Of one Detroit mural, he said, "Instead of depicting the sordid surroundings in which they live, I have shown probably the most beautiful thing they see--a snow-laden tree."²

He apparently understood the Section's goal of turning the people's minds from their problems and emphasizing the desirable features of their locality. Another mural included farm products in an urban setting, and of this he said the idea was "to show interdependence of the city worker and the farmer".³ This intention also promoted the Section's emphasis on community.

The Hodgenville mural is painted with tempera on canvas. Lichtner says no more about it, except that he worked on a toned ground heightened with white, then worked as directly as possible and heightened it further with white or opaque tones.

² Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas, 15, FN 30.

³ Park and Markovitz, Democratic Vistas, 56, FN 23.

Progression of the Project

Schomer Lichtner was offered the Hodgenville commission on the basis of excellent work he had submitted in the competition for the Milwaukee mural. He was to finish it in eight months and be paid \$600.

There was a sense of urgency about this work, since the United States had entered World War II only months before, and there was a growing feeling that only the most necessary government work should be undertaken. Rowan asked Lichtner to contact the Postmaster and prominent citizens to determine a suitable subject and to learn their attitude. Rowan stated that they were not desirous of antagonizing the public in matters of art.⁴

Lichtner responded, saying that Postmaster Dalph E. Creal was encouraging. The Postmaster had given the project careful consideration and could see no reason why it should not be done immediately. Rowan then urged the artist to submit proposals, as Rowan was anxious to get the work under contract at an early date.⁵

When Rowan did receive the preliminary sketches, he had reservations. The color was rich, but the blackbirds should be more clearly coordinated. Watson had returned from New York and agreed that the movement and color were

⁴ Rowan to Lichtner 12 February 1942, NA, SL.

⁵ Lichtner to Rowan, n.d., NA, SL; Rowan answer on 21 March, NA, TSL.

admirable but also agreed it should be more clearly coordinated for acceptance.⁶

Rowan hoped Lichtner wasn't getting discouraged, but it was imperative all commitments made by the Section be brought to a happy conclusion at the earliest possible date to reduce administration costs.⁷ It seems clear that Rowan was beginning to get frantic at this point. The artist finally sent a full-size cartoon which Rowan liked. He approved of the way the all-over pattern was solved.⁸

Postmaster Creal thought it a very fine addition to the decoration of the building, especially

"...because it has as its subject an object of purely local interest, the old mill for which the town was named and also especially because it does not refer to the 'Lincoln Lore' with which this locality is commonly associated.

Newspaper comments were not made because there might be some misunderstanding by the public due to the war effort and because the public might not realize fully that this was a project started before the entry of our country into the war."⁹

It was not difficult to keep any mention of it out of the newspaper because the Postmaster was also the editor of the paper.

The townspeople seemed to have no reservations whatever but appreciated the mural greatly.¹⁰ It does seem

⁶ Rowan to Lichtner 21 March 1942; 11 May 1942; and 27 May 1942, NA, TSL.

⁷ Rowan to Lichtner, 27 May 1942, NA, TSL.

⁸ Rowan to Lichtner, 30 December 1942, NA, TSL.

⁹ Dalph E. Creal, 30 July 1943, NA, SL., same date.

¹⁰ Ibid.

surprising, at first, that the opportunity was not taken to feature Abraham Lincoln in the mural, since Hodgenville is his birthplace, but, judging from the Postmaster's comment, the residents may have become weary of the subject.

THE LEXINGTON COURT HOUSE MURAL

Figures: 21 and 22

County: Fayette

Title: Daniel Boone's Arrival in Kentucky

Artist: Ward Lockwood

Date: 1938

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 8'1" W x 11'5" H

Ward Lockwood had a long and varied career and was one of the most highly regarded American artists of the day. He experimented with almost every new style over a period of forty years. He was born September 1894 in Atchison, Kansas. He became a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where he studied with Henry McCarter, and in Paris with Paul Ranson, but the following year Lockwood saw action in the Army during World War I. He later wrote, "That period now seems alternately a ghastly

dream and an exciting adventure..."¹ The surreal aspects of his later work may well have been derived from Ranson, but may equally have been prompted by his war experiences.

His Teachers

Henry McCarter (1866-1942) This Pennsylvania Academy teacher was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania but didn't stay there. In Paris he studied with Léon Bonnat, Puvis de Chavannes, and Toulouse-Lautrec. McCarter returned home to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to study with Thomas Eakins and later taught there. He also illustrated a book of poems and various magazines.

Paul Ranson A Surrealist, associated with Paul Gauguin.

Certainly, the war widened Lockwood's outlook, as it did that of many artists, and in 1921 he went to Paris to study at the Académie Ranson, where Maurice Denis taught. Denis seems to have had little or no effect on his art. Lockwood's work was thought worthy of being exhibited in the Salon d'Automne, but Lockwood found Paris bewildering and felt he had learned nothing at the Académie Ranson that he didn't already know and he abandoned academic study.

¹ Charles C. Eldredge, Ward Lockwood 1894-1963 (Lawrence, University of Kansas Museum of Art, 1974), 12.

He went to Provence where he learned to see the strong geometric forms beneath the surface of objects. However, unlike Cézanne's later work, his canvases were filled with people and animals. In this Lexington mural, however, it is noticeable that he uses solely Cézanne's colors - green, brown, and a pale ochre and places them in a triadic composition.

The next year he returned home where he felt he belonged and where his roots were. He taught at the Universities of Texas, Kansas, and others, but finally made his home in Taos, New Mexico, which became a mecca in the 1920s for many artists, including Georgia O'Keeffe (who spent her summers there in the 1930s and moved to the Taos area permanently in 1946) because of its spectacular scenery. The Frenchman, Andrew Dasburg, another newcomer, arrived and became a major influence on Lockwood.

Andrew Dasburg

Dasburg had studied with Vincent Dumond at the Art Students League in New York, as well as with Allyn Cox, a highly respected mural painter at the school. Dumond had had a thorough classical education in Paris with Boulanger, Lefèbvre, and Constant and, having absorbed much from such noted artists, Dasburg became a major figure in mural art.

Dasburg also went to Woodstock, the Art Students League summer school, to work with Birge Harrison, a writer and critic, painter, and the founder of the school. Harrison had had much the same sort of education in Paris as Dumond,

studying with Carolus Duran and Alexandre Cabanel, famous painters of the Paris salon.

Perhaps the strongest influence on Dasburg was that of Robert Henri, the leader of the urban realist school called "The Eight," with whom Dasburg studied. Dasburg, in turn, had a major influence on the Taos artists, and there is little doubt that Lockwood absorbed Dasburg's realist style, derived from Henri, which dealt with everyday life in the city, featuring recognizable people and events. This potent force probably stood Lockwood in good stead when painting Section murals since he presented the rural equivalent of the type of painting produced by "The Eight."

John Marin

Lockwood then became intrigued with painting watercolors when John Marin joined the colony. Marin was exposed to the style of "The Eight", also, through his study with Thomas Anschutz, an important teacher of some of the "Ash Can" school members.

John Marin is one of the three or four great watercolorists that the United States has produced. He is noted for his graphic, spare views of the sea, derived partly from a study of Whistler's etchings. His paintings have a delicate atmospheric effect, especially those painted on the Maine coast. He achieves all his effects with thin lines and abbreviated emphatic marks, which seem to be his own special touch.

Lockwood was ready at this time to give up his heavy blocky forms for a sense of rhythm and a lighter touch with paint. He learned to create a dynamic line and was not so much concerned with underlying forms.² Generally, his watercolors are stronger than Marin's, with fewer thin lines and transparencies. Dasburg liked Lockwood's watercolors best and called them "the apex of his art."³ Lockwood never did achieve the sense of weightlessness of Marin's paintings but perhaps he preferred to be more original.

Lockwood was fortunate to find a summer job teaching at an art academy in Colorado Springs. Others on the faculty included Dasburg, Thomas Hart Benton⁴, probably the most famous of the Regionalists; George Biddle, who continued to paint after convincing Roosevelt to sponsor government art programs, and Arnold Blanch, who himself had studied with Henri.⁵

Lockwood had truly found his roots and was caught up in the study of American history. By the 1930s, when government mural commissions came his way, he was only too pleased to paint scenes related to frontier life.

Just previous to this Lexington work, he had painted two murals for the Taos Court House, which was being

² Eldredge, 29.

³ Ibid., 32.

⁴ For information on Benton, see Chapter Two on the Regionalists.

⁵ Blanch's wife, Lucile Blanch, painted the Post Office mural in Flemingsburg, Kentucky.

restored after a fire. He executed these in pure fresco, a technique most American artists hadn't learned, although there was beginning to be a revived interest in it, partly due to the influence of the contemporary Mexican muralists.

It is indicative of the high esteem in which Lockwood was held that he was invited to paint two fresco murals in one of the first and most important projects the Section undertook. The one for which Lockwood received a commission was the Post Office Department Building, Washington, D.C.

Reginald Marsh, one of Lockwood's best friends, was painting another fresco in the same building. Marsh is best known for his sketchy renderings of scenes in the lower reaches of Manhattan. His use of light and shade is superb, and the seemingly loose handling of the brush produces characters closely observed and realized.

The Opening of the Southwest was the topic of Lockwood's Washington mural. He produced realistic but somewhat cluttered depictions of pioneers on the move. They consist of unrelated groups of figures, placed in no particularly cohesive way. In the interstices between the groups are smaller figures and objects--a pioneer and a woman carrying a baby, a priest, a conquistador, animal skeletons and a covered wagon. In one of the murals an Indian is scalping a man with impunity, a stagecoach is departing, and a locomotive is roaring into the scene. These have been described in some detail because this style

differs so radically from his Lexington work. He was probably finding his way.

Description of the Mural

This large vertical mural is situated in a Federal courtroom in the Lexington courthouse. No one could ask for a richer setting. In this handsome room the mural is placed between two ivory-colored projecting pilasters, with gray marble below it, and above it a decorative dull golden molding striped with red, while a frieze of gold scroll-work interspersed with brown corbels enlivens all four walls.

Lockwood had insured that the mural's colors blended perfectly with all this embellishment, but the mural is so powerful that it draws attention to itself first of all.

At the center stands the figure of Daniel Boone, eight feet tall, and surrounded by his companions, the Long Hunters, who are all in bending or seated positions, allowing Daniel to tower over them. These Long Hunters were an independent group of frontiersmen who forged ahead into the wilderness, seeking possible sites for settlements. They were often away for more than a year.

Daniel Boone was the first to make his way through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, and in 1769 he led a party of settlers through it. These brave people came from North

Carolina, although originally from Virginia. The mural scene depicts Daniel when he first broke through the wooded areas and saw the Bluegrass region before him.

In the mural, Boone is surrounded by his five companions, John Finley, John Stuart, Joseph Holden, James Murray, and William Cool, two below him at right, holding their rifles warily, as if on guard for attack. One older man on the left kneels, his rifle propped on the ground. He is the only one who is bareheaded, but he holds his hat in his hand. He looks weary and not nearly so inspired as Boone. Behind Boone stands the last man, a powder horn on his belt, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, and holding his rifle aloft, possibly in a gesture of triumph. All the men are dressed in buckskin hunting costume and two wear coonskin caps, including Boone. These articles are all in varied tones of beige, except for a black hat and green shirt on one of the men at right.

In fact, there is little color here except many variegated shades of brown and green and ochre. Daniel's clothing is highlighted so that his paler figure stands out starkly against the background of indistinct leaves, trees and grass, and the green of the woods beyond, which appears almost black. Large brown tree trunks, heavily shaded with a darker tone, stand in the background and lean in as if to create a frame for Daniel's figure. Despite the stillness, there is a sense of mounting intensity, largely because of

the composition. The mural is signed and dated in red paint.

Style, Technique and Maintenance

This mural is obviously the work of a very self-assured artist. The colors are totally appropriate, both to the truth of the scene and to their juxtaposition. The brush-work is very light and smooth, with no impasto, but the artist has given definition to the shadowing he used and a sense of swirling in the leaves.

Lockwood was a very careful artist and planned every detail. He has also created a dramatic composition here with a pyramidal, or triadic, structure, used so often by the Italian masters of the Renaissance, for example, Raphael's Madonna of the Meadows, 1505, or Andrea del Sarto's Madonna of the Harpies, 1517.

In the Lexington mural, at the apex of this triangular composition, is Boone's face, which makes a powerful impression. (See Figure 22). He was already a hero to the first Kentucky settlers, and the dreamy, yet determined expression Lockwood has so well portrayed seems to suggest that Boone was beginning to realize that he was indeed a man of destiny.

Lockwood must have recalled other versions of Daniel Boone, especially one by George Caleb Bingham, showing the

next episode in Boone's story, Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap (1851).⁶

Another comparison could be made, not with the subject but with the style of the figures, and that is with Piero della Francesca. Movement is seldom seen in his work, nor any incipient action. The Finding of the True Cross of the 1450s, one in a series, is an example. Every figure is completely immobile and yet in natural positions.

A Lexington lady wrote Bruce, saying she saw the mural in the court room with "two hot air vents under it which blasted hot air on it and carried up the inevitable current of soot, which in Lexington was something appalling."⁷

Bruce was not encouraging. He was afraid that the treatment of many of the murals was pretty awful and they would deteriorate or be ruined in due time. He saw no hope since they had a tough time to maintain what they had.⁸ Bruce did try, however. He wrote Inslee, a staff member, asking if they couldn't do something. The artist Peter Blume had said his work in Cannonsburg, Pennsylvania, had been sprayed all over with hydrochloric acid and the mural

⁶ Bingham himself was probably inspired by a painting by Nicolas Poussin, The Flight into Egypt (1630s), in which the central figure is a mother on horseback, holding a child.

⁷ Elizabeth Rothenstein to Bruce, 11 February 1938, NA, ASL.

⁸ Bruce to Elizabeth Rothenstein, 15 February 1938, NA, TSL.

ruined with holes. Bruce asked Inslee to contact the Carnegie Corporation for advice.⁹ Lockwood himself thought that because there was a light coat of wax on it, wiping with a soft rag would be sufficient.¹⁰

Progression of the Project

It is fortunate for Kentucky that it was Lockwood who painted this mural, because at least two other artists had been offered the commission before him, but had to decline. Lockwood accepted, offering the usual expressions of gratitude, but he remarked that Tom Lea (another artist) said the government paid his travel expenses when he went to see his mural space. Lockwood hoped they would do the same for him, as the distance was about fourteen hundred miles, and he felt it necessary to go to observe the location, and return to Lexington to see the mural installed. It should cost four or five hundred dollars. Nevertheless, he accepted by telegram on the same day Rowan wrote him that there would be no travel expense allowed and didn't think it would cost that much.¹¹

It was originally planned to paint it in fresco, but there was a time limit.¹²

⁹ Bruce to Inslee, 15 February 1938, NA, ASL.

¹⁰ Lockwood on Section form, n.d.

¹¹ Rowan to Lockwood, 22 November 1937, NA, TSL.

This Lexington mural was worked in oils on canvas but the two Post Office Department murals and previous murals for the Taos County Court House were frescoes. This medium was popular at the time, because of the influence of the fresco work of Diego Rivera and the other Mexican painters, and because it gave an artist a sense of historical justification through reference to Old Master techniques.¹³

Lockwood had many ideas for a subject. He wrote to Rowan, "Blue-prints, marble bays, doors, acoustic tile, thorough-breds, Daniel Boones, Henry Clays, have kaleidoscoped through my brain until the wee hours."¹⁴

Finally, he decided on Boone, since he seemed noncontroversial and was not only a hunter, a colonel, and a surveyor, but a frontier judge, and helped frame the first set of laws in the commonwealth of Kentucky. A court room would make the perfect setting and the verticals of his composition would add dignity.¹⁵

In the Taos frescoes, he had developed the use of large figures in his composition, one of the murals showing a central, upstanding male figure, surrounded by others at a lower level. He continued to use this motif in the Daniel Boone work, including the triangular composition. Many of

¹² Rowan to Lockwood, 5 November, 1937, NA, SL.

¹³ Eldredge, 56.

¹⁴ Contreras, Tradition, 76.

¹⁵ Lockwood to Rowan, 9 December 1937, NA, ASL.

the letters on the Lexington mural have been lost, but we do know that the Section approved.

Quite possibly Lockwood heard so little from the Section about the Lexington mural because he had forestalled criticism by his very meticulous research. He had learned by this time how sensitive the residents were to any depiction of themselves, their environment, or history. Fortunately, almost everyone could agree on the heroic Boone. But Lockwood took no chances, going to Lexington and hiring a plasterer to prepare the wall, asking for advice of the Daniel Boone Bicentennial Commission, and visiting the Frankfort Museum for a good look at Boone's rifle and other artifacts.¹⁶

In a letter to the Section, Lockwood quoted from a book which provided him with his scene:

"They had come out on a mountain promontory opposite one of the headwaters of the Kentucky River. Immediately at their feet, of course, rolled the billows of the lesser range and the foothills, but creeping out from that and rising to the horizon opposite their eyes lay a rich and beautiful country of forests, of low hills, and vales, and vast level plain... Long they stood leaning on their rifles, gazing in a muse of speculation or anticipation each after his desires. Perhaps it was from this point that Boone received his inspiration that he was ordained by God to open an empire to a people."¹⁷

¹⁶ Sue Bridwell Beckham, Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture: A Gentle Reconstruction (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), 283.

¹⁷ Lockwood to Rowan, 9 December, 1937, NA, TSL. Quote is from Stewart Edward White's Daniel Boone: Wilderness Scout, no other information given.

In his color sketch, Lockwood tried to restrain the color, avoid any rawness or violent color oppositions, and keep it in tone with the room.

Lockwood wrote again, concerned about a clock on the wall, which he wanted removed, since it would be balanced right on top of Daniel Boone's head.¹⁸ Eventually, it was situated on another wall.

Rowan expressed himself satisfied and said that congratulations were in order. However, the expression on the faces seemed to him to be overly austere. "One wonders if Boone at the moment of his great realization which you depict would not have worn a more enlightened expression."¹⁹

High praise came from many quarters, first from the Postmaster who said it was greatly admired, appropriate for this section, faultless work, and "to my mind as a layman, is a masterpiece."²⁰

Maria Ealand, the Section's secretary, sent Lockwood an article by Mr. Friendly in a Washington paper. It was quoted by Mabel Dodge in the New York Times of 8 July 1938, also. Rowan told him they were putting this mural on the cover of the next Section bulletin.²¹

¹⁸ Lockwood to Ealand, 25 January 1938, NA, TSL.

¹⁹ Rowan to Lockwood, 22 March 1938, NA, TSL.

²⁰ Postmaster R. F. Williams, Lexington, Ky., n.d.

²¹ Ealand to Lockwood, n.d.; Rowan to Lockwood, 23 July 1938, NA, TSL.

The Lexington Leader of 8 June 1938 featured two photographs on its first page, along with an article on the mural. The Section was so pleased with this newspaper article that Rowan wrote a note of thanks to the journalist: "Congratulations on the comprehensive and distinctive way the subject is treated. It is rather rare to find an article of this caliber in any but the most cosmopolitan papers."²² Rowan could always be trusted to express himself in elegant and sensitive ways, even when a criticism was involved.

Lockwood entered the Army as a Captain in World War II, and after becoming a civilian once again, moved to Taos and began to experiment with some of the new abstract forms, as well as work based on Paul Klee's style, whimsical, spare, and graphic, and on Indian motifs. Like so many of the Section artists, Lockwood had a leaning toward the new abstract art and experimented with it later in his career. In the 1950s, he painted Red Formations, a handsome study of red forms couched in geometric terms. Another was titled Undulations, which combines arcs and curves in shades of red and black. In 1953 the art historian, Alfred Frankenstein, praised him as a "romantic who uses abstract discoveries for his own purposes."²³

²² Rowan to John F. Day of the Lexington Leader, 15 June 1938, NA, TSL.

²³ Quoted in Eldredge, 99.

This Lexington mural of Daniel Boone was the last work Lockwood did for the government, but it didn't go unnoticed by anyone. Rowan felt it was of exceptional quality and one of the best of the most recent years. He also said that Forbes Watson thought it might be the finest thing they had done to date.²⁴

THE LOUISVILLE POST OFFICE AND COURT HOUSE MURALS

Figures: 24 through 33

County: Jefferson

Artist: Frank W. Long

Figure 24: Ohio River Traffic
25: Coal Mining
26: Agriculture
27: Stock Farming
28: Fox Hunting
29: Horse Racing
30: Unloading a Railroad
Postoffice Car
31: City Collection
32: The Star Route
33: Rural Free Delivery

Date: 1937

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: Given with descriptions

The Artist

Frank Weathers Long had a lengthy and varied career in many locations, but his heart was always in Berea, where he settled. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, and

the Académie Julian in Paris, and always preferred easel painting.¹ Although he did murals for the Section in Hagerstown, Maryland, Drumright, Oklahoma, and several others, he never considered himself a muralist. In his autobiography, Confessions of a Depression Muralist (the only one by any Kentucky muralist), he states that he did not consider it a high form of creative art.² Like Thomas Hart Benton and like other muralists working for the government, Long disliked the lack of spontaneity, for the mural had to be exactly like the sketch. "An artist of my temperament tends to rebel against what he sees as merely repeating the original conception, already fully realized in the approved design".³ Long was asked by the Section to provide some biographical notes for publicity purposes in connection with the Louisville murals. Long was only beginning his career, but he felt free to point out in his submission that his designs are interesting and his work "full of vital promise."⁴

His goal for the Louisville murals is worth quoting:

In these designs a peculiar and happy sense of generalization gives these scenes of daily life a dignity which removes them from the trivial and accidental and places them on a higher plane of

¹ For a fuller account of the life and career of Frank Long, see the entry on the Berea Post Office mural.

² Frank Long, Confessions of a Depression Muralist (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997, 1.

³ Ibid., 2

⁴ Long, Decoration for the Louisville, Kentucky, Post Office, 20 December 1935, NA, TD.

artistic expression. One feels in them certain qualities of abstraction and simplification in form and design which gives them what might be termed a classical approach and which makes Mr. Long's work especially well suited to mural decoration."⁵

Private commissions had dried up during the Depression, and Long was pleased to receive a commission from the Treasury's Relief Art Program to paint ten murals in the Louisville Post Office.

The original post office was a villa-like plan, thought to have been designed in 1858 by Ammi B. Young, the government's chief architect at that time. Alterations since then have been so extensive that no elements of the original interior remain. When the post office moved to a new location in the 1890s, the property was utilized as headquarters for The Courier-Journal newspaper. A new floor was added and all floors reinforced to accommodate eight huge printing presses.⁶

Today's building remains a courthouse and customs house. It is an imposing stone structure, designed by architects Churchill and Gilly. Possibly it was based on Perrault's new seventeenth-century Louvre Museum in Paris.

The building has two projecting entry pavilions on the facade. Inside each of these entrances is a small space where the artist has painted a long frieze-like work on

⁵ Long, Decoration for the Louisville, Kentucky, Post Office, 20 December 1935, NA, TD.

⁶ Bruns, 165.

each of the facing walls and each mural is located just below the ceiling.

There are two elevators at each end of the building, and Long has placed semicircular paintings over each elevator. The last two works are hung in alcoves off the lobby.

Long's intention was to feature the occupations carried on by the people of Jefferson County. This commission was an important one that would take a good deal of time to finish. The TRAP's regulations provided for a master painter with two or three assistants from the relief rolls.

Description of the Murals

Ohio River Traffic (Fig. 24) This mural is located in the pavilion entrance on the Seventh Street side, or west lobby and is one of the long, high, and narrow murals. Its dimensions are 23'5" W x 3'4 H. Here we find large subtle diagonals backing the action. Balance is kept, as we see three main groups center, and two groups of smaller figures, one group at each end. From left to right, enclosed in a central triangle, there is a group of men carrying sacks to the waterfront, one pushing a cart full of them and the others having their sacks slung over their shoulders, while another group of five men just to right of center sit and watch in a desultory manner. The third of the larger scenes shows a small boat, with two men bending

over pulling on a line, and another standing; these men seem to be casting off preparatory to a fishing trip. Two men, also fishing, sit on a dock and watch.

The position of these figures in the boat is somewhat reminiscent of the cartoon Raphael designed for use in creating the set of tapestries, now the property of the British Crown and displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The comparison is not striking, however, because of the small size of Long's figures.

The background and smaller scenes on the left consist of a far-off boat and a man walking with a large oar, while ahead of him are two smaller figures heading toward three canoes, and all the figures are carrying oars. In the center are two steamboats, which seem to be preparing to tie up. The right background features a bridge (possibly the Clark bridge) and buildings on a farther shore, while the two seated men fishing discuss what they see, as one points toward the center. As usual, the main figures are large, rather stiff but not in a heroic sense. The colors are dark and the whole scene is rather matter-of-fact, with little detail.

Coal Mining (Fig. 25) The second of the long horizontal murals, this one is opposite Ohio River Traffic, on the Seventh Street side. The dimensions are the same. This design seems more sophisticated than any of the others. The main scene is the inside of a mine. Twelve miners

wearing hard hats are working at various tasks. Again there is an enclosing triangle, this one almost curved and embracing just one scene in the center--the mine. There are the familiar auxiliary side scenes but they are very small and show the landscape outside the mine. At left are two men on a handcar, and at right a packhorse or mule waits to pull his cart of coal. These figures are backed by green hills and brown sheds. The men in the central section are rather large and dressed in pale blue or yellow-tan work clothes. They are working in a mine, but the striking difference in this mural is that each man has on his head a miner's hat with a light, and these lights cast strong, spreading beams, angled in different directions.

As designed, the two seated men at left sorting coal have their beams shine to the left. At center, four men carrying wood, a hammer, and other implements are at work, two of them swinging mattocks or picks, and they are facing each other, so that the lights almost intersect. There are two smaller figures behind them, handling wooden beams. Lastly, at right, two men bend to shovel, so their lights are directed to right and down. This effect is not rigid or symmetrical, but it is the most interesting of this type of mural for that very reason and because of the strong yellow of the lights in the dark mine.

Agriculture (Fig. 26). A sharp geometric effect is prominent here to the extent of subtracting from the reality of the scene. From left and right edges of the work rise diagonal lines which create a truncated pyramid at the top. Further, there are two diagonal lines perpendicular to these, and this, in effect, creates three small triangles in which the action takes place. In the left one, two men sit shucking corn with a basket between them and roosters pecking the ground. In the center section is a man ploughing with two brown horses. The diagonal line between them should separate these scenes but the man with the plow has one leg crossing the left separation line so that the eye easily follows along to the central scene. His horses step across the right diagonal and intrude on the scene at right. This is an obvious effort to connect the three disparate scenes.

This unusual configuration did not escape the notice of the Supervising Architect, Louis Simon, who noted the diamond shape and thought it too hard; it should be broken into by the back of the last cow.⁷ This remark indicates that Simon didn't realize the tendency to abstraction which Long was insinuating into the murals.

At the right, three men work with tobacco under the eye of an observant white cat. In the two background triangles stand red barns, and just glimpsed in the center background is a large white house.

⁷ Dows to Long, 10 September 1935, NA, ATL.

Stock Farming (Fig. 27) This mural is the last of the long, narrow type and is located opposite the mural Agriculture on the Sixth Street side. The general impression is of blue clad men and brown animals. There are two groups of men and animals, one coming from the left, one from the right and about to meet in the center. On the left are horses, with three men attending them, one pulling on a horse's rein, and a dog following. Pigs and brownish piglets are included here. Coming from the right a man is leading a bull and several cows, but our view of them is cut off by a rectangular sheepfold, tended by a shepherd. Long has provided variety and balance here with the two groups. In addition, at left stands a large pillared white house; in the center there is a silo with a sharp hill backing it, providing a focal point, and at right a tripartite barn with a windmill and trees behind it which balance the house at left. All of these works are intended, like most murals, to give a rather flat effect, and the figures are usually close to the picture plane, as here.

Like most of the Louisville murals, this one contains a barely concealed geometric basis underlying the realistic scene. In the four frieze-like murals, Long has carefully designed a wide triangular shape which cuts into the background and provides a sharp contrast to the curving figures, or occasionally, to rectangular objects. In this

panel there are actually three pyramidal structures spread across the canvas. A green background hill is at left, echoed by the pedimented roof of the house behind. At right the sheepfold is seen at an angle by the viewer and provides another triangular shape. However, the more realistic figures close to the picture plane are most clearly rendered--the curves of the horses' legs, the bending backs of the sheep and the raised head of a cow are most easily noticed by a viewer. The presence of geometric forms speaks plainly of a tendency to abstract work with which many of the artists would like to experiment, but which TRAP and Section regulations would not allow. The American Scene was paramount.

Frank Long was an accomplished writer, and it is worth-while noting what he has to say about these murals:

In these murals the artist's most obvious aim is to depict life in Kentucky in its principal industrial and recreational forms. In the four larger panels...the industrial activities are illustrated. Designs for these extremely long narrow panels, which are really parts of a broken frieze, are arranged in an arbitrary manner so that several scenes, unrelated in perspective, are included in a single space.

This treatment has enabled the artist to illustrate a large amount of subject matter within a small area. The various scenes are separated by rigid architectural lines which reflect and perpetuate the lines of the building.⁸

⁸ Long, Explanation of Subject Matter of Murals in Louisville, Ky. Federal Bldg., n.d., NA, TD.

The following two isolated paintings on inner walls seem rather pastel in color, and it appears that they were so originally.

Fox Hunting (Fig. 28) Dimensions: 10' 4" W x 3'4" H.

Placed in alcoves, this mural and the one showing a horse race are not readily visible. Here again Long demonstrates good action. Three horses jump a stone wall toward the left, while three brown and white dogs race ahead. The riders are men in simple plain jackets, breeches, boots, and derby-type hats, and their saddles are dark green. The horse in the center is keeping pace with his companions, and wears a yellow saddle but his rider can barely be seen. The colors are brighter than in its companion picture Horse Racing. The background consists of rounded hills and various shades of green foliage. In both a yellow-orange sky is above all. In this work there are opportunities for more detail but the artist confines himself to large figures and broad outlines. This mural is totally realistic, as the dogs and horses are shown in the act of clearing the wall and their positions are convincing.

Horse Racing (Fig. 29) There is a small mystery about this particular mural. The General Services Administration has records of these murals, and their picture of the horse race is totally different from the one that hangs on the wall. Theirs has a very dark background and three small

forms at left which may or may not be horses. We know that the original was still stored in the basement when the January 1937 flood caused so much damage in Louisville, and this particular mural was completely destroyed, so that Long had to redo it. He himself says that he was doing a much better job on the replacement mural.⁹ He was doing more than that. The new mural is completely different from the original. The mural hanging on the wall today is a much smaller picture (10'4" W x 3'4" H) and better proportioned than any frieze can be.

Here three horses, black, white, and brown, race to the right at a great pace, probably toward the finish line. The reddish-brown horse carries a rider in blue silks with a red hat and black boots. The inner jockey wears yellow silks with a blue hat and black boots. His horse wears blinders, and the others may, but the outlines are not clear and the figures are all slightly blurred because of the speed. The inner horse is ahead and the other two almost neck and neck. Here is an excellent depiction of action, as the sense of strain in the heads and legs is apparent. The jockeys may be in bright colors but are bent so closely over the horses' backs that they are almost unnoticeable. The jockey in the center is a shadowy figure, only his cap and a hand on the reins being visible. The background shows the white rail, a flag, trees, sky, and dust rising around the horses' legs.

⁹ Long to Cecil Jones, 24 May 1937, NA, ASL.

Remarks from the artist on the four scenes over the elevators:

The four small lunette panels, two over the elevators in each elevator lobby are devoted to the mail service. Of the first two, The Star Route, depicts the most primitive method of carrying mail in the United States, i.e. by horse or mule, a method still in great use in Kentucky mountain sections where roads are impassable to vehicles. The other of this pair of panels shows the familiar Rural Free Delivery cart as it traverses the rural highways and byways.

The two panels in the other elevator lobby illustrate the more modern city mail service. City Collection shows how the "screen trucks" pick up the mail deposited by carriers in the street storage boxes, while Unloading a Railway Post Office Car shows the removal of mail sacks from the car as it stands in the station.¹⁰

These lunettes are smaller than any seen in the building up to this point and lower, as well, being placed directly over the elevator door, making them closer and more visible to the viewer. The dimensions of all are 3'1" W x 6' H. Over the Sixth Street side elevators are the two which depict what were then modern methods of delivery.

Unloading a Railroad Post Office Car (Fig. 30), one of the lunettes in this location, shows a freight car with open door. A man on the ground in front of it, wearing brown and blue, holds a sack he has just pulled off the train and is preparing to place on a cart. The freight car itself is green, printed with yellow words such as U.S. Mail and Post Office, but not all words are completely shown. A man in

¹⁰

Ibid.

the open door, wearing a brown work suit, is ready to hand over another green sack. There are four more green sacks on the red-wheeled cart already. A crate is glimpsed at right and there is much black shadow under the train and in the doorway.

City Collection (Fig. 31) presents two mailmen in blue uniform, one with a brown leather mail bag, the other with a blue sack. The one on the right also holds letters in his hand and turns back to talk to his co-worker. Both wear caps with visors. A railway mail car is behind them, and in the left foreground can be seen the familiar rounded storage box for mail. Behind the men stands a green automobile (1937 vintage). The background is mostly a variety of yellow shades: a sidewalk, a building across the street, probably a public building, with a suggestion of fluted pillars. People on the opposite side of the street, waiting to cross, are somewhat blurred. Two shadows from the men are in the foreground, indicating that chiaroscuro is present, but it is barely noticeable.

Star Route (Fig. 32) On the Seventh Street side, we see a mailman who travels in a little yellow wagon, small but strangely tall and cut up with large windows. In both these lunettes, the horses are bending and stretching out their necks to graze. Here, a spotted dog runs beside the brown horse. The mailman is clad in shirt and vest and

wears a yellow straw hat. Neither of these mail carriers is in uniform like the city men. This man holds a package in each hand and looks to the right where three mail boxes stand, and he is apparently deciding which package goes in which box. The plain green hills beyond indicate that he is far out into the country.

In fact, a Star Route was an extremely rural route which was farmed out for bids, and anyone not connected with the postal service could be commissioned to take it over, along with the payment accruing to it.

Rural Free Delivery (Fig. 33) On this Seventh Street side, both lunette scenes feature the rural type of mail delivery. This painting shows a postman with a moustache riding a brown horse. The man has a saddlebag and another bag over his shoulder and he is handing a letter to a farmer with a sickle at left. The rider turns partially back to do so. The farmer, wearing overalls and a straw hat, looks up, his hand raised to take the letter. This farmer is not quite as well drawn as others; he seems awkward and his raised hand too large. A rugged wooden fence cuts in front of the figures, and the background contains a barn at right, as well as a wooden house with a stone chimney. The house has a spindley-looking porch with a rain barrel beside it. The background objects in all these are unobtrusive and placed in natural-looking perspective.

The colors in these elevator lunettes seem definitely brighter than in the other murals, and Long confirmed this in a letter to the Section. He believed a much stronger color range was necessary due to the brilliant tone of the bronze doors and position of the panels with relation to the viewer's eye-level.¹¹

These four paintings serve the admirable purpose of celebrating the services provided by the U. S. mail system in the space where some of the work is carried on. They provide a handsome group in themselves, but their setting is also attractive. There is a stone arch above each one, divided into blocks which widen and radiate toward the ceiling and toward the companion mural. Between each set of elevators is a stone pilaster with capital, and all are set off attractively by the glowing bronze of the elevators.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

Style has already been discussed and the tendency to abstraction observed. Long has efficiently combined his experiment in the new manner without compromising in any way the realism of the required American Scene style. This is no small achievement.

Frank Long realized that the long lobby friezes would

¹¹ Long to Dows, 17 March 1936, NA, ASL.

create problems. He stated that they were difficult to compose with all elements relating in a way that avoided any static or monotonous effect. The figure scale had to be large because a viewer would be seeing them from a difficult angle.¹² True, they do not require the viewer to assume a contorted position, as some dome painting by Tiepolo might, but the murals are too high to be studied closely, and the viewer has to stand at the opposite side of the narrow lobby to see the scene all at once.

His technique for proper balance was carefully worked out even in the lunettes. In each one of these, rectangular forms were offset by curving lines. For example, in the train unloading scene, the horizontals of the platform, the open door, the cart, and a box to its right are balanced by the bending backs of the two working men and the rounded shape of the mail sacks and the cart wheels. A study of all four murals will prove this was done with no loss of natural movement or effect.

Long wrote the Section that the murals were painted in oil on canvas treated with an absorbent ground--a surface very similar to plaster. Thus the visual effect obtained is dry and mat, very much like that of true fresco. He concluded, however that the fresco technique was not practicable for this job.¹³

¹² Frank Long, Confessions, 65.

¹³ Frank Long, Explanation of Subject Matter, 3.

Long had his problems with materials and the dubious skills of his assistants. Of the lunettes he wrote,

One of the assistants had used so much oil in the underpainting that it was impossible to work over the surface and retain the flat effect which is so necessary... The technique I have used ...is a progression from an extremely dry absorbent ground (half-chalk, with only enough oil to make it flexible) through a lean, dry underpainting to an overpainting containing more oil but only enough to permit the colors being laid on easily and worked into simple details.¹⁴

Long continued by saying he did not use turpentine for this because it acts for a long time and would change the color and value and probably cause darkening.

Progression of the Project

On receiving this commission, Long was advised he would be paid ninety-four dollars a month for one hundred twenty hours full time work. He was chosen on the basis of his excellent designs for the Louisville Marine Hospital, although he was not awarded that commission. It was a surprise to Long that the Louisville Post Office and Courthouse commission was so large and that he was to hire assistants. It was suggested to him that he get in touch with Miss Adele Brandeis, head of the local branch of the WPA, who would know which WPA artists would be eligible.¹⁵

¹⁴ Long to Dows, 10 October 1936, NA, ASL.

¹⁵ Dows to Long, 23 August 1935, NA, ATL.

Long was happy to accept and suggested his friend and assistant in Berea, Bert Mullins. He hoped he would be allowed to do the work in Berea, where both he and Mullins lived and had a studio, but he was willing to visit Louisville to study the building's layout.¹⁶

Long's first sketches were approved by all, including Mr. Simon, the Supervising Architect, and the sketches were placed in an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery.

It wasn't long before two more assistants, Martha Lauscher and Alois Ulrich, had been hired from WPA rolls: Bert Mullins was also engaged for the project with the help of Adele Brandeis who certified Mullins as "a needy person" and therefore eligible for the WPA rolls.¹⁷

Long writes in his memoirs about how amusing Ulrich was--a lovable old man who spoke English only fairly well and possessed just enough talent for the job, but who was extremely well liked by all who met him.¹⁸ Of Miss Laucher we know nothing.

The TRAP director, Olin Dows, visited Kentucky to see the progress of the work, and he and the artist appeared to enjoy each other's company and agree on many artistic things. On being informed that he would be forced to give up two of his assistants for lack of government money, Long replied that he felt he could do without any of them from

¹⁶ Long to Dows, 3 September 1935, NA, ATL.

¹⁷ Long, Confessions, 62.

¹⁸ Ibid., 76-78.

that point, as his own finishing work was all that remained to do and that they had not been as efficient as he had hoped. Long added that there was a mention in Time magazine of his painting of John Jacob Niles in an exhibit.¹⁹ Niles was a noted Kentucky folk singer, composer, balladeer, and good friend of Long's.

Long had promised to send two of the lunettes for a Whitney Museum exhibition, but was unable to do so because of what appeared to be the terminal illness of his father, who fortunately recovered. Then, in November of 1936 there were several exchanges of letters in which the question of how to ship the long panels was discussed. Dows wanted them rolled; Long did not, fearing the paint would crack. He finally won out and had them shipped on stretchers.

All these Section mural commissions were hedged round with bureaucratic protocol but, probably because this one was so large, there was an unbelievable amount of correspondence on this project. Letters flew daily to various departments, businesses, photographers, suppliers of material, to the Supervising Architect, to the Director of Procurement, to the Postmaster General; there was constant Section-artist correspondence, both parties in some fear of disregarding a regulation, questions of bills paid and unpaid, statements from the artist with totals of hours worked, forms not filled out properly, mix-ups over various identification numbers; permissions from several people for

¹⁹ Long to Dows, 3 June 1936, NA, ASL.

identification numbers; permissions from several people for each stage of payment to the artist, and yet more red tape. When Rowan or Dows claimed to be busy, it was no exaggeration.

Long was again advised to contact Miss Brandeis who would help find assistants for this difficult job of installation.²⁰

All was finished at last, just in time for the great flood of January 1937.

Flood waters in the Post Office reached into some of the mural spaces. Some murals which had not yet been installed were stored in the basement and completely submerged.²¹ None of the larger panels had been shipped and were thus spared. The Supervising Architect ordered that the completely ruined horse race mural be burned.²²

Long's portrait of John Jacob Niles with his dulcimer had been in an exhibition at the J. B. Speed Art Museum and this painting was also damaged when found floating about in the museum basement.

However, the Post Office project was finally complete, and newspaper accounts, including a long undated one by Richard Renneisen in The Courier-Journal, were laudatory,

²⁰ Cecil H. Jones, Acting Chief TRAP to Long, 16 January 1937.

²¹ J. Elliott Riddle, Louisville Postmaster, to Procurement Division, Treasury Department, 9 February 1937.

²² Louis Simon, Supervising Architect, to the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General, 22 May 1937, NA, TSL.

and general reaction was favorable. The Treasury Department was pleased, according to Cecil H. Jones, who wrote his congratulations to Long: "I don't believe anyone could find any fault with any part of it. It was capably done, is beautiful in color and has a high standard of quality that puts it well-nigh above reproach".²³ Long himself noted, "To my great surprise the lighting on the long panels at Louisville turned out to be well nigh perfect. The reflection from the ceiling gives a beautifully soft indirect illumination".²⁴

Long was a bit disappointed in only one respect: he had hoped the murals would be accompanied by plaques giving the titles and artist. It was not until 1989 that the murals were first cleaned, at which time they were framed and identifying bronze plaques installed.

Frank Long deserves the last word:

The artist aims at no obvious social message in these works. It is his conviction that his own social attitude and concept are so inextricably bound up with any sincere and successful work he may do that they will inevitably be expressed in such work, and no less powerfully because of subtlety. Actually, these paintings are an attempt by the artist to acquaint the public who sees them with some of the activities on which their existence depends, and to tell through his own feelings about these activities. At the same time, he has tried to serve a secondary purpose: the decorative embellishment of the building.²⁵

²³ Cecil H. Jones, Acting Chief TRAP, to Long, 11 June 1937.

²⁴ Long to Dows, n.d.

²⁵ Frank Long, Explanation of Subject Matter of Murals in Louisville, Kentucky, Federal Building, n.d., NA, TD.

THE MOREHEAD POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 34 (Black and white version)

Figure: 35 (Color version)

County: Rowan

Artist: Frank W. Long

Title: The Rural Free Delivery

Date: 1939

Medium: Egg tempera on linen

Dimensions: 12' W x 4' H'

The Artist

Frank W. Long was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1906. Early in his career he moved to Berea, Kentucky. He felt at home there, since the people were so much like those in his native state. His father was an artist, and Frank was sent to the Art Institute of Chicago to study. Later he went to France and was captivated by the recent trend to abstract work. He could not indulge this fascination in his work for the Section, however, since the government approved only representational work that showed aspects of American life.

Long may have been the most reluctant muralist in the section's employ. He felt easel painting was his true forte, and he also liked to work on woodcuts and engravings--anything, it seemed, but murals. Early in his career he painted two murals for the new Margaret I. King library at the University of Kentucky. He always considered them the best of his murals. His other work for the Section included murals for post offices in Berea and Louisville, Kentucky, Crawfordsville, Indiana, Hagerstown, Maryland, and Drumright, Oklahoma.¹

In 1937 there was an offer from the Section for Long to head a vocational art therapy project at the Narcotic Farm in Lexington. Long was to decorate with murals and also hold classes in painting for the residents. He had some qualms about his teaching abilities, but was interested enough to agree. Unfortunately, the project was abandoned before it was started, much to Long's regret.²

Description of the Mural

The scene is a quiet moment on the porch of a small log house. The central figure, the mother, is seated in a rocker, reading aloud a letter to family members. Just

¹ For additional information on Frank Long, see the Berea and Louisville Post Office entries.

² Cecil H. Jones, Acting Chief TRAP to Long, 12 July 1937, NA, TSL; Long to Jones 10 July, 1937; NA, ASL.

possibly, the others were listening so intently because the mother was the only literate one and was, of necessity, the transmitter of news. She is the brightest spot in the picture, wearing a yellow dress, partly covered by a light blue apron pinned to the bodice. She wears sturdy brown shoes, suitable for hard work. At far left is a Post Office horse-drawn carriage departing along a winding road, on its way to the next farm.

By the left edge of the porch stands an elderly man with a moustache, wearing dark blue overalls, brown jacket and black brimmed hat. At his feet stands a dog, probably a beagle hound, his blend of black, beige and white coloring well rendered. Seated at the porch's edge is a man with a guitar, dressed in brown work clothes, neither working nor playing, but looking up, engrossed in the letter's contents.

To the right of the mother a gray cat is stretched out with its tail curled round a post. On the edge of the porch on the right side sits a boy in brown shorts, blue shirt and yellow straw hat. He is in an awkward position, one leg stretched out, the other one bent, as he twists around to hear the news. Around the corner at the right side of the house stands a hired man in overalls holding a hoe. He is in deep conversation with a young girl in pink, seated on a window ledge. The position of the man's head doesn't seem quite correct, but all other figures are very natural.

The house itself is small, constructed with logs and mortar in dovetail. It probably consists of one room and two

windows. The porch supports are simply trunks of young saplings with short branches remaining on them. The old man grasps one of these and a lantern is hung on another. On the outside wall of the house hang a bucket and washtub. There is little background but a line of blue mountains, which creates a sense of isolation.

In the same year, Bert Mullins painted a mural for the Morganfield Post Office (Fig. 37) which has similarities to this one--a family scene in front of an old farm house, with a Rural Free Delivery mail wagon receding in the distance. The resemblance is not surprising, since Mullins studied with Long and aspired to his artistic skills.

Long has an engaging writing style, and it seems appropriate here to include his account of the painting:

The mural was designed from memory of a similar group I once saw in Letcher County, Kentucky, a setting very like that surrounding Morehead. The occasion was the reading of a letter, by the mother of the family, which had just been received via R.F.D. from her son, a student in a Kentucky college.

In depicting the characters and the setting I have attempted to create universal mountain types rather than particular individuals, and a characteristic setting rather than an actual location. There was an effort to delineate types so familiar that the spectator would feel that he had seen each character, sometimes even to remembering their names. To this end, as in all my painting, I have worked without the use of models, depending on visual memory alone, which recreates types rather than individuals and which divests the objects of details unnecessary to a vivid impression of the whole scene.

All the other elements, as well as the characters here represented, are typical of life in the hills. The dog is a Red-bone Beagle hound; the cat an ordinary tabby seen everywhere; the

guitar, at present a ubiquitous instrument in this locality; the lantern, the bucket and the hoe, virtually symbols of an almost primitive agrarian existence.

The R.F.D. is our daily connection with the outside world. It brings possibly a daily newspaper, an occasional letter and the mail-order catalog. In the present instance, the letter is interesting enough to hold everyone's attention except that of the boy, hired to hoe tobacco, and the daughter of the family, who appear to be preoccupied with each other.³

The Section added that the characters and the details of the setting faithfully represent agrarian life in the hills.⁴

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

Despite the primitive appearance of this painting, Long has not forgotten his study of the Old Masters. The boy perched on the porch is in a typical Michelangelo twisted position. Comparisons can be found especially in the *ignudi* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. There is a likeness to the *ignudo* in the lower right corner of the scene of God separating the dark from the light. He twists his body in a similar way, suggesting that Long had not forgotten his academic training and showing his real interest and abilities.

³ Frank Long, statement to Section, n.d., N.A., ASL.

⁴ Information sheet from the Section, 1939.

There is some resemblance to Millet's peasants here, such as in a work titled Peasants Resting (1866), although the characters in the mural exhibit a stronger sense of independence.

Piero della Francesca's figures come to mind when considering the deliberate depiction of immobility. Of course, this stillness is a natural effect, since all the figures have stopped their activities to hear the letter. Nevertheless, from an artistic viewpoint, there is a link to Piero, even such radically different paintings as his The Resurrection (late 1450s) and others also, since this frozen figure effect is a hallmark of Piero's style.

At first glance, and with eyes half shut, it seems to have the form of a triptych. There are definitely three sections, a central figure, and eyes turn toward her from both sides. Long may have had no such idea in mind, but if Max Beckmann could paint many triptychs which do not in any way resemble medieval work, so could Long.

Long's brush stroke is very visible here, in contrast to some of his other work. He uses much hatching for shadow effects, both straight and curved. The mural could hardly be called inspiring, but then, he was totally weary of this type of work and perhaps not meticulous about it. The mural itself is badly in need of restoration. The colors are faded and the whole work looks very faint on the wall.

The artist was unusually knowledgeable about techniques in a number of media. Here he experimented with a process

which would simulate true fresco. To a "Prestboard" backing (favored by most of the mural artists) he applied several coats of gesso, attached a linen canvas and used a chalk ground on this to create a matte effect on the surface of the finished painting. This method meant the canvas could not be rolled but had to be shipped flat. Installing such a large mural was a difficult project under these circumstances and required the help of a friend and the post office janitor. For paint he used thin emulsion of egg tempera and obtained nuance of tone and color by hatching. As a finishing touch, soft rubber rollers were rolled over the entire surface to assure its adhesion to the wall. No varnish was used.⁵

Progression of the Project

Long had entered the competition for the Vicksburg, Mississippi, Post Office mural and did not win, but his sketch was so well thought of that he was offered a commission to paint a mural for Morehead.⁶

On receiving the sketch, Rowan professed himself pleased except for the figures of the two women. He felt the mother had been caricatured and the girl seated in the

⁵ Long, Confessions, 144.

⁶ Rowan to Long, 23 June 1938, NA, SL.

window should be more typical of a girl of the farm.⁷ In return he received a long letter from the artist, agreeing to modify these figures but explaining his intentions. A portion of it follows:

...I can only say I wish you people could come down to these parts and see for yourself the types of womenfolks we have. Generally the old ones have developed into living caricatures of what we might image [sic] when we think of old ladies, and the young ones, even on the farms, are pretty interesting to look at as regards pulchritude. Dress them in the latest styles, hide their hands and feet, seat them in a graceful pose, and I would defy anyone to distinguish them, at a distance of twelve feet, from something you might expect to come off Park Avenue.

The secret of the difference here between youth and age is probably the hellish existence most of these mountain farmwives endure. It puts lumps where once were curves. If they happen to get fat, as did this old girl, the cause is glandular; not luxurious living. It was this contrast I had in mind when I so gaily made the sketch. However, when it is returned, I shall try to make the old lady a little more prepossessing and the young one perhaps a little less so.⁸

Years later, Long felt shame and regret at having capitulated and made the changes. He felt he had sacrificed aesthetic integrity for material reward.⁹

Long sent the Section a photograph of the finished mural, as required. Most of the artists preferred to photograph their work in a studio, since, once hung high

⁷ Rowan to Long 11 August 1938, NA, SL.

⁸ Long to Rowan, 15 August 1938, NA, ASL.

⁹ Long, Confessions, 143.

over the Postmaster's door, the mural was difficult to photograph, being at an awkward angle for a camera view. It is still difficult.

There were problems to come, however. A helper damaged the canvas irretrievably by falling against it, making the friable gesso ground crack and rendering the mural unfit for use.

At the same time Long fell ill of an inflammation of the lung due to breathing too much formalin while spraying the ground on the canvas. While convalescent, he worked on a copy of the mural to replace the damaged one. It was installed and there was general approval of it by the Postmaster, the citizens of Morehead, and local newspapers.

It was a shock, then, to hear from Hattie Burns, the Postmistress, in March of 1939, that the new mural had suddenly fallen off the wall onto the floor with no warning. Long felt this was "well-nigh calamitous."¹⁰ There was much activity at the Section, as every possible defect was considered and analyzed. Was the shellac too thin? Was it frozen in transit? Was too much carbolic acid used? The Postmaster, W. E. Crutcher, said they had nothing but an eyesore and wrote many letters, blaming everyone.¹¹

Long did sympathize with the Postmaster, but he was concerned about his reputation. People would think he was

¹⁰ Long to Rowan, 11 March 1939.

¹¹ Postmaster W. E. Crutcher to Fourth Assistant Postmaster General, 25 September 1939.

bungling and incompetent.¹² The problem was determined to be a bad batch of adhesive. Coming off a strike, the factory workers were careless in their haste to catch up production.

Rowan obtained repair funds and let the project out for bids. Long applied and was chosen. He was paid extra to paint this mural, but found it a big bore. It probably was, but he was not the first artist to make copies. Did Gilbert Stuart get tired of painting Washingtons? Not while he could sell them. Certainly, Ingres was obsessive in this regard, never satisfied until he had produced many trial efforts and copies of the one he liked best. In earlier centuries it was a common practice for an artist to make copies of portraits that the buyer wished to give as gifts. At any rate, Long wrote Rowan that he took great care and found that he had developed more skill since he painted the first one and that the mural was installed on July 30.¹³

The last communication on this troublesome matter came from Long, writing from a camouflage unit at Fort Meade, which he called "a damned fine organization." However, he points out that he was still not fully paid, since he didn't fill in forms for non-existent helpers.¹⁴

¹² Long to Rowan, 30 December 1939, NA, ASL.

¹³ Long to Rowan, 3 August 1942, NA, SL

¹⁴ Long to Rowan, 2 October 1942, NA, ASL.

MORGANFIELD POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 36 (Black and white version)

Figure: 37 (Color version)

County: Union

Artist: Bert Mullins

Title: Rural Free Delivery

Date: 1939

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 5' W x 4' H

The Artist

Bert Mullins was born April 29, 1901, in Disputanta, a little town in Kentucky. He attended Berea College, where he became a master turner but had little training in painting. He turned to other teachers, primarily C. B. Clough and Richard Miller, both of whom seem to be untraceable. But it was as assistant to the artist, Frank Long, that he gained most of his expertise in the medium of mural painting.

Long has described him as striking, with straight black hair and black eyes.¹ Long has written a book, Confessions of a Depression Muralist, which contains much information on Mullins.

Bert Mullins and his wife, Eva, settled in Disputanta and built their own house of local mountain stone. At one point, Mullins sold the house and went to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to study with Richard Miller.

Frank Long soon became aware that Mullins was jealous of Long's success and was becoming unfriendly. When, in later years, Mullins listed those under whom he had studied, he never mentioned Frank Long. This hurt Long deeply, since they had worked so well together for so long, but he concluded there was nothing he could do about it.

Mullins painted murals for the Glendon Hotel in Richmond, and for several churches, including the First Christian Church in Mount Vernon. Under the Section of Fine Arts Program, he completed two murals for the Post Office at Campbellsville, Kentucky. Under the Treasury Relief Art Program, and with two other painters, he worked as an assistant to Frank Long on the ten Louisville murals.²

¹ Long, Confessions, 26.

² Information on these murals are in the Louisville entry.

Description of the Mural

An excellent summing up of this project was made by the artist himself in a letter to the Section:

"...I have tried to depict a part of the great service rendered to our rural people by the mails. Many rural people depend largely on the mails for much of their shopping, especially for clothing and small hardware. This I have symbolized by the man examining the contents of the parcel post package.

The interest of the family group in the reading of the letter is a portrayal of the closely bound unit of the rural family. The characters and landscape are typical of Kentucky rural communities. The placement of characters in relation to the road is symbolic of the close connection that the mail makes between them and other communities."

The details validate the artist's description and bear out his intentions. The figures are placed in the foreground, spread across the canvas. At far left sits a woman with gray hair, wearing a dull orange dress. Her head is bent, as her attention is focused on stirring ingredients in a yellow bowl on her lap.

The figures at left are all seated on a wooden porch, and behind the seated woman is a blue dishpan hanging on the outside wall of the house. A white framed door leads into the structure. Through the doorway can be seen a mullioned window framed in white, while the whole house and porch are rendered in a yellow-beige tint.

Next to the woman sits a man with gray hair and moustache and darker complexion (presumably from working in the fields). He wears a pale blue shirt with deeper blue overalls--a typical farmer's attire. Hardly noticed at

first, it soon becomes apparent he is reading a letter of a greyish color.

Between these two stands a younger woman with brown hair. She wears a blue skirt, rose blouse and olive-tan shoes. She places a hand on a shoulder of each of the seated pair. The figure farthest right in this group is a young boy, seated on the edge of the porch, facing right but with his head turned to the viewer. He holds a long pole, aimlessly stretching it out on the ground, while a brown and white dog looks up at him.

Receiving a letter is no doubt an unusual occurrence and it may be a pleasant one, such as welcome news from a son in the city. A viewer may, on the other hand, come to a logical conclusion that the letter the man holds does not contain good news. This could be inferred from the gestures and expressions of the group. The seated woman appears to be burying herself in a necessary task to keep her emotions under control, the man crosses his legs and appears stoic, while the standing woman, touching the older couple, appears to be offering comfort. The boy looks in need of it as well, as his whole posture indicates curiosity and a lack of understanding. The viewer could very well be wrong, since the Section frowned on pessimistic subjects, and the mural has the neutral title of Rural Free Delivery.

A postal wagon is centrally located on a curving road which bisects the painting. The mail has been delivered, and the wagon is receding into the distance and thus is seen

from the back. It is an unstable-looking contraption with large thin wheels, and the disproportionately high, dark enclosed portion has small windows on back and sides. It is drawn by a single horse, and the postal carrier cannot be seen. The dull yellow dirt road passes by a neat house at the back, white with yellow trim and brown roof, nestled into hills of various greens.

The composition of this mural may imply that there are two families depicted, since there are two gray rural mailboxes with little red flags on the right side of the road and in the foreground. A. Baker is the name on one of them. A man seated on a brown box, wearing a white shirt, shadowed with gray, blue overalls, and a tan brimmed hat, scrutinizes the tools he is unwrapping from a brown parcel post box just delivered.

At far right a second boy sits on a gray sawhorse, watching, braced on his hand and leaning forward to see better. He has brown hair and wears a dull red shirt and slacks of a burnt sienna color. Between the two figures a brown drayhorse with blinders stands patiently waiting, perhaps to be shod.

The background is a well-planned blend of the low green hills, wheat fields and stands of trees. There is a very high horizon line; above it is a pale blue sky with slashes of gray and cobalt, but little of it can be seen, especially at left, where the porch roof cuts off almost all view of it.

This rural delivery is made to a fairly settled region, but in the Appalachian area, history was made by two hundred seventy-four brave women who set out on muleback to climb the trails and descend into the hollows to bring the mail and were often the only contact mountain families had with the outside world.³

Style, Technique and Maintenance

The mural has an over-all mottled look. Pastel tones are used exclusively and the brushstrokes are visible. These tones are constantly altering, causing the viewer some feeling of uncertainty. These factors create a rather misty, unclear look. This effect may have been his original intention, but the fading over the years has increased the vagueness and lack of definition, which Mullins could not have foreseen.

The mural could be attractive and unobtrusive, and doubtless it was once, but today it is a bit difficult to make out the details, and the whole right side of the mural is almost washed out. The result is an overall yellow color which could be compared with works like Gauguin's The Yellow Christ, except that here the color is much more subdued. One could say the background echoes Cézanne, and the family group at the left has some resemblance to the Le Nain

³ Blakey, 63.

brothers and their scenes of peasant life, but such conjectures are unlikely, considering that the primary art education Mullins had was what he learned on the job from Long, and European masterpieces would have been truly foreign to him.

The mural does owe something to Frank Long's Louisville murals, although the figures, while realistic, are thinner and smaller than Long's. The whole work resembles his teacher's naturalistic style, and the balance and perspective are technically correct. Mullins did not, however, show any hint of Long's tendency to abstraction.

Mullins provided the Section with the necessary information, but unfortunately that page has been lost. All that can be ascertained is that the medium is oil on canvas and that he used linseed oil. His method of working can only be surmised.

Progression of the Project

Bert Mullins was invited to accept this commission on the basis of designs he submitted for the Vicksburg, Mississippi, mural. He was to be paid \$150. Mullins was glad to accept. He was in Berea at the time and planned to visit Morganfield. He already had preliminary designs and was sending these to the Section along with photos of the Campbellsville murals, which had just been installed.⁴Rowan

⁴ Rowan to Mullins, 23 June 1938, NA, TSL; Rowan to

indicated that he preferred the Rural Free Delivery as a subject. He approved of the color sketch but with his usual caveats. The landscape was treated in too casual a manner, and "...the rather hazy approach indicated in the color sketch gives little appeal."⁵ He also wanted the figures on the right moved more to the center. Mullins was glad to oblige.

Returning from Puerto Rico in February (where he seemed to go fairly often) Rowan noted the improvement, but in regard to the old man on the left, "...his left leg from knee down does not seem convincingly related to the body."⁶ The right knee of the boy on the right needed similar attention. However, "As you know, I call your attention to these details in a spirit of friendly cooperation."⁷

Rowan continued to worry after the installation. He questioned the use of the name "A. Baker" on the mail box. Was this chosen at random or was it the Postmaster's name?⁸ [One of the Section's laws was a ban on any advertisement in a mural, and Rowan didn't want to flout it and cause trouble. The Section was always operating on a thin margin of approval and couldn't afford controversy of even the most minor sort.]

⁵ Mullins, 9 December 1938, NA, TSL.

⁵ Rowan to Mullins, 9 December 1938, NA, TSL.

⁶ Rowan to Mullins, 14 February 1939

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Rowan to Mullins, 3 May 1939, NA, ASL.

Mullins assured him it was not the name of any person in particular. Baker, he said, is a very common name in Kentucky, and he intentionally used one initial and no given name for the reason mentioned.

Sarah B. Clements, acting Postmaster, found it perfectly satisfactory to her and to all who had seen it. She wrote the Section that she was enclosing a short clipping from the local paper about the mural. She seems to have been most susceptible to Mullins's charming personality, as she added, "Mr. Mullins appears to be a courteous gentleman and an able artist and I assure you his visit here was very beneficial to the appearance of this office."⁹

Six months later the Section was in receipt of a disturbing communication. The mural had pulled loose from the wall and was drawing away from its frame.¹⁰ What to do? Rowan wrote to Mullins, saying he should fix it.¹¹

Mullins, of course, was distressed and said he used every precaution. He learned the trouble was in the adhesive (Dextrine). Whether he was at fault or not, he offered to re-install it, but asked for advice on the adhesive and also wished to postpone the work, since he was

⁹ Sarah B. Clements, Acting Postmaster, n.d.

¹⁰ Fourth Assistant Postmaster General Walter Myers to W. E. Reynolds, Commissioner of Public Buildings, 11 February 1942.

¹¹ Rowan to Mullins, 17 February 1942, NA, TSL.

over three hundred miles away from Morganfield and the weather was poor.¹²

Rowan agreed and suggested use of white lead and Darmar varnish as adhesive, a combination that was most commonly used.¹³ And there the matter rested. Today the mural appears to be very firmly attached to its wall.

It is interesting to note that this mural, painted in 1939, has the same title as one of the ten murals in the Louisville, Kentucky, Court House, painted by his friend and teacher, Frank Long in 1937.

Long shows the mail carrier in front of his cart, preparing to deposit mail in the boxes. Long apparently had no qualms about proper names, since his three mail boxes are marked Clark, Moore, and, oddly, Mullins.

A newspaper article on this mural from 1985 quotes Jean Hoskins, Morganfield Postmaster at that date, as saying she employed a rural mail carrier named A. Baker. In her opinion, rural delivery hadn't changed much. She added that she intended to find an artist to restore the mural, because "a lot of it has really faded."¹⁴

Apparently her plan was never carried out, since the mural shows no sign of restoration.

¹² Mullins to Rowan, 9 March 1942.

¹³ Rowan to Mullins, 16 March 1942, NA, ASL. It seems likely that the same batch of adhesive was used in both Morganfield and Morehead, since both were finished in 1939.

¹⁴ "Fading Mural," The Union County Advocate, 30 January 1985, pages 1 and 5.

THE PADUCAH COURT HOUSE MURAL

Figure: 38. View of courtroom

Figure: 39. Early Town

Figure: 40. The River

County: McCracken

Artist: John Folinsbee

Date: 1939

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 8'1" W x 11'5" H (each)

The Artist

John Folinsbee had a difficult life but also had a vibrant personality and exhibited no self-pity. He was born 14 March 1892 in Buffalo, New York. As a young boy on vacation at Sea Cliff, Long Island, in 1906, he was stricken with polio while swimming. A week later, his older brother Kendall was killed when he dived off a pier into shallow water and hit a rock. It is hardly surprising that the artist's feeling about the sea was ambivalent. He knew too well its dangers, but he was still fascinated by it. The majority of his paintings include some view of the water.

Folinsbee was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Friends said they seldom noticed it because of his own calm acceptance of it and his cheerful attitude.

He first studied in New Jersey with Jonas Lie, then at the Art Students League in New York. That was a short stay and he went on to Woodstock where he had the added instruction of John F. Carlson and Vincent Dumond.

He married Ruth Baldwin, a wealthy woman, had two children, and made a trip to France, but seemed to feel no influence from the "modern" painting being seen there.

Folinsbee's most important training was at the Woodstock School under Birge Harrison. Harrison wrote a book on landscape painting which Ruth gave her husband. It was this book which prompted Folinsbee to study at Woodstock. Like most of the government program painters, he had learned quickly under skilled teachers.

Folinsbee soon moved his family to New Hope, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, on the banks of the Delaware River, where he joined an artists colony in the town. It became a very popular place for artists to study and practice.

He lived by the river, continuing his need to include water. He was no recluse, however, and was recognized by a number of exhibition entries, one being at the National Academy of Design, the prestigious artists' organization. In addition to the Paducah work, Folinsbee also painted murals for the Post Office and Court House in Freeland, and

Burgettstown, both in Pennsylvania, on commission from the section.

His Teachers

Jonas Lie. Not a native American, he was born in Oslo, Norway in 1880. Once in the United States, he attended the National Academy of Design and the Cooper Union School of Art. His field was landscape painting, with a tendency to Impressionist effects, and he was very successful. He won a medal at the Saint Louis Exposition of 1904, and his works are seen at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point and in the collections of Franklin Roosevelt and of Crown Prince Olav of Norway.

Birge Harrison. This is the man who was valued at Woodstock more as a teacher than a painter. He had a long distinguished career. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1854, he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and then in 1875 he went to Paris and was taught by Carolus-Duran and Alexandre Cabanel. He won medals at three expositions: the Paris Exposition of 1889, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and the St. Louis Exposition of 1904. He was also the founder of the Woodstock summer school. The book he wrote on landscape painting became very popular and is today something of a classic.

Frank Vincent Dumond

Many good American painters owe much of their art education to him, as he taught at the Art Students League for a number of years. His own specialty was portrait painting, and he was much in demand for such work to which he gave an almost photographic distinction.

Description of the Murals

The Paducah paintings are in a handsome location in an impressive Federal court room, one on either side of a large, dark pedimented door facing the judge's bench and under a molding complete with classic details. The room's wall is stucco, with wide fluted pilasters at intervals, painted in an ivory color. These and the murals are bordered with blue-grey framing with triple insets. The murals are large enough not only to be seen but to be instantly recognizable for the scenes they portray.

The painting on the left of the door, Early Town, exhibits one of Folinsbee's artistic traits, namely, that his figures are always very clear, despite the strong, slashing brushstroke he used. It is a simple scene, portraying two men and a horse standing beside a bridge.

The foreground is bright with a wide area of yellow and green grasses, heavily shadowed in dark green. Cropped on the left is a blanket over a pole, perhaps for the horse. The horse is impressive, dark brown with convincing lighter highlights and beige tail. His head is lowered as he crops the grass. He stands in front of a tall sycamore tree of light olive bark, shaded with burnt sienna. There are several bare branches, but the artist's slashing brushstroke produces leaves of various shades of green and orange, indicating fall foliage.

Behind the horse stand two men at the end of the bridge. This bridge is a rather primitive affair, made of planks and wooden rails. It is in shades of gray and is also cropped, drawing attention to the two small men and the long vista of background.

The man on the left is all in gray--top hat, cape and cane; he has black sideburns. The second man with whom he is in conversation is much clearer and may or may not be Henry Clay. There was much debate on this point.

(The dissension caused by Folinsbee's intention to paint a new railroad roundhouse in Paducah caused assistant Peter Cook to write, "We substituted a version of Lewis and Clark standing under an oak tree, no doubt planning a negotiation with Indians, which nonsense proved to be acceptable to the Historical Society.")¹

¹ Peter Cook, in John Folinsbee (Dublin: Wm. L. Bauhan, Publisher, 1994), 87.

This man's features are clearer and he has a high forehead, long gray hair, black coat, and carries a cane in one hand and a top hat under his other arm.

The scene behind them is a street in a small town, with houses ranged along the left side, seeming to recede as they diminish in size, creating an accurate perspective and giving the impression of an isolated but civilized town surrounded by a kindly nature.

The first and largest building, directly behind the tree, is built with bricks of variegated reds. The roof is gray, as is the roof of a small porch on the front. The building (by some accounts meant to be the original McCracken County Court House) casts a large dark gray shadow onto the beige and dusty-looking road. In the center of the road, but at some distance, is a small stagecoach, tan with brown wheels and roof. A man manipulating two brown horses indicates that a team of horses is being changed.

This ostler is in blue top with brown slacks and is pulling on the bridle of one of the brown horses. There are two white horses hitched to the stagecoach apparently waiting patiently for release.

On both sides of the road are wide sidewalks. At the end of the road can be seen a stretch of blue river fronted by several trees in fall colors clustered around some small houses.

On the far bank of the river stand pale green trees and hills, with the tree foliage reflected in the water. There

is a rather large area of bright blue sky visible with drifting white clouds. The composition is well worked out, with the large sycamore's branches filing the canvas at the top and partially at the center, drawing attention to the men below.

The River, flanking the door on the right side, shows a river landing, with a sternwheeler close to it, a small red barge at left and, beyond it, a small towboat underway on the river. In the front right corner is a horse-pulled wagon.

Folinsbee has worked out the composition well here, also. Many of these features are at a diagonal, upper right to lower left--the sternwheeler being the most noticeable, but the barge just left of it is on the same line. The landing itself seems to be in hilly stages, separated by shadows which are on the diagonal, as is the horse and wagon.

The diagonal is partially offset by a crude ramp leading up to the small boat, as well as by two gangways from the steamboat to the shore, all on an opposing diagonal line. Again, the artist has cropped features on both sides of the painting, giving a strong effect of an open composition.

The central feature of this painting is the sternwheeler, in the usual white color, including the thin stanchions between decks but with the divisions between its three floors and pilot house a light brown, as is the lower deck, the gangways, and the paddle wheel itself.

The pilot house on top has a green roof resembling that of a pagoda and is situated just behind two tall, thin, black smokestacks. These do not appear to have any ornamentation, but are both billowing out white steam which turns to gray as it rises and covers a large portion of the upper canvas. The boat's name, "Paducah", is seen in red capital letters on the white wall of the lowest deck.

There are various indistinct figures working around the steamboat, and the colors of their clothing are unclear, as well. Several workers on the boat seem disinclined to do anything much, but one is rolling up a bale, splashed by brown shadows from the deck above. On the shore end of the gangway are two other figures, bent under the weight of the blue bales they are carrying onto the boat. The boat in the distance is smaller, with fewer decks, but its smokestacks are putting out a good deal of steam.

The small boat, or barge, left and close to the shore, is an unusual shape but has no distinguishing features. The hull is red, the rim around the top is beige and the interior a darker tone. The walkway onto the boat is a darker beige, indistinguishable from the color of the shore which is bordered by gray and brown rocks of a geometric

shape. This color scheme was probably planned to give cohesion without distracting attention from the steamboat. The horse and spring wagon are all in dark, verging on black. The horse has its head lowered as if in search, and a dark-skinned man in white with a yellow cap works on the wagon, which has a raised chair-like seat at the back.

The water is rather pale at the shoreline, as it flows around the rocks, then changes abruptly to a very dark green depicting the shadow of the boat. Beyond the sternwheeler the color lightens and becomes short streaks of pale blue and light blue, with the occasional green streak. On the opposite shore is a long horizontal section likely to be a sand bar. Just behind it is a line of dark green trees which are reflected in the water near the shore. Also reflected is the billowing steam, and this duplication creates a unifying effect. At far left is a meadow, with distant trees behind it. What can be seen of the sky consists of horizontals of light gray and deep blue.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

John Folinsbee is not easy to classify as an artist. An exhibition catalogue of his work is subtitled, "Following His Own Course" and that is what he did. What was in vogue at the time interested him not at all. He and his wife were young when they settled in New Hope, Pennsylvania, where he

learned more technique from Edward Redfield. Redfield was an important American Impressionist and of the group of Bucks County painters. Many different works were in evidence at New Hope, but Folinsbee's were largely the river, genre paintings of scenes he saw every day, and landscapes. "His best work was done after he left this style--the brush more flowing, bolder and more personal."²

It may be that he had so many teachers and had learned from them all that he took aspects of each one's specialty and blended them with his own style. He was an extremely confident painter. He often rearranged elements in a landscape to suit his sense of composition. He didn't want a dead reproduction of nature.

The artist had also learned much from all his study of artists of earlier times. From Edgar Degas he had absorbed the idea of a kind of zigzag composition that keeps the viewer's eye moving from one side of the canvas to the other. One example of Degas's use of this method can be seen in his Ballet Rehearsal (Adagio) (1876). Another trait of Degas's was cropping, cutting off the picture in the middle of a figure or object. This characteristic can also be seen in this painting of Degas's and Folinsbee was very prone to its use.

² John Folinsbee, 1892-1972: Following His Own Course (Newman Galleries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) 2 March to 7 April, 1990. Exhibition catalogue, 9.

Water is a common feature in his paintings and little significance can be attached to resemblances. Nevertheless, Folinsbee's color and clarity do seem to echo John Sloan's The Wake of the Ferry of 1907.

The ocean took over almost completely when the family moved to Maine, and Folinsbee began to produce scenes of rocks, islands, houses on the shore, storms, many of these with dramatic lighting and waves that clearly show the power and depth of the sea. They are fine work, almost equal to Homer's similar work in the same place. Folinsbee's style in Maine was dramatically different from his earlier work. In Maine, water is not so peaceful and storms can be truly frightening. It must have awakened Folinsbee's dormant fear of the sea.

Like most of the Section painters, Folinsbee was well acquainted with the work of the Old Masters, and had either deliberately learned or stored in his subconscious certain of their techniques. His Glass Blowers, very dark with half bare men lighted by the red fire and the fire's reflections bears some resemblance to Rubens's Vulcan's Forge (about 1614).

Folinsbee's style changed dramatically in Maine. It became darker and richer, with more intensity. "One day I suddenly realized that the waves of a heavy sea duplicate what El Greco did in painting the heavy folds of his

drapery. There are quick turns in both, the darkest dark against the lightest light. In draperies the texture was most visible at that spot."³ What he had seen in Harrison's work was put to good use here, one of his teacher's techniques being to avoid sharp edges. Light falling on the rim of an object actually diffuses at the edge and doesn't delineate the object sufficiently to stop the viewer's eye.

Folinsbee painted from memory, as did Frank Long, but he knew his subject well enough to do so because his memory was phenomenal. He hoped to give the general impression of a scene and the emotion it invoked in him. There was no longer a trace of Impressionism, but he developed his own method of contouring, a more flowing, and a more personal effect.

Folinsbee also painted handsome portraits in the Titian tradition. He exhibited in some prestigious galleries but probably not as many as he could have, since he did not care to use a dealer. He wanted to sell directly to people who came to him. He disliked what art was becoming, with so many fads and "isms" and novelties, such as Abstract Expressionism, and had no use for them.

Folinsbee saw the Armory Show but was decidedly unimpressed. His work at this time was largely landscape. Some of his snow scenes foreshadow the work of Andrew Wyeth in their use of chiaroscuro and depiction of texture.

³ Ibid., 24.

The "American Impressionists" who did attempt one of the new styles were doing merely decorative work, he felt, while Robert Henri and his group, "The Eight", were just beginning their realistic school.

It is perhaps unfortunate that Folinsbee never had close contact with this group because his work was often the rural equivalent of "The Eight's" urban genre scenes. Folinsbee's landscapes, careful studies of working men at their tasks, and views of the natural beauty of the land made him an ideal choice for the type of mural the Section had in mind--the American Scene.

As to his method of working, he painted the whole canvas at once, not centering on one part first, and the underpainting thus applied he kept very thin so there was no danger of cracking. He experimented with new chemical colors, but discarded them. Folinsbee preferred simplicity in everything. Occasionally he liked to paint on masonite rather than canvas because the paint flowed so smoothly, like water.

The court room walls were covered with acoustic plaster, which he thought rough and too absorbent for adherence. The Superintending Architect, Louis Simon, thought it could be covered with masonite; otherwise, replastering was the only alternative. Folinsbee hoped the painting would be cleaned by an expert. It had no varnish and he recommended raw potato, to loosen dirt, and wiping with a damp cloth.

Progression of the Project

Bringing this enterprise to fruition was one of the most difficult achievements of the Section. Controversy surrounded it from the announcement of the murals' subjects. At first, all seemed normal. Folinsbee was selected to paint them and he made a trip to Paducah and talked to local historians and writers about the city. The artist wrote to Rowan, "River sketch shows one of the famous old steamboats at the point where the Tennessee and Ohio join. The other represents present industrial life of Paducah--the railroad shops, which I am told are now the first or second largest in the country. These two main themes struck me as most vital."⁴

Folinsbee felt they would celebrate Paducah as a center of commerce and trade. He was not one of the many Americans who distrusted machines. He welcomed their benefits and, perhaps he was glad to have something new to paint.

But he reckoned without Mrs. Martha Grassham Purcell. She was horrified at the idea of a dirty, smoky roundhouse representing her fair city. There is only one letter in the files upholding Folinsbee's conception. Apparently from a private citizen, Mrs. Charlette de Werthern, the letter states that the murals must be meaningful to the present. She ends by saying, "The attitude of the Middle West toward art is not very encouraging, I know, but we are growing and

⁴ Folinsbee to Rowan 12 November 1938, NA, SL.

changing and...at worst the feeling is only indifference.⁵"

1 Mrs. Purcell set out to prevent what she saw as a disaster for Paducah. It seems that she was behind the barrage of letters sent out by various groups. It would be tedious to repeat them all, but they included The Paducah Garden Club, The Mothers Club, The P.T.A., The Magazine Club, The United Daughters of the Confederacy, The Kalasophic Club, and others, all indignant about the proposed roundhouse mural.

The Louisville Courier-Journal of 25 November 1938 carried a long story of the controversy on its front page, and three days later, one of the editors, attempting to be judicious, considered the possibility that the women might be right.⁶ The City Editor of the Paducah Sun-Democrat of 27 November 1938 said "Personally, I see no need for the murals at all, and look upon them as a waste of the public money".⁷

Asked for suggestions, Mrs. Purcell wrote Rowan that she had taken a poll and the response was one hundred per cent for pioneer history.⁸ Many of the letters from these heartbroken women are very effusive. They call upon proper

⁵ Charlotte de Werthern to Admiral Peoples, 18 November 1938; Folinsbee to Rowan, 12 November 1938.

⁶ "Club Women are Right", editorial in The Courier-Journal, 28 November 1938.

⁷ City Editor Henry Ward, Paducah Sun-Democrat, NA, SL.

⁸ Mrs. Purcell to Rowan, 19 November 1938.

feelings in the human heart; they plead to show their youth the deeds that made our nation; it will bring peace, and so on.

There was an odd offshoot of this brouhaha taking place in Louisville. Adele Brandeis wrote, saying everyone seemed to believe the murals were under the control of the WPA, and since she was the local head of the WPA/FAP, she was being bombarded with letters, begging her to do something.⁹

Rowan wrote Folinsbee, saying he understood the artist's dislike of painting some historical scene which had been done over and over, yet they want to please everyone. Rowan pointed out that being obstinate would not help Folinsbee's reputation.¹⁰

Mrs. Purcell had found a subject which would make everyone happy! George Rogers Clark, "the Hannibal of the Ohio," claiming land from Indians would be perfect. Finding Rowan not convinced, she wrote Rear Admiral C. J. Peoples, Director of the Procurement Division of the Treasury, a very long and impassioned letter putting forth her version of Paducah's history as it concerned Clark.

Rowan was beginning to have trouble standing up to this barrage and wrote Adele Brandeis that he hardly knew what to do. "Indians shooting at white men from behind trees will

⁹ Adele Brandeis to Rowan, 28 November 1938.

¹⁰ Rowan to Folinsbee 2 December 1938.

not prove more uplifting".¹¹

Folinsbee said he was appalled by new evidence of Mrs. Purcell's drive against his mural and regrets the embarrassment to the office. "I should like to have him [the judge] know, however, that I considered the subjects proposed by Mrs. Purcell from every angle and rejected them...because they seemed inappropriate for a hall of justice. The subjects--of Clark's surprise attack on the Indians and the subsequent purchase of the land for a mere fraction of its value...are hardly to be commended as justice--to the Indians. I believe my point of view will be understood by the judge...".¹²

Rowan must have been somewhat cheered by a column from the Paducah Sun-Democrat by Fred G. Neuman. He agreed with the Section that Clark had no direct connection with Paducah but was claimed by a hundred cities. He died before Paducah was named or platted and he had no more place on the mural than the man in the moon. Irwin S. Cobb backed up these statements, saying Clark only passed the site of the town before there was any town.¹³

The murals were finally installed and the Postmaster wrote "We are sure that the greater majority of spectators

¹¹ Rowan to Adele Brandeis, 28 April 1939.

¹² Folinsbee to Rowan, 1 May 1939.

¹³ Fred G. Neuman to Folinsbee, n.d.; Irwin S. Cobb to Fred G. Neuman, 23 March 1939.

approve them, and they add to the looks of the room".¹⁴

As expected, there were still complaints. One man wrote in a newspaper that he was anxious to hear the reaction from local river men to the steamer the artist has pictured. He believed the artist had pictured the steamboat moored to the bank with no means of propulsion, there was no provision for turning the pilot's wheel, and other objections of a more technical nature.¹⁵

There were other citizens who didn't think that the landing and the workers should be portrayed at all. Fred G. Neuman defended their inclusion, saying the river folk had cherished memories of the scene. "They were not a rough and rowdy element, these men whose names still sweep down the years--the Fowlers, the Owens, the Pells, the Lawsons, the Crumbaughs, the Murrays, the Massengales--names woven into the town."¹⁶

Was Mrs. Purcell reconciled to the fact? By no means. One of her cohorts had many complaints about details, such as the presence of a hill that never existed, inaccuracies in the court house, and so on, and even the rumor that the man in the frock coat was intended to be the brother of George Rogers Clark, William Clark, who, with Merriweather

¹⁴ Postmaster Fred Acker to Rowan 14 September 1939, NA ASL.

¹⁵ Burgess Scott in column "Off the Record", no source, n.d.

¹⁶ Fred G. Neuman, "Sidelights on Paducah" column in The Paducah Sun-Democrat, n.d.

Lewis, had explored the Northwest Territory, failed to mollify any of them.¹⁷ Mrs. Puryear wrote again to claim the Mr. Folinsbee couldn't paint figures; and another letter suggested that the murals be replaced with paintings by a local artist.¹⁸ Folinsbee was forced under pressure to paint a substitute mural, Early Town. Rowan sent courteous replies to all, but it was clear that he was irked to a high degree.

There were a number of clashes of opinion between the section and residents of other towns about the suitability of murals, but the Paducah problem was one of the most widely known.

John Folinsbee died in 1972. His was a very full life, spent in doing what he loved. He had the gift of being able to express through his painting the mood of the scene and his own delight in it. A handsome man, who liked to be called Jack, he overcame his disabilities through a serene acceptance of them and an appreciation of what he did have. He seems to have been, at this distance, an admirable character.

As an artist, John Folinsbee was one of those painters whose work embodied the American Scene and set the stage for the government murals of the 1930s. His last work, titled

¹⁷ Mrs. Puryear to Rowan, n.d.

¹⁸ Mrs. Puryear to Rowan, n.d.

Zero Morning, speaks of his optimistic nature. Instead of a dreary winter scene he concentrates on the brilliant winter light, hoping to raise the spirits of the viewer. Folinsbee never forgot what Millet said: "Technique should always hide itself modestly behind the thing expressed".¹⁹

¹⁹

John Folinsbee, 14.

PINEVILLE POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 41

County: Bell

Artist: Edward Benedict Fern

Title: Kentucky Mountain Mail en Route

Date: 1942

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 12' W x 5' H

The Artist

It is fortunate that we have access to letters of at least some of the artists responsible for these murals. Otherwise, we would have little or no sense of the artist's personality or his way of thinking. In Fern's case, they go far toward explaining the problems that arose between him and the Section.

Fern was born in Milford, Ohio, in 1909 and lived in Louisville at some time. He studied at the Cincinnati Art Academy, the Herron Art Institute, and The Pennsylvania

Academy of the Fine Arts. Known primarily as a portraitist, he received high praise locally. "Accurate likenesses and lifelike poses make Fern's work outstanding."¹

A Pineville artist, Robert Mason Combs, was asked to comment on the Pineville mural and said he had been in the Army and so had never met Fern, but that his "elements of composition, drawing, design and color are masterfully handled in his distinct style."²

Fern was noted especially for his portraits of many prominent families. He was named as one of the nation's top portraitists at one time. His work was shown in many exhibitions both before and after he produced this mural for Pineville, Kentucky. He also painted landscapes, two of which were hung during the 1950s in the Senate Dining Room in Washington.³

He spent his later years painting in Hawaii, where he continued his work which included a mural of The Last Supper using Hawaiian models. For the Section, he painted a mural in the New Albany Post Office, Mississippi, and was also a WPA artist. Fern died in 1966 at the age of fifty-seven.

¹ Tim L. Cornett, in Part Two of an article on the Pineville mural in The Pineville Sun, 12 March 1987, 1.

² Ibid., unnumbered page.

³ Ibid., 1

Description of the Mural

This mural is, like most of the Post Office paintings, a long horizontal rectangle over the Postmaster's door. The first impression bears out the evaluations mentioned above, in that the technical aspects of painting have been carefully observed.

The painting is rather dark, but intentionally so. It shows a mail carrier on horseback in the center. He wears a khaki shirt and cap with blue trousers. (The model for the mailman was a painter named Alois Fabry, a minor point but of interest, since he worked as assistant to Frank Long on the ten Louisville murals, and information about him is sparse.)

The horse is white but so deeply shadowed it appears gray. The horse is encumbered with a package tied to its side and a sack of mail placed behind the saddle. At left, a woman in yellow dress and holding a nude baby in one arm reaches out her other arm to take a letter the man is bending forward to offer her. She stands ankle-deep in the curving stream from which the horse is drinking. Her figure is backed by a large gray angled rock with dark foliage at the base.

At right is a girl standing on the opposite shore of the stream, barefoot, dressed in pink, and wearing a white sunbonnet, matched by white trim on her dress. She waves a letter, apparently having come to meet the mail carrier and give it to him. Several levels of hills provide the

background, in various greens and yellows and interspersed with small dark trees, but what is most striking about this work is the deep blue sky. It is a bright, although misty, blue near the horizon and deepens to a blue-black shade at the top.

One architectural feature does detract from the mural's effect. During a later renovation (during which the post office was moved to a new building and the building containing the mural became the city hall), the service counter was extended, causing an angled white section to intrude on the bottom left, cutting off part of the woman's leg.

It was not universally admired at the time, as letters to the newspaper prove. The editor himself was opposed to it, critical of spending government money for art in wartime. He also felt the scene depicted looked like something "out west" rather than our own mountains. He was answered by a letter from the Pineville Postmaster, Rev. J. A. McCord, who defended the work and added that "The artist told me he got the idea for this picture in Lee County, Ky. The name on the letter being delivered, is Miss Joyce Hamilton, Delvintia, Ky."⁴

The whole work points out the difficulties of mail delivery in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky. There is a strong sense of isolation, with no dwelling

places visible. The viewer feels that these women have walked some distance to meet the mail at a designated spot. No rural carriage could cope with the rugged terrain. It required an equally rugged horse and mailman, and the work stands as a tribute to the dedication and endurance of postal workers.

Style and Technique

This mural seems to validate the praise received by other work of Fern's. There are no obvious flaws, and the simplicity of the design makes it memorable. The composition is a classic one, with the major interest in the center, flanked by auxiliary figures. The artist has left a good deal of space between each of them, a technique which adds to the effect of isolation, lack of neighborly assistance, and the self-reliance which these mountain people must possess. The mural accents the fact that the mail is the only link with the world beyond the mountains, the only dependable tie for this still isolated area.

There is a well-planned use of arms here which ties the composition together. The woman at left stretches her arm far out to receive the letter which the mailman in turn stretches down to give her. Her other arm is curved about the baby to hold it close to her, providing a contrast which is completely natural. On the right, the arm motif is

continued, as the girl in pink holds her letter high in the air, and there is a sense that she is waving it to attract the man's attention. There is an excitement in her stance, a suggestion that she is calling to him, and her other arm is brought forward in a rather agitated position. Although her figure is smaller than the others' because of her position in the middle distance, her activity gives weight to the right side.

The color, although realistic, is quite handsome. It is strongly affected by the shadowed areas, which are numerous. The light appears to be coming from the direction of the picture plane and probably represents the setting sun. Gray predominates, against the deep blue of the sky, with the girls' dresses creating bright accents at left and right.

The stream itself reflects the setting sun and is in various shades of blue and gray, lighter in the distance where the sun strikes it, and darker in the foreground where the woman's feet and horse's feet create small, swirling eddies, and the girl on the right casts a darker shadow on the stream. The brushwork is smooth, with slight evidence of it except to delineate the eddies in the stream.

Little expression is seen on the figures' faces, but this is typical of most of these murals. The positions, clothing, and gestures are usually what serve to represent their condition, and the people themselves act as a microcosm of a larger community or group of people in

similar situations. The excellent perspective and proportions here only add to this impression.

A suggestion has been made that the woman at left bears some resemblance to Soviet art, especially sculpture, in her stance and gesture. There are too many other factors to offset this idea. She is, despite being a mountain woman, not at all brawny or aggressive. She is delicate, feminine and nurturing. A viewer is more apt to see her as a modern Madonna and Child.

There is a painting by the Italian artist Vanni which has something in common with this one. The name of it is The Madonna delle Pappa (about 1600), and the Mother there is holding the nude Christ Child about the waist with her right arm, much as in the mural, and her left arm is stretched out to take something from a tray an angel is holding out to her.⁵ This painting has an outdoor setting, with the figures surrounded by soft green foliage. Purdy certainly had an academic background and can be expected to have retained certain images which might reappear in his own work and in his own style. This mural also has an outdoor setting, with the figures surrounded by foliage. The background seems to have the clarity of early Renaissance painting. The large rock behind the woman reminds one of Bellini, as in his painting of St. Francis of Assisi titled Saint Francis in Ecstasy (1485), and Giotto's

⁵ There is a variant of this work after Vanni in the J.B.Speed Museum, painted in reverse on copper.

work could have been the prototype for the low hills and surrounding trees, especially in some of the Arena Chapel frescoes in Padua (1305).

The figures stand out against the deep blue sky (a Maxwell Parrish sky?), and the horse bears a strong resemblance to Remington's The Norther (1900) and to Gutzon Borglum's The Fallen Warrior (1891). These are both bronze statues, but Remington uses this position for horses in his paintings as well. Of course, it's a natural position for a horse drinking, and many horses in art seem to find their avatar in the naturalistic horses on the Parthenon frieze.

Progress of the Project

Edward Fern was invited to submit a design for a Pineville Post Office mural on the basis of competent work under TRAP. A number of Kentucky murals were commissioned in this way, without going through a competition. He was to be paid \$600 for it.⁶ Fern had his own ideas. He had visited Pineville, and, rather than the location suggested, he preferred it to be over the service windows. He would do it for the same fee, but there was a hint he would not be averse to additional payment.

⁶ Rowan to Fern, 5 March 1937, NA, SL.

Rowan disabused him of both notions, writing that the mural would be better seen from the lobby if placed over the postmaster's door, and that no more money was available.⁷ The title was selected, a one-year term of work was set, and Fern sent sketches, saying he planned on deep, rich color for the mural and would do his best.

Rowan's artistic instincts were almost always on the mark. He suggested that, although the scale of figures seemed excellent, the figure on the right should be moved slightly farther right to open up the design a little and improve the spatial relationship. Fern sent a color sketch in May but was dissatisfied with it because he had an aversion to and inability to work on very small canvases. "I work and feel in a big manner about painting."⁸

Rowan had some qualms about the placing of shadows, feeling the dark shadow on the horse and the luminous ones on the girls created an inconsistency. Other complaints included his opinion that the lavender of the man's shirt was not a particularly happy use of color; perhaps khaki would be better. Fern insisted the shirt really was khaki and only the photos were to blame for color distortion.⁹

Fern finished the mural but wrote to say he could not hang it for financial reasons. He had been working for the

⁷ Exchange of letters, early April 1937, NA, SL.

⁸ Rowan to Fern 21 May 1937, NA, SL; Fern to Rowan, 9 May 1937, NA, ASL.

⁹ Exchange of letters, April and May, 1937, NA, SL.

WPA in Cincinnati but they felt he was making too much money and dismissed him, and he found it all he could do to care for his family and his wife's family and had no money to go to Pineville. He was told his contract could be revoked and someone in Pineville would have to install it.¹⁰

Fern answered that he needed fifty dollars to make the trip. "Now fifty smacks on the nose is more than I've been able to take what with the support of my family and three other families to help." Fern suggested Rowan or some of the other "perfectly swell people there" could advance the money as he was tired of keeping the painting.¹¹

Five months later Rowan urged the artist to find some way to install it, after which he would receive his final payment. "You have delayed this work in a distressing way and by doing so are endangering your opportunities of being considered for further work under this program."¹² Rowan was concerned enough to write Bert Mullins in Berea and suggest that he hang the mural, and Mullins agreed. There were further negotiations and remonstrances from Rowan to Fern.

Fern attempted to justify himself:

"Honestly, Mr. Rowan, I simply haven't been able to buy the white lead and varnish and the freight for the painting since I heard from [Mullins]. It really distresses me to sing the blues all the time. I realize it must get

¹⁰ Fern to Rowan 20 August 1937, NA, ASL.; Maria Ealand to Fern, 30 January 1939. NA, TSL

¹¹ Fern to Ealand, 10 February 1939, NA, SL.

¹² Rowan to Fern 19 June 1939, NA, SL.; Rowan to Mullins 2 January 1940, NA, SL.

tiresome but dawg-gonnit! I haven't had a commission since November !! I beg you to believe me ...perhaps something will turn up this week..."¹³

Rowan had become suspicious, both of the state of the mural and Fern's Micawber-like attitude. Rowan had no wish to install damaged government property. It had now been two years with no result, and he asked artist Richard Zoellner of Cincinnati to inspect the mural.¹⁴ Zoellner told Rowan, "By nature Fern is charming, erratic, noisy, spasmodic, over-confident, under-confident, energetic and gay; a slave to his emotions. This of course makes him extremely unreliable. He begins work with great enthusiasm, however if the enthusiasm doesn't outlast the work, it's too bad for the work. This may have happened in this case."¹⁵ Oddly, Rowan said this letter made him feel more kindly disposed toward Mr. Fern.

This feeling increased when he learned about Fern's car accident in which the artist broke his jaw. Rowan wrote, "[It is] very difficult at times to work with artists through the sole medium of the letter and I feel that possibly you have felt the lack of complete sympathy or understanding on my part and if so I am very sorry and apologize to you at this time..."¹⁶

¹³ Fern to Rowan 8 April 1940.

¹⁴ Rowan to Zoellner 23 July 1940, NA, TSL.

¹⁵ Zoellner to Rowan 8 August 1940, NA, SL.

¹⁶ Rowan to Fern 31 8 August 1940, NA, SL.

Fern answered with a description of the car accident (careless drunken youngsters) and was taking his family to Kentucky hills to recuperate as all four of them were injured. He could understand Rowan's concern but the mural was undamaged.¹⁷

Months went by without further word and Rowan made one more try, writing Fern, "A case of this kind has a tendency to antagonize engineers and others in connection with the construction against artists as a group and I feel that that is really serious."¹⁸

Fern promised to install the mural within two weeks. His car had been wrecked but friends would drive him to Pineville. He hadn't seen the mural for some time so he unrolled it and was glad he did. "It was in perfect condition, of course, but it was so damned inferior to my present abilities that I re-stretched it and have been spending the past two weeks in improving the whole canvas. I used to be proud of the painting I sent TRAP but I realize now how they must smell." He was then working for a die-casting foundry and suggested this as a subject.¹⁹

Progress at last! Fern had sold a portrait and had money for the trip to Pineville. "Have a bottle of brandy in your desk drawer to revive you when you receive word that

¹⁷ Fern to Rowan 16 August 1940, NA, ASL.

¹⁸ Rowan to Fern 31 January 1941, NA, SL.

¹⁹ Fern to Rowan 28 February 1941, NA, SL.

the deed is done..." Rowan claimed to be amused at the suggestion. However, this exchange took place in August and by February Rowan was shocked at the dalliance and he said that was putting it mildly. "I do not believe that you are aware of the Administration costs which you are causing your Government by an inordinate delay of this nature". He stated that Fern's contract was cancelled. "I have attempted to avoid any action which would embarrass you or your family but the time has come when every mature American citizen must assume his responsibility in full force and I am making this last plea to you to snap into it!"²⁰

Fern answered quickly that the mural would be sent the next day. He was naturally unhappy about the cancellation. "I'm going to have to start my life all over again...What the hell will I do without the specter of Federal agents swooping down on me and my little brood to cart me away to the guillotine...? You and your letters have taken on the ineffable aspect of a kindly Nemesis; what will I do without them. Seriously, Ed, I am truly sorry I have caused this trouble..." He went on to tell of further family troubles and made a solemn promise that in the future, should he win a competition, he would execute it with speed and dispatch.²¹

²⁰ Fern to Rowan 11 August 1941, NA, SL.; Rowan to Fern 16 February 1941, NA, SL.

²¹ Fern to Rowan 24 February 1942, NA, SL.

Rowan professed himself delighted but "You will forgive me if I say that I am holding my breath until there is an actual statement from the Postmaster that the work has been installed."²² Three months later he was able to release his breath on hearing from Fern that the mural was in place and Rowan could now, says Fern, get out that bottle. He had had a lucky break since the post office was being redecorated and the painters had helped him install the mural. "People who have seen it are very pleased as is the rather dour old Postmaster." Fern had applied to several armed forces' training schools without success and asked Rowan to put in a word for him. He displayed a bit of self-knowledge when he said that the Army might train some of this procrastination out of him. He ended by saying "This will probably hand you a laugh, but I think I am a changed man now and would like very much to do another job for the department. There probably have been requests with more gall or crust, but I doubt it. Thanks again."

Rowan merely acknowledged receipt of Fern's letter, saying that this "brings to a happy conclusion the Pineville, Kentucky, Post Office mural."²³ There is no record of any further work done by Edward Fern for the Section.

²² Rowan to Fern 2 March 1942, NA, SL.

²³ Fern to Rowan 12 July 1942, NA, SL; Rowan to Fern 15 August 1942, NA, SL.

THE PRINCETON POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 42

County: Caldwell

Artist: Robert Cleaver Purdy

Title: Kentucky Tobacco Field

Date: 1939

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 130" W x 54" H

The Artist

Robert Purdy was born in Bradfordsville, Kentucky, although no dates are available, and he moved to Louisville as a teenager. As a child, he had suffered a skating accident and spent three years in a plaster cast. It was then that he developed an interest in art, especially painting. He graduated from Male High School in Louisville and attended the University of Louisville for a year.

He taught at the Art Center and was then awarded a scholarship at the John Herron Art Institute, Indianapolis, where he studied primarily under Eliot O'Hara, an excellent

teacher,¹ and Purdy was still a student there when he received the commission for the Princeton mural on the basis of an outstanding design for the San Antonio, Texas, Post office competition.

During this same year he completed for the Section a mural titled Milking Time for the post office at New Albany, Mississippi. This was highly praised, although it was only a simple farm scene. A woman with a pail is seen from the back, against barns and a spacious green background. There is a serenity in the sway of the woman's dress, the swishing of the cow's tail, and the undulation of the hills. Purdy's composition and handling of paint give the scene a significance that is not actually endemic to it.

Purdy left some notable works in Louisville, including murals for the home of Mrs. Malcolm Crawford, and he supervised a series of children's murals at the Kosair Hospital. A scholarship to the Colorado School of Fine Arts and a fellowship at Oyster Bay, at the Long Island estate of Louis Comfort Tiffany, added to his knowledge and skill.

A newspaper photograph accompanying a feature story on the occasion of the Princeton commission shows him to be a good-looking young man with dark eyes and a serious expression.²

¹ For information on Eliot O'Hara, see the Anchorage Post Office mural.

² From an unidentified local newspaper, September 1937, provided to the author by Princeton Postmaster Monte Naismith, July 1997.

He was still remembered in Louisville in the 1960s, as shown by an article describing his current and proposed projects.³ At the time, he was designing the Crystal Palace of Fashion for the New York World's Fair. It was modeled on the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, England, 1815, a summer retreat for the Prince Regent. That building was a fantasy of exotic styles, and it seems that Purdy was attempting an elaborate setting, as well. He designed it in the form of an amphitheatre, to display boutiques arranged around a reflecting pool which contained perfumed fountains rising and falling to synchronized music.

The newspaper article stated that he planned to retreat to his home on Maryland's Eastern Shore to work on several New York exhibits to be held at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum, and other museums where he had had success in the past.

Description of the Mural

Although this mural is the size of most of the others over a Postmaster's door, it gives the impression of being smaller. This is perhaps because it does not extend to the wall on either side. It is a plain rectangle, and the white walls around it, as well as a nearby window, cause the

³

The Louisville Times, 9 December 1963.

colors to show clearly, but the mural is rather faded. The general effect is of blue, green, and yellow.

Six figures can be seen laboring in a tobacco field. The man at left is closest to the picture plane and is the largest. He wears a white shirt and a straw hat, although the hat doesn't seem to have prevented his face from sunburn. The next man, farther back, stands and works with a cutting tool. He has a white shirt, blue overalls and brown work gloves, and holds his head at an angle, as if looking at the woman far right.

Center right and at some distance from the workers is a wagon drawn by two brown horses, their reins being held by a standing man in farmer's apparel. He is approaching the group through a field. At center right is a shorter man, dressed all in brown, including his hat, and bending over slightly to work with a two-handled cutting tool. Some distance behind him is a man almost hidden by the tall tobacco in the field.

The woman at right is seen from a back three-quarter view, her face in profile. She is rather tall, with dark hair, and wears a pink dress and white apron. In the forefront of the picture, large tobacco plants are being worked on and are very prominent, all across the mural's width, leaving no doubt about the painting's subject. Between the plants are large patches of reddish ground, shadowed with brown and realistically rendered.

When this scene is studied, there seems to be some silent communication between the man in the blue overalls and the woman at right. They appear to be looking at each other with some unexpressed meaning they are unable to voice because of the pressure of work. This interpretation may be a valid one or simply a fantasy brought on by too much study of it and not intended by Purdy at all.

The peacefulness of the scene is emphasized by the background, especially the smooth horizon line above the field. The plants in the field are hardly differentiated, being a pale yellow with hints of green. There are several accents on the horizon, consisting of a distant white house and silo with red roofs, and several dark green trees. One of these trees is directly behind the man in the wagon, causing more attention to be drawn to him.

The sky is several shades of a calm blue, split by one long filmy white cloud that extends the length of the mural.

Style, Technique and Maintenance

The artist has made much use of shadow in clothing and plants, which adds to the realism of the scene. The perspective is also well handled. The colors are laid on smoothly, except for a section of the cloud, where the brushstroke is evident.

The figures look normal except for one peculiarity:

The man in overalls, cutting a plant and looking toward the woman, has a right ear which seems larger than natural and also seems to have a pointed tip, an attribute which, it seems, can only be logically applied to the thirteenth-century gargoyles and grotesques on French cathedrals, such as Notre Dame, Paris. Fiendish figures with pointed ears are seen even earlier, an especially outstanding one being next to the statue of Saint James on the Miègeville Door of the Church of San-Sernin at Toulouse in the twelfth century.

However interesting the comparison, it is not a likely one. Most of these monsters are actually too high on the cathedrals to be visible in detail, and they have no relation whatsoever to a tobacco field. Purdy was an accomplished artist, so the ear cannot be an inferior piece of work. No doubt the ear will remain a mystery.

The balance in the composition has been carefully thought out, the two figures at left being larger to compensate for the wagon's position, slightly to the right.

Although the work is successful, there is a certain stiffness in the figures and a lack of emotion. The man and woman, as noted, look directly at each other but are completely expressionless. Perhaps this effect was deliberate, the intention being to show the difficult labor which takes all their resources. After all, their livelihood depended on this crop. The growing of tobacco has long been a major industry in Kentucky, and a number of Kentucky murals reflect that fact.

Purdy had not yet developed his own style, but neither did he attempt to follow any of the Regionalists in their paintings of rural life. Possibly he had in mind Millet's The Gleaners (1857) in certain of the mural's aspects. Purdy, like Millet, uses a level horizon line with foliage placed on it at intervals, a wagon in the distance, and the human figures in the foreground who are hard at work. Each painting shows a scene of harvesting and invests the harvesters with a patient dignity.

Progression of the Project

It all began with the letter from Rowan giving Purdy the commission and offering five hundred ninety dollars as pay.⁴ Purdy was delighted and planned to visit Princeton. After receiving the sketch, Rowan wrote that the consensus of the Section staff was that Purdy had attempted to incorporate too much material without satisfactory organization of the whole. He suggested working the central theme of agriculture into a simple design. Also he had ideas for different positioning of the figures, and wanted more observance of nature. He felt that the figures, as they were, were not convincing. Rowan had still other suggestions as to need of more warmth in the greens and more

⁴ Rowan to Purdy, July 1937, NA, TSL, NA, TSL.

brilliant color in the tobacco leaves, and, in short, he recommended the painting of a new sketch.⁵

Still another letter followed, stating that the Section and the Supervising Architect felt that values were too low in tone but that the artist had material for an interesting mural and it was approved. Rowan closed with a few more suggestions.⁶

The second sketch was considered good--interesting pattern, foreground stronger, more warmth in the greens.⁷

Finally Purdy responded to all this in a telegram saying he had not received a contract and needed the first payment to buy materials to continue.⁸ This exchange of minor suggestions from Rowan and complaints about lack of pay from Purdy continued for some while.

Finally the mural was finished and Purdy sent a photo of it. He was anxious to install it by June 25th because he had received a scholarship to study under Eliot O'Hara at the John Herron Art Institute, Indianapolis, in the summer. He felt in a quandary because he didn't want to lose it and yet didn't want to let the Section down. He stated that a government commission had made it possible to complete his

⁵ Rowan to Purdy, 30 September 1937. NA, SL.

⁶ Rowan to Purdy, 8 December 1937, NA, SL.

⁷ Rowan to Purdy, 8 February 1938, NA. TSL.

⁸ Purdy to Rowan, 21 March 1938, NA, telegram.

first year at the John Herron Art Institute and he was grateful for that.⁹

Rowan wired him to proceed with installation, that the check had been sent, and Purdy should find out if hanging lamps would interfere with a view of the mural, and finally wished him success at school.¹⁰

Maria Ealand, the Section office manager, wrote to the Princeton Postmaster, J. Blackburn, asking for a statement from him about it.¹¹ She received a reply from Assistant Postmaster Billie T. Gresham claiming that the mural had received most favorable remarks from the majority of patrons.

"As you doubtless know, ...our city is in the heart of the so-called Dark Tobacco Patch of Kentucky and Tennessee...it makes a very appropriate setting. We have but recently completed a five-day Dark Tobacco Festival",¹² which attracted twenty-five thousand visitors, and he warned Rowan not to miss it next year, promising a rare good time. He also sent congratulations to Mr. Purdy, "a gentleman of culture and rare charm also."¹³

⁹ Purdy to Rowan, 17 June 1938, NA, ASL.

¹⁰ Rowan to Purdy, 21 June, 1938, NA. telegram.

¹¹ Ealand to Postmaster J. Blackburn, 1 September 1938, NA, TSL.

¹² Assistant Postmaster Billie T. Gresham to Maria Ealand, 14 September 1938. NA, TSL.

¹³ Ibid.

There was further trouble over delayed checks and much communication but no resolution until Purdy resorted to a plea in typed capital letters, followed by a telegram.

Rowan passed on to Purdy the comments of Charles Gage, in charge of the tobacco division in the Department of Agriculture. His specific comment on the Princeton mural was:

This relates to a section of the country where an entirely different type of tobacco is produced. The photograph depicts what appears to be a loaded wagon being driven through a field of standing tobacco. This would never be done because of the great amount of injury to the crop... The activities of the people in the picture are rather confused. Also the representation of tobacco is very bad as to shape of leaves, habit of growth, mass effect in the background, and stand"¹⁴

Rowan asked if Purdy had any thought on these remarks, stating that he would be interested in hearing them.

What Purdy thought will remain unknown, since the National Archives' Princeton file ends here. Mr. Gage's comments may not be accurate in many respects. We see that the painting is not perfect.

But it must be remembered how young Purdy was when he did this work, still a student with much to learn, and years of study were still ahead of him. The community was very proud of the mural in 1963, according to the newspaper article, and probably continues to be so. If opinions were solicited today, there would no doubt be agreement that the

¹⁴ Rowan to Purdy, 19 July, 1941, NA, SL.

mural is a point of interest and a tribute to the citizens of the town, both past and present.

THE WILLIAMSBURG POST OFFICE MURAL

Figure: 43

County: Whitley

Artist: Alois Fabrey

Title: Floating Horses Down the
Cumberland River

Date: 1939

Medium: Tempera on canvas

Dimensions: 144" W x 42" H

The Artist

Alois Fabrey was born in New York City 11 April 1912. No information can be found on him or his work except for the resume he provided the Section. He studied with Peppino Mangravite, one of the leading teachers at the Art Students League in New York, and then at the School of Fine Arts at Yale University. He became "Director of the Mural Painting Department in the Beaux Arts Institute of Design"¹ and was

¹ Alois Fabry, resume requested by Section, 10 August 1942.

also an instructor of drawing, painting, and design at Columbia University. He had many private patrons who wanted their homes or clubs decorated, so he must at one time have been well known. In 1938 he painted two murals for the lobby of the Brooklyn City Hall.

For the Section he painted a mural for the Post Office at Upper Sandusky, Ohio. It was title The Mail and dated 1937. Naturally, the postal service was a common subject, since a post office was the site of most of the Section murals, and because the mail is a major factor in the lives of people in small towns and rural areas.

About this Ohio mural Fabrey said, "The whole idea is to show the human and close association the mail plays as it reaches the heart of every American family."²

Description of the Mural

This scene depicts two horse traders floating their stock down the Cumberland River to market on a "homemade raft."³ Actually, it more closely resembles a shallow wooden boat with an iron chock at the prow, used for tying the vessel to a dock. The viewpoint is unusual and causes

² Gerald Markowitz and Marlene Park, "Not by Bread Alone: Post Office Art of the New Deal." in Timeline: a publication of the Ohio Historical Society (Columbus, Ohio: The Society, 1989), 2-19.

³ Information sheet on this work from Section, 1939.

an observer to look at the scene from the lower left and at a slight diagonal. At the center stand two rather large figures of men steering the raft. At left are three horses and on the right one horse. There is a strong sense of motion in all the elements here. Of the horses at left, two of them are white with gray manes and tails and the other tan with a reddish mane and tail. We see them from the back, but it's clear that they are alert to their surroundings, and the swishing of their tails ensures they will not be overlooked.

The two men give an impression of strength and a familiarity with hard work. The suntanned skin and well-developed muscles indicate that they are not strangers to this job. One man, with black hair and wearing a green shirt and pale beige trousers is seen from the front. He is slightly bent forward, his head down in concentration, as he pushes at a long wooden tiller. One knee is bent, the other leg braced behind to steady him and provide extra force.

The man to the right is seen from the back, but his head is in profile as he leans toward his partner to help. He wears a white shirt, dark blue denims and a brown cap. He sits on the tiller and is holding his left hand under the tiller to lift it. With his right hand he holds a rope attached to the white horse standing at the prow and straining against the rope. This horse has his head raised and his whole body slanted forward as if eager to see the

destination. The horse is deeply shadowed in gray, and his tail streams behind him.

The wooden raft, somewhat like a flatboat, is certainly a homemade object. The wooden planks are rough, and iron chocks are placed at intervals on the gunwale. At far right the prow breaks the swirling green water. In the middle distance, the river color changes to cobalt blue with white streaks. A coal barge is passing on the far right. The sky is not remarkable, being a dull gray with streaks of purple. The opposite bank is pale yellow, with low green hills beyond, dotted with small dark green trees. There are high hills behind them, almost like mountains, and they fade gradually to a pale blue-gray. Possibly an attempt was made here to make use of atmospheric perspective.

Style, Technique, and Maintenance

Fabrey's classical background seems to have been set aside, as he depicts a simple American scene, with no attempt at stylistic references. Nevertheless, the standing horses at left, their rounded shapes seen from the back, are not far removed from those of Franz Marc, a German Expressionist. True, his were often a deep blue color, far from naturalistic, but the number and position of these and the tilt of their heads does bring them to mind.

These two men are extremely muscular and are exerting great strength in directing the craft. Francisco de Goya was also, among other things, an excellent portrayer of anatomical effort. One example would be his The Forge (1812) in which two men strain at their work of hammering. Naturally, the American river scene doesn't have the Caravaggesque background a forging scene would require, but there are some similarities.

No doubt every artist of the time was familiar with the work of the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, and his influence may be felt here. Rivera worked on a large scale and his figures are usually muscular, unsophisticated working people, as in the paintings he produced at the Ford River Rouge plant. They often show several groups of men using all their combined strength to control the machinery which towers above them.

Another feature here that is reminiscent of Rivera's murals is the carefully worked out rhythm in the dual actions of the men and the position of the horse at right, all of which add to the effect of motion. The color throughout is straightforward, with little nuance, but all figures and objects are realistically shadowed by darker tones of the same colors. Fabrey's brushstroke is visible in a number of places. He uses a good deal of hatching, often following contour lines, and a few instances of cross-hatching.

The composition is one of this mural's best features. The length of the mural allows for a sweeping effect, and the artist has taken advantage of it. There is good balance in the central figures as they work together, one seen from the front and one from the back, both exhibiting much effort and strain.

The necessarily diagonal view the observer has is emphasized by the parallel diagonals of the tiller, the boat gunwales, and the taut rope holding the horse.

As to cleaning, Fabrey wrote, "I do not believe the mural will require cleaning as the tempera colors will never fade, and the dust that might accumulate over a period of years will add to the quality of the work. I recommend nothing but a good feather dusting every six months. No washing is necessary. No varnish or protective coat was used."⁴

Progression of the Project

On the basis of competent designs in a competition, Fabrey was chosen, through the Director of Procurement, through Louis Simon, the Supervising Architect, and on to Rowan, who sent the invitation. Fabrey was happy to receive it and agreed to finish it within a year for the sum of \$670.⁵ But cold water was dashed on his expectations when

⁴ Fabrey to Rowan on an undated form, NA, TSL.

⁵ Rowan to Fabrey 14 November 1938, NA, TSL.

Rowan told him the sketch was frankly not ready to be recommended. "The two scales you have used in the design are not entirely convincing, and the form indicated in the figure drawing in our estimation does not have much significance for the people for whom the mural is intended." He closed this missive with a request for several more sketches.⁶

Fabrey sent four more sketches. He had written the Postmaster at Williamsburg asking for topics suitable for the county seat, but the answer was not encouraging. In the Postmaster's view, Williamsburg was lacking in industries and manufacturing plants and had little or no local history.⁷ Fabrey was answered by Inslee Hopper, a staff member of the Section, who suggested creating a larger scene by dropping the sides down to the top of the bulletin boards.⁸ Apparently, this method of enlarging the mural had not been used before, but it became very common. Luckily, both Fabrey and the Section preferred the sketch of the floating horses, and Fabrey sent a color sketch.

Rowan was quick to send his usual objections, writing that the sketch was quite handsome in color and approach-- but the perspective of the boat wasn't satisfactory; all sides should be related to the whole. The left side of the

⁶ Rowan to Fabrey 10 January 1939, NA, SL.

⁷ Fabrey to Rowan, 26 January 1939, NA, TSL.

⁸ Hopper, Consultant to the Chief, to Fabrey, 1 February 1939, NA, TSL.

boat didn't harmonize with the right; the two figures operating the raft should be improved. He questioned the hills on the opposite side of the river, doubting they were as barren and stark as represented. The section of Kentucky with which he was acquainted had pronounced hills that were tree covered. He assured Fabrey that the latter point was rather important locally, and every effort should be made to improve the situation.⁹

Although Fabrey had little choice but to thank Rowan for the constructive criticism, it must have been galling to all these artists to have their work picked apart in such a fashion. Rowan wasn't finished with this mural yet.

He felt the general scheme was satisfactory but some staff members advocated checking certain details: the extremities of the colt on right were not completely realized. He might be moved a bit to the right in order that the front line of his body should not coincide with the angle of the rudder bar; the second horse from left needed further study, especially the head; the right leg of the man seated on the bar needed work. There was no real feeling that the element seen between the bar and the edge of the boat was related to the torso of this figure.¹⁰

⁹ Rowan to Fabrey, 13 March 1939, NA, SL

¹⁰ Rowan to Fabrey, 9 May 1939, NA, TSL.

Fabrey brought a photograph of the mural in place to Washington, D.C. He missed Rowan but had a nice talk with Mr. Watson who was most encouraging.¹¹

When asked to comment, the Postmaster said the mural was very satisfactory and he had had quite a number of complimentary [sic] remarks on the painting. He enjoyed having Mr. Fabrey in his own home very much.¹²

As was the case in many Post Offices, there were hanging ceiling lights which obscured the mural somewhat. These were raised, at no cost to the government. Today lights are set into the ceiling but in their place is a white fan which doesn't actually impinge on the mural itself but can be distracting to a viewer.

This mural is particularly noticeable to anyone entering the Post Office lobby because of several features, one being the light colors employed. No vivid colors are seen, but the paler ones harmonize with each other, and the impression is of a large area of brightness on the wall.

Mention has been made of the sense of motion in the mural, caused by several factors, one being the close connection of the mural's figures and objects which creates a cohesive effect and a sense of direction. The paucity of detail also is important in this regard. There is only the most basic and necessary detail here, allowing the viewer's

¹¹ Fabrey to Rowan, 7 July 1939, NA, SL.

¹² Williamsburg Postmaster James P. Mahan to Rowan, 14 July, 1939, NA TSL.

eye to follow the sweeping movement with no intervening distractions. The simplicity of this painting obscures the many technical methods used to create an unusual and attractive mural.

APPENDIX

This additional section deals with post office mural work for Franklin and Campbellsville, both in Kentucky. A visit to these towns to see the murals would be unavailing, because the murals are not there. No one knows what became of them.

Nevertheless, Section files at the National Archives in Washington, DC, do provide written and visual documentation of these works, and they merit a mention, at least, both as works of art and as an indication of the power of the people's preferences.

Franklin [Figure 44]

Franklin is in Simpson County. Carl Hall received a commission from the Section to paint a mural for the post office in that town, and the mural was finished in 1943 but was never hung.

Hall was not able to visit Franklin, so did all his research in the Detroit Public Library from a Liggett and Myers pamphlet. One item of information he gleaned from

this (and the value of the pamphlet may be inferred from it) was that tobacco farming was a family affair with everyone contributing to the effort. He determined to create such a scene on his mural, although among his six workers, he has included no women.

The painting itself is well done, as seen in a black and white photograph, if a little too busy. The workers seem a bit too crowded together and, in spite of this, unaware of each other. There is very strong chiaroscuro here, with the deep blacks directly juxtaposed to the brilliant whites, in most instances.

Rowan approved with his usual cavilling, especially about the feet. It is true most of them are removed from sight behind grass or plants. Rowan thought "the feet seem to be treated more or less as though you were avoiding any statement on these elements."¹

With Rowan's complaints about the dour aspect of all characters in the mural, Hall went to Franklin to hang the work. The Postmaster refused to let him do so because the tobacco in Franklin was not treated as Hall had depicted.

The Postmaster explained, "it is not an authentic portrayal of the agricultural industry of this county." He went on to say it would be a source of criticism rather than admired by the people.²

¹ Rowan to Hall, 19 January 1941, NA, TSL.

² Postmaster Henry S. Bogan to Fourth Assistant PostMaster General, Honorable Walter Myers, 28 January 1942, NA, TSL.

It seems that Hall had painted the processing of flue-cured tobacco and a barn suitable for curing burley tobacco. The trouble was that the crop in Franklin was "one-sucker" tobacco, which is not treated in either of these two ways, but in the field on the stalk before it is harvested.³

The local newspaper backed up the Postmaster, stating that Simpson County was the home of the finest quality of one-sucker tobacco grown in all the world . . . the mural would be impossible ever to be acclimatized on our post office wall.⁴

Naturally Rowan was displeased at this setback and felt that the Postmaster had exceeded his authority. And indeed Mr. Bogan did seem adamant. When Hall made a new sketch, Bogan wrote, "The Citizens of this community have made it very clear that no mural of any kind is needed here. They do not want it . . . you should advise Mr. Hall to discontinue work on this useless piece of decoration."⁵

Rowan tried to place the mural in Manning, South Carolina, where it was admired but unacceptable because their post office hadn't yet been built. Rowan was forced to advise Hall that it could not be used, but Hall was paid all his fee but a small amount. Hall was, naturally, very

³ Beckham, Depression Post Office Murals and Southern Culture, 111.

⁴ The Franklin Favorite, 4 June 1942.

⁵ Postmaster Bogan to Rowan, 17 July 1942, NA, TSL.

unhappy about it all. "I feel very hurt and disappointed that my first mural has caused such unnecessary trouble for your office". He claimed he had given up all hope of pleasing the Postmaster and doesn't think he wanted one in the first place.⁶

Campbellsville

This community in Taylor County did receive, not one mural for its post office, but two, but they are no longer in place. I wrote the current postmaster, who was really intrigued and, without identifying himself by name, called me twice. He had consulted post office records, he had gone to all the public buildings which might previously have been a post office, he had spoken to old-time residents, who seemed to remember the murals but were not very clear on the subject. The postmaster said he had given up. I visited the library in Campbellsville and learned that the murals had been there until some years ago when a remodeling was done and the murals disappeared.

There are records, however, and photographs. The murals were painted by Bert Mullins, a familiar name by now, since he painted the Morehead mural, and his biography can be found in that entry of this paper, and there are some previous references to him, since he worked with Frank Long.

⁶ Hall to Rowan, 20 August 1942, NA, ASL.

In 1937 Mullins was commissioned to paint a mural to be placed over the Campbellsville Postmaster's door. He would receive \$560. The Postmaster was enthusiastic and had ideas for a subject: The Confederate monument, the Battle of Green River Hill, General Morgan's brick house, and so on.

Mullins finally decided on an agricultural scene, not very different from some seen before. He seemed to feel, however, that it represented something essential. He wrote, "The mural, Agriculture in Kentucky, [Figure 45] is my attempt to depict the rhythm of the service of man, of beast, and of the soil, each to the other, and all to one purpose--the life of mankind . . ."7

The mural actually is intriguing in its sparseness. There are only two men depicted, one watering the stock, the other ploughing. The main interest seems to center on the buildings behind them--barns, silos, houses, fence. The unusual feature of these buildings is their geometric look. Cézanne's "cylinder, sphere, and cone" can be made out by a viewer who observes not only the foreground buildings but a far-off line of small buildings on the horizon, past a gently rolling valley. The artist was evidently bringing out the undeniable connection between city and farm.

It is strange that Rowan didn't seem to recognize the encroaching abstraction and dearth of detail, but his

7

Mullins to Forbes Watson, 21 April 1938, NA, TSL

comments centered largely on the lack of robustness. He claimed that the foreground elements were surrounded by an ephemeral light, robbing them of solid reality.⁸ He was correct, as he usually was, but he failed to note that this use of light gave the work the ethereal significance Mullins had in mind.

The local newspaper printed a laudatory article on the first page. Urging residents to see the painting, the article went on, "It is very unusual to find a mural painting of this quality on the walls of a post office in a town no larger than Campbellsville and the people of this city and Taylor County should be and are proud that they have been thusly honored."⁹

Postmaster Joseph P. Gozder was very much involved with this project. He was pleased but not satisfied. "Every day someone says something nice about the mural and what a great addition that ornament is to the lobby of the building." He pointed out that there was a space over the lock boxes at the other end of the lobby and he suggested a portrait of Governor Zachary Taylor, after whom the county was named, if there were any money left.¹⁰

⁸ Rowan to Mullins, 21 January, 1938, NA, SL.

⁹ The News-Journal, Campbellsville, Ky., 18 August 1938, 1, ff.

¹⁰ Postmaster Joseph P. Gozder to Rowan, September 1938.

Rowan considered the idea and liked it. He had no difficulty in persuading Mullins to paint the second mural.

General Zachary Taylor in the Everglades [Figure 46]

Taylor served as president for one year, and he is one of our neglected "famous" American leaders. He took part in the war of 1812 and accepted the surrender at the end of the Black Hawk War. Where he received great notice and popularity was in the Mexican War, when he won the battle of Buena Vista against a force three times larger than his and under the leadership of Santa Anna. The approval he won from the people for this feat led him to the presidency. He lived in Louisville much of his life, and John Crittenden and others preferred him to their own Henry Clay. But what was he doing in the Everglades?

"Taylor is in conference with his officers and several Indians at the beginning of his campaign against the Seminoles, when he served under the leadership of Andrew Jackson."¹¹ He is probably planning the battle of Okeechobee, where he routed the Seminole and Mikasuki in a fierce fight. For this he received promotion to Brigadier General and the nickname, "Old Rough and Ready".

In the mural, Taylor is seated at a crude table in the fields, poring over a map. At the left are boxes and bags which support nine or ten rifles which seem precariously

¹¹ Section Information Sheet, 1940.

propped. An officer sits on a box at left, and another standing man holds a horse's reins as he glances down at the map.

To the right of the table stands a man carrying what is evidently a heavy box. He seems rather short, and Rowan feels he must be standing in a depression of some sort but it should be made clearer.¹² Two other soldiers, at some distance, also carry boxes, one in his hands, the other on his back. The background resembles an uneven field, strewn with rocks, and several trees stand up against the lowering sky, but it couldn't be mistaken for the Everglades, even if we might imagine a bit of Spanish moss hanging from the tree directly behind the General.

In the right foreground the figure closest to the picture plane is an Indian seated on the ground. He wears only moccasins and deerskin trousers, and he has a scalp lock which is prominent as he turns to look at the General. It seems almost certain that this figure exists and is placed where he is because of the early American painter, Benjamin West's The Death of General Wolfe (1770) in which a similar Indian is seated or squatting at the left of the canvas, staring gravely at the dying General. The similarity is too strong to be accidental.

Letters were sent to the Section praising the mural as

¹² Rowan to Mullins, 4 October 1939, NA, TSL.

a "lovely addition to our post office".¹³

Again the local newspaper printed an approving several columns, referring to the mural as having "rare merit" and naming it "one of the finest displays of modern American art to be found in any similar public building anywhere."¹⁴

When we consider how many of the government art works were lost in the aftermath of the Depression, we can be glad Kentucky can count only three among its missing postal murals.

¹³ Letter from unknown writer to Section, 2 February 1940, NA, SL.

¹⁴ News-Journal, Campbellsville, Ky., undated clipping.

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Depression Era Art in Illinois Post Offices, documentary
produced by Mary Emma Thompson and WEIU TV. (video)



Figure 1. Anchorage. Exterior View of Post Office



Figure 2. Harrodsburg. Exterior View of Post Office

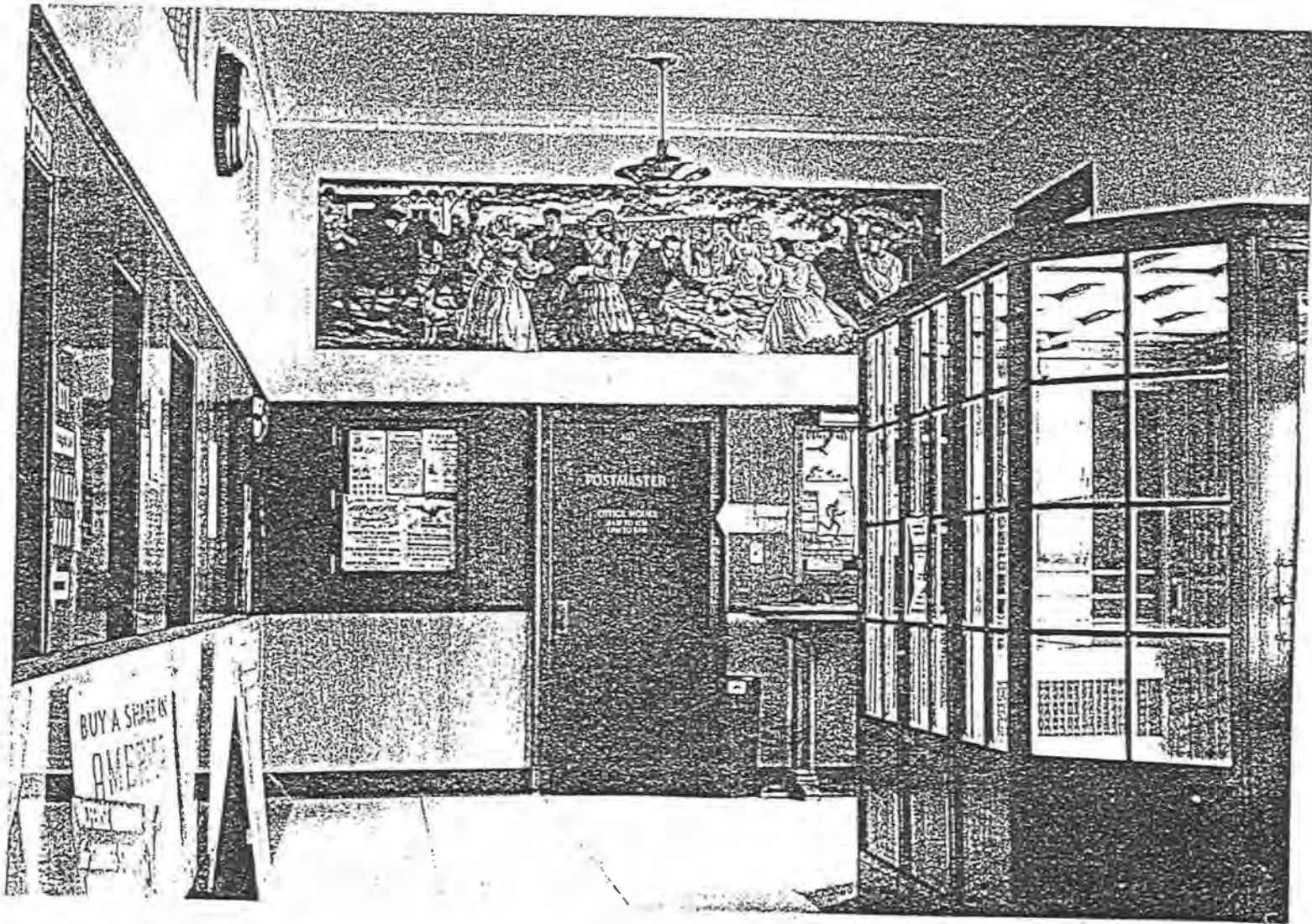


Figure 3. Anchorage. Interior View of Post Office Lobby



Figure 4. Anchorage. Meeting the Train



Figure 5. Anchorage. Symbol of Anchorage



Figure 6. Berea.
Berea Commencement in the Old Days

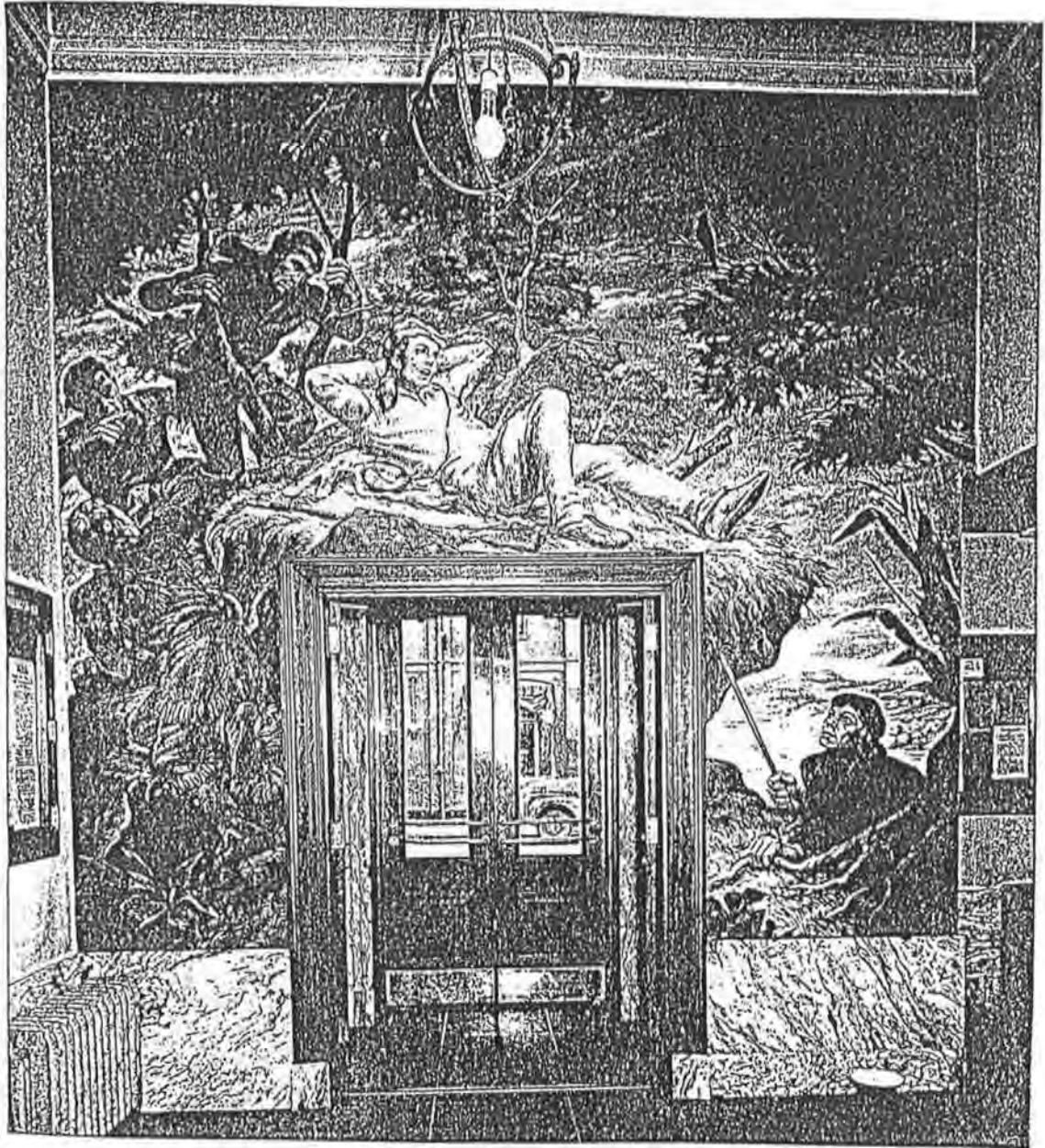


Figure 7. Bowling Green. The Long Hunters Discover Daniel Boone



Figure 8. Corbin. The Dark and Bloody Ground



Figure 9. Flemingsburg. Crossing to the Battle of Blue Lick



Figure 10. Fort Thomas. Generals G.H. Thomas and Philip Sheridan



Figure 11. Greenville. Source of Power



Figure 12. Hardinsburg. Kentucky Homestead



Figure 13. Harrodsburg. A Settler is Killed by Indians



Figure 14. Harrodsburg. Spreading the News



Figure 15. Harrodsburg. An Arrow Strikes as Prelude to an Attack



Figure 16. Harrodsburg. Seeking Safety in the School



Figure 17. Harrodsburg. Boone Seeking a Truce



Figure 18. Harrodsburg. The Return of Daniel Boone



Figure 19. Hickman. Mississippi Packets



Figure 20. Hodgenville. Hodgen's Mill

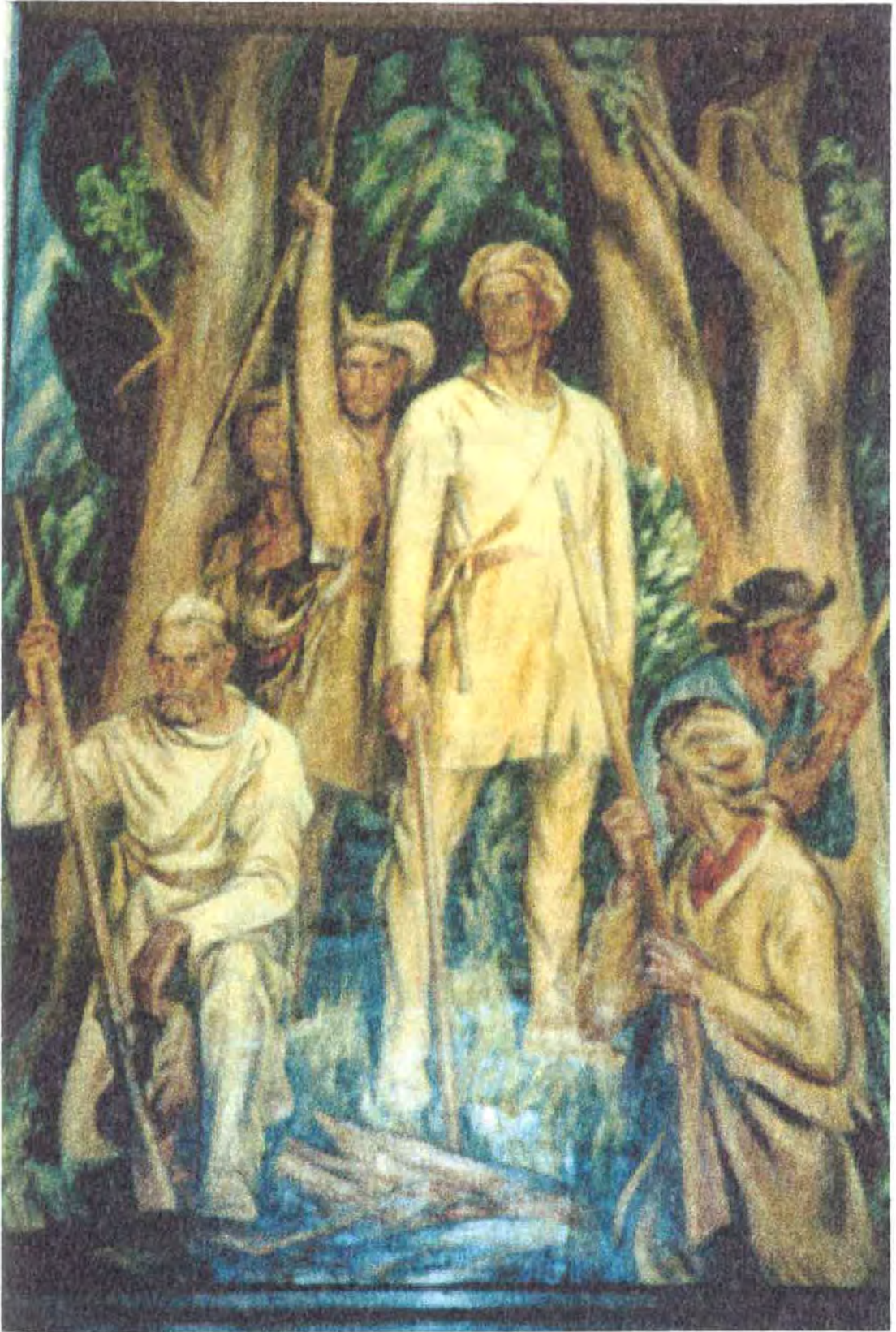


Figure 21. Lexington. Daniel Boone's Arrival in Kentucky

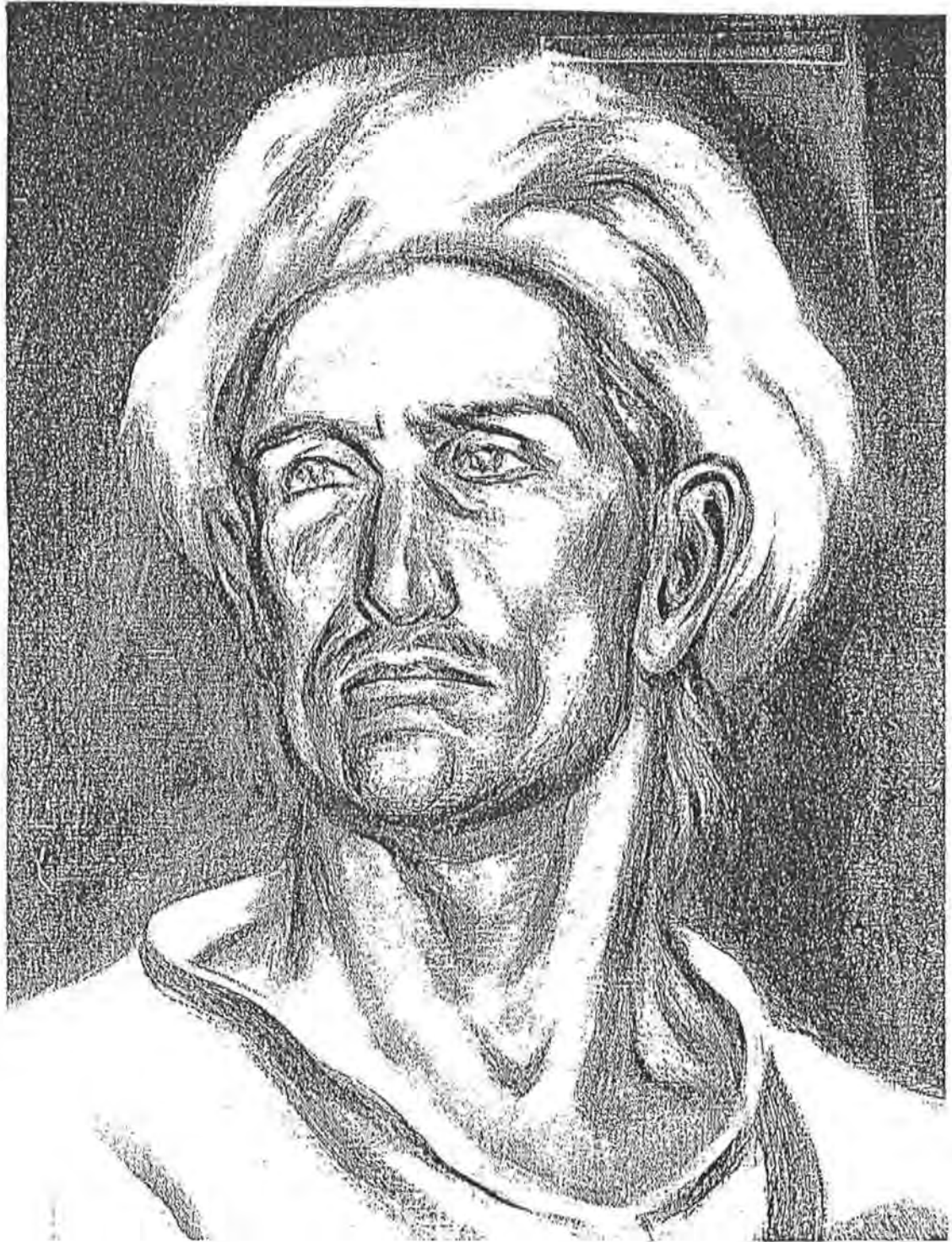
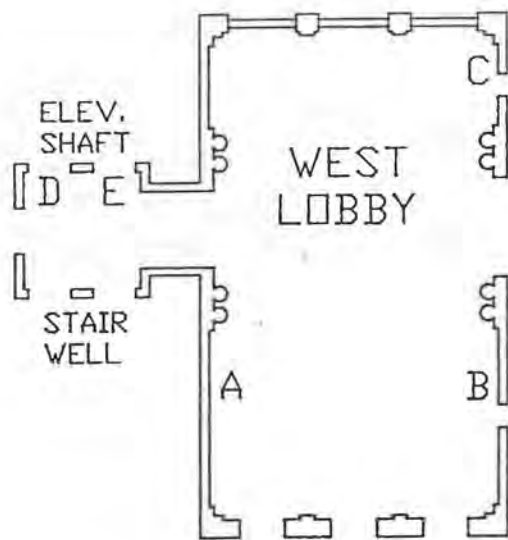
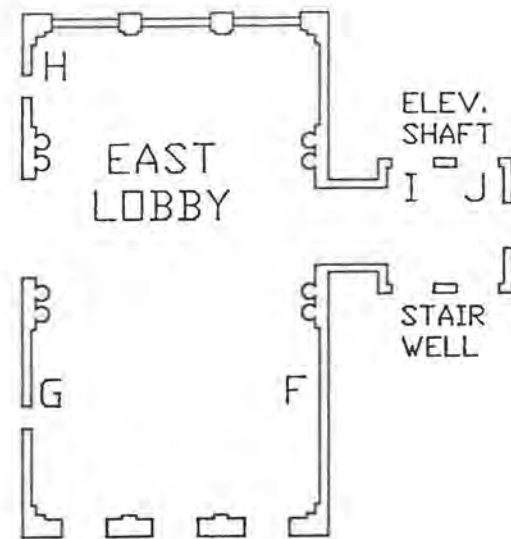


Figure 22. Lexington. Detail of Daniel Boone



- A. OHIO RIVER TRAFFIC
- B. COAL MINING
- C. HORSE RACING
- D. THE STAR ROUTE
- E. RURAL FREE DELIVERY



- F. AGRICULTURE
- G. STOCK FARMING
- H. FOX HUNTING
- I. CITY COLLECTION
- J. UNLOADING A RAILROAD
POST OFFICE CAR

Figure 23. Louisville. Plan of Gene Snyder Building Lobbies



Figure 24. Louisville. Ohio River Traffic



Figure 25. Louisville. Coal Mining



Figure 26. Louisville. Agriculture



Figure 27. Louisville. Stock Farming



Figure 28. Louisville. Fox Hunting



Figure 29. Louisville. Horse Racing



FIGURE 30, Louisville: UNLOADING A RAILROAD POSTOFFICE CAR



FIGURE 31, Louisville: CITY COLLECTION



Figure 32. Louisville. The Star Route



Figure 33. Louisville. Rural Free Delivery

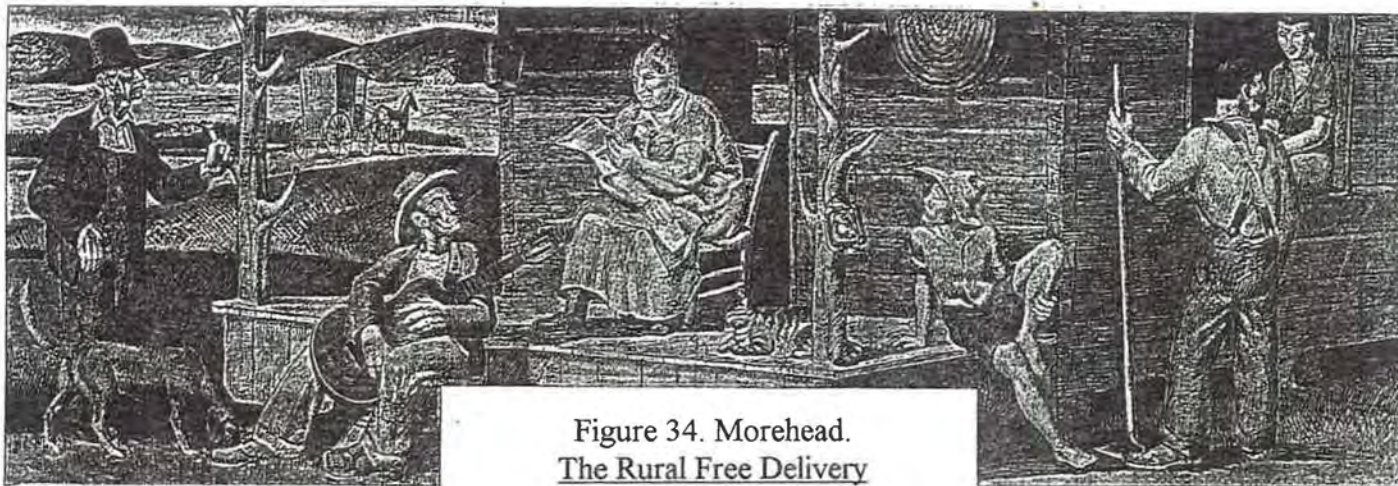


Figure 34. Morehead.
The Rural Free Delivery
(Original Sketch)

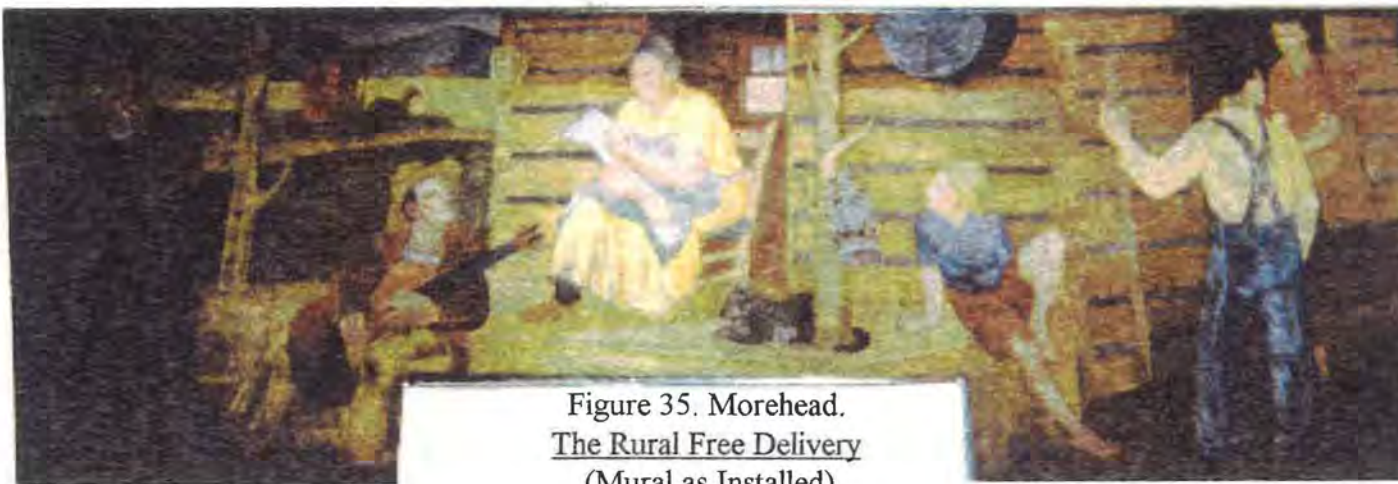


Figure 35. Morehead.
The Rural Free Delivery
(Mural as Installed)

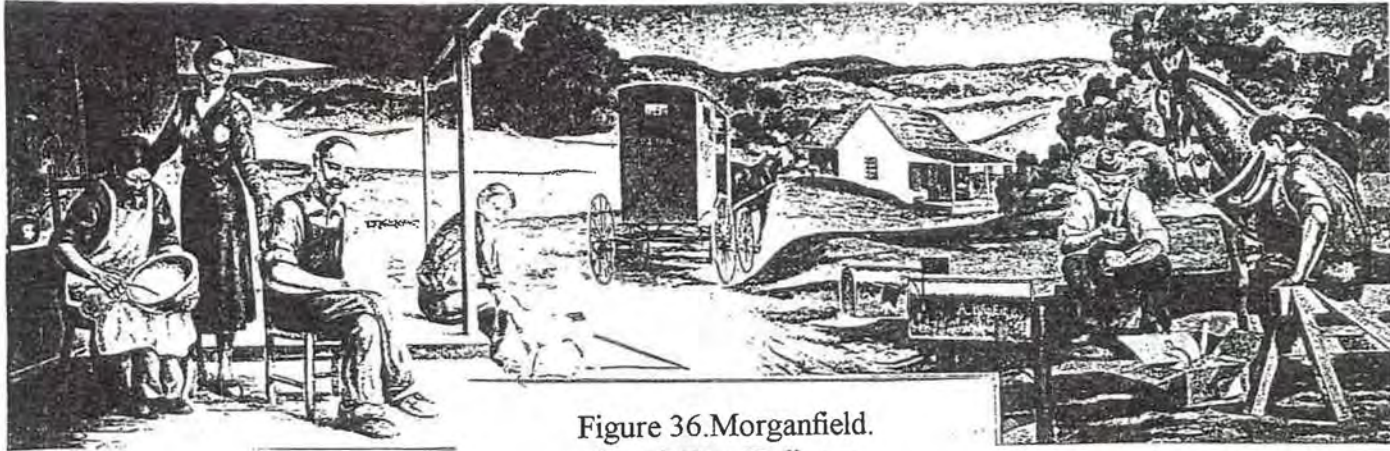


Figure 36. Morganfield.
Rural Free Delivery
(Original Sketch)



Figure 37. Morganfield.
Rural Free Delivery
(Mural as Installed)

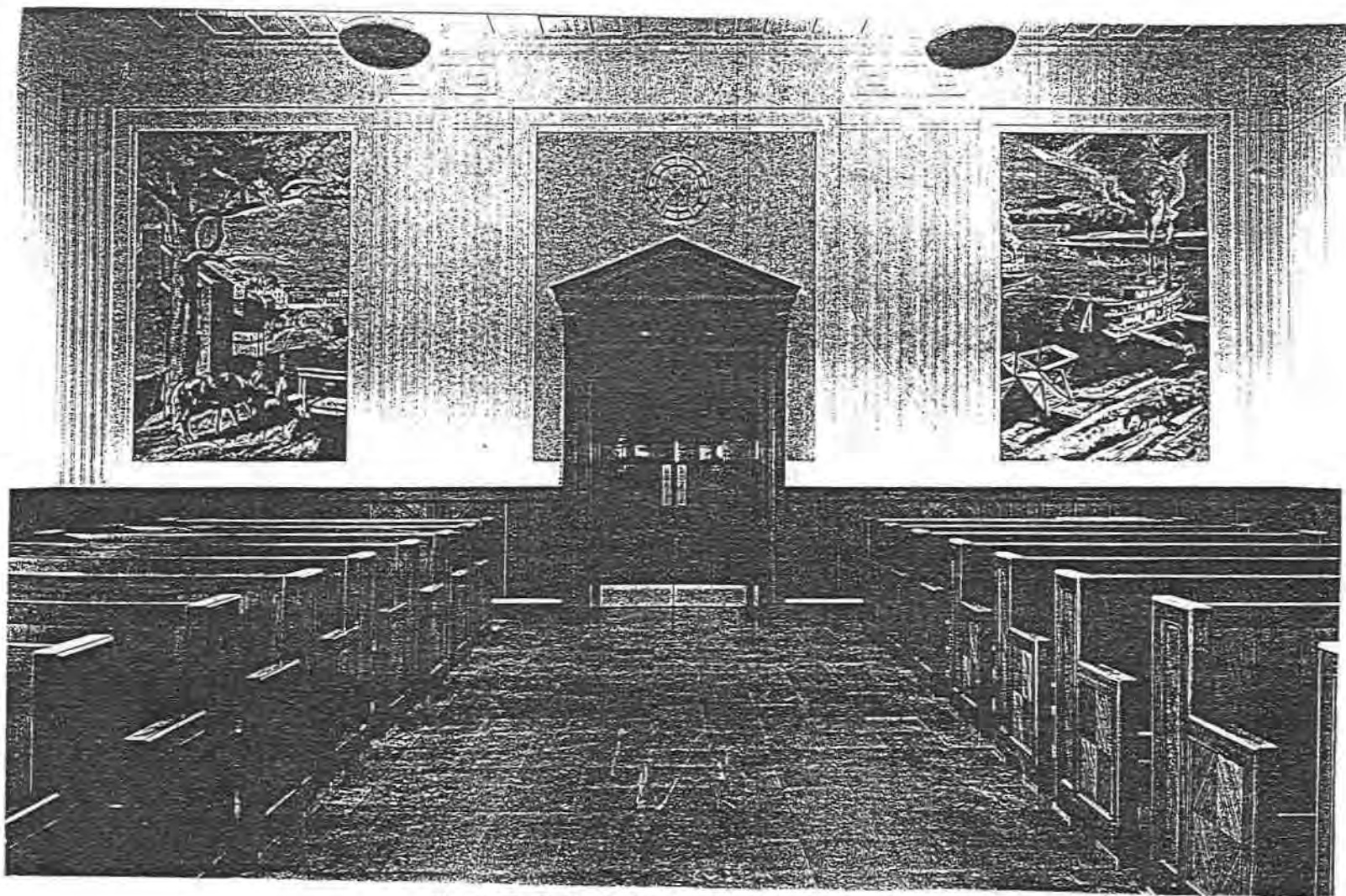


Figure 38. Paducah. Interior of Federal Courtroom

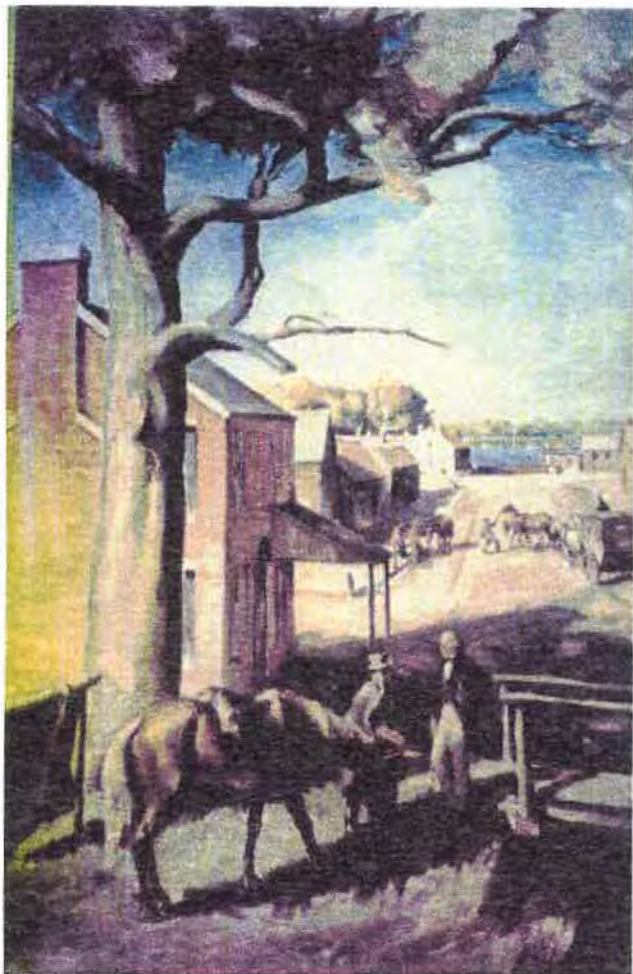


Figure 39. Paducah. Early Town

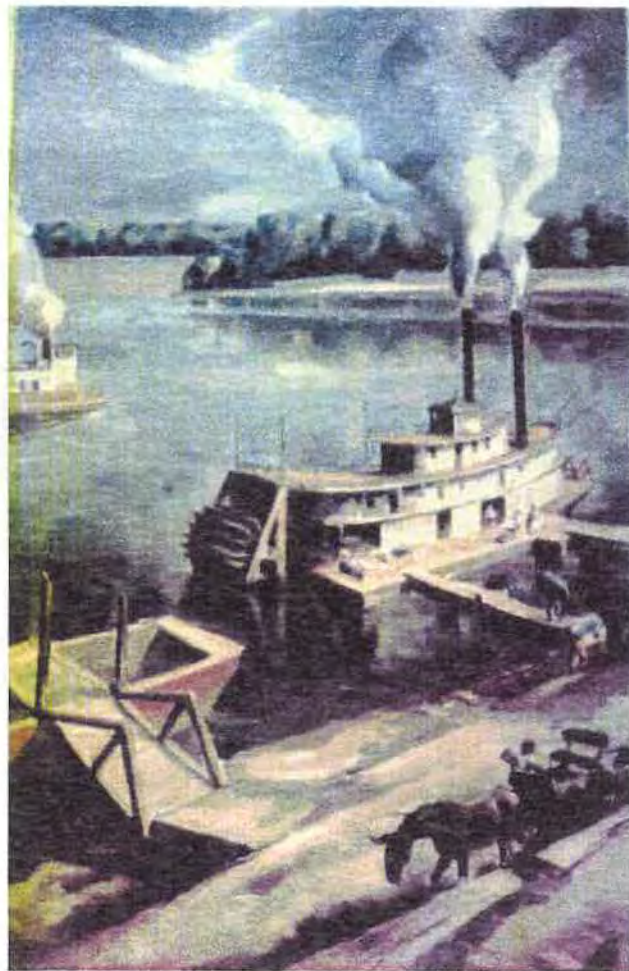


Figure 40. Paducah. River



Figure 41. Pineville. Kentucky Mounted Mail Enroute



Figure 42. Princeton. Kentucky Tobacco Field

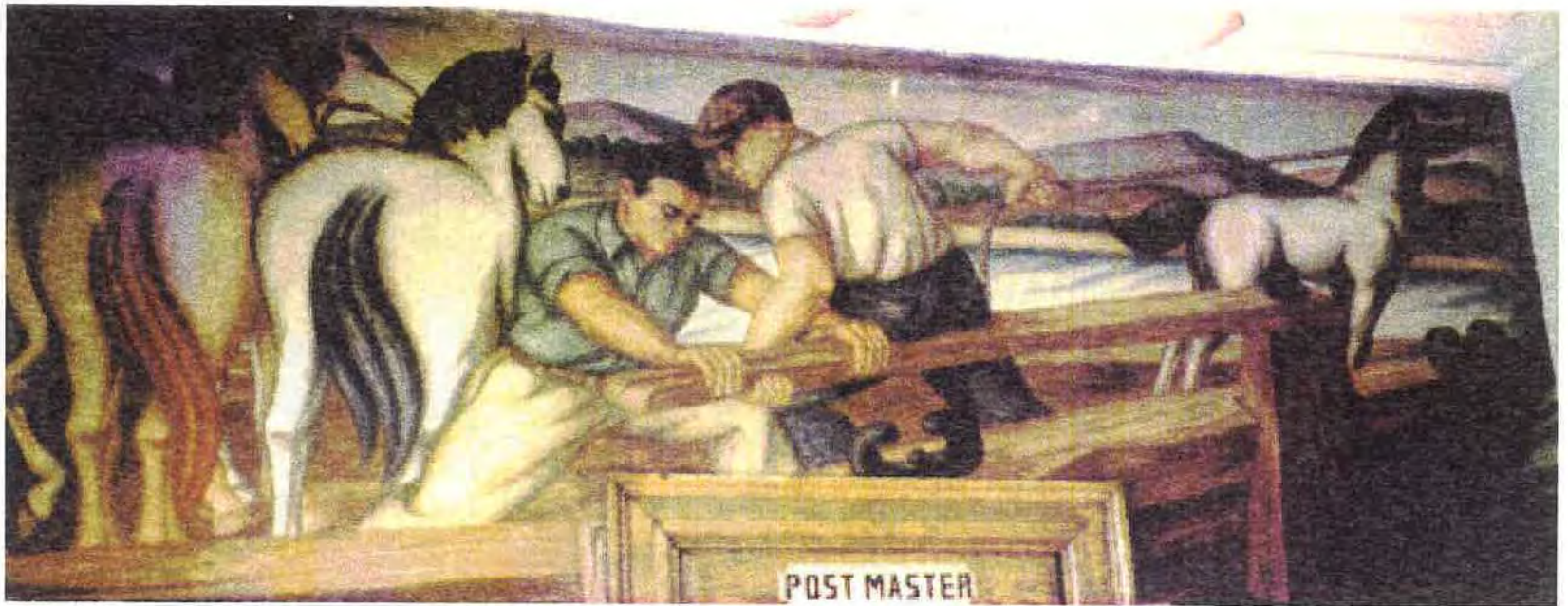


Figure 43. Williamsburg. Floating Horses Down the Cumberland River



Figure 44. Franklin. Tobacco Farming



Figure 45.
Campbellville.
Agriculture in Kentucky



Figure 46. Campbellville. General Zachary Taylor in the Field.

Photo Sources

All color photographs by author

All black and white photographs
courtesy of National Archives,^{1/3}
Washington, D.C.

VITA

The author, Eileen Toutant, is a native of Auburn, New York, and acquired her preliminary education in that city.

She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Louisville in August 1983 with highest honors in Art History. She was the recipient of the Justus Bier Award for outstanding Art History major and became a member of the Woodcock Society and the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi.

In 1984 she enrolled as a candidate for the Master of Arts degree at the University of Louisville. For four semesters she taught surveys of the history of art as a graduate assistant.

She was a participant in the sixth annual Symposium for Art History graduate students at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, in March 1986. The paper delivered at this symposium was published in the sixth edition of the Florida State University Journal Athenor. In December 1987 she was awarded the Master of Arts in Art History.

Since 1986 she has taught junior and senior levels of

courses in Art History at the University of Louisville as an instructor.

The author enrolled as a candidate for the Ph.D. program in Art History at the University of Louisville in 1996. For all three degrees she earned a Grade Point Average of 4.0.

She is married to Dr. William T. Toutant. They have eight children.