



Made in Montana : Montanas post office murals
by Elizabeth Joan Mentzer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History
Montana State University
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Abstract:

In the decade between 1933 and 1943, the government organized and managed a series of federally subsidized art programs. These projects lasted varying lengths of time and targeted different artists. The Federal Art Project, which was the better known program, aimed its efforts towards artists on relief. A simultaneous program managed by the Treasury Department aided artists not on relief, and commissioned the post office murals found throughout Montana. Montana's murals materialized in a four year span and can still be found in the post office or federal building for which these designs were commissioned.

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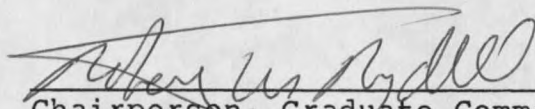
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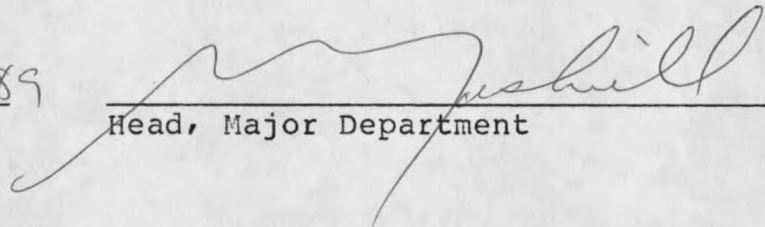
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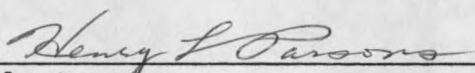
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ABSTRACT

In the decade between 1933 and 1943, the government organized and managed a series of federally subsidized art programs. These projects lasted varying lengths of time and targeted different artists. The Federal Art Project, which was the better known program, aimed its efforts towards artists on relief. A simultaneous program managed by the Treasury Department aided artists not on relief, and commissioned the post office murals found throughout Montana. Montana's murals materialized in a four year span and can still be found in the post office or federal building for which these designs were commissioned.

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CHAPTER 1

NEW DEAL MURALS IN MONTANA: AN INTRODUCTION

Between 1933 and 1943, the federal government organized and managed a number of relief programs. In addition to those projects which resulted in new bridges, buildings, and roads, the government expanded the scope of its efforts and included artists in government supported programs. Musicians, actors/actresses, and writers received assistance as well as those who plied paintbrushes on canvas. The Roosevelt administration realized it needed to make federal money available for everyone. Artists suffered from the Depression just as laborers did.

In spreading its attempts to aid everyone, the government's policies reflected two different factors. One was President Roosevelt's personal ideology. He stressed the need to try to solve a problem. If one solution failed, then another should be tested. Thus, a number of different programs appeared. Some lasted a long time, while others dissolved into new ones. The second factor in government supported art reflected the direction art had taken in the United States since World War I. During the 1920s, the United States slowly but surely began to divorce itself from European artistic

innovations. Previously, Americans copied European advances. Indeed, American artists who could afford to study in Europe took advantage of the talent there, usually locating in Italy or France. However, in the 1930s, there was an emphasis on the American scene, a movement to take art away from remote ateliers, and make art available for the masses. This sharing of art became a primary motive behind the government supported programs.

Towards this end, the government divided its efforts. Different programs developed, which targeted different artists. The Works Progress (later Project) Administration's Federal Art Project aimed its efforts at artists on relief. Coincidentally, the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture concentrated its efforts towards employing artists not on relief. It was this latter program which commissioned the post office murals found throughout Montana. Billings, Deer Lodge, Dillon, Glasgow, Hamilton, and Sidney, Montana merited murals when these respective towns received a new federal/post office building. Usually, one percent of the building's cost was set aside for interior decoration. Although the government actively supported these programs for a decade, Montana's murals materialized within a four year span, from 1938 to 1942.

Although this federal support of the arts was short-lived, the various programs achieved positive results in Montana as well as across the country. The selection of murals for decoration proved a wise choice for two reasons. By their very nature, murals were/are public art. Each design related an event which was pertinent to the town in which it was located, making it a tangible part of the town's heritage. Secondly, the cost of this kind of interior decoration was reasonable. Thus, the least financial expenditure by the government reached the largest number of people, and reminded them of the government's largesse.

In establishing its mural program, the government exercised originality with innovation. Although it borrowed the idea for murals from Mexico and Europe, officials made changes which made the program a viable one for America. Artists, public relation men, museum directors and bureaucrats combined their efforts and increased the efficacy of the program. Furthermore, because the government officials were well aware of the intended audience, they included members of communities in the mural process. The Section made an honest effort to award young and unknown artists, women, and Native Americans with commissions. Finally, artists did not have

to paint their designs on the wall al fresco. Oil on canvas, which was then affixed to the wall, was accepted as a mural.

In many aspects, Montana followed the national trend. Two of its artists were women; all the murals were oil on canvas; and in most instances the communities played active roles in the mural selection. Most of the artists were young and found that painting for the government enhanced their careers. Although none of the artists traveled to Europe for study, most studied in New York, Chicago, or California. However, all returned to the West to paint, once their training was completed.

While mirroring the national program in most regards, Montana maintained some independence, which made its murals unique. Most of the muralists were native sons or daughters. Towns exhibited a preference for native-born artists to paint their mural. Most of the artists painted a significant event in the town's history, sometimes adding imagination or artistic license to the painting. In so doing, these artists painted the West, incorporating reality and myth. Native Americans, cowboys and cattle drives, and early pioneers decorated the walls of Montana's post offices, telling the story of the West.

In 1938, Elizabeth Lochrie painted Montana's first mural in Dillon. News From The States pleased the citizenry there and promised a successful beginning for the mural program in Montana. Verona Burkhard's mural in Deer Lodge followed, which depicted early settlers, the Stuart brothers, in Deer Lodge Valley. Leo Beaulaurier told the tale of a cattle drive in Billings, Montana's post office. James K. Ralston related an event from eastern Montana, painting General Sully crossing the Yellowstone River near Sidney. Henry Meloy's mural in Hamilton concentrated on Native Americans for its subject matter. Finally, Forrest Hill's mural in Glasgow retold events from Montana's past with miners, trappers, and Native Americans as well as anticipating the future with the inclusion of the new Fort Peck Dam and the Glasgow Civic Center. Each artist gave his/her audience a subject matter to which they could relate. They recreated the past by painting a story, and made a tangible contribution to the town's collective memory.

Although the artists painted to please their audiences, they also had to consider their patron, the United States government. This three sided relationship gave way to the inevitable accusations of censorship. Antagonists implied that it was impossible to have a

program of this scope without censorship. Montana's artists, however, did not feel that censorship was an issue. Two or three made changes in their murals to please the audiences but none labeled these changes as censorship. It is the opinion of this writer that the antagonists missed the real strength of their claims. The government exercised fewer demands than the local communities. For example, Great Falls reacted so violently to a proposed mural design that their post office walls remain bare today. Hill's Glasgow mural provoked an outburst, because he included a gambler in a prominent position. This offended some residents, who voiced their dissatisfaction to Washington. Washington, in turn, notified Hill that he needed to change the position of the gambler.

The mural decorations in post offices told only part of the story, the finished product. A part of their story was in the relationship among artists, audiences, and patrons. How did the government select an artist to design a mural for a town? There were two means the government employed to commission an artist. The Section reserved for itself the right to appoint an artist to paint a mural. In Montana, three murals resulted from this action. The second method was more democratic and

the preferred method. The Section sponsored competitions, in which artists submitted anonymous entries, drawn to scale, for a proposed post office. A local jury judged the entries, selected their preferred three, and boxed the entire collection to be sent to Washington, D.C. for a final approval. Generally, the government agreed with their decisions, and began the process of notifying the painter and beginning payments. Again, the energies of the townspeople and the artists, too, showed themselves. Artists and their friends never hesitated to ask an elected official to help him/her win a commission. Citizens were willing to have art given to them by the government, but they exercised decided tastes in what they would accept.

The artists were well aware of the importance of the design to the town. Indeed, they painted to please their respective audiences, and in most instances, no problems resulted. These artists painted the locale, including prominent mountain peaks, rivers, and vistas. They painted the myths of the West, but included some elements from the 1930s, too. Most of the subjects appeared clean and well pressed; apparently, none of these early settlers succumbed to body odor or dirty clothes. Beaulaurier's sole cowboy smoked a cigarette, making him a part of the

1930s as well as an earlier time. Emphasizing the past besides including contemporary elements made the murals more real, and provided a common ground on which people would accept the murals.

Initial reactions to the murals expressed support and appreciation to the artist and the government for the murals in town's post offices. But over time, the murals became forgotten; most people did not realize the mural was there. The question why the murals suffered this fate had several possible explanations. Perhaps people did not want to be reminded of the Depression. It had been a difficult time, and no one wanted to dwell on it. If the government had continued its program, the recognition factor would have continued. As it was, the government lost its best salesmanship. Finally, perhaps in its efforts to reach as many people as possible, the government erred in its preference for mural art. Murals demanded patience, talent, and experience from artists. Ideally, younger artists should have learned this technique from older, more experienced artists. However, this ideal blend was not forthcoming, due to the sudden appearance of the program.

In the aftermath of the Depression, the murals fell into oblivion for four decades. Recently, however, there

has been a revival of scholarly interest in them. But Montana has been relegated to the periphery of the national experience. In the early 1980s, Karal Ann Marling's book, Wall-to-Wall America, brought murals to people's attention. She explored the reactions of the small towns, when murals or other art pieces were created for a specific place. Though her work criss-crossed the entire nation, Montana did not fall into her investigatory scope. In 1984, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz published Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal. These two authors complemented Marling's analysis, and discussed the major themes of the 1930s, such as the importance of agriculture, even though industry had surpassed agriculture in economic importance. Park and Markowitz relied on art done through the Section of Fine Arts, and again, Montana was omitted. These two authors discussed other murals done by Montana artists in other states. They included murals done in Wyoming, Idaho, North Dakota and North Carolina, but not Montana. With the exception of North Carolina, none of the other states in the Park and Markowitz's had more murals than Montana. Idaho and Wyoming had six; North Dakota had only four federally commissioned paintings. There is no reason to suppose that Montana's artists plied their talents more

diligently outside the state than within it. Telling the story of Montana's murals, what they meant to the artists and audiences of the 1930s, and what they might mean to us in the 1980s, is overdue. In view of the lacuna in historical scholarship, my goal is to bring Montana's muralists and murals to the attention of its citizens and address the cultural and historical significance of these murals.

CHAPTER 2

MURAL ART IN MONTANA: ITS GENESIS AND SIGNIFICANCE

During a 1983 interview with a reporter from the Billings Gazette, artist Leo Beaulaurier, seventy years old, reminisced about the post office mural he had been commissioned to paint four decades earlier. "It was a real boon to us, because it was a hard time for the arts. People could barely afford necessities, much less painting."¹ Beaulaurier's statement conveyed a deeper meaning than he may have intended. He gave a blunt and accurate description of the Depression, one which could be applied beyond Montana's borders. He spoke from personal experience, as much for himself as for the thousand others in similar circumstances. His response reflected the gratitude he experienced when the government had paid him to paint the Billings' mural as well as another one in Langdon, North Dakota. In addition, his comment mirrored the image of government Roosevelt wanted to convey, one of caring for and wanting to improve the condition of the common man, workers and artists alike.

The mechanics behind Beaulaurier's appointment reveal one of the more ambitious and unique programs of Roosevelt's New Deal. The government's employment of

artists owed its existence to George Biddle, who advocated that the federal government produce a "real spurt in the arts".² Biddle was well educated in art, having studied for many years in Europe and Latin America under the tutelage of such noted masters as Mary Cassatt and Diego Rivera.³ The Mexican mural program impressed Biddle, and he hoped to duplicate the same spirit and advantages in the United States. In addition, he maintained that art had, to this point, failed to exert itself as a positive influence; art had been "a prostitute well paid, sleeping in expensive beds, but divorced... from our program of life."⁴ Biddle suggested to President Roosevelt that governmental aid to artists would help his administration's social aims and create a lasting monument to these ideals.⁵ Biddle's arguments struck a responsive chord with Roosevelt. This program would aid not only artists but bring an awareness and appreciation of art to the masses.

Despite Roosevelt's and Biddle's idealism, strong opposition to Biddle's innovation came from those whom he hoped to help--the artists themselves. Unable to set differences aside to unite for a common goal, the artists divided into two camps, the conservatives and modernists. Understandably, support for Biddle's program came from the

modernists, including Thomas Hart Benton, Maurice Sterne, and Boardman Robinson. These artists preferred to create an art which recorded the moment, the 1930s. Ford cars, cigarette wrappers, and clothing styles materialized on their canvasses. Conservatives or academic artists stressed the relationship between artists and architects and relied on classical Greek and Roman models. The result of their work likely prompted Biddle's criticism, because it was too far removed from the average American's life style. Conservatives, who rejected modernist art out of hand, argued that art of this nature would produce pictures of only an incidental nature.⁶ Indeed, not all of the art produced during the New Deal's sponsorship was exceptional. It must be remembered that besides creating an awareness of art, the government hoped to employ a large number of artists. Uniform quality was not a realistic expectation, though it was certainly an idealistic aspiration.

Quality notwithstanding, the government's efforts to sponsor art mirrored Roosevelt's personal ideology in two contrasting ways. Initially, it expressed his opinion that Americans deserved "a more abundant life".⁷ Thus Roosevelt willingly supported programs but preferred not to entangle himself in the controversies between the

conservatives and modernists.⁸ The second manner in which the art patronage of the government reflected Roosevelt's personal style was the fact that these projects underwent several changes during the decade they existed. The President asserted that if one program did not work then another should be tried: "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."⁹ As a result of his attitude and the combined enthusiasm and efforts of various administrators, a number of programs to aid artists occurred. Some endured longer than others, a few concentrated on helping artists on relief. The Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture geared its efforts towards artists not on relief. This program produced the murals in some of Montana's post offices.

The government first experimented with the Public Works of Art Project. This program lasted only one year, from 1933 to 1934. However, even before its funding ended, the government realized its relevance. In addition to the government's realization of its potential in supporting the arts, everyone realized that the Depression was still very much a part of people's lives. Edward Bruce, an established American businessman, attorney, and artist managed the PWAP, having secured the support and

enthusiasm of several well-placed individuals such as Eleanor Roosevelt, the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Department, Lawrence W. Robert, and respected art critic, Forbes Watson.¹⁰ Bruce's intention was to divide the country into sixteen regions, allowing each area to attend to the necessary administrative details. Region sixteen included Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and Montana, and was managed from Portland, Oregon. Burt Brown Barker managed the Portland bureau, receiving frequent advice and instructions from Bruce.¹¹

Advice from Bruce covered both administrative and aesthetic suggestions. In 1933, Bruce telegraphed Barker:

Public Works of Art Project authorized by Civil Works Administration. Not relief work-eliminate 'relief' in any reference to project or in any discussion with artists about it... we want to put competent artists to work who are out of work.¹²

Having finished with the administrative aspect, Bruce's correspondence suddenly changed tenor: "This project is a challenge to American art as a whole and every artist in America should get behind it. Those who can afford it should contribute their services to the movement."¹³ Bruce's background allowed him the flexibility to offer contrasting suggestions. He had graduated from Columbia Law School and had served as President of the Pacific Development Company. When this venture failed, he turned

to art. He studied for six years in Italy with American artist Maurice Sterne. The Treasury Department actively solicited Edward Bruce to work for them due to his experience in international monetary affairs.¹⁴ His business acumen, artistic ability and solid social standing made him a natural director for the government's ambitious program.

Funding for the PWAP lasted for only one year, but because the government recognized the positive effects of the project, federal sponsorship continued. The PWAP evolved into the Works Progress (later Projects) Administration's Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP), which is the most recognized. The WPA/FAP existed eight years, from 1935 to 1943. Harry Hopkins directed the FAP and his aims differed from those of Edward Bruce, who had directed the PWAP and later would head the Section of Fine Arts. Hopkins wanted to employ as many artists as possible, especially those on relief. The large volume of production generated would reflect the employment of more artists, achieving the government's purpose.¹⁵ Work produced under the aegis of the WPA/FAP concentrated on artists in large cities, housing its art in state and municipal buildings.¹⁶

Another relief program for artists was the Treasury Relief Art Program (TRAP), which lasted from 1935 to 1939. The managers of TRAP and the WPA/FAP conflicted frequently. Each accused the other of taking its artists. Perhaps because of the tensions between the two organizations, some of the artists hired were not on relief, and the overall calibre of work produced was less than desirable. Nationally, these painters finished eighty-nine murals, sixty-five sculptures, and more than ten-thousand easel paintings and prints.¹⁷ In Montana, TRAP's emphasis on relief forced it into oblivion. Olin Dows, a young artist and aide to Bruce, wrote to Bozeman architect, Fred F. Willson, "...sorry that there are no artists on the relief rolls in the state of Montana, as I wish we could start a project there."¹⁸ Perhaps these Montana artists were simply exhibiting their independence from the East by not putting their names on relief rolls. They may have found other employment, or they may not have been aware of the possibilities to paint for the government. Whatever the reason, the ultimate result was that Montana's artists did not respond to TRAP.

The Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture (later known as the Section of Fine Arts) originated in October, 1934.¹⁹ Edward Bruce managed this

art program. His initial intent was to reserve one percent of the cost of a federal building for decoration. Bruce's initiative failed to win the necessary support for survival, but the funding received enabled nearly fourteen-hundred commissions to be completed, including commissions that gave Montana its six post office murals.²⁰

The Section concentrated its efforts on artists who were not on relief, emphasized local talent, mandated that only the highest quality of art would be considered, and organized anonymous competitions to determine which artist should receive a commission. In addition, the government reserved the right to give an artist work without competing in a competition.²¹ Women received about one-sixth of the commissions, and special efforts were made to recognize Native Americans and unknown western artists.²² Its goals expanded beyond the scope of earlier programs but continued the government's efforts to bring art to the common people.

Post offices and/or federal buildings served the goal of the Section of Fine Arts nicely. In any town, and especially in small towns, the post office was the hub of activity. Nearly everyone had reason to go there and fairly often. With each return, citizens would become

more familiar with the art work there. In Montana, murals usually materialized over the door to the Postmaster's Office. An unexpected effect of placing the art in an obvious location was that many looked at it but did not see the mural for what it was - a phenomenon that continues today.²³ Only six pictures appeared throughout the state, when new post office buildings were constructed. Billings, Deer Lodge, Dillon, Hamilton, Glasgow and Sidney received new federal buildings, and part of the money allotted for these towns was for decoration. In Great Falls, the government remodeled the post office, and though there were funds for decoration, the intended mural never resulted.

The process of securing a mural decoration began with federal government approval for a new post office. Hamilton's newspaper, Western News, carried articles on proposed construction between 1937 and 1941. The newspaper kept the issue alive in townspeople's minds by advising them of communication from Montana's congressman and United States senators. Ultimately, the government pledged eighty-thousand dollars for site acquisition and construction. A native Montanan, Henry Meloy, received the commission to paint a mural, for which he received eight hundred dollars.²⁴

Dillon, Montana counted itself fortunate to have a new post office, much less a mural. The citizens divided on the need for a new post office. Some enthusiastically accepted the government's pledge for a new building, while others argued that a new building would only result in yet another empty structure in the town. The anti-construction forces finally capitulated to the majority, who wanted a new building. The prospect of additional jobs and the interest shown by the federal government towards this small town far outweighed the empty building factor. Even with complete cooperation from the town, Dillon received its post office only through the efforts of Senators Wheeler and Monaghan.²⁵ Finally, in 1936, the Dillon Tribune projected a completion date for that spring.²⁶

These separate incidents revealed differing western attitudes. Despite some fiercely independent individuals, most of the populace eagerly accepted aid from the East. A new building, which would provide employment and at least a temporary boost to the economy was too good an offer to refuse. Besides, Hamilton and Dillon's citizens were as eligible for federal subsidies as anyone else in the West. Another consideration was the trust placed in elected officials. These men would work for the good of

Montana's citizens. The trust was well placed. Personal letters from Montanans received prompt consideration from these bureaucrats.²⁷ Of course, these senators and congressmen could not afford to neglect their constituents. Despite Montana's sparse population, news of this nature would travel quickly and widely. Obviously, it was in the best interest of these federal employees to keep Montanan concerns uppermost among their duties.

What complicated matters for the federal government was its inexperience in art management. The New Deal sponsored an art program which was and remains unique. Never before had the government financed such massive support of the arts. Fortune Magazine reported in May issue, 1937, "What the government's experimentation in music, painting, and theater actually did, even in the first year, was to work a sort of cultural revolution in America."²⁸ Despite this heady success, the government still had to proceed cautiously. While federal officials recognized that it should not dictate themes, in essence censoring art, the government wanted a certain calibre of art produced. This art was to reflect the American spirit and initiative. Rowan suggested in a directive that any artist who included foreign subjects "had better be

dropped and an opportunity given to the man or woman with enough imagination and vision to use the beauty and possibility for aesthetic expression in the subject matter of his own country."²⁹ It is difficult to state whether Rowan's adamant opinion reflected personal or aesthetic convictions--or both. However, it must be remembered that after World War I, America began to distance itself from Europe. The repugnance felt by many Americans for the war itself contributed to this reluctance to follow European models. This separation was widespread, and art was only one of the areas affected.

In addition to severing ties with Europe, the political and economic crises of the 1930s pushed artists to search for a national and personal identity. In the United States, the public usually received art indifferently. In Europe, American artists were regarded as provincial. In spite of this cultural inferiority complex, American artists began to find their identities by focusing their attention on America, where the subject matter was theirs.³⁰ Earlier artistic innovations came to the United States from France and Italy and comprised such movements as Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism. American artists incorporated these changes into their art without the finesse of the European leaders such as Picasso and

Georges Braque. The imperfect productions of American artists added to the public's inability to relate to the end product.³¹

The suspicion towards European artistic innovations and the need to paint the positive and negative sides of America did not affect all American painters. However, the movement wended westward, and one result was that Montana's muralists painted as regionalists. Each concentrated on his/her portion of the West and painted in a simple fashion. Only one artist, Mordi Gassner, whose mural depiction resembled a Titian masterpiece more than contemporary art, tried to widen his viewers' horizons. Ultimately, he failed. His ideas were too distant from what his audience wanted or was willing to accept, and he never painted his mural in Great Falls. None of the other artists directly used a European innovation, even though most had studied in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago.

Montana's muralists capitalized on the geographic beauty of their respective loci when they painted their murals. Most of the painters, five in fact, visited the area before beginning the painting. James Ralston drove to Sidney and meandered along the Yellowstone River with the postmaster from Sidney to locate the probable site where General Sully would have crossed the river.

Elizabeth Lochrie went to Dillon and included an area west of town known as Frying Pan Basin for the background for her mural. Verona Burkhard stayed in Deer Lodge, while painting her mural for the better part of a summer. The inclusion of topography familiar to a town's inhabitants served to make the painting mean more to them, providing instant recognition and response. And the surroundings served to further the painter's respective talents. The western landscape has long been recognized for its natural beauty and no doubt inspired the artists. These painters relied on and benefited from the arid atmosphere, which further heightened the area's colors.

Besides preserving the town's milieu in oils on canvas, these artists, consciously or not, included another aspect of the West in their creations. All of them, with the exception of Henry Meloy, recorded the coming and effect of "civilization" on the West. Meloy painted a small party of Flathead braves departing to meet a Blackfoot war party, which was intent on stealing horses from the Flathead Indians. Meloy depicted a distinct aspect of Native Americans, one which began long before the arrival of whites. Yet he recorded a moment which was destined to become history. The other painters represented the invasion of this sanctuary of the West

with the accoutrements of civilization without which whites could not live. Whites were not about to leave the comforts and necessities of home behind when they departed for the West. Elizabeth Lochrie included the arrival of the mail as well as ardent reading of a newspaper, posing a contradiction in her mural. Though these men (in her mural all the figures are men) have come West seemingly to escape the East, they appear starved for news. Letters satisfied the need for personal items, and the nation's news was revealed through the newspaper. Two individuals, a herder and a miner, appeared as long-time residents in the West and ignored this invasion of civilization upon their Eden, though they too have been unable to break free completely from their previous lives. The miner knew that gold would always have a strong appeal for whites; he was in business to make money. The sheepherder, despite his seeming independence, relied on a market elsewhere for the sale of his wool each season. While each of these figures called his life his own, neither was completely free from financial necessities imposed by established standards.

Two more murals also illustrated the coming of civilization to the West. These murals were painted for post offices in Billings and Sidney, Montana. These towns were in south-central and south-eastern Montana,

respectively. In this drier section of the state, water played an important role. Both artists utilized the Yellowstone River, recognizing its importance. Leo Beaulaurier's mural, Trailing Cattle, showed a cattle drive through the Yellowstone Valley near Billings. A lone cowboy regarded the scene of the passing cattle, dust, and restlessness below him. He was not an integral part of the action but only a detached observer, smoking a cigarette, while watching the men and beasts follow the river. James K. Ralston painted the second mural which figured the Yellowstone River. He depicted General Sully, his troops, and Holmes party of immigrants which traveled with the army, crossing this river near Sidney, Montana.

These murals illustrated the past as each artist interpreted it; how the past might have been. The painters captured the moment, not as a camera would have, but rather through the medium of oil on canvas. They recreated what might have been and probably came close to the truth. This utilization of history gave each decoration a validity. Even if the incident designed was fictitious, the inclusion of native surroundings, though painted more as they were in the 1930s than an earlier time the image was to depict, added a measure of authenticity to the murals. The landscape captured or

created a timelessness, a moment. The past cannot be completely recreated, so in their renditions of the past, the artists came as close to truth as one could expect.

Relying heavily on the past seemed to comfort these artists. The past suggested the consoling continuance of civilization's influences. Though times might have been tough, people had persevered and survived, coming through the difficult times stronger than they had commenced the struggle. The citizens of the 1930s and 1940s were experiencing hard times with the Depression. Even if the mural neglected to portray pioneers' indomitable spirit in overcoming natural obstacles, it was easier for people to dwell on the past. The future appeared too uncertain to determine when change might serve for the better. Reflecting on earlier events and people connected with these circumstances allowed citizens a certain detachment. The mural probably did not depict anything personal to any specific person, but rather an occurrence with which he/she was familiar. Retelling an incident, though done through a different medium than words, provided a sense of identity for the townspeople.

While most of the muralists relied on the past for themes, Forrest Hill anticipated the future when he designed his mural in 1942. Like the other artists, he

was intimately aware of the American West's recent past and refurbished memories of pioneers, Indians and buffalo, the merits of dry land farming, the new Fort Peck Dam, ranching and commercial activity. In 1942, when the nation was beginning to recover from the Depression, Hill could afford the optimism he painted on his canvas.

The murals, with their attention to history and to positive changes that might result in a better future, helped frame the Depression years for many Montanans. With the help of the federal government, these muralists left an indelible imprint on the cultural landscape of the state.

Notes

1. Billings Gazette, 10 April 1983, Sec. C., p. 1.
2. Richard D. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 5.
3. Ibid.
4. See scrapbooks in George Biddle Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); George Biddle Diary [summer 1933] on Archives of American Art (Washington, D.C.) Microfilm Reel D 127. As cited in McKinzie, p. 5.
5. McKinzie, The New Deal For Authors, p. 5.
6. Ibid., p. 7.
7. Ibid., p. x.
8. Ibid., p. 7.
9. Annual Message to Congress, 3 January 1938, Roosevelt, Public Papers (New York, 1941), vol. 6, p. 14. As cited in Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), p. 3.
10. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, pp. 5-18.
11. Mr. Barker was the regional director of region sixteen, which permitted him to act as an executive officer for this geographical area, managing routine and clerical work.
12. Edward Bruce to Burt Barker, 12-18-33. Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
13. Ibid.
14. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p. 8.
15. Ibid., pp. 75-76.
16. Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in The New Deal, p. 6.

17. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p. 39.
18. Olin Dows to Fred F. Willson, 10-21-35. RG 121. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
19. Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in The New Deal, p. 6.
20. Ibid., p. 7.
21. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p. 37.
22. Park and Markowitz, Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in The New Deal, p. 8.
23. In personal conversation with residents (sometimes former residents) of towns with murals, only one person has responded that she clearly recalled the mural. Some have even denied that a mural was in his/her post office. When I have gone to one - any one - of the towns with a mural to photograph it, people coming into the post office react with surprise when they realized what I am doing. Most seem to become aware of the mural for the first time.
24. Western News, 30 October 1938. Artists Vertical File, Montana State Historical Society, Helena, Mt.
25. Dillon Tribune, 28 June 1934, D-530; 1-5-1933 to 12-27-1934.
26. Dillon Tribune, 9 March 1936. D-530; 1-3-1935 to 12-31-1936.
27. As an example, Mrs. Ellen Ralston (J.K. Ralston's mother) wrote to the Commissioner of Public Buildings, who forwarded the letter to Senator Burton K. Wheeler. RG 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
28. Carl N. Degler, "The Third American Revolution," Conflict and Consensus in Modern American History, eds. Allen F. Davis and Harold D. Woodman, 4th edition (Lexington, MA, 1976), p. 304.
29. McKinzie, The New Deal For Artists, p. 23.

30. Duane and Sarah Prible, Artforms: An Introduction to the Visual Arts (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 384.
31. Ibid., pp. 352-376.

CHAPTER 3

GOVERNMENT PATRONAGE: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

During its four and a half years existence, the Section of Painting and Sculpture authorized 79 competitions. Nearly 5,000 artists participated in these events, though only 375 contestants completed contracts. Awards totaled over a half million dollars.¹ Simple arithmetic revealed that for each competition, an average of 60 painters competed, which presented formidable odds to any designer who wished to enter. Keeping in mind the few contracts awarded, additional statistics disclosed the following: the Section sponsored thirty-two local projects in seventeen states in its first fifteen months of operation, and contracts ranged between \$240.00 and \$4,900.00.² About two competitions a month with varying awards ought to have discouraged artists from entering. If those conditions were not sufficiently discouraging, the Section outlined the occasions when it would be able to help the artists:

When suitable spaces occur in the building, a monetary reservation for their decoration is set aside from the building fund. If, when the building is seventy-five per cent completed, it has not been necessary to use this reservation (in the construction) the Director of Procurement (of the Treasury Department)

authorizes its expenditures for the execution of mural paintings and sculptures.

The monetary reservation usually did not exceed one per cent of the cost of the building.³ Despite its restrictions on artists and limited opportunity, the Section maintained its ultimate goal of securing the best art the country could produce with merit as the only test.⁴ Opinions differed then as they do now on the overall quality of the art produced through this government sponsored program. Whether or not each mural boasted superior quality is uncertain. What is clear is that these drawings became for each town a part of its history and heritage. The importance of each composition may reside in its historical rather than artistic contribution.

Despite the odds against each artist in competitions and the potential for negative reactions to his or her work, artists responded positively to the competitions. In An American Artist's Story, George Biddle observed that since people had enforced leisure during the Depression throughout the country attendance at exhibitions increased noticeably. The authorities responded to the growing awareness between painters and the public, creating a number of different federal programs to support the arts.⁵

Understandably, the reaction to the government's art agenda varied widely. Objections arose within the world of artists, among the bureaucrats who managed the various programs, and the intended audience, the public. Probably the most common argument concerned the cost of the art. Americans usually conceded payment for manual labor more readily than financial remuneration for painters. Bridges and roads had a practical value and were utilitarian, whereas art was aesthetic and intangible, making it difficult to justify in the Depression.

Putting artists on the government payroll changed their personal perspectives. Suddenly the painters became an active part of "Public Works". Often they worked with an audience in attendance. Though removed from remote ateliers, painters' public works forced an awareness of art work onto the public. These artists, while earning a livelihood in a different fashion, were working in communities around the country. But who were they working for? Were they working for themselves, for the federal government, or for the communities?

As the public became more aware of art, inevitable conflict arose. Controversies materialized among the populace and politicians. Some community leaders believed that government sponsorship fostered mediocrity and that

the financial assistance given by the administration undoubtedly reached those who exercised limited talent. Defenders of the artists agreed that some inadequate art was inevitable but that the program permitted new talent to develop and many artists benefitted from this unprecedented opportunity. Undaunted by this defense, those against government aid rejoined with a second contention, claiming that art administrators enjoyed the authority to promote their personal tastes or preference for a specific school of art. One artist nicely refuted this contention: "Art is a very large field, where none need jostle his neighbors, and no one need shut himself up in a corner."⁶ Though Henry Adams's remark stressed the obvious, one needed to keep in mind the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. In this twenty year span, American artists turned away from European principles and advances in art. While this severing of ties allowed American artists to grow, it allowed bureaucrats to exercise some personal favoritism. However regrettable, personal preference and mediocrity, remained an element of government subsidy.⁷

In 1936, George Biddle reviewed two simultaneous exhibitions. The Artists' Congress financed the first, and its subject matter, titled "America Today", revealed

how far the artistic gap between Europe and America had grown. Prints provided social criticism of American life, and natural disasters. Of the submitted art work, "...none could be said to enjoy, reflect, participate in our inherited, democratic-capitalist culture in the sense that Velasquez, Goya, and Titian seem at home in their courtly life..."⁸ This comment mirrored attitudes throughout the country as much as it did the artistic expression. The artists painted what they saw and knew with an honesty the government probably would have preferred not to see. Biddle contrasted this show of the French exhibits by such notables as Picasso, Chagall, Matisse and Dufy. Not one French artist submitted art concerned with life or social problems. These Parisians continued to paint for art alone: art for art's sake.⁹ The Depression played an important role in the paths American artists followed, forcing attention on things American. A certain urgency characterized their work indicating that these were unusual times that needed to be remembered on canvas.

The federal government certainly thought art had a role to play in addressing the "hard times" of the 1930s and established guidelines for artists. This conformity to a patron brought cries of "censorship" from those who

opposed bureaucratic assistance for artists. Some of these laments may well have come from artists themselves. Censorship remained a possibility while the bureaucracy supported national assistance to the arts. Concerns were voiced that painters might paint to please their patron, which was the United States government. Some painters, Diego Rivera and George Biddle did, in particular, suffer at the hands of government, which objected to their murals. But artists in Montana voiced different opinions.

Verona Burkhard, for example, did not feel the government dictated to her what or how to paint her mural in Deer Lodge's post office: "In every case I was free to choose my own subject. The government never indicated what I should paint or how."¹⁰ Elizabeth Davey Lochrie's daughter wrote about her mother:

I think she never felt constraint about the federal regulations for her mural work--mainly because hers were given by the Treasury Section to recognized artists; ...the commissions were given as an honor.¹¹

Granted, these responses to events which occurred more than four decades earlier may lack complete reliability. Verona Burkhard probably did not recall the discussion about Mt. Powell in her mural. Opinions differed then as they do now if Burkhard had painted Mt. Powell accurately. Burkhard did not change her picture,

even though the Section advised her: "The mountain should in every way be authentic." This possible error had been brought to Rowan's attention when a former Deer Lodge resident studied the proposed designs for the post office, which had been sent to Washington, D.C.¹² Burkhard replied:

A number of people have taken it for granted that my design is an incorrect portrait of a mountain dominating the scenery... I am sorry anyone received this impression as it was not what I intended.¹³

Burkhard realized her debt to the citizenry of Deer Lodge, adding "I realize the local citizens are justified wanting a literal interpretation of a favorite mountain--I can sympathize with them."¹⁴ Despite her sympathies with local townspeople, Burkhard did not change her mural. She did not capitulate to government requests.

Forrest Hill, whose mural decorated the walls of Glasgow's post office, claimed that had he not changed the position of a gambler in his mural to a less obvious position, he would not have been paid.¹⁵ While he carried this impression from that experience, extant government documents about that mural failed to verify his statement.

Whether the government censored Montana artists, it seems to have exercised a strong influence, and was itself subject to local pressures. The continued success of

federal subsidies to artists, after all, depended on a satisfied audience. Hill, for instance, freely selected his subject matter from government proposals, but needed to conform to expectations on both the local and national levels. Whether or not Hill perceived this as censorship or only making changes to please his patron cannot be answered. However, the effect of the government's control became an issue for artists to consider.

Another artist who intended to paint a mural in Montana experienced indirect censorship. Mordi Gassner, a New York City resident, competed for and won the commission to decorate the walls of the post office in Great Falls, Montana. Though Gassner won this opportunity, the parenthetical statement that the building in which his mural would be placed had yet to be selected, qualified his award.¹⁶ In fact, the Section of Fine Arts had already decided that Gassner's mural would be placed in the Great Falls's Post Office. The local postmaster and Edward Rowan corresponded about the intended decoration for the federal building. The general populace seemed unaware of their government's noblesse until they opened their issues of Life magazines of early December. With a three page spread, the magazine had printed photos of the proposed murals with the artist's name and a short

description of the design.¹⁷

Upon viewing the proposed sketch, the response from Great Falls came swiftly and urgently:

Since the issuance of the Dec. 4 copy of Life, a large number of Great Falls citizens have reported to us that they were somewhat astonished and shocked to learn that the mural by Mr. Gassner of New York was to be adopted for the Great Falls, Montana, Post Office...So many of these people have been unable to clearly decipher just what is portrayed by the conglomeration [sic] depicted by the artist, evidently desiring to illustrate the old and new Montana pioneer problems which portrayal is so vague. ...The picture seems to be a great jumble of so many things not representing this city or environs and the criticism seems unanimous that a much truer portrayal could have been painted.¹⁸

The outrage of Great Falls's citizenry comprised only part of the tale. The inhabitants were intensely loyal to native son Charlie Russell's paintings, which differed drastically from Gassner's. These people harbored the mistrust between easterners and westerners. Finally, in the late 1930s, anti-Semitism was widespread, and there was no reason to assume Great Falls was immune from this sentiment.

Beyond the reaction of Great Falls to Gassner's mural, another problem arose when communication between Gassner and Section members fell short. For example, a letter from the artist to Forbes Watson, the spokesman for

the program, disclosed that a promised "Letter follows" had not materialized.¹⁹ And only when Gassner read the New York Times did he learn that he had won the competition. Generally, winners knew in advance of the public announcement. Gassner closed his letter with a request to learn of his obligations so that he could begin to work on the mural. The Section apparently failed to keep Gassner abreast of affairs, because nearly a year later, Gassner vented his frustration:

If a private corporation were to run a nationwide competition, select and publicize winners, and then postpone the actual award in this fashion, it would be put out of business by the scandal of such an arrant outrage. It is no less outrageous when a government agency is responsible for such an abuse of confidence. I have been a staunch supporter of the regime that inaugurated the Federal Arts Program. But I consider such postponement of awards to be entirely unprincipled; ...a less firm believer in government sponsorship of creative art the result of such victimization of the artist would be alienation from the whole idea. I think it must be plain to you ...that in the critical period thru [sic] which we are passing, no agency of a liberal government can afford to create an onus as naturally issues from such treatment.²⁰

Gassner's vocabulary was punctuated with concerns about censorship. He called the government a regime, accusing it of imperious tactics. And he felt that government sponsorship of art led to the artist's suffering at the hands of bureaucracy. Obviously, he drew

on personal experience to express his feelings. And with victimization the artist would naturally maintain negative feelings about federally sponsored assistance.

The third party in this affair was the Section itself. The extant records demonstrated that what the Section said and what it did were often not the same. Before the competition occurred, Rowan wrote to the Great Falls postmaster, informing him that his building had been selected for a mural decoration.²¹ Yet, when the New York Times printed names of successful artists in the competition, the paper had included the remark that the building had yet to be selected.²² When the citizens in that northern Rockies town expressed their anger through the Chamber of Commerce, Rowan penned a memo, "Is there any job we could give Mordi Gassner instead of waiting for Great Falls? Note the complaint of the Chamber of Commerce, which I think is entirely justified."²³ In addition, Rowan received a letter from James E. Murray, one of Montana's United States Senators. Senator Murray knew of the furor in Great Falls, because he had a copy of the letter from Great Falls to Washington, D.C. Senator Murray requested Rowan to give a full report on the matter. Rowan's response evidenced the excellent bureaucratic politesse Rowan possessed: "...Since

receiving your letter it has been ascertained that no funds will be available for the mural decoration of the Great Falls, Montana, Post Office and Mr. Gassner will be invited to decorate another building under this program. Thanking you for your interest..."²⁴ Even though Rowan had earlier accepted the verdict of the elite jury, when they had selected Gassner's sketch, he withdrew his support. Yet if he had forced the western city residents to accept the mural, they would have accused him of the same highhandedness as did Gassner, except that a different party in the triad would suffer. As it was, Rowan made his own decisions perhaps dictated by insufficient funding and concerns about the quality of the mural.

Rowan's conscience pricked him more than a little, because in the Fall of 1940, he wrote to Mordi Gassner, advising him that funds were authorized for a mural in Sidney, Montana. However, Rowan informed Gassner that should he choose to enter the competition, a formal invitation would be sent to him. It will:

...involve a design other than... successful entry unless you can procure a statement from the local citizens that the subject matter which you used in the design and which was rejected by the citizens of Great Falls is regarded as appropriate for Sidney, Montana.²⁵

The government, through Rowan, clearly dictated the terms

under which Gassner could paint in Sidney, Montana. Though Rowan's assumptions about artistic tastes in Sidney were probably correct, he assumed the right to decide the matter for Sidney citizens.

Significantly, Rowan relied more than once on the statement, "...there are no funds available at this time." This platitude temporarily resolved his dilemmas and discouraged further action by artists.

The clamor of citizens in Deer Lodge, Montana, about their mural again illustrated the government's authority. When Deer Lodge won its new post office building, the Postmaster received a letter from Rowan, which suggested that funds were available for decoration. The citizens responded enthusiastically. A number of organizations sent requests to Washington, D.C., asking that native born Elizabeth Lochrie be given the commission. The townspeople knew her and her work, and apparently felt that a mural by Lochrie would be appropriate.

The enthusiasm of Deer Lodge citizens was echoed in Washington, D.C. One of Montana's representatives, Jerry O'Connell, involved himself in the potential decoration. O'Connell refrained from endorsing Lochrie to paint the mural, because he felt that government work should not be given to one person. Instead, he offered his nomination,

Mr. Tom Moore of Hamilton, Montana. The onus of coping with another branch of government as well as with the exuberance of western townspeople forced Rowan to act. October 25, 1937, the assistant superintendent of the Section of Painting and Sculpture, Inslee Hopper, wrote to the clubs in Deer Lodge, buying time:

In answer I am sorry to inform you that funds for the decoration of Deer Lodge, Montana Post Office are not available at this time. It is possible that when the building is completed a sufficient balance may remain so that a mural decoration may be undertaken.²⁶

Rowan later added his supporting statement to Hopper's letter and directed his missive to the Kiwanis International Club.²⁷ Having settled matters with local citizens, Rowan next undertook to iron out any wrinkles of misunderstanding between O'Connell and the Section. The director of procurement, under whose aegis the Section existed, wrote to O'Connell and informed him that the Section would sponsor a state or regional competition to determine the commission's winner.

In early January, 1938, Representative O'Connell and Deer Lodge citizens received notice that a reservation for \$630.00 for a mural decoration had been authorized. Artists in question, Elizabeth Lochrie and Tom Moore were encouraged to compete. The Section argued that

competitions were the most egalitarian means for selecting the best work:

This method is the most democratic one which we are able to conceive and since the work is done under a Federal program we feel the necessity of giving everyone a chance.²⁸

Rowan neglected to add that the Section reserved the right to commission a specific painter, whose entry design had appealed to Section members. Did Rowan feel the need to maintain the upper hand in this instance, denying Lochrie the chance to paint? Or did he fear that giving her the commission was blatant favoritism, because she recently completed the mural in Dillon, Montana? Had he allowed Lochrie to paint the walls in Deer Lodge's post office, the audience would have been satisfied with the finished product because of their direct involvement with the artist and her work. Had Rowan bent the rules in this instance and allowed Lochrie to decorate the building, how far would the discontent have spread? Would he have had to answer to the President? Would this disregard have caused the program to cease? These options were unlikely. Perhaps Rowan feared that bitterness and resentment would spread among the western artists. Because Rowan never allowed the Lochrie appointment to materialize, these questions cannot be answered. However, his ability to

prevent a situation from becoming nasty made him a valuable member of the Section staff.

Elizabeth Lochrie's reactions deserve comment. She never assumed she would receive the Deer Lodge commission. She maintained a frequent correspondence with Rowan, keeping him advised of her intentions to enter various competitions, taking his suggestions to heart about possible changes in her mural designs, and stressing that she had no hurt feelings about the Deer Lodge mural.²⁹ Rowan failed to appreciate the sterling character with which he was working. Had he awarded her the commission, he would not have damaged his reputation or the program.

Other artists, too, corresponded with Edward Rowan. Or, in the case of J. K. Ralston, his mother and wife tended to secretarial duties for him. Ralston's wife inquired about one competition, while Ralston's mother penned a note to Rowan, asking about the Dillon competition. She had only a few details about the event from the Bozeman Daily Chronicle and wanted to know more.³⁰ Ralston's wife also wrote to Rowan about the Sidney, Montana, mural. She wrote on the advice of their personal friend, Associate Montana Supreme Court Justice Leif Erickson, and wondered if it was possible to organize a committee in eastern Montana to promote mural work.³¹

And Lochrie telegraphed names to Rowan of those who were serving on the committee for promotion of art in Montana and would pass on the competition for Dillon, Montana.³²

The above discussion centered on only a small part of the correspondence between Montana artists and Washington, D.C. It would seem that the artists knew each other or at least knew about the others. Lochrie's daughter suggested as much, writing that "I think she knew all of them well-- certainly, about them; often, as very good friends."³³ Verona Burkhard had written to Ralston. Henry Meloy, the Hamilton muralist, wrote to Rowan, "I had the pleasure of meeting and having lunch with you last spring in company with Miss Burkhard."³⁴ The artists exhibited a network among themselves, displaying support for each other as well as the art program. None hesitated to direct inquiries to Washington, sensing that despite Rowan's position, he was indeed a public servant and someone who could help them. These artists accepted this reliance on the government and nation's urban centers as a necessary precondition for fulfilling their goals.

Long before they ever accepted federal commissions, these aspiring artists had recognized the need to leave Montana and turn elsewhere for training. New York presented a logical choice, and three Montana painters

availed themselves of the advantages there. Elizabeth Lochrie, Verona Burkhard and Henry Meloy spent time in New York City. Lochrie spent weekends at the Art Students' League while studying at the Pratt Institute's Normal School.³⁵ Burkhard worked under Frank Mechau at Columbia University.³⁶ Henry Meloy also studied at the Art Students' League, though earlier he had attended the National Academy.³⁷

The Art Institute in Chicago also exerted considerable training for Montana muralists. Again, three found their way there: Meloy, James K. Ralston, and Forrest Hill. Meloy spent two years there, from 1923 to 1925.³⁸ Ralston's tenure at the Institute was interrupted by service in World War I. However, he returned to complete his courses.³⁹ Forrest Hill's sojourn in Chicago came after he had completed his Glasgow mural. From the money earned, he stayed a year, augmenting his income working as a custodian.⁴⁰

The urban culture of California appealed to two artists, Leo Beaulaurier and Elizabeth Lochrie. Beaulaurier studied at the Art Center in Los Angeles, having earned a four year scholarship.⁴¹ Lochrie studied under Victor Arnautoff and Dorothy Puccinelli, learning fresco, mural and seco. In addition, Lochrie took

advantage of some Montana training. She worked under the Swiss painter, Weinold Reiss, for two summers in Glacier Park or the Flathead Valley.⁴² She concentrated her efforts on the Blackfeet Indians, who eventually adopted her into their tribe.⁴³

Though these western artists left the state to improve their craft, they returned to Montana to exercise that talent. Most preferred to use Montana as a base from which to work. Burkhard eventually settled in Colorado. Nearly all continued to paint and improve their reputations; they established themselves well in the world of art. While painting government murals may not have been a turning point in their careers, that opportunity added to general confidence and a new awareness of potential.

Notes

1. Grace Overmeyer, Government and the Arts (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1939) p. 103.
2. Ralph Purcell, Government and Art: A Study of American Experience (Washington, D.C. : Public Affairs Press, 1956), p. 68.
3. Overmeyer, Government and the Arts, pp. 103-104.
4. Ibid., p. 105.
5. George Biddle, An American Artist's Story (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), p. 262.
6. Overmeyer, Government and the Arts, p. 209.
7. Ibid.
8. Biddle, An American Artist's Story, p. 292.
9. Ibid.
10. Verona Burkhard, Personal letter, August 1988.
11. Betty Hoag McGlynn, Personal letter, November 17, 1987.
12. Edward Rowan to Verona Burkhard, 13 March 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
13. Verona Burkhard to Edward Rowan, 31 March 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
14. Ibid.
15. Personal interview with Forrest Hill, Laurel, Montana, November, 1987.
16. New York Times, 26 October 1939, Art Section, p. 21.
17. Life, 4 December 1939, pp. 12-13.
18. A. J. Breitenstein to Edward Rowan, 14 December 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

19. Mordi Gassner to Forbes Watson, 26 October 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
20. Mordi Gassner to Edward Rowan, 25 September 1940, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
21. Edward Rowan to R. C. Lots, Postmaster, Great Falls, Montana, 18 May 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
22. New York Times, 26 October 1939, p. 21.
23. Edward Rowan to Maria Ealand, 5 January 1940, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
24. Edward Rowan to Senator James E. Murray, 2 February 1940, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
25. Edward Rowan to Mordi Gassner, 2 October 1940, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
26. Inslee Hopper to Rotary Club of Deer Lodge, Montana, 25 October 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
27. Edward Rowan to Don Valiton, 18 November 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
28. W. E. Reynolds to Honorable Jerry J. O'Connell, 7 January 1938, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
29. Elizabeth Lochrie to Edward Rowan, 25 February 1938, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
30. Mrs. Ellen Ralston to Edward Rowan, undated letter, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
31. Mrs. James K. Ralston to Senator James E. Murray, 3 October 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
32. Elizabeth Lochrie to Edward Rowan, 26 April 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
33. Betty Hoag McGlynn, Personal letter, November 17, 1987.

34. Henry Meloy to Edward Rowan, 29 September 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
35. Artists Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
36. Telephone Interview with Verona Burkhard, August, 1987.
37. Artists Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
38. Artists Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
39. Dale A. Burk, New Interpretations, (N.P. Western Life Publications, Inc., 1969), p. 96.
40. Personal interview with Forrest Hill, November 1987.
41. Burk, New Interpretations, p. 90.
42. Artists Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
43. Artists Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.

CHAPTER 4

ARTISTS, AUDIENCES, AND AGENCIES: THE SELECTION PROCESS

A press release scheduled for Monday, 11 December, 1933, stated the aspirations of the Public Works of Art Program. It revealed the lofty and almost unreal expectations of the founders of this scheme. Reality had yet to establish itself in the everyday workings of government affairs. The article waxed:

This is the greatest opportunity that the artists of this country or any other country ever had to show their metal... an opportunity to sell themselves to the country and I know they'll answer the challenge.

The artists will be employed in making pictorial records of national activities.¹

With this announcement, Edward Bruce and his colleagues outlined their expectations and optimism for America's government sponsored art. Though the PWA underwent name and federal funding changes, the core of the agenda remained much the same. As the PWA evolved into the Section of Fine Arts it continued to aim its efforts at artists not on relief. Due to this concentration, the Section initiated a unique selection process. Artists would have the opportunity to compete for a commission and local juries would have the chance to voice their opinions

and preferences. The result was a constant effort to balance the demands of artists, audiences, and other government agencies.

In addition to satisfying the egos of the artists and audiences, the Section travailed under another handicap. Since the Section of Fine Arts came under the aegis of the director of procurement of the Treasury Department, numerous forms and red tape slowed or hampered its decisions. The artist, George Biddle, who initiated the mural program and worked closely for a time with the government's mural program, offered his assessment:

The Section is part of the Procurement Division --that department of the Treasury which is to buy--furniture, cement building blocks, oil burners,... has the same outlook on life as a grocer. Its one aim is to get a reliable standard of quality. It deals in its purchases of art as it deals in the purchases of soap, blotting paper or toilet fixtures. Its obsession is that it will be cheated in a bargain; quid pro quo is its guiding moral principle. The Procurement Division handles artists with the same delicacy with which it handles building contractors and dry goods salesmen. It surrounds itself with triple defenses of vouchers, inspections, performance bonds and delay. I am not saying the Section has this mentality; but the Section is under the Procurement Division. This is as stupid and wasteful an organizational relation for art as if our battleships were designed and constructed by a Department of Fine Arts. Now the aim of the Section is to obtain the finest quality of art--to produce a Michelangelo. That is what will justify it in the eyes of the taxpayers or of the none too sophisticated congressmen. Its aesthetic credo is that fine murals will create

culture in America. With this in mind and because it operated under the Procurement Division, which is in a constant night sweat lest it be cheated, the Section severely censors the artists. For this reason, it rarely gets their best work.²

Biddle's comments described the mechanics of the Section perfectly. And Rowan's (one of the three Section administrators) pontifications from Washington to the artists verified Biddle's criticisms. Though Rowan worked with artists across the country, the situations of those in Montana illustrated the burden and anxiety under which the Section operated.

Whether artists received a commission or actively competed for one, they accepted responsibility for the cost of producing the mural. The artist paid for the canvas, after sending a sample to Washington, D.C. to assure a satisfactory canvas quality. For instance, before Forrest Hill began to paint his mural, he bartered with the Section about which type of canvas he should use. He sent some cotton samples, which Rowan preferred Hill not use. Hill's samples of linen canvases pleased Rowan, but the difficulty with these was that the supply was in Western Europe in Nazi occupied Belgium. Hill eventually paid two hundred dollars for a Belgian canvas plus forty dollars for shipping charges. The memory of this exchange continued to impress Hill. He told me, "I paid an arm and

a leg for it."³ Obviously, Hill wanted to please his patron and ultimately did so. But Rowan wanted things done his way from beginning to end. The issue of the canvas provided him the opportunity to establish his authority.

Although the Section's concerns included both artists and the intended murals, attention to bureaucratic detail was stressed. Designers signed a contract, which was not unusual. However, this document demanded precise information. Artists gave the technique they would use, the intended colors, the manufacturer of the oils and where these would be purchased. Artists also informed the Section how they would install the canvas and the products used to accomplish the installation. White lead proved popular among these muralists for installation. Henry Meloy added that his painting was varnished with Grumbacher's retouching varnish, which, he advised, was not a finishing varnish. In a year, he hoped to return to apply a heavier varnish.⁴ Artists complied with these demands. Fortunately for Rowan, their personal thoughts about these details were not on paper.

Once issues of colors and canvas were addressed to the Section's satisfaction, the Section dangled the proverbial "carrot and stick" in the painter's sight by

meting out payment in three stages. The first allotment sent to the artist was after Washington received a preliminary design. The second installment, usually smaller than the first payment, was received by the artist after he/she sent a photograph of the full size cartoon. The third salary check came when the mural was completed, installed, and approved, and an 8 x 10 black and white negative arrived in Washington.

The contract between the government and Verona Burkhard illustrated the payment schedule. Dated 1 March 1939, Number Tlpb-5476 for mural decoration in Deer Lodge:

Artist submitted a preliminary design--satisfactory. Accordingly the Section recommended approval of design and authorization of payment of first installment of fee due Miss Burkhard under her contract.⁵

The Section authorized the second and third payments 19 June and 7 September.⁶

Though this system of checks and balances exerted pressure on the artists, Rowan exercised bureaucratic discretion when he advised painters about their commissions. He wrote Burkhard briefly and impersonally: "Your entry chosen for Deer Lodge mural. Kindly keep confidential until announced."⁷ The announcement would be forthcoming in the Bulletin, the Section's sporadic publication. By the time the general artist populace

learned of Burkhard's commission, the bureaucratic demands would be satisfied and difficult to change.

Artists also had another master. The Section placed some responsibility for mural selection on the communities which were to be given a mural. In the government's eyes, audience participation involved more people in the mural process, making them a part of it and promised viewer satisfaction. This process was not without its critics. George Biddle again vented his rancor over the democratic process of mural selection:

The award--in a competition--or a jury is the majority opinion of a selected group. It is always more intelligent than its dullest member. It is never as intelligent as its most intelligent member. A jury always tends towards a mean--the mediocre. Its value is that it insures against complete nullity. It can never select the best.⁸

He softened this evaluation, by adding:

The precedent of selecting artists through a jury rather than by direct appointment ...in the majority of cases, by competitions rather than on the basis of established reputation, has one great, outstanding, obvious merit, for which Bruce has the thanks of American artists. It continually holds open the door for fresh talent and younger, unknown painters... On the whole, it is the best contribution of the Section.⁹

Biddle's comments anticipated events in Montana more clearly than he could have expected. Whether or not juries selected the best painting cannot be determined,

because these entries are no longer available. The government sponsored three competitions in Montana. Dillon, Deer Lodge, and Glasgow derived murals from these contests. However, as a result of the Glasgow competition, three artists received appointments to paint designs in new federal buildings, in Hamilton, Billings and Sidney, Montana. The Section kept for itself the prerogative of inviting an artist to submit a design for a specific building. The division seemingly exercised this initiative when they disagreed with the consensus of the local jury and felt another design worthy of installation. These Section administrators knew and practiced art; their opinions reflected a practical and technical expertise, which a town's jurors usually lacked.

Glasgow's contest evoked a response from Washington, which gave credence to Biddle's assessment of federally funded art programs. Section members evidently felt that Glasgow's jury would have benefitted from more guidance in their selection. Rowan wrote to Josef Sklower, chairman of the jury committee, and suggested that one design, number eight, surpassed all others. In Glasgow's opinion, this particular design merited no recognition. Yet Washington officials appreciated the rich colors, the able drawing, and unusual composition. They conceded, though,

that there may have been a reason for the negative response Glasgow gave it; something of which they were unaware. If the local committee found number eight unacceptable, number thirty-three proved satisfactory, but preferred number thirty-two, which the Section found "...uninspired in our eyes". According to the Section, "the drawing of the figures is especially weak and the introduction of the dam in an otherwise historical presentation is incongruous."¹⁰ This jury, in D.C.'s eyes, obviously failed to select the most capable artistic rendering. The democratic process, whether in Glasgow, Montana, or Washington, D.C., netted similar results. The jurors may have responded emotionally rather than aesthetically to submitted designs. Or they may have made their selection with the intended audience in mind and imposed that imagined approval on their selection. The jurors and the townspeople would have to live with the mural; widespread approval was important. Whatever factors played in their decisions, they fell short of selecting the most competent piece.

The competitions and the appointments reflected the loyalty among Montanans. They maintained an insular quality. The contest was often regional or confined to Montana. The suggestions to emphasize Montana came from

various solons and had the backing of the general populace. If an artist had been born and raised in the state, this endeared him/her to the people. Rowan recognized the pride in native born sons or daughters. The three appointed artists were natives of the state. Again, the tendency of westerners, specifically Montanans, to avail themselves of the largesse of congressmen came into play. These westerners never hesitated to use the means at hand to achieve their purpose. They refuted the image of the westerner who would settle all matters himself with bravado backed by the six-shooter. Rather, utilizing elected officials or contacting Rowan through letters seemed to be the most expedient means for Montanans to resolve their difficulties.

The three competitions in Montana differed in important ways. Two had juries comprised of "out of town" persons, and the third had a jury composed entirely of local citizens. The reactions in each town differed when these communities learned that their new post office would house a mural. Reactions were favorable, but the pride was displayed in different fashions. Glasgow's mural involved the entire town and subjected the artists' entries to two voting sessions: that of the townspeople and that of the jury. Though Biddle suggested that the

juries often consisted of third rate people and that the Section and artists knew this, it appeared in Montana that these bodies considered their task a serious one and did not take the honor of serving lightly.

Even before the citizens of Glasgow knew that their post office was under consideration for a mural decoration, the news spread among various Washington offices. It began in the Section offices, with a memo from Maria Ealand, one of Edward Rowan's assistants, to Miss Mitchell, who worked in the office of Senator Burton K. Wheeler. Miss Ealand advised Miss Mitchell that a Glasgow mural would be awarded as the result of an anonymous competition. If any artist exhibited an interest in this event and was not receiving the Bulletin, he/she should contact Miss Ealand.¹¹ Seemingly, the democratic process espoused by the Section was in effect. However, a penciled note on a letter suggested that Ealand had someone in mind for the commission. Though this never came to pass, it again revealed the vagaries of the Section. Another incident which the Glasgow citizenry never knew about was that James L. Long, a frequent contributor to the magazine, Indians at Work, and a member of the Assiniboine tribe, desired to have the Native Americans play an active role in the Glasgow mural. His

letter to Rowan failed to state if he preferred a Native American to paint the mural or if several should pose as models for the artist.¹² Rowan responded promptly, stressing that the Section had tried without much success to have Native Americans work for them. Rowan appreciated the interest shown and implied that if the Native Americans wanted to paint a mural, the Section would willingly study the matter. Rowan wrote to Long:

This office in the past has made an effort to discover American Indian artists in your region and has not been successful. If you have Indian painters in mind will you kindly send me their names and addresses at your earliest convenience.¹³

A final possibility Rowan considered for the Glasgow mural was a design done for the Forty-Eight States Mural Competition depicting a legend which explained the origins of an Indian tribe. If this design should prove acceptable to Glasgow residents, the artist would receive an invitation to paint Glasgow's mural.

When a Native American artist failed to materialize, the responsibility for the mural decoration fell on Glasgow. The Glasgow competition differed from those held in Deer Lodge and Dillon. This contest expanded beyond Montana's borders and included the western states of Idaho, Nebraska, Wyoming, North and South Dakota. Rowan wrote to the chairman in Glasgow that due to the pressures

of work, the government would prefer a regional competition. This should have increased the number of entries, but the thirty-nine submitted drawings did not speak too well for the expanded scope of the contest. However, the larger competition reflected some confidence not present in the earlier rivalries. The economic atmosphere suggested better times. The recently completed Fort Peck Dam and sugar beet factory anticipated a brighter and more solid economic outlook, and the price the government was willing to pay seemed to suggest better times were ahead. For this design, the government paid \$1,250.00, the highest amount for any Montana mural. This mural was the largest one, which suggested that the space over the postmaster's door was substantial. In addition, the larger mural implied that Glasgow was a thriving town, needing a larger post office/federal building than the other communities which had designs.

The public announcement for the competition specified six subjects appropriate for the Glasgow area. Prehistoric times, Native Americans, trappers and homesteaders, agriculture and stock growers, present and future development gave artists a variety of subject matter, yet stated clearly what the citizens of Glasgow wanted to see in their post office. Because all the jury

members came from Glasgow, the citizens were confident that an appropriate design would be selected. Glasgow's position in Montana separated it from much of the rest of the state, which probably accounted for only local jury members. As one of the committee members explained a rejected design, "...no such scenery could be found for four hundred and fifty miles."¹⁴

Because all the jury called Glasgow home, they exercised an unusual degree of independence. In the fall of 1940, Josef Sklower informed the Section that he was the chairman of the committee and that he was pleased to have this nomination. In addition, he asked if the competition could be extended two months and close 15 April rather than 15 February 1941.¹⁵ Rowan concurred and suggested that the competition dates be extended to 15 June or even later, allowing artists more time to work.¹⁶ In addition, the committee delayed a final decision until August, with Rowan's acquiescence, due to the interference of summer vacations. Rowan preferred that the full committee be present for the judging.¹⁷ Given these generous extensions, the jury decided to include all the townspeople in the judging.

The entries from thirty-three artists were displayed in the department store of one of the judges, Paul Freidl.

The designs were available for the public to view for two weeks before voting. This community involvement set new standards for citizen involvement and worked towards insuring a successful selection. The popular vote would perhaps play a role in the final voting by the jury members, who found their task a difficult one: "...some drawings excelled in idea and others in color and drawing."¹⁸ However, they expressed satisfaction with their labors and packaged the collection for delivery to Washington, D.C. Rowan must have anticipated this arrival, knowing how much activity it generated. Glasgow's participation spoke well for the Section's ideals. Surely everyone in that town had an increased awareness of art as a result of the competition and could take pride in the town's mural.

Regrettably, not everyone on the committee agreed with the final decision. Joseph P. Sternhagen, Glasgow's postmaster and committee member, wrote to Rowan and confided his preference for a different design. "I am writing this from the standpoint of being a member of the committee and should have no further consideration just because I happen to be also the Postmaster here."¹⁹ Sternhagen's comments carried more emphasis than he anticipated, because Rowan informed the Glasgow jury that

the Section preferred drawings other than the ones they selected. While Washington endorsed a different design than Sternhagen's choice, the Section members realized there must have been reasons of which they were unaware that Glasgow residents had not voted for it. Therefore, they suggested that Sternhagen's choice be selected, even though "The painting quality is not distinguished, however, nor are the color or composition. It is certainly true though that the subject matter will carry meaning for the patrons of the Post Office."²⁰

Washington's response to Glasgow carried mixed messages. The Section, affected by Sternhagen's letter, overruled Glasgow's decisions. Yet the Section did not agree with Sternhagen's choice either. They overrode the first choice of the jury--"Design number thirty-two is uninspired in our eyes"²¹--preferring instead another design. The competition results in this northern Montana town reflected George Biddle's concerns. This jury had selected an apparently mediocre drawing. Yet, the selection process gave the Section the opportunity to give a commission to a young and unknown artist, Forrest Hill, to try his hand and brush. The sequence of events in Glasgow, though drawn out for almost two years, validated the Section's theory of selection. The audience would be

content with their mural, an unknown artist received a chance to paint for the government, and the bureaucratic paperwork did not require changes.

The Glasgow committee met a final time to reconsider their options. Viewing the photographs of the disputed selections, they wondered too why they had selected number thirty-two. They agreed number eight was well drawn but were convinced it did not reflect Glasgow's locale. Number thirty-three depicted Glasgow in detail, and with a few changes the artist offered to make, that design would do nicely for their post office. The jury apologized obliquely, "Somehow it seems that none of the designs submitted won any enthusiastic support, and that may have been due to the possibility that none of the artists visited or studied the local scene long enough or thoroughly enough to capture the local spirit."²² Glasgow's citizenry seemingly suffered because their landscape was so much harsher than western Montana's. They relied on irrigation for water more than they did on rain. Trees were few, and though they could see for miles from any point, they had no mountains to call their own. Why had the jury selected the design it had? Josef Sklower summed up the situation in his minutes from the last meeting:

It seems that in a competition of this kind, the artist is faced with the difficult task of not only making an artistic picture, but also one that the public responds to. Naturally, the judges not being artists, the decision was based upon what appealed to the layman's taste, and what would please and interest the local people. From this point of view, number thirty-three was the logical selection.²³

Though this committee lacked artistic expertise, it grasped the difficulties under which the Section operated and artists worked. Even though their selection was not approved in Washington, they had worked conscientiously for the Section. If Glasgow's postmaster had not interfered, perhaps number thirty-two would be on the wall today rather than thirty-three.

Glasgow's competition proved fruitful for Montana. Not only did that town earn a mural for its new post office and federal building, but from that single contest the Section gave three appointments for additional murals throughout the state. A native Montanan, Henry Meloy, painted Glasgow design number eight, which the Section approved but Glasgow rejected, because it did not reflect the locale. On the basis of this sketch, the Section invited Meloy to submit a design for the new Hamilton post office.²⁴ The Section also contacted Leo Beaulaurier, who had submitted a design for the Glasgow competition, "On the basis of the design submitted--the cowboy and western

landscape, you will be invited to undertake the mural decoration of Billing's Post Office.²⁵ In these two instances, the Section used its prerogative to appoint an artist to paint. From a practical viewpoint, appointments cost less and saved more time than competitions. But the tendency to dictate to a town reflected the negative side to federal involvement in the arts. Perhaps the Section hoped that any time it appointed an artist, the resulting design would justify the entire scope of government supported art. The democratic process of selecting artists through competitions worked best when the Section gave the process its encouragement.

The third appointment from Glasgow's contest renewed the complex process of negotiation among various government offices. Once more Edward Rowan had to work with Mordi Gassner, the artist initially selected to paint the Great Falls mural. To complicate matters further, Rowan had to contend with two determined Montana women, the wife and mother of artist James K. Ralston. These women used every opportunity to further Ralston's career and appeared to be the moving force behind his talent. Without their efforts, Ralston might have continued being a cowboy, a life he loved but which brought less recognition than painting for the government. Ralston's

wife and mother wrote to Montana's Senators James E. Murray and Burton K. Wheeler, enlisting their assistance in securing a commission for their cowboy-turned-artist. The senators obliged their constituents but involved the Treasury Department, the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General and of course, the Section of Fine Arts.

Rowan was adept at balancing bureaucratic egos; he knew when to concede. And quite truthfully, he probably had no objection to giving Ralston the Sidney commission. However, he had promised this specific mural to Mordi Gassner, the New York artist whose design the Great Falls's citizens had refused. Indeed, Rowan had written to Gassner,

In about six months it will be possible for this office to proceed with the Sidney, Montana post office decoration and it is our intention to transfer you from the Great Falls to the Sidney building. Kindly keep this confidential until the press release has been announced. Congratulating you on your achievement.²⁶

Rowan's promises were not binding and Mordi Gassner lost again to combined efforts of westerners. He suffered his first defeat against the force of a united town. His second defeat occurred when two women utilized the connections of Montana's senators. Most likely, neither senator was aware of the Section's agreement with Mordi

Gassner; even if they had known about it, their constituents' wishes would have been paramount. The Section selected its artist, as it had the right to do, but often with the assistance of many government officials. Rowan and Bruce could not afford to ignore the wishes of those with whom they worked. Bureaucratic displeasure posed a possible threat to the continuation of their program. The disappointment of a single artist was less serious than the demise of their program.

Mordi Gassner was not the only artist who suffered disappointment in his expectations. Two artists in Billings, Montana, also objected to the way the Section dispensed of commissions. LeRoy Greene and Edward Sawyer expressed interest in painting murals for the government. Rowan suggested to Sawyer that he enter a competition, so that the Section could evaluate his work. Green complained that there had not been sufficient notice about the competition for the Billings mural. He first knew about it when he read a small notice in the local paper.²⁷ Rowan responded that the Section relied on competitions and that surely Greene realized it would not be feasible for the government to hold a competition for each and every building. He added that the Glasgow competition was well advertised throughout Montana, and that Beaulaurier

had won the honor on the basis of an open competition.²⁸ Rowan contacted the postmaster in Billings to advise him that Beaulaurier would be painting a mural, on the basis of the excellent design he submitted in the Glasgow contest. Rowan suggested, "Offer him your full cooperation."²⁹ Postmaster Fagg complied.

The competition for Glasgow's mural created opportunities for artists in other Montana towns. But it would be erroneous to regard Glasgow as typical. The contest in Dillon, for instance differed from Glasgow's in a number of ways. The jury members came from towns other than Dillon. The chairperson was Olga Ross Hannon, who taught art at the State Agricultural College in Bozeman.³⁰ Hannon took her responsibility seriously and she admitted she found the task an interesting one. Elizabeth Lochrie, the winner of this competition wanted to paint the mural al fresco, but was prevented from doing so by the combined forces of the harsh winter weather and poor roads between Butte and Dillon.³¹ Hannon notified Rowan that the jurors would meet in Dillon on 10 September 1937 to select three superior designs.³² After the Section notified Lochrie of her success, Hannon wrote to Rowan and suggested that the jury would meet in Dillon and view Lochrie's mural before it was installed.³³ Did Hannon inadvertently suggest

censorship with this offer? Did she feel her talents superior to Lochrie's and that Lochrie should therefore, make changes if Hannon thought them necessary? While Rowan concurred with Hannon's wish, her demands were unique to Montana's competitions and leaves one wondering if Rowan would have agreed with Hannon's changes? When these events occurred, the Section was fairly new and untried. Fortunately, the jury accepted Lochrie's mural as it was. Although no changes were required, this incident showed the influence of the local committee. Local committees as well as Washington bureaucrats effected changes in designs to assure that the artist would not go astray.

Another manner in which Rowan showed his unfamiliarity with his position was in working with another branch of government. As has already been suggested, the Section often capitulated to requests from congressmen. In Dillon's competition, Rowan granted one request but withheld another. Congressman Jerry O'Connell initially contacted the Secretary of the Treasury, Robert Morgenthau, asking that the competition be restricted to artists in Montana.³⁴ He next wrote to Edward Bruce, the Chief of the Section of Painting and Sculpture and suggested that Montana had at least five nationally known

artists. O'Connell added:

I feel that they would be better qualified to do the type of work that is required for the Dillon mural, and in addition, the community would be particularly pleased to have a mural in their post office building executed by a Montana man.³⁵

Representative O'Connell certainly had the interests of his constituents close to his heart. Dillon's decoration was the first mural for Montana. Assuring that the reward was limited to a Montanan showed good political sense for O'Connell. The populace as well as elected officials agreed that Montanans painted Montana better than anyone else. This request proved easy to grant. Edward Bruce wrote to Inslee Hopper that this state competition "...should prove quite an interesting experiment."³⁶ In addition, Bruce notified O'Connell that "...in compliance with your wishes limited exclusively to those artists resident of or attached to Montana."³⁷ Having granted one request, Bruce asked O'Connell to recommend five people, other than artists, to serve on the jury, with at least one being from or near Dillon.³⁸

Though he was successful in limiting the competition to Montana, O'Connell's second request was not granted. The representative had a specific painter in mind when he wrote "a Montana man" in his letter to Bruce. He hoped that Tom Moore, a Hamilton artist, be given the

commission.³⁹ Rowan replied that the designs were in the office, but that O'Connell had to remember that this was an anonymous competition! There were a number of suitable sketches from which to select an acceptable design. Rowan's admonishments did not have negative results, and the Section maintained its integrity. Only later would this government body succumb to political pressure. This time, though, the Section complied with the wishes of the local jurors in selecting Lochrie's design. Though not a Montana man, Lochrie proved herself capable of painting a suitable mural for Dillon.

Deer Lodge's competition, though not limited to the state, again reflected the importance of state pride.⁴⁰ Twenty-seven artists competed with thirty-two pictures and eighteen of those designers claimed Montana as home. Three temporarily out-of-state artists submitted designs. One of these came from Leo Beaulaurier, who would later paint Billings's mural. At this time, he was studying art in Los Angeles. The eventual winner of this contest, Verona Burkhard, submitted her sketch from Tenafly, New Jersey. However, because she had a job in Wyoming during the summer, she was able to justify her entry.

It was quite probable that Burkhard and perhaps some of the other artists were aware of the efforts by Deer

Lodge citizens who wanted Elizabeth Lochrie to paint their mural. Certainly, the jury chairman, George Yphantis, who taught in the Department of Fine Arts, Montana State University in Missoula, knew about that furor. Yphantis agreed to serve as committee head.⁴¹ He requested that the names of other jurists be kept secret until February 15, when the jury would select its preferred designs. Yphantis feared that the competition might not be entirely objective. He wrote to Rowan, after he conferred with the local postmaster. Yphantis regretted to report impressions about other individuals with whom he conferred. Their chief concern was to have the commission awarded to a person whose name has already been entered among the competitors. Yphantis ended with this assertion: the award would be made on legitimate grounds.⁴²

Rowan suggested that the jury be composed of those individuals informed in the arts and should include at least one member from any of the active Deer Lodge clubs. Rowan had been impressed by the show of support for Lochrie, too. Yphantis accordingly included three out-of-town Montanans and the postmaster from Deer Lodge on the committee.⁴³ This judging committee realized the delicacy of pleasing not only Deer Lodge citizens but the need to

appease Lochrie. When they met in February on Washington's birthday, Yphantis stressed they make their selection on the basis of merit and appropriateness for mural decoration, color scheme, pattern, design, and feeling of unity and permanence of interest. This lengthy defense attempted to rationalize reasons for a mediocre selection. Only three members were present to make the selection, which perhaps was a part of the explanation. Unknowingly, the jury performed exactly as Biddle predicted. They picked neither the best nor the worst. In their efforts to be fair, they exercised a reverse prejudice and ignored the obvious. They awarded first place to Burkhard. A Wyoming resident won second place, and Leo Beaulaurier earned third. One of Lochrie's sketches deserved attention, but did not merit one of the first three awards. Jurors determined it to be in the research stage. Beaulaurier's sketch rated highly; "a brilliant sketch--pictorial matter is arranged in octagonal medallions..."⁴⁴ Beaulaurier was learning to "paint Section." As a result of this competition, he received a commission to paint a mural in Langdon, North Dakota.

Why did the will of townspeople fail to prevail? Perhaps Rowan had his own agenda and the power to realize

it. If the community had utilized the talents of senators or congressmen, perhaps their efforts have been more fruitful. The important point is that competitions were rarely democratic. Lochrie could not win, even though Deer Lodge would have appreciated her work. Later, Rowan never hesitated to appoint an artist to paint; three artists, in fact, won commissions from Glasgow's event. The towns which received these murals had no opportunity to express their feelings about the mural--or the town could have its say but accomplished little. Why did Rowan refrain from exercising this prerogative in Deer Lodge? Perhaps he feared a general uprising and resentment among western artists.

The government entertained noble ideas in its efforts to paint America. Bureaucracy established a process to implement this scheme. However, the program neglected to take human nature into account. Eastern functionaries did not really know how people in the West might react to a proposed design. Despite the Section's concerns about designs and subtle censorship, it had not seriously considered the reactions of local people. Not only did citizens have defined tastes about what they would accept, they had distinct preferences for painters as well. The performance of the juries lacked conviction. The Section

utilized the competitions to save money and appoint a favored artist to paint in another town. Sharing art, bringing it to the common people proved larger than they realized it would be. Involving the common people in the process of making art a reality increased the difficulties in the program. Rather than allowing the average citizens to live with their decision, the Section imposed its will and suggested changes in the designs or artists. When these men feared the opinions of various towns about art, they undertook to educate other sites about art and brought in an artist to give art to these people. The democratic process assumed second place to the Section's goals. But at least these people would have art.

Notes

1. Press Release, 11 December 1933, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
2. George Biddle, An American Artist's Story, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1939), pp. 278-279.
3. Personal interview with Forrest Hill, November, 1987.
4. Henry Meloy to Edward Rowan, 27 October 1942, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
5. Contract for Verona Burkhard, 1 March 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
6. Ibid.
7. Edward Rowan to Verona Burkhard, 6 March 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
8. George Biddle, An American Artist's Story, p. 278.
9. Ibid.
10. Minutes of the Meeting of the Judges, 3 September 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
11. Maria Ealand to Maude Mitchell, 8 April 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
12. James L. Long to Edward Rowan, 15 May 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
13. Edward Rowan to James L. Long, 17 May 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
14. J. P. Sternhagen to Edward Rowan, 3 September 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
15. Josef Sklower to Edward Rowan, 27 December 1940, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
16. Edward Rowan to Josef Sklower, 11 February 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

17. Edward Rowan to Josef Sklower, 9 July 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
18. Josef Sklower to Edward Rowan, 11 August 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
19. James P. Sternhagen to Edward Rowan, 14 August 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
20. Edward Rowan to Josef Sklower, 26 August 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington D.C.
21. Ibid.
22. Josef Sklower to Edward Rowan, 5 September 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
23. Minutes of the Meeting of the Judges, 3 September 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
24. Edward Rowan to Henry Meloy, 16 September 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
25. Edward Rowan to Leo Beaulaurier, 17 October 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
26. Edward Rowan to Mordi Gassner, 20 October 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
27. LeRoy E. Greene to Edward Bruce, 12 November 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
28. Edward Rowan to LeRoy E. Greene, 17 November 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
29. Edward Rowan to Postmaster Mearl L. Fagg, 27 October 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington D.C.
30. Edward Rowan to Olga Ross Hannon, 6 May 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
31. Elizabeth Lochrie to Edward Rowan, undated letter, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
32. Olga Ross Hannon to Edward Rowan, 7 September 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

33. Olga Ross Hannon to Edward Rowan, 28 March 1938, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
34. Honorable Jerry O'Connell to Robert Morgenthau, 10 February 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
35. Honorable Jerry O'Connell to Edward Bruce, 11 March 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
36. Edward Bruce to Inslee Hopper, 12 March 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
37. Edward Bruce to Honorable Jerry O'Connell, 8 April 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
38. Ibid.
39. Honorable Jerry O'Connell to Edward Bruce, 19 September 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
40. Honorable Jerry O'Connell to W. E. Reynolds, Assistant Director of Procurement, 11 January 1938: "Sometime ago I urged that competition be restricted to Montana artists, and I sincerely hope that this will be the regulation in the Deer Lodge case as it was in the Dillon case."
41. George Yphantis to Edward Rowan, 15 January 1938, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
42. George Yphantis to Edward Rowan, 26 October 1938, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
43. Ibid.
44. George Yphantis to Edward Rowan, 22 February 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

CHAPTER 5

EVERY MURAL TELLS A STORY

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson purchased a substantial section of America from the French ruler, Napoléon Bonaparte. Jefferson paid only fifteen million dollars for opening what would become known as the American West, a land rich in resources, precious metals and soil. Besides the tangible wealth, the West provided fulfillment of the American dream for many decades. Authors and painters contributed to this mythic West through their books and drawings. Native Americans, the pristine scenery with magnificent vistas, and the opportunity to prove oneself brought a variety of individuals to this Eden. After arriving in their desired location, the realities of the West penetrated and these westerners--for that was how they viewed themselves--found themselves at the mercy of nature and often at odds with Native Americans if not their neighbors. The same grievances which prompted their departure from the East recurred in the West. Despite these negative factors, the love affair with the West refused to die. Well into the twentieth-century its popularity endured, whether in an historical or contemporary context.

Montana's muralists capitalized on the West's popularity and utilized various western themes in their work. Each assumed the need to record the West as he/she knew it. Each artist depended on the local milieu to serve as a unifying agent in his/her mural, sometimes adding more imagination to the canvas than the native Montanans preferred. These painters relied on what they knew and what was familiar to them. Neither bread lines, soup kitchens, nor the homeless comprised reality for them. The contribution of these muralists to the myth of the West appeared in their depictions of cattle drives, Native Americans, wagon trains, and prospectors.

In addition to representing western lore, Montana's muralists tended to rely on the local landscape. As suggested in Chapter One, American artists began to exercise an independence from European trends in art and turn towards America and its scenes for inspiration. Artists painted what was familiar to them, whether cornfields, mountains, or the ocean. The mobility of Americans in the 1930s, speeded by the growing network of highways, affected the essence of regionalism. Kaj Klitgaard remarked in his book, Through the American Landscape, that it took a strong native to paint landscapes, especially western ones.² He referred to the panorama as

terra incognita, implying that the independence American artists displayed was yet young and inexperienced. Capturing the scene in front of their easels presented difficulties, and the muralists succeeded in varying degrees in duplicating the scenery.

Klitgaard commented that vistas changed from one state line to another.³ He apparently did not travel through Montana, because the landscape within its borders differed dramatically. Mountains dominated the western section, while endless horizons and high plains demarcated the eastern portion. Differences in soil composition, the latitude, temperature, and precipitation affected the backgrounds the artists wanted to include on their canvasses.⁴ Some of the muralists traveled to the town where his/her mural was to be installed and made sketches of the area before painting the design. Verona Burkhard lived outside of Deer Lodge while working on her picture. Henry Meloy relied on his brother's information, Lochrie and Ralston visited the town and area, and Forrest Hill included surrounding scenery besides Glasgow's to make his canvas acceptable.

Besides the topography, two muralists, Leo Beaulaurier and James Ralston, noted the importance of water in the West. Water always played a major role in

the development of this part of the country, mostly because there was none to spare. Water, in these instances represented by the Yellowstone River, provided drinking and cooking liquid, allowed stock to drink, offered a means of transport and transportation, and later provided irrigation for crops. Despite the importance of the river, neither artist emphasized it, but rather used the river for its beauty and recognition factor. J. K. Ralston painted the lower Yellowstone near Sidney, and Leo Beaulaurier depicted the river as it appeared near Billings, Montana. The appearance of the river changed dramatically between these loci but these artists included it less for its life-giving qualities than for reasons of aesthetics.

Ralston's mural told the story of General Sully and his entourage of army troops and immigrant party crossing the Yellowstone River about fifteen miles above Sidney. The Holmes party traveled under the protection of the army against Indians and relied on the army to serve as a buffer against their general inexperience. Ralston's depiction failed to convey General Sully's thoughts about the inconveniences and responsibilities included in taking immigrants under his care for the westward trek. Heavier burdens occupied Sully's mind, such as the lost supplies

from the wrecked steamboat or the punitive measures he intended to levy against the Santee and Teton Sioux.⁵ Sully's appearance in the West typified the attitudes of many whites. The land was there for the "better" people to use. In addition to this prejudice, whites assumed that there was more than enough land for everyone, although they preferred land suited for farming and/or livestock production.

Ralston's selection of General Sully and the Holmes party reflected a part of his attitudes about painting and life. His life had been woven into some of those who came with the immigrant party. Ralston's grandparents counted as friends two brothers, Benedict and Nicholas Hilger, who traveled west under Sully in 1864.⁶ As a boy in Helena, Ralston met some of these immigrants. He benefited from the familiarity of the subject matter and from being a native son. Ralston conferred with the postmaster about subject choice and the location where Sully crossed the river. These considerations assured him of a positive reception for his mural. Besides the selection of a popular theme, Ralston's mural narrated some of Montana's history. Ralston's biographer, John Popovich, eulogized Ralston not only as a great artist but as a great historian as well, one who helped preserve the history of

the state.⁷ The recording of the event comprised a specific sharing or contribution to Montana's history but the actual rendering left something to be desired.

When looking at Ralston's mural, similarities between his art and that of C. M. Russell became apparent. Russell was a long time hero of Ralston's. Growing up in Helena enabled Ralston to become familiar with Russell's work, and it was not unexpected that he would emulate Russell's art. Ralston's animals bore the closest resemblance to Russell's pictures. The oxen pulling the wagons showed the rigor of the constant demands placed on them; all their ribs showed through their coats. Only the military horses had any vitality; they seemed well fed and rested. The comparison carried over to the owners of the animals. The soldiers contained the only vitality in the mural; the immigrants bore the same resignation as their oxen.

Although he emulated a long-admired artist, J. K. Ralston failed to duplicate Russell's success with this mural. Rowan's comments to Ralston about his work expressed some doubts when Ralston sent the preliminary sketch to Washington, D.C. Rowan wrote that the sketch "...is almost too illustrative in approach and too studio manufactured." In addition, Rowan felt that Ralston

relied too much on his knowledge and as a result, neglected to paint with much conviction. Ralston neglected to take Rowan's comments to heart, and painted a significant event with an arm that might have preferred to be guiding a horse rather than a paintbrush.

Although Ralston did not accord the Yellowstone its full importance and the overall appearance of the mural was stiff and unrealistic, his paintbrush recreated the countryside well. The petrified skull of either a Texas longhorn or an ox blended well with the diamond willow, which abounded then (and now) in eastern Montana. Deep wagon ruts suggested the numbers that used this crossing, resulting in a changed land. The ruts remained long after the last wagon passed that way. The influx of settlers and the means of their passing changed the land forever. Even those who walked altered the appearance of the ground, especially the four legged creatures. Ralston caught the land as it was, including the high butte by the river, the willow trees lining it, redeeming in part his otherwise mediocre painting.

Other artists besides Ralston captured changes wrought by the incoming settlers. Beaulaurier's cattle drive implied a number of changes in the land and among the people. The drive from Texas to Montana of thousands

of cattle changed the landscape noticeably. Not only did the land change but the kinds of cattle available changed too, with the introduction of a new breed. These longhorns were tangible reminders of the Spanish influence in America. Longhorns had light carcasses with long legs, sloping ribs, thin loins and ribs, and unexpectedly large bellies. Colors varied among yellow, red, dun and black, with an iron gray stripe along their backs. Due to their meat, described as "teasingly tough," they never enjoyed the popularity of more domesticated cattle.⁹ Cattle drives began traditionally in June, when the cattle shed their winter coats and brands became readable.¹⁰ Herds moved about fifteen to twenty miles a day and taxed the abilities of those who rode with them. Two riders were point men and directed the course of the herd; remaining cattle drivers were known as swing men. These herders rode on either side of the cattle.¹¹ Although Leo Beaulaurier implied that changes were made, it was the romance and drama of the cattle drive which convinced Washington officials to have Beaulaurier paint the Billings's mural. Beaulaurier, like Ralston realized the veracity of Biddle's comment: "The best art is good salesmanship. Always has been."¹² The theme of a mural

influenced people, whether viewers or judges, as much as the finished piece.

Keeping this tenet in mind, Beaulaurier selected his theme carefully when he entered the Glasgow competition. He chose well, because on the basis of his entry for the Glasgow competition, Washington appointed him to paint the Billings's mural. He drew a cowboy and surrounded him with the western landscape for his entry.¹³ The implied romance and attraction of the vista captured the imaginations of the easterners and the design implied that their perceptions of the West were correct and enduring. Beaulaurier changed his design for Billings and added the cattle drive. Realistically, cattle drives were short-lived affairs, declining in the early twentieth-century. With the advent of numerous homesteaders and the development of agriculture, cattle raisers lost ground.¹⁴ Leo Beaulaurier stayed with his theme, even though Billings played a less significant role in the cattle drives than did Miles City, which for a long time was the center of the Montana ranges.¹⁵ Beaulaurier's mural allowed the city of Billings to forget that it was second to Miles City in the cattle industry and gave it added importance, whether earned or not.

Beaulaurier's depiction belied the orderliness of various descriptions of cattle drives. One noted the dust raised by these animals, which was not at all unlikely, with the time of year and dry conditions under which they traveled. These cattle appeared to be traveling randomly with detached outriders. Nor were there colors as varied as described; browns and whites colored most of the beasts. Despite the distance crossed, these cattle seemed to be in good condition. Ironically, as much as the West claimed cattle drives for itself, these ventures would not have occurred without solid financial backing from the East and Europe.¹⁶ Only those directly involved with the drives were aware of this; westerners like easterners accepted these incidents as unique to the West.

Though the murals contained themes as varied as cattle drives to getting the mail, they presented a common denominator. Each of the murals expressed the mobility of Americans. In the 1930s, Americans moved again, mostly in search of employment and a new life just as their ancestors had done. This reality of the 1930s permeated the lives of the muralists and exhibited itself on their canvasses. Ralston expressed this mobility well with the Holmes immigrant party. These people traveled far before ever reaching America. Beaulaurier suggested the nomadic

lives of some Americans, journeying between Texas and Montana with cattle drives. Most of Western America's original inhabitants, the Native Americans also lived nomadic lives, though none of the muralists directly broached this feature.

Elizabeth Lochrie's mural suggested the tendency of some westerners to move yet retain contact with their roots. Lochrie painted a variegated group of settlers gathered around a newspaper. Her title, "News From The States," was decidedly appropriate. Although these various men had moved west for a number of reasons, they still starved for news from home. A few lucky men clutched letters, while a mailbox brought the cast of mural characters to this spot to share the newspaper and anything else in letters one might have wanted to share. Lochrie painted her characters in Frying Pan Basin, an area south of Dillon, Montana. She dated her mural 1858, because at that time Dillon was a stop on the mail route from Virginia City to Bannack. Lochrie's group of mail receivers shared the mail box, but there was an additional use for it. Wrapped around its post, due to a lack of trees in the area, was a "Wanted Dead or Alive" poster for the notorious sheriff, Henry Plummer.

Lochrie's droll humor appeared in other ways in her mural. She included a rattlesnake but it was so well camouflaged that finding it taxed viewers. In addition, she painted a grizzled miner, who disdained to mingle with the group. Just outside the group, he fought against his rebelling mule who obviously had other ideas about which way to travel. Curiously, just as the miner stayed away from the group, they in turn ignored him. Most within the group had their backs to him and those that could see him conveniently kept him from their line of vision. Another loner was the shepherd. He glanced suspiciously at the group from over his shoulder and moved his sheep ahead. Neither the miner nor the herder appeared to have any need for news from home. Their appearances suggested that they had long been residents of the West and the East had no ties for them any longer. Therein lay a paradox, however, these two men relied on the East, despite their distaste for it. They needed those markets for whatever wool or minerals they wanted to sell. They personified the dilemma of westerners. While these folks wanted to maintain an independence from the East, they could never do this completely. Westerners needed capital and markets for their goods. The obligation was mutual; easterners

needed men to go west and raise crops and livestock, mine, or herd sheep.

Lochrie included homesteading in her mural, suggesting the homesteader was the likeliest individual to make that area a permanent home. To one side of the mural, she placed a homesteader's cabin, with smoke curling out of the chimney. Whether the owner was among those at the mailbox cannot be ascertained. But his inclusion suggested another change to the land and to the type of settler who would be coming to the area. This individual would have more reasons to stay in his home and more apt to bring a wife with him. Agriculture promised to change the land in a number of ways. Although the homesteader intimated that he would stay, he, like others in the mural, had come from elsewhere.

The mobility Lochrie and some of the other muralists implied came at viewers from all sides of Forrest Hill's mural in Glasgow. Surrounding the shape of the state of Montana, Hill included figures from the mythic West as well as those from the real and tangible West. The nomadic, romantic mountain men, the intrepid frontiersman, Native Americans, and miners shared space with those who came later, such as surveyors, homesteaders, cowboys, and of course, women.

Women appeared only infrequently in Montana's murals. Hill's design contained two; Ralston's Sidney mural had one. This woman had her arm around her son or a young boy but she stood with her back to the viewers. Turned to face the line of approaching wagons, she prompted more than a few rhetorical questions. Did the endlessness of the view in front of her weaken her courage to continue? Were the woman and the boy looking for someone else who had yet to cross the river? Or simply, had Ralston not wanted to paint her well if she had her face to the viewers? Unfortunately, Ralston did not give any answers in his mural.

Hill's women maintained the traditional role everyone always attributed to women in the West. One woman held a Bible, while standing close to her husband. The other, seated on a wagon box with a young child, faced viewers from the rear of the mural. Her husband walked along side the wagon. These are the women who received and gave credence to the term, "gentle tamers." It was their role to "civilize" the West by bringing religion, children, and elements of culture to this deprived area. The courage of these women cannot be underestimated. But the question posed itself as to how authentic these women or the views of them were? These women, like most of the mural

inhabitants wore clean clothes. Dirt was nowhere to be seen. Their painted appearances suggested something unreal. Frontier life offered little respite from drudgery, yet none of these women personified that element of frontier life. These were nineteenth-century women whose pedestals moved from the East to the West and never displaced their owners.

Yet the muralists cannot be blamed entirely for this attitude. They painted not only for themselves but for the potential audience. And their painting reflected the period in which they lived. They did not want to see women or paint them as they had been. That brought too much of a reminder as to how difficult times were--then and in the 1930s. Hill's woman with the Bible was carefully attired in a white dress and multiple petticoats. She lacked the glamour of a pin-up girl but her attraction lay in the fact that she brought respectability with her. Married and religious outlined her lot in life. Despite the role women played in the settling of the West, only two muralists addressed that element.

Artists also projected another ingredient from the 1930s into their murals--the pervasiveness of advertising. Beaulaurier's sole observer of the cattle drive below him

smoked a cigarette in silence and apparent relaxation. The cigarette dangled from his right hand and gave him a more realistic appearance than his very white shirt and newly heeled boots. Advertising in the 1930s stressed the importance of proper hygiene, implying that this was the sure and only way to a successful and happy life. Clear complexions, clean breath and no body odor became de rigueur and smoking connoted independence.¹⁶

Beaulaurier was not alone in falling prey to the subtleties of Madison Avenue ads. Hill's characters, especially the women, were neat and trim. Ralston's characters displayed the cleanliness and virtue of early rising. Lochrie's men were similarly cast through dominant stereotypes heavily influenced by advertising. Her shepherd and miner were grizzled and surly; in all probability their bodies matched their mentalities. Among the group gathered around the newspaper was a pot pourri of costuming; some were disheveled and shirts had holes in them, battered and worn hats perched on top of heads. Her sole smoker appeared as tough as the land to which he had come. Most of these men seemed in need of baths and shaves. The lack of domesticity spoke for itself.

Not all mural figures suggested a lack of amenities. Two well dressed brothers appeared in Verona Burkhard's

Deer Lodge mural. She painted James and Granville Stuart, the original prospectors in Deer Lodge Valley and credited with discovering gold and bringing miners to Montana. In 1852, the Stuart brothers left the East for California to make their fortunes in the gold rush but success eluded their extended efforts, convincing them to return eastward. They wintered in the Bitterroot Valley until the scarcity of food prompted them to move. They settled in Deer Lodge Valley and it was there they discovered a small amount of gold. They wasted no time notifying friends in Colorado of their timely luck. Their find coincided with the demise of the Pike's Peak bust and convinced many miners to try Montana's gold fields. The brothers received credit for bringing miners to Montana, even though the strike was less than significant.¹⁷ Writing about the cattle industry in Montana, E. C. Abbott wrote at about the same time that Burkhard painted the Stuarts, that Granville "was the history of Montana."¹⁸ While this lofty praise showed some exaggeration, it clearly expressed the adulation Stuart enjoyed among some Montanans. Abbott credited Stuart with having brought settlers to the western portion of the state, causing it to be settled before the eastern plains.¹⁹

Verona Burkhard researched the story of Deer Lodge Valley carefully, before beginning to paint her mural. She recognized the importance of the Stuarts and incorporated them into her mural. Other artists knew the role gold played and when the competition was held, many entries used that for the subject matter. Elizabeth Lochrie's entry was titled "Gold!"; the native daughter knew well what was vital to her hometown. However, the inclusion of the brothers seemed to provide the winning element for Burkhard. Besides painting the brothers, Burkhard's design included an important local mountain, Mt. Powell. This majestic peak was a favorite one among the citizens of Deer Lodge. The mountain received its name in honor of John Wesley Powell, the Civil War veteran, confidant of General Grant, and instigator of the Powell Geographic Expedition. Powell attempted the first federal reclamation program in the West, dreaming of turning the pristine and untouched land to a "palatinate of industrial agriculture."²⁰

With the inclusion of winning material in her design, Burkhard only needed to put effort into the rendering of her idea. Yet she experienced some difficulties, not only from townspeople but from Edward Rowan in Washington, D.C. The problems were not serious and probably showed

Burkhard's lack of experience in mural painting. Despite her attempts to please everyone concerned, her mountain and deer were taken to task. She wrote to Rowan that a number of people took it for granted that her design was an incorrect portrait of a mountain dominating the scenery around the town of Deer Lodge.²¹ Her intent had been to "...build around an old 1860 sketch of part of Deer Lodge Valley, to which she added some of Deer Lodge's prominent pioneers and some deer and mixed in some imagination."²² The postmaster advised her that if she included Mt. Powell, she would have the approval of the entire town.²³ Burkhard responded that the townspeople's request was reasonable and she understood their position. However, she displayed a stubborn streak and did not make many changes in her design, with the exception of changing the tail of the deer from white to black.²⁴

The issue of the deer prompted correspondence from Rowan to Burkhard. In her final mural design, she painted a single deer. In earlier efforts, she drew a herd of deer, which Rowan told her needed to be checked for scale. Even though she painted a single undulant in the mural, the deer boasted unlikely size. This sort of inaccuracy resulted from general inexperience in mural painting--from which more than one artist suffered.

Painting the right kind of deer and being true to the landscape exacted immense efforts from the artists as they tried to please their audiences. Viewers seemingly wanted to relate to the landscape more than to the theme of a mural, reflecting their mostly unsophisticated tastes. They accepted wooden and poorly proportioned figures and animals. But the murals received an overall acceptance as long as they remained true to the locale. Keeping true to the town's heritage also made points for the artists; following the style of another artist to whom viewers could relate, for instance Charlie Russell, also helped mural artists win acceptance.

Beyond remaining true to legend and locale, some of the artists included another element of the West in their designs. Four artists concentrated on Native Americans. But these muralists fell prey to contemporary attitudes about Native Americans, which included the traditional view of Indians as noble savages or just savages. The artists included the Native Americans because they belonged to the West and they painted them accordingly.

Hill's Glasgow mural portrayed a Native American in full regalia, complete with a white war bonnet, a staff with feathers, and a disdainful expression on his face. The Indian's torso is bare, which suggested that these

people were less civilized than whites, who were dressed at all times. Native Americans displayed strange habits in the opinion of whites, and partial nudity was one of them. Westerners as well as those in the East entertained various notions about Indians' strange habits and life, which Hill expressed on canvas.

Another artist who painted the "typical" Native American was J. K. Ralston. He too included a sole representative, and implied that some of these people found a way of life acceptable to whites. His Indian was a scout for the army and appeared in the front of the mural, just behind the general and another soldier. Ralston's Indian wore a blanket around his shoulders and sat impassively on his horse. Although he guided the group a substantial distance and safely, he remained separate from the others. The artist gave the Indian only minimal attention.

Henry Meloy's mural was exactly the opposite. He emphasized Native Americans in his mural, while a token white man stood nearby and watched the activity without participating. The white figure reminded viewers of the observer in Leo Beaulaurier's mural; he appeared to be in the wrong mural. He was not a part of the action and his presence added little to the overall effect of the mural.²⁵ Meloy's Native Americans were slight with

elongated physiques. Some were partially clad, wearing deerskin leggings. Others wore feathers or headdresses. The Flathead Indians prepared to battle against the Blackfoot, who had come into the valley and stolen some of the Flathead's horses. Motion dominated this mural; only a few figures remained static, and these were mostly in the background. The Flathead brandished spears and shields; most were mounted, although two Indians who were not on horseback appeared to be an integral part of the action. To add a measure of verisimilitude to his mural, Meloy included the Bitterroot mountains with an emphasis on Mt. Como, thus pinpointing the locale satisfactorily.

Just as Henry Meloy painted a specific peak to give authenticity to his mural, so Lochrie made good use of the Dillon area. She drove to Dillon and spent some time making notes on the landscape. And like Meloy, Lochrie included Native Americans in her mural. She painted two with distinctive differences between them. Although newspapers referred to these figures as "grim visaged," dignified would have been the better adjective to describe Lochrie's opinion of Native Americans.²⁶

Undoubtedly, Lochrie respected the Blackfoot. As a child, she lived near a "braid" settlement and spent much

time with the Indians there.²⁷ As an adult, the Blackfoot adopted her into their tribe, naming her "Netchitake" meaning "Woman Alone in her Way". Lochrie wrote about the Indians, "The more time I spend with these lost children of nature the more I love and admire them... It takes time to know them intimately. Every step must be taken by you."²⁸ The Blackfoot reciprocated, commenting about Lochrie: "She came to us from over the western mountains, this white woman. She was friendly and understanding, and we brought her into the medicine tepee and made her our sister."²⁹ Lochrie spent a few summers in Glacier Park and the Flathead Valley, working under the tutelage of Weinold Reiss, learning to paint the Blackfoot. Lochrie felt strongly that her subjects' faces held the key to their personalities and must be shown.³⁰ All the features of her figures were clear and precise, making her mural unique in Montana.

Besides concentrating on the facial expressions, Lochrie gave attention to the smallest details. She painted the two Native Americans carefully and precisely. One of the Indians wore a beaded belt, and the design of the belt cannot be missed. The bright red and blue contrasted sharply with his buckskin shirt. He also wore a bead necklace countered by the shell he wore around his

neck on a leather thong. This decoration gave evidence to the wide trading practiced among the Native Americans, while the beads implied trading with whites. An array of feathers over the figure's left ear accentuated his dignity. His features remained impassive while watching these white men, who were so anxious for a word from home. The Indian carried a rifle in a buckskin bag, again combining two cultures. His companion received no less attention to detail than he. His belt and knife sheath showed concern for the beaded design, and the colored pattern of his blanket received no less attention. His face suggested a certain impatience with these proceedings; he looked ready to leave and wished his companion would accommodate him.

Ultimately, whether these artists painted Native Americans, cattle drives or important pioneers, they used the West and its myths to advantage. They recognized the force of the landscape, the feeling that you could move forever and never have to stop.³¹ Yet none relied on the vista alone for their mural. Each utilized that element, but added to it an historical incident or used his/her imagination and painted what might have been. They exercised a loyalty to this part of the country as well as pride in it. They told in oils the story--or part of it--

of the West. They were proud of being westerners and showed their pride in varying degrees in their murals.

Notes

1. Le Figaro, 24 Octobre 1987, p. 50.
2. Kaj Klitgaard, Through The American Landscape (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), p. 181.
3. Ibid., p. 241.
4. Ibid., pp. 240-241.
5. James K. Ralston to Edward Rowan, 10 January 1942, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
6. James K. Ralston, The Voice of the Curlew: J. K. Ralston's Story of his Life as told to John A. Popovich, (Billings: J.K. Ralston Studio, Inc. 1986), p. 254.
7. Billings Gazette, 27 November 1987, pp. 1, 4.
8. Edward Rowan to James K. Ralston, 16 January 1942, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
9. Ernest Staples Osgood, The Days of the Cattlemen (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1929), pp. 26-27.
10. Andy Adams, The Ranch on the Beaver (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), p. 46.
11. Andy Adams, The Log of a Cowboy: A Narrative of the old Trail Days (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), p. 28.
12. George Biddle, An American Artist's Story (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), p. 314.
13. Edward Rowan to Leo Beaulaurier, 17 October 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
14. Osgood, The Days of the Cattlemen, p. 255.
15. Ibid.

16. Ralph K. Andrist, ed., The American Heritage History of The 1920s and the 1930s (New York: American Heritage/Bonanza Books, 1970), pp. 276-284.
17. Richard K. Mueller, "Granville Stuart and the Montana Vigilantes of 1884", (M.A. Thesis: University of Oregon, 1980), p. 13.
18. E. C. Abbott and Helena Huntington Smith, We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher (New York and Toronto: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc. 1939), p. 20.
19. Ibid.
20. Marc Reisner, Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1986), pp. 26-27, 65, 250-251.
21. Verona Burkhard to Edward Rowan, 31 March 1939, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Deer Lodge file. Record Group 121, N.A. Washington, D.C. Undated and untitled newspaper clippings.
25. I spoke with Sue Near, Curator of Collections at the Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana. She in turn spoke with retired Judge Peter Meloy, brother of Henry Meloy. Judge Meloy told Sue who shared the information with me that the white man in the mural was modeled after Frank Mechau, a long time friend and fellow artist of Henry Meloy.

It pertains to the "family" sense of the artists: Verona Burkhard knew Henry Meloy; she is good friends with Paula Mechau, Frank's widow. Indeed, I contacted Paula Mechau in trying to establish contact with Verona Burkhard!
26. Dillon file. Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Undated and untitled newspaper clippings.

27. Dale, A. Burk, New Interpretations, (N.P. Western Life Publications, Inc., 1969), pp. 87-88, 90.
28. Seattle Post Intelligencer, 17 August 1964, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
29. Denver Post Empire Magazine 9 May 1954, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
30. Peggy and Harold Samuels, The Illustrated Biographical Encyclopedia of Artists of the American West (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 291.
31. Thomas Hart Benton, An Artist in America (New York: University of Kansas City Press-Twayne Publishers, 1937. Revised edition 1951), pp. 199-200.

CHAPTER 6

THE IMPACT OF NEW DEAL MURALS ON MONTANA

I saw the mural when I first started work here, but haven't paid any attention since.¹

This statement, made by an employee in the Billings post office in 1983, reflected the general attitude towards government-sponsored art. Historical celebrations in towns which house murals occasionally have prompted a renewed interest in the murals, though this interest usually has been short lived. The common and prevalent attitude has been one of indifference towards the murals. Why and how did apathy replace the initial enthusiasm for the government's gift to the community? Had the government failed in its efforts to give art to the people? Or did the blame fall directly on the masses, the recipients of the bureaucratic largesse? If the murals were better executed and more striking, if the government heeded George Biddle's advice, "The best art is good salesmanship," would a positive reaction have endured longer than it did?² These attitudes and questions will be addressed in this final chapter.

The event which provoked the comment that begins this chapter was the cleaning and restoration of the Billings's mural in 1983. The United States Postal Service hired the

Rocky Mountain Regional Conservation Center in Denver to evaluate two murals: Beaulaurier's design in Billings and Ralston's picture in Sidney, Montana. The appearance of the art conservator sent to assess the mural sparked momentary interest in the design. Appropriate publicity through the Billings Gazette provided the artist and some of his friends the opportunity to tell when and why the mural was painted. The Gazette's correspondent hoped the result would be not only a cleaner and better preserved mural, but "a better audience for that neglected work and forgotten artist."³

The renewed enthusiasm for the mural suffered an ironic defeat. Leo Beaulaurier installed his design over the door to the Postmaster's office, the same place all Montana's murals were placed. However, the government, in the Billings building, separated the lobby from the offices by installing a partition of dark glass. This addition successfully hid the picture from anyone in the lobby. In addition, the glare of the lights in the lobby reflected into the glass, making it quite impossible to view the mural from the lobby. One could view the mural from only a few feet away and looking straight up. In this instance, the government was its own best enemy.

Whether Leo Beaulaurier anticipated such an impediment to his design was doubtful. When Beaulaurier was painting his mural, he queried Edward Rowan if the placement for the picture might be changed. Beaulaurier made his request, because there was a clock in the space where the mural was to be placed. He suggested placing his mural over the elevator as it was a larger area. "The floor indicator could be removed while installing the sketch and replaced over the canvas afterwards."⁴ Apparently, Beaulaurier felt a floor indicator detracted less from the mural than a clock. Rowan took the matter in hand and resolved it satisfactorily. The postmaster relocated the offending clock to the door casing directly below the mural.⁵ The new locus of the timepiece should have played an important part in people's awareness of the mural. Knowing the time was and is essential to everyone; glancing at the clock would naturally lead to observing the mural. This foresight endured only until the government installed its partitions.

Another artist who questioned the placement of a mural was Elizabeth Lochrie. She did not have to contend with clocks and floor indicators. But before painting the picture, she traveled to Dillon, Montana, to observe the

area and to get a sense of the post office lobby. She wrote the results of her observations to Edward Rowan:

Seventeen out of twenty people entering the vestibule turned through the righthand door into the lobby, walked directly to the long wall facing the entrance, attended business and then exited by the same door; very few used the left hand door, that facing the end wall and postmaster's office; none looked towards that door and space.⁶

She suggested using the longer wall for her mural and rashly added that all artists should be made aware of this possible problem. As usual, Edward Rowan responded quickly and advised her to place her mural where it was originally meant to be.⁷ Olga Ross Hannon, the jury committee's chairperson, concurred with Lochrie's comments about the mural placement. She added, however, that due to the long narrow lobby, "strong colors would carry better from the end as planned, rather than the front view decoration."⁸ Governmental insistence on using the same location for each mural, however, worked against its intentions of helping the public better appreciate art. Uniform placement reflected bureaucratic attitudes and allowed for a certain replication in the program. However, when a different placement might have prompted more attention to the mural, perhaps some deviation from policy would have been more beneficial than strictly following precedent.

The location of the murals in other towns seems not to have been an issue. Whether those artists might have preferred a different place remains unknown. One of these designs, though, proved that other factors besides the placement of the picture in a building kept the mural alive in people's consciousness. This was James K. Ralston's design in Sidney, Montana. In this town, people responded immediately and positively to my queries about their mural. In the 1970s, Sidney experienced an oil boom and as a result of the influx of population and funds, the government built a new post office building. At about the same time, the county built the MonDak Heritage Center, an old-West museum. Controversy then raged as to which of the three institutions should house the Ralston mural. Proponents who wanted the mural to remain in its original location carried the day, but the entire town voiced its opinions. The result of the town's temporary involvement some forty years after Ralston painted the mural renewed their interest in and awareness of the picture.

Other towns similarly exhibited renewed interest in their murals. In 1976, Verona Burkhard and a friend, Paula Mechau, traveled from Colorado to Montana so that Burkhard could show some copper jewelry.⁹ Simultaneously, the United States Government began to assess murals and

fine arts, and implemented the process to have the murals cleaned and restored. A memo from the Missoula SCF/Manager/Postmaster stated, "These murals are priceless objects and deserve protection."¹⁰ Burkhard was not far from Deer Lodge and graciously consented to clean and varnish not only the Deer Lodge mural but also those in Dillon and Hamilton, Montana.¹¹ Burkhard's generous gifts of time and expertise directed these towns' awareness back to the murals. The cleaning of the pictures prompted some postmasters to draw attention to the murals. Although these murals lacked the strength of Picasso or Michelangelo, they were, in a sense, priceless. Each was unique; no other state had "General Sully Crossing the Yellowstone," or "Receiving the Mail." Though all the murals across the country remained as tangible reminders of the government's efforts to help people in the 1930s and 1940s, Montana's murals were and remain unique to this state.

Despite these periodic rekindlings of awareness, people generally failed to remember if their town had a mural. Only one of my acquaintances remembered the mural in her town. When I mentioned this project, she commented that when she was young, she always tried to spot the snake, which Lochrie expertly camouflaged in the Dillon

mural. Despite my friend's best efforts, the viper remained hidden. Her predicament exposed a shortcoming with all the murals and again brought attention to the placement of the designs. Each artist painted his/her picture at eye level. When the artists installed their murals, the designs were raised well above average height, making it difficult to locate a specific object in the mural. Had the government considered a different setting for the murals, people might have thought about the designs longer rather than looking but no longer seeing them, like the Billings postal employee. Perhaps as a consequence of their placement, Montana murals become such a part of everyday life that citizens no longer recognize them.

Reactions to the murals in the present contrast sharply with the public's initial response when the murals were installed. Dillon's reaction reflected every possible aspect Washington officials could have wanted to result from its involvement in supporting the arts. Postmaster Harry Jandina wrote to Edward Rowan, shortly after installation of the mural:

...truly beautiful painting, correct in every detail and the colors blend in perfectly with the colors of our lobby and has at the same time given the picture of our country. All that has viewed it since it was installed praise it very

highly. I am sure the artist and the department have made many friends in this community through this excellent work. We are grateful Dillon has the first mural in Montana and pleased with Elizabeth Lochrie. Thanks for a gift appreciated by all.¹²

Dillon's enthusiasm as conveyed by Jandina assured Washington that the mural program in Montana began on a successful note. The painting evoked an overall positive response among townspeople, and promised a solid beginning for the scheme in this western state. Rowan may have wondered why he waited to begin the project in Montana. Jandina's letter implied that the government program merited and deserved thanks from all concerned, and Dillon citizens were not adverse to expressing their appreciation.

Other towns expressed their satisfaction and appreciation, too. Henry Meloy wrote to Edward Rowan:

It looked good and the people of Hamilton who came in during the process and afterward seemed to like it and to feel that it finished and enhanced their post office building.¹³

The Western News carried notice of the mural installation observing that: "The mural adds color to the lobby and will doubtless be much enjoyed by lovers of art."¹⁴

Verona Burkhard wrote to Edward Rowan:

People of Deer Lodge surprised me by their great interest in the mural, and I have had many visitors to see the painting. All of them...seem...highly pleased and delighted...¹⁵

This praise satisfied the artists and relieved government officials. Bureaucrats wanted to have the newspaper accounts as tangible proof of their success. Rowan requested Billings's Postmaster Mearl J. Fagg, "...if any comments in newspapers--be interested in seeing them."¹⁶ Fagg obliged, "The newspapers carried an excellent article on this picture. Be glad to send an account." In addition, Fagg advised Rowan that patrons were satisfied with the mural, and felt that its theme fit in with the country, recording a history of actual scenes.¹⁷

Fagg's note to Rowan exemplified some common denominators about the murals. Initially, patrons responded enthusiastically and appreciatively to the pictures. A second denominator was the record of historical events provided by the murals. Five of the murals retold parts of Montana's past and Lochrie's sketch incorporated a fictitious event with some factual information about Dillon. In 1939, Montana was still a young state with only fifty years to its credit. Seeing Montana's history on canvas struck a responsive chord among its population. Many Montanans remembered these events and the relationship between the person and the story on the wall served to instill a sense of personal pride in the state.

Some of the artists made great efforts to recreate the historical events of the state. J. K. Ralston's biographer, John Popovich, commented:

I've always regarded him as one of Montana's great artists, as well as being a great historian. ...he has helped preserve the history of the state, its cattle industry, fur trade and early exploration and settling of the state. He is a third-generation Montanan who has been very generous with his art and talents.¹⁸

All of Montana's muralists contributed to the West's history, memorializing events with oils and canvas as well as making history by participating in the government program to paint post office walls. In their own way, while telling the history of the West, these artists contributed to its mystique. The romantic elements associated with cattle drives, gold prospecting, wagon trains heading west emphasized the ideal. None of these murals implied the drudgery, danger, and tedium of the events they recorded. These occurrences only achieved glamour when gold was discovered, wagons reached a final destination, or the cattle arrived and were sold. Viewers forgot about the daily work load; they accepted that the West was built by strong men who equaled or bettered nature, Native Americans and neighbors. Only when the country was habitable did these men permit women to come

and further civilize the area. Montana's muralists lived by this principle and incorporated it into their designs.

Montana's citizens judged the artists capable of recording their history best if the artists came from this state. Time after time, newspaper articles noted that one designer or another was "native-born." Because five of the six artists were native Montanans, this element weighed heavily on jurors' minds as well as those of communities. Fortunately, Verona Burkhard loved the West, as evidenced by the time she spent in the Rockies before becoming a permanent Colorado resident. Great Falls's rejection of Mordi Gassner's mural may partly have resulted from the fact that he was an easterner. That incident personified the distrust and antipathy between easterners and westerners. Though westerners relied on the East in a number of ways, they preferred to think of themselves as independent and owing no one. Yet most incidents recorded in the murals could not have happened without financial backing from the East. This fact was not important to the muralists. They painted the West their audiences wanted and the West they imagined.

Montana's muralists absorbed an important message when they painted their designs for the government. They learned that audiences appreciated western art, whether in

the western United States or further east. Each continued to paint the West, whether recording historical events, landscape, or Native Americans. Most of them experimented with different mediums other than oils, working with water colors, pottery, jewelry, or ceramics. The experiments with various media provided the artists excellent means to learn their chosen carrers. George Biddle nicely anticipated their efforts:

An artist is most completely individual in that particular medium which is suited to his personality and style; but if he cannot express himself fluently in half a dozen different media, he is somewhat limited in his expression.¹⁹

The Montana muralists who enjoyed more celebrity followed Biddle's maxim, proving its veracity.

One muralist who won acclaim was Elizabeth Lochrie. Pioneer West called her Montana's greatest woman artist.²⁰ Approximately twenty years earlier a newspaper article named Lochrie as Montana's successor to Charlie Russell. Lochrie's gifted paintings of Blackfoot Indians and her thoughtful renderings of Montana's landscapes earned such accolades.²¹ Lochrie worked with pastels, watercolors, oils and occasionally polymers; she left her sketches on cork, velvet, leather, board and canvas.²² Lochrie exerted all her efforts to present each person's personality she painted. Facial expressions revealed

personalities and Lochrie worked diligently to capture these expressions. "Character is the most important thing to put into a portrait," Lochrie commented.²³ Her work mirrored her artistic tenets as well as her talent. She painted what she knew, sharing her view of the West with interested viewers.

Another artist who painted what he knew best and achieved notice as a result was James K. Ralston, who enjoyed a reputation as the "cowboy artist." Working as a cowboy and painting filled Ralston's life; the subtitle of a newspaper article described him as "...painter, but most of all a cowboy."²⁴ Ralston recorded the history of cowboy life, reproducing cattle brands and the accoutrements of life in the saddle with an authenticity few could match. Ralston fancied himself a student of Montana and western history and based his works on solid historical information.²⁵ Ralston's paintings concentrated on eastern Montana, paying homage to that part of the state.

Another Montanan, conscious of the need to paint a passing era, was Leo Beaulaurier. Like Ralston, Beaulaurier pulled from his life for subjects for his art. His self-imposed need to portray a history that soon disappeared or an occasion which passed from memory led

him to make particular efforts to preserve the Native Americans' heritage, drawing portraits of them for future reference.²⁶

Verona Burkhard's art expanded beyond a conscious desire to paint history. She involved herself in art-related activities, such as working with recovering alcoholics, teaching them with art therapy. She helped found the Mesa County Arts Center. Besides painting, Burkhard sculpted, did architectural decorations, and designed three fountains.²⁷ She followed Biddle's advice well, becoming an accomplished artist in a number of different media. In the late 1940s, she made the West her permanent home, affording her the opportunity to paint what she loved and the chance to use her talents to help others. She remarked once that when she painted the Deer Lodge mural, she really had no confidence in her artistic abilities; the mural was something she had to try.²⁸ She blossomed as an artist in subsequent years.

Of the remaining muralists, Forrest Hill remarked that his art never caught on in Montana.²⁹ He painted the West, Montana scenes and Native Americans, but he did not enjoy the outstanding success that Lochrie and Burkhard experienced. He exhibited within the state but his job as clerk for the Northern Pacific Railroad may

have demanded more time and effort from him, resulting in less time to paint. In addition, he received less training than the other artists, which may account for his more moderate success.

Henry Meloy enjoyed the success which eluded Forrest Hill. Meloy painted Western scenes, too, although his work at Columbia University brought him into contact with a wider array of subjects. At a New York exhibit, watercolors, oils, ceramics, and many pieces in ink were shown.³⁰ Another show in Helena, Montana reflected Meloy's western heritage. Scenes from the Helena area, Wolf Creek, Hellgate and Hassel Canyons numbered among the thirty-seven watercolors shown. Meloy's talents led him beyond western landscapes; some nudes and animal subjects were included in this show.³¹

Montana's muralists achieved relative success with their paintings. For most, the pride and boost to their morales in winning a competition or being appointed to paint a picture provided the necessary impetus to continue painting. They seemingly enjoyed the opportunity to try a different medium, and benefitted from this experience. Their audiences appreciated their efforts and responded positively to the finished results. The conscientious efforts of the Washington bureaucrats, artists and towns-

people combined to make a winning combination. Artists, along with other deserving citizens received much needed salaries; community members became involved with unique decisions about public art. In addition, the pride in having the United States Government notice a town by building a new post office and including a mural eased minds worried by the Depression. Obviously, the government cared about its citizens and would not leave them to fight the Depression alone.

Through time, the palliative effects of the murals have vanished from popular consciousness. Why were these designs no longer noticed thirty to forty years later? Artists then and now offered their opinions about the government's art program. A contemporary artist, Edward Lucie-Smith expressed his feelings about the project in his book, Art in the 1930s. He implied that the quality of most of the murals produced under the government's aegis were mediocre. These designs qualified as "stylistic backwater," and revealed nothing about artistic progress--such as Modernism.³² This harsh evaluation, written in 1985, contained more than a few grains of truth. However, his assessment seemed to be entirely artistic and failed to include consideration of the circumstances under which the program survived. He did

not consider that Edward Bruce, Edward Rowan, and Forbes Watson did not want modern advances in the art they sponsored. They recognized that for many within their audiences, this might be the first association with fine art. Rather than present something that might possibly be offensive, the directors concentrated on a safer art. They preferred a regional art which was less complicated and easier to understand. The artists grew beyond painting for themselves and "art for art's sake"; they directed their art to the public. By their very nature, murals were public art that told a popular story. They interpreted an event and retold this story on canvas, keeping their audiences' tastes uppermost in their minds.

There was an irony in the mural program. Mural art, by itself, was not an American expression. In the 1930s, when the emphasis was on things American, officials selected an art form from Europe and Mexico. Murals were known in the United States, but had never enjoyed the popularity here that they had elsewhere. By painting American scenes, though, the artists impressed an American identification on their works. Because the art program endured only a decade, artists were unable to garner the necessary quota of experience to make the program the success it might have enjoyed. Artists did not have the

opportunity to learn from advanced or experienced muralists. They had to rely on their training and talent and any experience gained from painting other murals. Mostly, they gained experience as they painted. Hiring local artists caused problems for the Section. While a local person may well have had the necessary talent, he/she likely lacked experience. Giving the opportunity to a fellow citizen made the townspeople feel good; one liked to know that you could help others. But while a local citizen probably had the necessary feeling for an area, knowledge and talent were required to paint a satisfactory design. Artists selected to paint were often young, local, and while often talented, lacked the experience to produce more viable murals. This inexperience apparently mattered little to Montanans. They displayed a fierce loyalty and preference for fellow citizens; they demonstrated their unfamiliarity with art by showing this favoritism but never regretted this choice. Because a representative number of citizens participated in the program as jurors, the other townspeople respected their artistic opinions and accepted their decisions.

The decisions of a few people which resulted in a mural decoration involved numerous factors. The mural

program needed someone with the vision of George Biddle when he had outlined his plan to President Roosevelt. Plodding bureaucrats like Edward Rowan were equally essential for implementing the various mechanics for government supported art. The artists and their audiences, their mentors, and of course, a place to put the decorations completed the required conditions. These elements combined, not always easily, to produce an increased awareness of art across the country. In the short term, the government brought art to the people, changed people's perspectives about artists, and prompted artists to reconsider their audiences.

In the long term, the murals suffered from seeming apathy or indifference from those very people who once supported them wholeheartedly. There were several reasons for this change. One was that the perspective of the murals changed. At first, the decorations represented the government's goodness, the care it extended to the people during the Depression. Once the difficult years passed, the murals served as a reminder of those hard times. Just as some people avoided some foods they had consumed during the Depression, so people avoided this constant visual reminder of that era. Ignoring the murals served as a defense mechanism; ignoring the murals made life seem

better if only because you could avoid thinking about the Depression.

The habit of looking without seeing became ingrained as Americans' life styles changed. Increased mechanization, advertising, and consumerism invaded lives and changed values and expectations. Going to the post office to look at a mural bordered on the absurd. Different media brought various art forms into their homes; post office murals became passé. The murals did not change; rather, the audiences did. The murals represented a specific time and served to jog memories back to that time. The people whose lives the murals touched moved ahead, made changes and adapted to the changed circumstances of Postwar America. As the murals fell prey to historical changes, a Section artist, Orr C. Fisher, was moved to affirm:

One thing I feel sure is that the work of the Section and of the artists will be remembered as long as our beloved America is remembered and may that be as long as civilization endures.³³

That Fisher's conviction does not square with reality is no fault of his or other artists. Like their fellow citizens everywhere, Montanans have lost touch within their collective past. But the murals may yet serve as

vital links to our history, enabling us to learn rather than to escape from it.

Notes

1. Billings Gazette, 7 April 1983, p. 1.
2. George Biddle, An American Artist's Story (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), p. 314.
3. Billings Gazette, 7 April 1983, p. 1.
4. Leo Beaulaurier to Edward Rowan, 17 November 1941, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
5. Edward Rowan to Leo Beaulaurier, 24 February 1942, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
6. Elizabeth Lochrie to Edward Rowan, 11 July 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
7. Edward Rowan to Elizabeth Lochrie, 4 August, 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
8. Olga Ross Hannon to Edward Rowan, 4 August 1937, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
9. Deer Lodge Post Office folder, Deer Lodge, Montana.
10. United States Post Office memo to Postmasters in Dillon, Deer Lodge, and Hamilton, Montana from J. A. Aanenson, SCF/Manager, Postmaster.
11. Telephone interview with Verona Burkhard, August 1987.
12. Harry Jandina, Postmaster, to Edward Rowan, 16 May 1938, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D. C.
13. Henry Meloy to Edward Rowan, 2 October 1942, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
14. Western News, 1 October 1942, Artists' Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
15. Verona Burkhard to Edward Rowan (undated correspondence). Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

16. Edward Rowan to Postmaster Mearl J. Fagg, 23 April 1942, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
17. Mearl J. Fagg to Edward Rowan, 23 April 1942, Record Group 121, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
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21. Pioneer Press, Cut Bank, Montana, (Artist's Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
22. Dale A. Burk, New Interpretations (N.P.: Western Life Publications, Inc., 1969), p. 90.
23. Ibid.
24. The Independent Record, 6 December 1987, p. 1D.
25. Ibid.
26. Burk, New-Interpretations, p. 90.
27. Artists Vertical File, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana.
28. Telephone interview with Verona Burkhard, August 1987.
29. Personal interview with Forrest Hill, November 1987.
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31. Ibid.
32. Edward Lucie Smith, Art in the 1930s: The Age of Anxiety (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985), p. 250.
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