



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.

Besides its willingness to assist artists, the government also wanted to give art to the common people, to make them aware of and give them an appreciation for art. To achieve this, the government stressed that the artists should paint American scenes. Accordingly, Montana's muralists relied on the locale of the town where his/her mural was to be placed. In addition, they usually recorded an event from the town's heritage with their brushes. These two factors gave a measure of authenticity to their designs.

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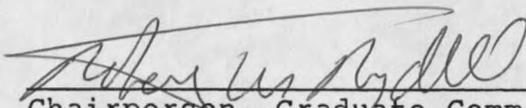
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Elizabeth Joan Mentzer

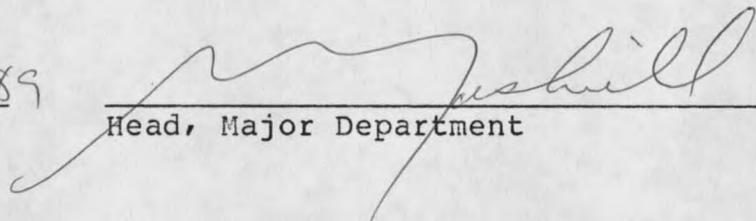
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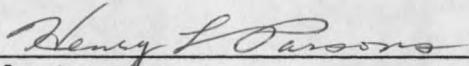
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ABSTRACT

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

