

EXHIBIT REVIEW

A Common Canvas: Pennsylvania's New Deal Post Office Murals.

The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Exhibit ran from November 22–May 19, 2009.

A traveling version of the exhibit will appear in Mercyhurst College, Erie, Pennsylvania in February 2010, and other venues around the state.

Sites interested in hosting the exhibit may also contact Curt Miner at the State Museum at wminer@state.pa.us.

Internet: The State Museum produced an interactive Google map identifying the location of the eighty-eight extant Section of Fine Arts murals in Pennsylvania. The site also includes eight brief YouTube videos featuring portions of a gallery talk by curator Curt Miner. It can be located at: <http://www.statemuseumpa.org/common-canvas.html>. A gallery interview conducted with the exhibit's curators can be found on the PA Bookstore's website <http://www.pabookstore.com/spimedpococa.html>.

As part of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the State Museum of Pennsylvania mounted a temporary exhibit, *A Common Canvas: Pennsylvania's New Deal Post Office Murals*, which ran from November 22, 2008 to May 17, 2009. The exhibit was also designed to function as a traveling exhibit when its run at the State Museum ended. Curated by Senior Curator of History Curtis Miner and independent scholar David Lembeck, and featuring the photographs of Michael Mutmanský, this show examined a collection of federally sponsored murals that had previously only been available to those who glimpsed them on display in the eighty-eight post offices and federal buildings where they hang. By gathering and contextualizing this collection of hidden treasures, the State Museum of Pennsylvania provided a fascinating window into the New Deal's impact on Pennsylvania. The artworks and the extensive research undertaken by the curators revealed the distinctive character of the state's local communities in the 1930s, and showcased a rich artistic legacy of the Depression era.

A Common Canvas features one of the lesser-known New Deal programs, the United States Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts (commonly called the Section), a national public art initiative that committed one percent of all federal construction appropriations to the production of murals to enhance government buildings. Unlike the arts programs of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Treasury Department's primary objective was to commission great works of art, not to employ struggling artists. Unlike the freedom enjoyed by many WPA artists, the Section required its artists to create uplifting, civic-minded works produced in the "Midwestern Regionalist" or "American Scene" style popularized by Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton. The artists developed their artworks in collaboration with local officials (often a community's postmaster) in order to produce works that would satisfy the values and tastes of community residents. Treasury department administrators also scrutinized the artists' works at all stages of production to ensure each met the program's guidelines. The murals thus reflected unique collaborations between artists, New Dealers, and ordinary Pennsylvania citizens.

Between 1934 and 1943, eighty-two artists hired by the Section produced ninety-four murals for federal buildings in Pennsylvania, eighty-eight of which were installed in post offices constructed or remodeled in the 1930s. Fifty-eight of the post office murals were paintings, but artists also utilized a wide range of other materials including mosaic tiles, stone, glass, metal,

and wood. Several artists chose media that reflected a community's major industry, such as Josephine Mather's homage to Ford City's glass industry, *Glass Making*, sandblasted onto Cararra glass, and Barbara Crawford's mural for Bangor, Pennsylvania called *Slate Belt People*, painted onto four massive sheets of locally-quarried stone.

The curators arranged the exhibit into six sections. Visitor first encountered a full-sized mural from the Selinsgrove post office that introduced the Section of Fine Arts Program, the rationale behind it, and the guidelines and collaborative process in which artists worked. The murals were then arranged thematically into five groupings based on the subject portrayed in the artwork: agriculture, coal and steel, history, town and country, and local industry. Several small displays followed the main exhibit featuring artwork produced by other New Deal programs, including the Works Progress Administration's Museum Extension Program, the Federal Writers Project, and the Federal Arts Project. The exhibit's final item was a full-size replica of Douglas Cooper's pair of murals of the Pennsylvania Turnpike commissioned for the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission's Executive Boardroom in 2001. Cooper's murals illustrated the ongoing tradition of public art in Pennsylvania while also showcasing the state's largest, New Deal era public works project.

Because most of the Section murals were permanently installed in the federal buildings that housed them, only a few original works of sculpture could be exhibited. Instead, the curators used photographs taken by Robert Mutmanský to display the artworks. The photographic reproductions were of extremely high quality, effectively conveying the artistry of the painted murals. Many of the mural photographs were quite large, but only a limited number were presented at full scale. While the decision to reduce the size of the mural images was understandable in order to showcase numerous murals in the limited gallery space, the smaller images diminished some of the power and majesty inherent in the larger-than-life works.

Yet by sacrificing the scale of the works, the curators enabled visitor to see the range of artistic methods utilized by Section artists working in Pennsylvania. Artists showed remarkable diversity within the parameters established by the Treasury, producing works that reflected such styles as romanticism, impressionism, cubism, precisionism, and social realism, as well as works in the "American Scene" style. The thematic organization of the exhibit had the effect of juxtaposing, and thus highlighting, the variety of artistic techniques employed by Section artists. While the guidelines of

the Section precluded the decade's most radical and innovative styles, the murals presented in the *Common Canvas* exhibit displayed a rich array of interwar art.

For historians, the murals represented a fascinating collection of historical documents through which to rediscover traces of the Pennsylvania of the 1930s. The studies of cities and small towns captured the unique architecture, streetscapes, and landmarks of Pennsylvania's communities, while the murals that featured scene of farms and industry preserved vivid details of Depression-era workplaces and workers. Tiny details, such as strings of electrical wires traversing a pastoral landscape painted for the Roaring Spring post office, reminded viewers of the transformation in rural life taking place in the 1930s through the New Deal's Rural Electrification Administration. Murals reflecting historical subjects also offered a fascinating study in public memory by showing the aspects of local history communities wanted celebrated, and how they wished to have those stories presented to the public. The curators further highlighted the sense of the murals as time-capsules by accompanying each artwork with a community description drawn from the WPA's *Pennsylvania: A Guide to the Keystone State*. The quaint, often quirky descriptions emphasized the unique characteristics of each community while also underscoring how dramatically some Pennsylvania communities had changed in the last seventy-five years. While the decline of the coal and steel industries is well known, the de-industrialization of rural Pennsylvania proved particularly striking.

The research behind this exhibit was meticulous, including extensive contact with Section artists and their families, and research conducted in Treasury Department records at the National Archives. The curators shared their deep knowledge of this program through rich labels that allowed visitors to appreciate the murals as works of art and historical documents. Of particular interest were the negotiations the curators unearthed between the artists and Section administrators, such as when Treasury officials demanded that artist Robert Lepper insert more bayonets into his completed mural, *The Battle of Bushy Run*, in response to complaints from the postmaster and residents of Jeannette. The curators also noted efforts by artists to circumvent Section regulations, such as when Stuyvesant Van Veen surreptitiously expressed his leftist sympathies by hiding a hammer and sickle in his mural *Pittsburgh Panorama*, or when Harold Lehman showed his support for organized labor by placing union buttons on the hats of the railroad workers in his painting, *Locomotive Repair Operation*.

This was an outstanding exhibit, and it is ironic that this study in the value of public art almost did not occur because the United States Postal Service (USPS) now restricts the right of the public to photograph or reproduce the New Deal murals housed in Post Office buildings. Though the works were created by the federal government for the public good, the USPS now contends that the works are part of its “intellectual property” and that the works may only be professionally photographed or reproduced through a licensing agreement with the USPS. A compromise was reached between the State Museum and the USPS that allowed the exhibit to go forward (albeit without color images of nearly half the extant murals), but the USPS continues to thwart the efforts of Robert Mutmansky and David Lembeck to complete their photo-documentation of the state’s post office murals—a project made even more urgent as the USPS considers closing many small town post offices to address its growing financial difficulties.

The State Museum of Pennsylvania’s *Common Canvas* exhibit was an extraordinary exhibit, one that deserves a long life and large audiences as a traveling exhibit. Not only did this exhibit bring to light remarkable works of art, but it brought them to the public’s attention at a critical moment when the future of both the artworks and the small-town post offices that house them remain uncertain. Moreover, the legal issues the curators encountered from the United States Postal Service in mounting this exhibit serve as powerful reminders that the historical community must advocate to ensure that these and other pieces of our common heritage remain accessible to the public. Championing that spirit of public heritage would be a most fitting way to commemorate the legacy of the New Deal.

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