Smithsonian Launches “Indians at the Post Office”

New Online Exhibition Explores Native Themes in New Deal-Era Murals

The Smithsonian’s National Postal Museum and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian have collaborated to create the digital exhibition “Indians at the Post Office: Native Themes in New Deal-Era Murals.” The exhibition features 27 murals in post offices across the country depicting American Indians.

During the New Deal-era, the U.S. Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture, in a non-relief effort, established a “48 states” art competition to commission artists to create public art in post offices. The competition resulted in the painting of 1,600 murals in post offices and federal buildings nationwide.

“Four hundred of these post office murals depict American Indians, and they will be the focus of this ongoing collaborative project of the National Postal Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian,” said Allen Kane, director of the National Postal Museum. “We look forward to adding new images and stories every year.”

The National Museum of the American Indian has closely examined 1,630 black-and-white images of these murals and sculptures provided by the U.S. Postal Service, which showed that of the 400 murals containing American Indians, only 24 were created by American Indians. Most of the artists participating in these visual stories were entirely unfamiliar with the region connected to the post office to which they were assigned, and most, unless they were a Native themselves, were unfamiliar with Indian culture.

“The long-range goal of the ‘Indians at the Post Office: Native Themes in New Deal-Era Murals’ online exhibition is to publish 21st-century critiques of the 400 murals to address both virtues and inaccuracies,” said Kevin Gover, director of the National Museum of the American Indian. “The goal is to have as many murals as possible researched and written about by American Indians,
particularly from the areas and cultures depicted.” Collaboration with tribal college faculty and students from the various regions is planned to address, interpret and provide commentary on the murals.

The National Postal Museum is devoted to presenting the colorful and engaging history of the nation’s mail service and showcasing one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of stamps and philatelic material in the world. It is located at 2 Massachusetts Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C., across from Union Station. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (closed Dec. 25). For more information about the Smithsonian, call (202) 633-1000 or visit the museum website at www$postalmuseum.si.edu.

The National Museum of the American Indian is committed to advancing knowledge and understanding of the Native cultures of the Western Hemisphere—past, present and future—through partnership with Native people and others. The museum works to support the continuance of culture, traditional values and transitions in contemporary Native life. For more information, visit the museum website at www.AmericanIndian.si.edu.

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