INDIANS AT THE POST OFFICE:
New Deal Era Murals and Their Legacy of American Indian Representation

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Introduction

The New Deal era of the 1930s through the early 40s was a dynamic period of growth and change for the United States. Beyond the work relief projects aimed at stemming the crippling effects of the Great Depression in communities across the nation, it was also a vibrant time of artistic innovation and expression. This article presents an overview of various themes presented by non-Native and Native artists in New Deal-era post office murals in terms of their depictions of American Indians. Inspired by Mexican muralists and driven by the circumstances of the Depression, the United States government sponsored four distinct programs that commissioned artists, directly and through anonymous competitions, to create murals and sculptures for federal buildings. Through research conducted with the support of the Smithsonian National Postal Museum Scholarship[i], I examined murals in post offices painted under the auspices of the Section of Fine Arts and featuring American Indian subjects. In this paper, I consider how the artistic trends and social conditions of this period contributed to the creation of a distinctly American art that portrayed American Indians in a variety of ways and reflected contemporaneous views of their place in historic and social society. As I observe, Indians were portrayed in post office murals as figures of myth and legend, symbols of a vanished past, obstacles to settlement and progress resolved through conflict and negotiation, and a romanticized, primitive ideal. I also examine the influence of the Santa Fe Indian School and Oklahoma schools of Indian art, who concentrated their efforts on teaching American Indians, and what they meant for the growth of the Indian artistry of the period. I further pose questions regarding government influence in the arts and the challenges of engineering a cultural democracy. Finally, these discussions lead to the implications of New Deal mural images of Indians in present-day debates on Native agency and representation. Overall, these murals provide a vibrant and fascinating window into New Deal public art projects, and their legacy of portraying Indians at the post office.

Mexican Muralists

New Deal-era government arts programs have at least partial roots in the Mexican mural movement of the early 20th Century. Many Mexican artists, having been exiled from Mexico for their radical ideas, returned to the country under the liberal leadership of President Alvaro Obregon. Inspired by the Mexican cultural revolution of 1910, celebrated muralists including Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera began painting a "people's art" focusing on themes of Spanish and indigenous Indian culture and the philosophy of the revolution (Mathews 1974). In the 1920s, Orozco was invited to execute several murals in the United States. In 1927, Orozco painted *Prometheus Bringing the Gift of Fire to Mankind* at Pomona College and, in 1930, he completed another mural at the New School for Social Research in New York. He then took up a position as Artist in Residence at Dartmouth College before returning to Mexico in 1934. Diego Rivera was also commissioned to paint several American murals. He painted in the San Francisco Stock Exchange in 1930 and the Detroit Institute of Art in 1933, but when his half-finished mural in Rockefeller Center was found to include an image of Vladimir Lenin, he was paid in full and dismissed. Rivera went back to Mexico, and the partial mural was removed. American artists, inspired by these Mexican exemplars of art reflecting social commentary and ideals, began to create art that expressed their own desire to revive "the American Dream" (Contreras 1983).

Federal Arts Programs of the 1930s-40s

In the early 1930s, the popularity of the Mexican muralists and the economic crisis of the Great Depression provided the impetus for relief programs for artists. George Biddle, an artist and former schoolmate of President Roosevelt at Groton School and Harvard, was intrigued by the Mexican muralists (Stevens and Fogel 2010). Inspired by their example and concerned for the dire economic circumstances faced by artists in the Great Depression, he appealed to President Roosevelt to do something to provide relief for artists (Mathews 1974). Between 1933 and 1943, four separate federal art programs operated: The Public Works of Art Project, the Section of Fine Arts, the Treasury Relief Art Project, and the Federal Art Project (O'Connor 1969). Though contemporary scholarship on New Deal-era art programs tends to lump these programs together in a jumble of acronyms, each was a distinct entity and followed its own rules, regulations, and goals (Kalfatovic 1994). On December 8, 1933, lawyer and artist Edward Bruce held a meeting in his Washington, D.C. home that launched the first federal project for artists. The Public Works of Art Project, or PWAP, was funded by the Civil Works Administration and overseen by Bruce (Greengard et al 1986). The PWAP divided the country into sixteen regions, each chaired by a Regional Committee. In addition to murals and sculptures in public buildings, a display of PWAP art at the Corcoran in Washington, D.C. in 1934 included American Indian textiles, painting and pottery. Despite this success, the PWAP stirred up some controversy over politics, modernity, and radicalism in art, and the program was concluded in June 1934 (Kalfatovic 1994). Over seven months, the PWAP employed 3,749 artists nationally and cost approximately $1,312,000 (Greengard et al 1986).

In October 1934, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. established the Section of Painting and Sculpture, known hereafter as "the Section." The Treasury oversaw the funds for building new federal architecture, and thus could allocate funding for murals and sculptures to decorate new federal buildings. As a general rule, 1% of the budget for each new federal building was designated for murals or sculptures (Kalfatovic 1994). In contrast to the PWAP, the goal of the Section was to commission public art on the basis of quality alone (Watson 1939). The Section invited anonymous submissions to national competitions for mural commissions through Bulletins, which varied in length and were irregularly distributed between 1934 and 1941. In all, 24 Bulletins were published. Those artists whose mural submissions were not chosen for the original competition but whose work displayed high quality were given commissions at smaller post offices across the country. The official name of the program became the Section of Fine Arts in 1938 and the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration of the Federal Works Agency in 1939. In the fall of 1939, the Section announced the "48 States Competition" with the goal of placing a Section mural in every state in the Union. In addition to post offices, Section projects included the murals in the Department of the Interior building and other federal buildings in Washington, D.C. The Section was overseen by Edward Bruce and operated at the ground level by the Assistant Chief of the Section, Edward Rowan. Initially considered successful, the Section lost funding and momentum throughout the years of World War II, and formally closed in July 1943, six months after the death of Edward Bruce (Kalfatovic 1994). During its nine years of operation, the Section commissioned 1,124 murals at a total cost of $1,472,199 (Greengard et al 1986).

While the Section was still in operation, the WPA funded a new relief-oriented program known as the Treasury Relief Art Project, or TRAP. Artists had to meet strict requirements for establishing need, and the program was kept small enough to also uphold high standards, mingling the priorities of the PWAP and the Section in terms of relief and the cultivation of a

strong artistic scene. TRAP was headed by Olin Dows, and concluded in June 1938 having spent $833,784 for 10,000 easel paintings, 43 sculptures, and 89 murals. Beginning in 1935, the WPA announced Federal Project Number One, or Federal One, which was divided into four branches: the Federal Art Project (FAP), Federal Theatre Project, Federal Writer's Project, and Federal Music Project. The Federal Art Project was run by Holger Cahill, and required 75% of its working artists to be eligible for relief. Federal One was the subject of much controversy, and finally closed in 1942, having cost a total of $35,000,000 (Kalfatovic 1994).

The 1930s Indian Art Scene

The early 20th century was also an exciting time in the Southwestern and American Indian art scenes. Driven by a modernist rejection of European culture and standards, American artists began to focus on the creation of a distinct national culture that was uniquely American. This fostered an increased interest in folk art of the Americas, and in the "primitive" arts in contrast to European high art. The Indian cultures of the Southwest were seen as the perfect combination of artistry and spiritual purity (Grieve 2009). In order to find this "real" America, wealthy art patron Mabel Dodge moved to Taos, New Mexico in 1917 and endeavored to create "a haven for artists, writers, [and] intellectuals" built on a "spiritual connection to life and the land". She later married Antonio Luhan, a Pueblo Indian from the Tiwa tribe. Amongst the artists who visited Taos, many developed a new appreciation for "an organic society" and romanticized the American folk and their artistic traditions (2009, 40).

One of Mabel Dodge Luhan's early visitors was John Collier, Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the eventual architect of the "Indian New Deal" in 1933. During his 1920 visit to Taos, Mabel Luhan made a deep impression on him with her insistence on Pueblo culture as a spiritual ideal. This experience informed Collier's original plans for ending Federal assimilationist policies and advocating a new framework for relations between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian peoples (Melosh 1991). Collier was opposed to government policies aimed at developing American Indian communities according to Anglo-American models, such as the division of land into allotments that were then granted to individuals. In his original proposals, he aimed to end the allotment of Indian lands and return all unallotted land to communal tribal control with titles held in common (Baird 1990). If well-intentioned, Collier's ideas were not universally popular. In particular, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole), living in Oklahoma following their removal from the southeast, reacted with such horror to initiatives they saw as turning the clock back, undermining their liberties, and preventing their advancement and success, that Collier was forced to revise his proposals completely, and the Oklahoma tribes were exempted from the provisions of his new legislation (Baird 1990). In Minnesota, artist Dewey Albinson (1965) called Collier "one of the greatest disgraces of this period" and accused the BIA of tearing down the homes of Chippewa people in Grand Portage and forcing them to live in isolated boxes in the woods. Despite these and other objections, Collier's plans for ending assimilationist policies were generally well-received, and he is credited with overseeing a sea change in education policy at Indian schools in the Southwest, encouraging the development and expression of Native artistic traditions, rather than forbidding or punishing them (Pate 1974).

Meanwhile, Indian art schools in the Southwest were gaining momentum. Driven by the renewed interest in Indian arts of the Southwest, young artists from the Santa Fe area gained support in the 1920s from the School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico, as well as museums and galleries in New York City (Crawford 1982). In 1920 Susie Peters, an

Indian Service field matron in Oklahoma, gathered and encouraged young Kiowa artists who would come to be known as the Kiowa Five: Stephen Mopope, Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Monroe Tsatoke, and Jack Hokeah (Pate 1974). These artists were all students at Saint Patrick's Mission School near Anadarko, and Peters successfully brought them to the attention of Oscar Jacobson, head of the Art Department at the University of Oklahoma (McLerran 2009). Through his advocacy and artistic direction, these young artists, working in a traditional style, gained recognition and praise across the United States and even in Europe (Jones et al 2007). In 1932, Dorothy Dunn established an experimental studio at the Santa Fe Indian School, followed by the Indian Division of the Public Works of Art Project (McLerran 2009). In Muskogee, Oklahoma, an art program was established in 1935 under the direction of founding art director Acee Blue Eagle (Creek/Pawnee). A contemporary of the original Kiowa artists and student of Oscar Jacobson, Blue Eagle was considered a "second-generation Jacobson artist" (Jones et al 2007, 4). The Santa Fe, Kiowa, and Bacone styles came to embody and represent a new wave of Southwestern Indian painting in the 1920s and thereafter.

Social Realism, Regionalism, and American Idealism

Two enduring artistic styles came to dominate the New Deal period: Social Realism and Regionalism. Social Realism was inspired by the human and tactile experiences of the Depression, including the suffering of the homeless, the breakdown of the economy, and the victims of police abuse during riots and unionization rallies. Additionally, the plight of the worker and left wing ideals were central to the Mexican muralist school that had played such a great role in inspiring the development of American mural programs. In opposition to Social Realism, Section administrators advocated for mural scenes that would appeal to local audiences through regional imagery. Regionalism celebrated a green paradise without dust, starvation or distress, and upheld all that the American dream could be (Fogel and Stevens 2001).

The Section struggled to reconcile the divide between "those who saw progress in labor unions and the triumph of the industrial worker and those devoted to family, faith and farm" (Stevens and Fogel 2010, 161). While they differed in many ways, both Social Realism and Regionalism celebrated the common man and shared a mutual aversion to fascism (Fogel and Stevens 2001). The overlap created by these shared principles gave rise to a particular style of Section art known as American Idealism, or "propaganda for the goodness of America" (2001, 18). Rosenzweig and Melosh argue that analyses of the New Deal visual arts projects are complicated by the fixation of art historians on these aesthetic considerations (1990). All three of these art styles were used to express particular understandings of American Indians through murals. Understanding these schools of artistic thought, one can begin to consider the representations of Indians in murals in terms of social change, regional identities, and an idealized past.

Social Issues in New Deal Public Art

As noted above, the art scene at the time of the New Deal programs was freshly exploring what it meant to be American, and how to move forward into a positive future without ignoring the scars of the Depression. Erika Doss has examined the theme of work in New Deal art, and contends that the body of labor was a frequent choice for mural themes because "work was celebrated as the single most important factor in reviving the American economy" (2002, 241). Andrew Hemingway argues that while the mechanisms of the Section prevented artists from

painting outside the lines of "Americanism," they found space to create "affirmative images of labour and critical representations of local history" (2007, 276).

New Deal art also acted as an agent of statement and change on the subject of race. In the Recorder of Deeds building in Washington, D.C., completed in 1940, Recorder William J. Thompkins oversaw the production of Section-sponsored murals featuring African Americans, their accomplishments, and their contributions to United States society and history. Products of Thompkins's personal conviction and racial pride, these murals honored the minority, subverted the status quo, and brought civil rights advocacy to an integrated space in the nation's capital (Butler 2011). Mitchell Jamieson's mural for the Department of the Interior building, *An Incident in Contemporary American Life*, depicted the 1939 Easter Sunday concert given by African-American contralto Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial. In the mural, Anderson is a barely visible and indistinguishable speck in the distance, viewed from the back of a large integrated crowd. By placing the focus of the mural on two side-by-side spectators of differing races, the mural became an art of protest. As Butler explains, the mural "constitutes an early chapter in the struggle to define, shape, interpret, and codify the [civil rights] movement and its legacy through visual imagery" (2005, 177). Jameison's mural was "not simply a record of change nor a call for change but…in fact, an agent of change" (178).

While the Recorder of Deeds and Marian Anderson concert murals are positive reminders of the power of public art to advocate for changes in social relations, the Section was only selectively attentive to racial considerations in mural art. When Gustaf Dalstrom created historical scenes for mural panels in Saint Joseph, Missouri, a group of African Americans organized a protest against the panel entitled *Negro River Music*. This was the only protest by African Americans to their depiction in any Section mural. Though there are numerous examples of the Section yielding to local pressure regarding mural content, they did not do so in this case, suggesting that "the Section, like the New Deal in general, yielded to the most powerful elements in a community and resisted the less powerful ones despite its broad commitment to the democratic process" (Park and Markowitz 1984, 21).

It does not appear that the Section ever thought of the depiction of Indians as a specific racial issue. While Rowan frequently expressed a general distaste for scenes of conflict, the Section took no official positions on the depiction of Indians in murals, and "Indian scenes" became highly popular subject matter. As a result, complex and varied depictions of Native peoples grace the walls of post offices across the country. Some were portrayed as part of a mythical, legendary past that separated them from factual history and glossed over the present-day realities of many Indian communities. Alternatively, they became symbolic of a past that was slowly fading out of non-Native memory and recognition. Indian figures in murals came to represent one end of the spectrum in the arc of modernity and social progress. In some instances, Indians were obstacles who had to be overcome to secure the safety and prosperity of colonists or settlers through military engagements or treaty negotiations. They were also romanticized and utilized as symbols of the Wild West, spiritual freedom, and an idealized relationship with the natural world, as exemplified by Mabel Dodge Luhan's artist community in Taos. At the same time, Indian artists from the Santa Fe, Kiowa and Bacone schools were establishing new artistic identities and sharing their skills with ever-wider audiences. As with labor and civil rights, New Deal murals became vehicles for artists to explore the role of Indians in their own conceptions of history, culture, and the American art narrative.

Indians as Myth and Legend

Around 400 of the approximately 1,600 New Deal-era murals commissioned took up American Indians as their subject matter, and the variety of approaches to their representation show the wide range occupied by Indians in the artistic and American imagination of the 1930s (Park and Markowitz 1984). Scenes of isolated Indian life were the most popular thematic choice, closely followed by peaceful contact with immigrants, then conflict and mayhem, and distantly, assimilation or European ascendancy. In Gibson City, Illinois, Chicago-based artist Frances Foy reached farther back than the historic past to the time of myth and legend in her mural *Hiawatha Returning with Minnehaha* (Fig. 1). The mural, inspired by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic 1855 poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*, depicts an idyllic forest scene in which five Indian men await Hiawatha and a sixth grips the bow of his canoe. Hiawatha stands proudly in the canoe, his right hand raised in greeting and his left clutching the hand of Minnehaha, whose eyes are downcast. In Longfellow's lengthy poem, Hiawatha wins the heart of Minnehaha, or Laughing Water, the loveliest woman from the land of the "Dacotahs" [sic], and brings her back to his home on the shores of Lake Superior (Longfellow 1898). Apparently, this trochaic epic was more positively received in 1939 than it was at its publication in 1855, when a New York Times reviewer claimed that "as a poem, it deserves no place" as there is "no romance about the Indian", an "uninteresting and… justly exterminated race" (*New York Times,* December 28, 1855). Rowan (1939a), however, described Foy's initial sketch for the mural design as "replete with a kind of lyric poetry". Despite the fact that the Indians depicted had nothing to do with the local history of the Native peoples of Illinois, or any other area for that matter, the mural design was praised for its ability to capture a poetic legend even as it simultaneously transformed Indians from living, breathing people to works of fiction.

Fig. 1: *Hiawatha Returning with Minnehaha* by Frances Foy, Gibson City, Illinois.
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<u>Indians as a Symbol of the Past</u>

Along with murals that transformed Indians into figments of fantasy, another common theme for murals featuring American Indians was the "myth of extinction," making Indian peoples and ways of life synonymous with a vanished or vanishing past. An example is Albinson's *Lake Superior Shores – Yesterday and Today* (Fig. 2), painted in 1937 for the post office in Cloquet, Minnesota. Ernest Dewey Albinson was born in Minneapolis in 1898 to Swedish immigrant parents, and grew up summering at Lake Minnetonka. He studied at the Minneapolis School of Art from 1915 through 1919, and then earned a scholarship to the Art Students League in New York City. In 1921, he returned to Minnesota and traveled through the

St. Croix Valley and the North Shore of Lake Superior, painting landscapes he found inspiring. His passion for his home state was such that one scholar likened him to the popular American regionalist writers of the 1920s "whose boosterism both satirized and eulogized rural America" (Swanson 1991, 269). During this time, Albinson took the suggestion of an engineer he knew and went to the town of Grand Portage on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Here, he met local Ojibwe Indians John Cramer and the widowed sisters Mrs. Spruce and Mrs. Tamarack, and painted their portraits. While posing, Cramer shared stories from his grandfather. During his time in Grand Portage, Albinson also learned of a particular tree on the edge of the water that had a special history.

This tree, a three hundred year old twisted cedar located on the north side of a stone outcropping known as Hat Point, is also known as Manito Geezhigaynce, or Little Spirit Cedar Tree (Gilman 1991). Some stories relate that it was once inhabited by a being that appeared to humans in the shape of a large eagle. Albinson was told that an Evil Spirit lived in the tree and the Indians of old avoided it, approaching only in large groups with singing and drumming, offering gifts of tobacco. He was captivated by this tree, and in 1922 he claimed to be the first to call it The Witch Tree, a name by which it is still commonly known (Swanson 1991). In 1990, the land on which the tree sits was put up for sale and purchased by the Grand Portage tribe. The Grand Portage Tribal Council now requires an Ojibwe guide to accompany any visitors to the tree (State of Minnesota Indian Affairs Council 2014). When Albinson was given an opportunity to submit a design for a post office mural to Mrs. Increase Robinson, the regional supervisor for Chicago under the Federal Art Project, he turned to this tree as his subject matter.

At first, his sketch for *Lake Superior Shores – Yesterday and Today* was dismissed. According to Albinson, Americana was then "the cult," and Mrs. Robinson desired an American scene that was socially conscious. Despite this original rejection, when asked to submit designs for the post office mural in Cloquet, Minnesota by the Section of Fine Arts, Albinson submitted the same design and was accepted. By his own description, the left side of the mural depicts Little Spirit Cedar Tree surrounded by a group of Indians. One makes an offering of tobacco while the others sit in a circle, singing and playing a drum. In the background, many canoes are traveling across the lake. On the right side of the mural, fishermen are shown with their boats, nets and families representing, as Albinson described it, "the modern" (1965). Little Spirit Cedar Tree became a recognizable symbol that set the mural in a particular place, and allowed it to show a progression of time rooted in shared space. As with so many murals painted at this time, the Indian was used to represent the past and offer contrast to the modern.

Fig. 2: *Lake Superior Shores – Yesterday and Today* by Dewey Albinson, Cloquet, Minnesota
Image by Meghan Navarro, courtesy of the National Archives. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Dewey Albinson was by no means alone in his use of Indian imagery to set up a dichotomous relationship between the past, as represented by Indians, and the modern present as represented by non-Natives. Marlene Park summarizes this natural progression as it is shown in a mural in the Bronx in New York City: "The Mayan civilization and life of the North American Indian is shown, the coming of Dutch and English traders, and the early settlers. Their descendants move to the west through the peril of Indian attack, the United States fights through its various wars and enters the modern period of invention and progress" (1979, 43). Ila McAfee Turner's *The Scene Changes* in Cordell, Oklahoma (Fig. 3) shows an Indian on horseback and his dog exiting to the right, set against his tipi and a herd of buffalo as a cowboy and herd of cattle enter from the left, bringing with them plowed fields, a windmill, and a farmhouse. In Casper, Wyoming, Louise Emmerson Ronnebeck's *The Fertile Land Remembers* sets a white couple and their baby in their covered wagon against a sky filled with ghosts of Indians and buffalo (Fig. 4). Ronnebeck drew on this same theme of displacement for *Harvest,* her lunette in the Grand Junction, Colorado post office (Fig. 5). In her own words appending a sketch of the mural sent to the Section, Ronnebeck described *Harvest* as "[s]howing [an] exodus of Ute Indians in 1881 – Coming of White Settler, Paddlewheel for irrigation, industrial growth and finally the rich fruit growing" (National Archives 1938). The Indians form a procession out of the scene over the left shoulders of a hale and hearty White couple, picking from a heavily laden fruit tree and carrying full baskets of the rewards of their labor (Fahlman 2002).

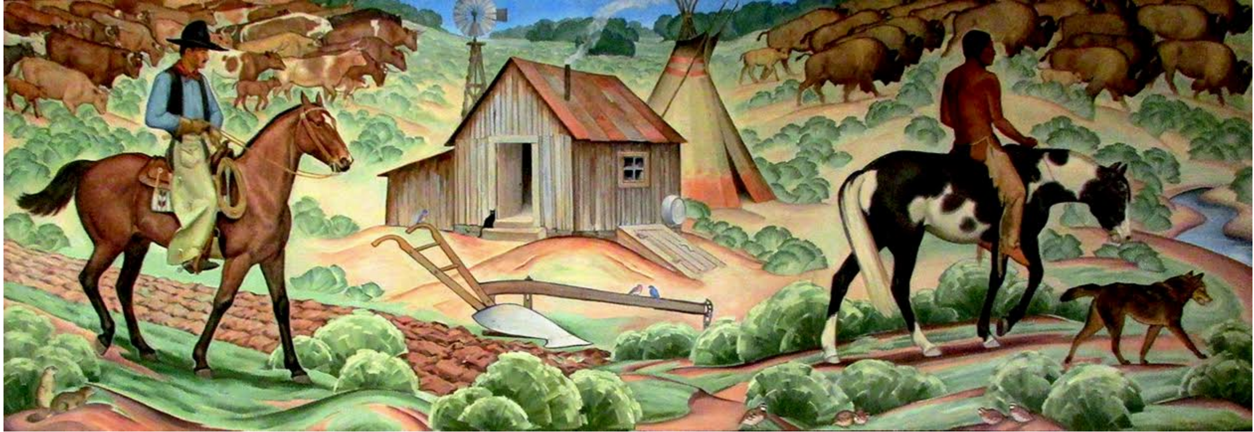

Fig. 3: *The Scene Changes* by Ila McAfee Turner, Cordell, Oklahoma.
Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

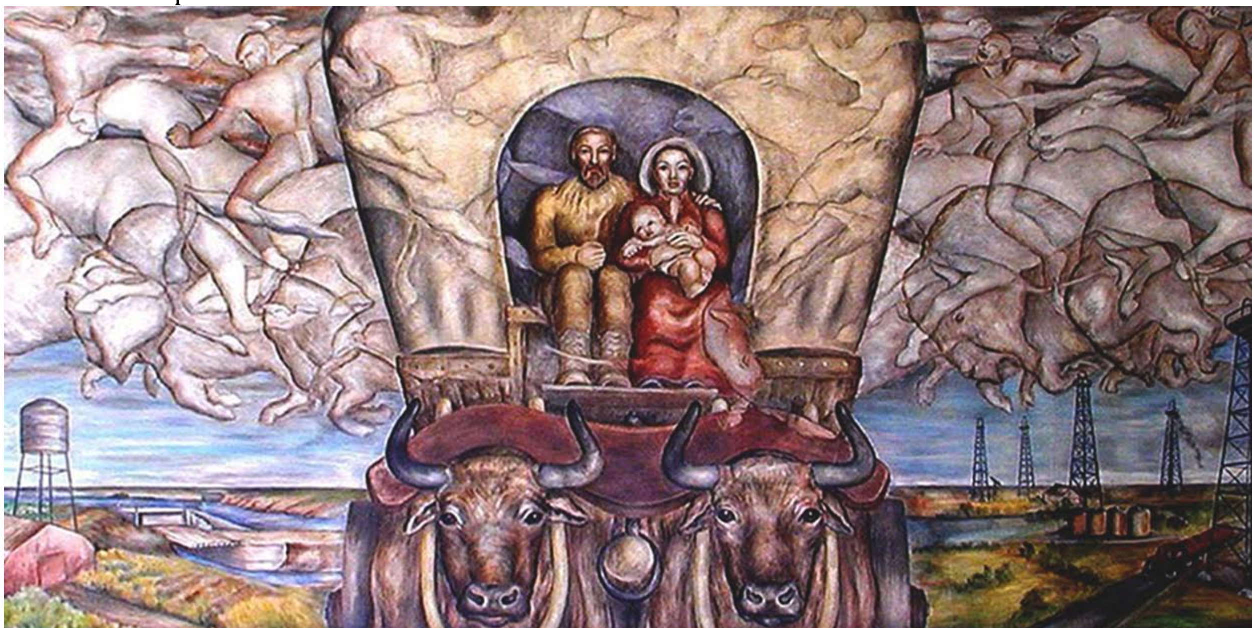

Fig. 4: *The Fertile Land Remembers* by Louise Emerson Ronnebeck, Casper, Wyoming.
Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Fig. 5: *Harvest* by Louise Emerson Ronnebeck, Grand Junction, Colorado.
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In the Los Angeles Terminal Annex post office, Boris Deutsch also employed the theme of past and present, painting a total of eleven lunettes entitled *Cultural Contributions of North, South and Central America.* In the first six, indigenous peoples of the Americas are shown weaving, dancing, wearing ceremonial regalia, making pottery, and meeting Father Junipero Serra, the Jesuit missionary who traveled throughout Baja and Alta California, setting up a network of missions (Fig. 6a). In the following five panels, white Americans illustrate the exciting modern era of discovery and the future filled with innovation through depictions of a pioneer wagon train, physics class (Fig. 6b), astronomy laboratory, telecommunications office, and the modern military (Deutsch 1964). Images of North, South and Central American Indians are rooted in the historical and traditional, and the domain of modernity and progress belongs solely to others. In the words of W.T. Brannon, "the Indian has been relegated to the reservation and the past while we get on with the civilized business of creating more devastating weapons of destruction" (1952, 4). In this context, Albinson's mural in Cloquet is clearly part of a larger narrative of the times that connected Indian people with local history but saw little role for them in the present day. Ironically, while the Little Spirit Cedar Tree still stands on land owned by the local tribe, who control access to it for protection and preservation (Bewer 2011, 165), Albinson's mural was destroyed at an undetermined point in time.

Fig. 6a: *Cultural Contributions of North, South and Central America* by Boris Deutsch, Los Angeles Terminal Annex Post Office, California.
Image by Jordan McAlister. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Fig. 6b: *Cultural Contributions of North, South and Central America* by Boris Deutsch, Los Angeles Terminal Annex Post Office, California.
Image by Jordan McAlister. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Indians as Obstacles – Conflict and Negotiation

If Indians sometimes faded into the past, at other times they were violently overcome. An Indian-related subject that proved popular with audiences and unpopular with the Section of Fine Arts was conflict. The Section repeatedly expressed reservations about depicting Indian-White conflicts and stated that the Department of the Interior objected to these and other representations of "general unfriendly relations". Edward Rowan was even more direct in a letter to artist Louis Bouche, stating categorically that "massacres are out" and claiming that the Section had no interest "in taking part in continuing or abetting any racial prejudices" (Melosh 1991, 41). Administrators objected to conflict scenes in murals as part of a broad anti-war policy, and the Section suggested that "warfare, even historical warfare between Indians and whites, was undesirable as a subject in view of the armed conflict in Europe." (Park and Markowitz 1984, 37) Despite these objections, artists and communities argued for them in several cases, feeling that the episodes were important and exciting pieces of local history. In fact, Barbara Melosh argues that the erasure of violent conflicts resulted in a revisionist history of the frontier and contributed purposefully to a government-intended image of a domesticated frontier, a common motif in Section art (1991, 42).

For his mural *An Incident in King Philip's War, 1670* in Millbury, Massachusetts (Fig. 7), artist Joe Lasker preemptively assured Rowan that he had no plans for a "bloody, unsightly picture" but that he intended to treat his chosen subject "in a decorative muralesque manner" (1940). Joe Lasker, born in Brooklyn in 1919, attended Cooper Union Art School and graduated in 1939. He was drafted into the Army in 1942 and served just over three years. After his military service he returned to painting, supported by the G.I. Bill and painting prizes such as the Edwin Austin Abbey Mural Painting Scholarship (Park and Markowitz n.d.). He first submitted mural designs for the Social Security Building and St. Louis post office mural competitions, but only received honorable mentions. On the strength of these submissions, he was offered the commission for the mural in the Millbury, Massachusetts post office for the amount of $800 (Section of Fine Arts 1942, 23). In order to come up with appropriate subject matter for the mural, Lasker conducted research in the New York Public Library and chose a scene from the 1675-6 King Philip's War in Massachusetts because it was dramatic and offered numerous pictorial possibilities. As expressed in a letter to scholars Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, he "just couldn't get excited about onion farming for Millbury" (Lasker 1979).

King Philip was the English name for Metacomet, the son of Massasoit and brother of Wamsutta, who became Grand Sachem of the Wampanoag after Wamsutta's death in 1662. Originally, the Wampanoag and the English Colonists coexisted in uneasy peace. However, increasing colonial expansion led to escalating tensions. In 1675 the situation boiled over upon the murder of the Christianized or "Praying" Indian John Sassamon, a translator and advisor to Metacomet. After he reportedly informed Plymouth Colony officials that Metacomet was arranging Indian attacks on colonial settlements, he was allegedly murdered by three Wampanoag. The three were arrested and hanged. In retaliation, a band of Pokanoket attacked several homesteads in Plymouth Colony on June 20, 1675. The war spread quickly and eventually the Nipmuc, Podunc, Narragansett and Nashaway were all involved, fighting the New England Confederation and their allies, the Mohegan and Pequot. By the Spring of 1676, after many victories on both sides, the conflict became a war of attrition. Metacomet was shot and killed in August, 1676, leading to the surrender of the Indian forces. He was beheaded, and his head was displayed on spike in Plymouth for over 20 years (Ranlet 1988).

For his mural design, Joe Lasker chose a particular incident that happened in the vicinity of Millbury:

In 1675, at the start of King Phillip's (the Indian Sachem) war against the early settlers, a band of mounted English Colonists under the command of Captains Hutchins and Wheeler, were ambushed and attacked by about two hundred Nipmuck Indians, the aboriginal inhabitants of what is now Worcester County and surrounding vicinity. As a result, eight of the white soldiers were killed. This clash took place in the neighborhood of where Millbury now stands." (Lasker 1940)

Lasker refers Rowan to the historical volumes he referenced for this material, including one containing the personal report of the Captains Hutchins and Wheeler. Rowan expressed his approval and his relief that Lasker intended to portray the scene tastefully, and urged him to consult local authorities on Indian attire (1940). In his response, Lasker notes that the Millbury Postmaster had not been able to offer any advice or refer him to anyone in town qualified to provide input on the mural and its subjects, costumes and other details. However, he assures Rowan that the mural "will be accurate in its technical aspects, more so than the color sketch" (1941).

While his commitment to textual research for historical accuracy is commendable, Joe Lasker never actually visited Millbury until he installed the mural in 1941. Instead, he painted it on canvas in his Manhattan studio, rolled it up and shipped it to Millbury. He then made his first visit to the town and installed the mural in one day with the assistance of the post office janitor. Additionally, no explanation is given for the mural's titular reference to an incident in 1670 when the war did not start until 1675, a fact clearly known by the artist and referenced in his December 1940 letter to Edward Rowan.

The resulting mural shows five Indians in battle with three colonists, and a fourth is implied by a riderless horse. Lasker used vivid colors of yellow in clothing, blue in a colonist's flowing cape, and red in saddle blankets, Indians' roach hairpieces, and what appears to be blood on the ground under a fallen Indian. The colors are striking and the energy of the mural is frenetic, with horses and people moving in all directions. In fact, Lasker consulted the New York libraries and researched as many examples as he could find of battles on horseback by artists including Leonardo, Rubens, Delacroix, and the Napoleonic painters (Park and Markowitz n.d.). He discovered that all these paintings had a "formula" to their composition, and he used that same formula to compose the Millbury mural. An added signature on the mural notes that it was restored, at least partially, in 1991.

Fig. 7: *An Incident in King Philip's War, 1670* by Joseph Lasker, Millbury, Massachusetts. Image by Evan Kalish. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Mural scenes depicting the historic struggle for land between Indians and white settlers were not always scenes of conflict. The community in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, loudly requested a mural that featured the local Osage (Rush 1937). The commission was given to Olive Rush, an artist based in Santa Fe, who was trained at the Art Students' League in New York City and the Howard Pyle School in Delaware (Daily Journal 1938). In response to public insistence on an Indian theme, and in keeping with the location of Pawhuska in the heart of Osage territory, Rush created a design featuring different phases in the relationship between white settlers and the Osage: *Osage Treaties* (Fig. 8). Underneath the original submitted sketch, she described the scene of "Osage Treaties, old and new" (National Archives 1937). To the right of the mural, a group of Osage sit in conference on the ground, deep in discussion as indicated by their lined foreheads, stern expressions, and the resting of one chin on a closed hand in a classic thinking pose. In the left of the mural, an Osage man converses and shakes hands with two white settlers, one leading a pair of grazing horses. According to a newspaper clipping published after the completion of the murals, one of the non-Native men depicted was Major L.J. Miles, a popular Indian agent who spent many years in Pawhuska, negotiating the transition to United States citizenship of the Osage (Thoburn and Wright 1929). The Osage man in this vignette is also said to resemble a well-known local figure referred to as "Baconrind" (*Daily Journal,* October 19, 1938). Finally, in the center background, an Indian mother and her baby are pictured in a tipi.

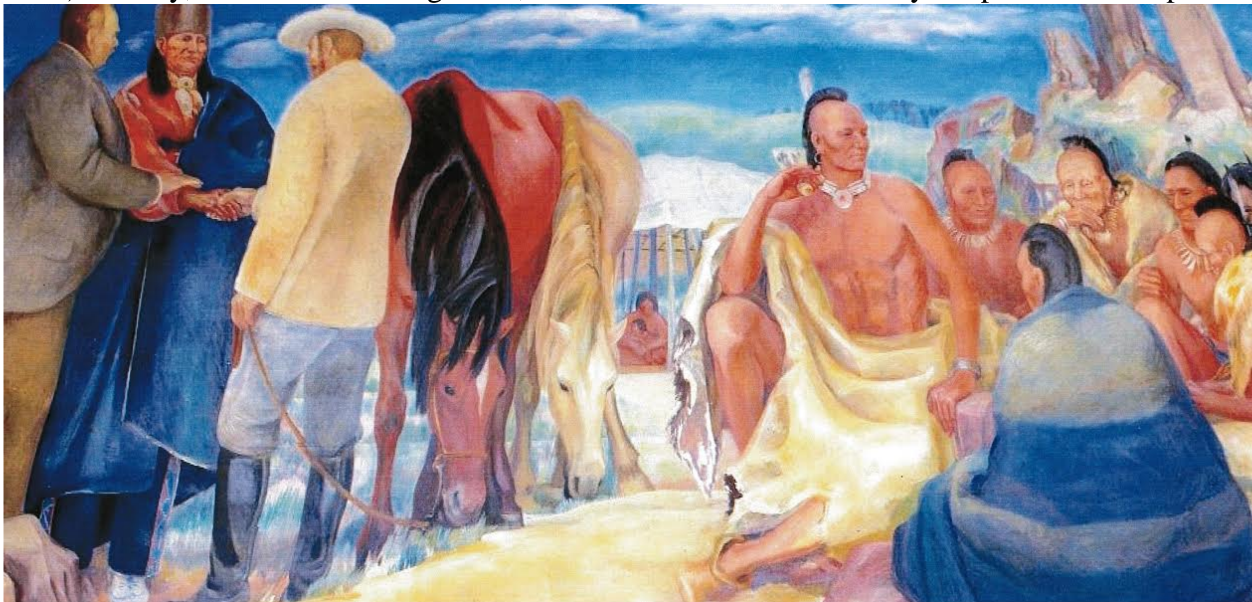

Fig. 8: *Osage Treaties* by Olive Rush, Pawhuska, Oklahoma.
Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

The mural was received with delight by the community, and the praise reported in the local papers and by the Postmaster was enthusiastic. It was applauded as "beautiful in color and design" as well as "typically Indian" and "of the time" in the Daily Journal. Nan Sheets of the Daily Oklahomian described the mural as "vibrant with life" and commended the manner in which it was painted as adding to the dignity of the room itself (*Daily Oklahomian,* March 31, 1938). In a letter to Rowan, the Pawhuska Postmaster thanked the Section for "such [a] nice picture" and remarked that "the people of the town and especially the Indians like it very much" (Morrow 1940). Instead of a battle scene, Rush chose to incorporate the local history of treaties and settlement in Osage in a peaceful mural that emphasized cooperation.

Indians as the Romantic Primitive

As an extension of this romanticized rendition of Western history, Indians were also used to represent a primitive but spiritually pure sense of the traditional, and a romanticized simplistic existence in harmony with nature. Artist Maynard Dixon idealized the American West and Indians as "spatial, symbolic, and spiritual markers of national identity" (Doss 2004, 20). Similarly, he viewed Indians as both primitive and spiritually superior, describing them as "a little remnant of the stone age still living", praising their "savage beauty" and utilizing them as a means of expressing a fantasy "of freedom and space and thought" (22). In a way, Dixon's art was a reaction to his despair at modernization and the erosion of a freedom and beauty embodied in the Western landscape and Indian cultures.

In 1939, California artist Suzanne Scheuer was awarded two mural commissions in small Texas towns. In an interview in 1964, she admitted that when she received the commissions, she knew nothing about the towns themselves and so chose an Indian theme for the murals. Though visually dissimilar, her murals do bear a resemblance in subject matter to others completed by Native artists. *Indian Buffalo Hunt* in Eastland (Fig. 9) addresses the same topic as Potawatomi artist Woody Crumbo's *Buffalo Hunt* in the Department of the Interior building in Washington, D.C. The mural in Caldwell, *Indians Moving* (Fig. 10), bears many similarities to one of Kiowa artist Stephen Mopope's panels in the Anadarko, Oklahoma post office. Lacking a local frame of reference for her murals, Scheuer was drawn to this theme through her belief that Indian life "in its simplicity and harmony with nature, can be a lesson to us in many ways" (Melosh 1991, 39). In this way, Indian cultures were romanticized and held up as cultural examples, a simplification as inaccurate as the mythology of Foy's mural in Gibson City. The danger of this logic is twofold: first, it prevents an acceptance of an authentic Indian experience that embraces technology, education, or any aspect of the modern; second, it establishes the necessity of respect for Native peoples in their "goodness" and "simplicity" and not in their basic humanity. By advocating for Indian peoples based on subjective descriptors, the argument for Native rights and recognition becomes much shakier than if it were based on inalienable and fundamental human rights.

Fig. 9: *Buffalo Hunt* by Suzanne Scheuer, Eastland, Texas.
Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Fig. 10: *Indians Moving* by Suzanne Scheuer, Caldwell, Texas.
Image courtesy of Terry Jeanson. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Indian Artists

Romantic or not, the newfound interest in Native artistic traditions did lead to opportunities for Indian artists under the New Deal programs. Acknowledging the flourishing schools of Indian painting and mural design in New Mexico and Oklahoma, the Section commissioned murals from a number of Indian artists for post offices in Oklahoma. One visually striking example of a mural by an Indian artist is *The Rainbow Trail*, by Woodrow Wilson "Woody" Crumbo (Potawatomi), in Nowata (Fig. 11). Born in 1912 near Lexington, Oklahoma, Crumbo was orphaned at the age of seven and subsequently raised by Muscogee Creek families (Damron 2012). At age 17, he enrolled at the Chilocco Indian School, where he studied under Susie Peters, before attending the American Indian Institute in Wichita, Kansas, on scholarship. Crumbo then attended the University of Wichita from 1933-36, where he studied mural technique with Olaf Nordmark, followed by studies at the University of Oklahoma under Oscar Jacobson from1936-38. In 1938, Crumbo was offered the position of Director of Art at Bacone College (Koshare Indian Museum, 2014). When the Section of Fine Arts was looking for Indian artists to execute murals in the new Department of the Interior building in Washington, D.C., Crumbo was recommended for the project by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. In 1939, he was chosen as one of six Indian artists and asked to submit mural designs to the Section. He created six murals in the DOI building: *Buffalo Hunt, Deer, Courting, Flute Player, Wild Horses,* and *Peyote Bird* (McLerran 2009). In 1941, Crumbo was offered the commission for the Nowata post office by the Section of Fine Arts on the strength of his submissions to the competition for the mural in Okemah, which eventually went to Walter "Dick" West (Cheyenne). He gladly accepted.

Woody Crumbo submitted two designs for Nowata, but the overwhelming favorite was his design of three men on horseback, seeing a rainbow in the sky. In a letter to Edward Rowan in October 1941, Crumbo noted that he had met with J.T. Norton, the Nowata Postmaster, who preferred this design to the other, and felt the residents of Nowata would prefer it as well. Rowan agreed, and described the design in his letter of approval as "quite thrilling in its dramatic composition" (1941a). In the design, three Indian men are depicted on horseback in a setting of low shrubs and cacti. The rider at the front of the group points to the left-hand side of the mural, where a rainbow arcs through the sky. The mural is a beautiful example of the Bacone style, which focused on "detailed rendering of garments, feathers, hair, and facial features, as well as

anatomy in both animals and humans" (Jones et al 2007, 4). Unlike several other mural designs, including Anadarko's *Scenes of Kiowa Life* by Stephen Mopope (Kiowa) and *Chickasaw Family Making Pah Sho Fah* by Solomon McCombs (Creek), *Rainbow Trail* did not depict specific ceremonial dances or cultural practices of a particular group, nor does it tell a story or legend, or specify a particular event in history. In his letter to Rowan, Crumbo simply refers to it as a design of three men on horses with one pointing to a rainbow.

Fig. 11: *The Rainbow Trail* by Woodrow Wilson "Woody" Crumbo, Nowata, Oklahoma. Image by Frank Wallace. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Even when the Section made explicit efforts to commission Indian artists, reactions were not universally positive. Inspired by the success of the mural competition for Anadarko, Oklahoma, which was open only to Indian artists and won by Stephen Mopope, the Section resolved to hire an Indian artist to paint murals in the new Blackfoot, Idaho post office in September 1936. Inslee Hopper, Edward Rowan's assistant, contacted Superintendent Frank Gross of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation in Blackfoot to ask if he could recommend local artists or knowledgeable persons. Though Superintendent Gross referred the Section to two local Indian artists and a professor at the University of Idaho, no artists from the Blackfoot area were deemed suitable. Rather than invite submissions for a competition open only to Indian artists, which was considered infeasible due to "tribal prejudices," the Section took the recommendation of the Department of the Interior and offered the commission to Oglala-Lakota artist Andrew Standing Soldier from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Standing Soldier, while not a member of the tribes in the immediate vicinity of Blackfoot, was described as a "Plains Indian…who would be acceptable to the Blackfoot residents" (Rowan 1937a). In December 1937, Standing Soldier was invited to submit drawings for mural designs for the post office and advised to visit Blackfoot to confer with the Postmaster as well as the chiefs of the local Shoshone, Bannock, Lemhi and Nez Perce (Rowan 1937b).

Standing Soldier created two mural designs for walls in the public lobby and lock box lobby of the post office. In the public lobby, his mural depicting Shoshone-Bannock camp life was titled The Arrival Celebration (Fig. 12). In the lock box lobby, his design showed Indians roping and branding cattle and was titled The Round Up (Section of Fine Arts 1938). After a series of sketches were submitted to the Section and approved, work on the murals began on August 1, 1939 (Daily Bulletin, August 30, 1939). On a visit to the Blackfoot post office while the murals were being completed, Standing Soldier's teacher Olaf Nordmark noted local

opinions on the work in progress and shared his findings with the Section and Edward Rowan. Rowan wrote to Standing Soldier on August 14, relaying Nordmark's assurance that "the work is very well liked by Indians, cowboys and other citizens." However, the letter noted that one individual had "undertaken a criticism of the achievement." Rowan indicated the Section's satisfaction with the progress of the murals and implored Standing Soldier not to be "perturbed by the fact that one individual has set out to take exception to your murals." He then reemphasized the feeling of the Section that "an Indian artist should know more about the customs and habits of the Indians he is including in his mural than anyone else" (1939b).

Fig. 12: *The Arrival Celebration* by Andrew Standing Soldier, Blackfoot, Idaho.
Image by Jimmy Emerson. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

Later that autumn, that individual sent a 3-page letter to Superintendent Gross at Fort Hall, outlining many of his objections to the murals in the post office. Mr. Byrd Trego, a member of the Board of Directors of the Idaho Historical Society who had lived on the edge of Fort Hall Reservation for fifty four years, claimed that the murals did not represent the Shoshone-Bannock Indians "as they are now or as they have been in any period of their history." Of the sixty or so local people he had interviewed, "including some Indians," many "expressed regret that such fine work should be so misapplied as to misrepresent the Indian people." Mr. Trego went on to make lengthy and detailed recommendations for more historically accurate murals, and for needed local public buildings in which these murals could be completed. He then listed some of his objections to the Blackfoot murals, including the depicted breed of cows, the type of horses, and the lightness of the complexions of the Indians themselves. The riding bits and bridles are noted as incorrect, modeled after those used in prairie states rather than the Spanish style tack in use in the Blackfoot area. Trego also objected to the use of coffee cups and saucers rather than

tin cans, the placement of kettles on fires, and the depiction of "braves" doing certain camp chores such as pouring coffee and mixing bread: "That is not the Indian way. Squas [sic] do all the camp service". He accused the artist of "misrepresent[ing] a historical every-day practice" and charged that "The whole camp is an historical falsehood." He concluded the letter by stating that making changes to the mural provided an opportunity to demonstrate "progress" by Indians when "[m]ost white people think the Indian is unprogressive" (Trego 1939).

Superintendent Gross passed Mr. Trego's protest on to Willard W. Beatty, Director of Education at the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Mr. Beatty replied to Mr. Trego, thanking him for his input, offering to forward his letter as he had "no authority over the mural work done in government buildings," and noting that Andrew Standing Soldier had conferred with elders from the Shoshone-Bannock tribes while working on his mural designs (1939a). Beatty then forwarded Trego's letter to Edward Rowan with a note of his own, stating that he had met Mr. Trego during a visit to Blackfoot and that he was "a bitter critic of everything about Andrew's work and was expressing himself violently and publicly." He explained that he had asked Superintendent Gross and two other local citizens to "work on Mr. Trego", after which had he calmed down considerably but had reserved "his inalienable right to kick" (1939b). In his response, Rowan thanked Beatty and congratulated him on his response to Mr. Trego. He reiterated yet again the Section's belief in an Indian artist knowing his material best and added that the office was "particularly anxious not to influence the attitude of Indian artists in relation to their work." Finally, he stated his continued opinion that Standing Soldier "reflected in his work Indians as he knew them" (Rowan 1939c).

Despite these dismissals of Byrd Trego's objections and efforts to quell his dissent, the Section later received a petition signed by members of the Blackfoot Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Fort Hall Indian Council. Dated January 14, 1941, this petition called for the murals to be replaced, claiming "The existing murals, designed to portray the Shoshone and Bannock Indians do not show them as they have ever been…They are based largely on imagination, rather than on facts, and will be misleading and detrimental to the reputation of both tribes." The petition then recommends new murals depicting different phases in tribal history, and asks that Shoshone and Bannock artists be commissioned to paint them (Blackfoot Rotary Club et al 1941).

Edward Rowan's response to the petition was in a stiffly formal style unlike Mr. Beatty's soothing letter to Mr. Trego. In a letter addressed to the complainants, he stated that Mr. Standing Soldier was selected on the recommendation of the Department of the Interior for the mural commission and that no funds were available to repaint the murals. While acknowledging the merit of their arguments for historical accuracy, he did no more than suggest that they attempt to raise their own funds to have the murals painted by artists of their choosing in local buildings, such as the public library or high school (1941b). Though not explicitly stated, the tone implies that Rowan had had enough of complaints on the historical accuracy and detail of the murals in Blackfoot. He maintained their overall popularity and the firm determination by the Section to allow Indian artists to paint Indians as they saw fit. The murals still grace the walls of the Blackfoot post office in the present day.

In a letter to Rowan after the completion of the murals, Andrew Standing Soldier made it clear that he was aware of some of the criticisms of the murals and stated, sagely and with perhaps a touch of exasperation, that he "never could please everybody." He was pleased that Rowan himself was satisfied with the murals and noted that if he was concerned with the opinions of all, he would be forever starting his work over and over again (1939). While

Rowan's support for Standing Soldier appears admirable, as are his sentiments regarding the freedom of Indian artists from the Section's interference, these sentiments were not always borne out in the experience of Section muralists.

Government and Other Influences in Mural Art

During the Department of the Interior project, Jennifer McLerran observes that the Section "carefully controlled the artists' production, offering advice and instructions throughout the entire production process" (2009, 176). Indeed, one of the most respected muralists of the period, Thomas Hart Benton, turned down several invitations to paint murals for the Section because of a perceived lack of individual and artistic freedom. He told Rowan he would not take a commission until he could be given a contract "in which all responsibility is mine, in which I am completely trusted to do a good job and over which no one but myself has effective rights of approval or disapproval" (O'Connor 1969, 62). The New Deal art programs have even been accused of outright censorship of production and imagery, expecting artists to "support regimes in exchange for their salaries" (Dubin 1986, 680). However, Laurel Bliss and Melissa Lamont argue that instances of direct censorship were rare, despite natural tensions between the artists and sponsors, and that most artists saw their art as "a service to society" (2010, 5). George Biddle himself stated that "for the first time in history many thousands of artists are working for the government almost without censorship" (1940, 335).

It was not only the Section who exerted influence over muralists during this time. While the criticisms of the Blackfoot murals came after the work had begun, and were rejected by the Section, in some communities local voices changed the picture before it had even made it onto the walls. In Greensboro, Georgia, Rowan rejected an Indian massacre scene in favor of Carson Davenport's *Cotton Picking*, but was forced to designate more funds for a second mural after pressure from a local historian who had the support of a member of Congress (Melosh 1991). As Marling notes, "[t]his battle…was a spiritual reservoir for the proud descendants of the courageous settlers who won. Like drought or a plague of seven-year locusts, the Indian was a natural obstacle overcome by the pioneer builders of America" (1982, 231).

Postmasters also had a high degree of influence over murals, and Section officials frequently advised artists to consult with Postmasters before submitting designs so they could determine what subject matter would be most positively received in the community (Mentzer 2003). The subject of government influence in art is one of the chief points of contention in analyses of the New Deal arts programs and their legacies. To those involved at the federal level, such as Edward Bruce, Edward Rowan, and Forbes Watson, the projects provided a unique opportunity to create what was termed a "cultural democracy" (Grieve 2009). According to Jane De Hart Mathews, this term best encompasses "the ideas and aspirations of a New Deal élite who sought to integrate the artist into the mainstream of American life and make the arts both expressive of the spirit of a nation and accessible to its people" (1975, 316). The federal art programs are generally considered to have succeeded in government engagement of artistic communities across the whole of the country and in greater widespread public interest in the arts than at any other time in history (Beckh 1960). Writing at the time of the demise of the last federal art programs, H.M. Kallen goes one step further in his impassioned argument for government support for the arts in a democracy, stating that "art safeguards the spirit and body of democracy" by creating "symbols by which to affirm an idea" and "contributing to cultural abundance without material return, and thereby to the freedom of the spirit in which democracy inheres" (1944, 141).

Going Forward

While the influence and intentions of the Section and artists is a critical consideration, it is also important to recognize the agency of public art and its ability to manifest historical narratives, enforce stereotypes, and tacitly permit the propagation of misinformation. As an example, the analysis of the Marion Anderson mural demonstrates the power of public art to do something, to create a particular vision of the future and visualize racial points of conflict and the civil rights movement (Butler 2005). If federal art in public spaces is considered an agent of change and narrative construction, attention must be given to the implications of the representations of American Indians on the present-day discourse on appropriation of Native imagery. This is a heated contemporary debate that spans the arenas of sports, fashion, and entertainment. In February 2013, The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian presented *Racist Stereotypes and Cultural Appropriation in American Sports*, a symposium and community conversation. According to the panelists, images of American Indians have the power to continue misunderstandings and obscure the lived reality of Native peoples in North America (Smithsonian Newsdesk 2012). As Adrienne Keene, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and a postdoctoral fellow at Brown in Native American Studies, states on her *Native Appropriations* blog, "identities are erased and replaced with the stereotypes you see every weekend on [sports] uniforms" (2014).

Most of the murals in post offices across the country do not create the same degree of offense as sporting mascots, music video costumes, and fashion choices. However, they do perform a similar function of creating and perpetuating specific ideas regarding the role of Indians in our national history, their relationship to white settlers, and their present-day experiences. Even murals produced by Indian artists were subject to a degree of governmental control and influence that dictated the narrative and set the parameters on the relationships that could be explored (McLerran 2009). The purpose of this interference was not to enforce a negative, cartoonish stereotype onto Native artists, but to neutralize the conversation about the relationships between Native peoples and others. By focusing on a positive and passive celebration of the artistic traditions of Indian cultures, the Section was able to avoid more uncomfortable conversations about twentieth century Indians. Edward Bruce stated that he preferred murals that made him "feel comfortable about America," an attitude designed to prevent social criticism (Dennis 1974).

Conclusion

In the end, these Section murals in post offices show us less of what overt prejudice can do, and more of what ignorance, indifference, or both can do. Some also show what respect and encouragement can do. The 400 murals featuring American Indians provide important subjects for study as examples of government-sponsored art, historical narratives, and the intersection of circumstances of the Great Depression, the Roosevelt administration, the Mexican muralists, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Santa Fe and Oklahoma schools of art. In this unique setting, we can view period pieces on American understandings of Indians through the lenses of myth and legend, conflict, nation-building, the pioneer spirit, and the romance of the West. In 1952, Woody Crumbo observed that it was largely as a result of "widespread ignorance" among Americans that "the Indian exists in poverty and oblivion, hardly more than a statistic on government records" (Brannon 1952, 5). The New Deal era post office murals, in providing tangible examples of historical representation, misrepresentation, and Native agency, connect the

past in a visible way with the present and offer a unique opportunity to explore the roles of Indians in American history, artistic traditions, and the public imagination.

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