Marc Chagall and Edward Millman

At first look, the similarities between Edward Millman’s *The Blessings of Water* and Marc Chagall’s *The Four Seasons* seem to end in their obvious categorization as examples of Chicago public art -- between the works and between the artists themselves one is hard-pressed to find a parallel. However, it is within a larger political framework that these works find company with one another as each challenges the notion of public with regard to public works of art.

In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) commissioned a mural for the Water Bureau office wall in City Hall. Mrs. Increase Robinson, regional director for the WPA suggested that the artists working on the mural consider this, “What would the city of Chicago be without socialized water?” She encouraged the artist to think about the politics of water in Chicago -- where the water was coming from and how it would be put to use. The artist was then asked to convey these ideas through the commissioned mural. At this time murals were considered artwork for the public. They were also used to convey political sentiment to a wide public audience. “The mural, by virtue of its physical characteristics (being of large scale on a wall where it is on permanent public display), belongs to a people’s audience.”

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1 *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 8, 1935, pg.3
In 1934, Edward Millman, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, went to Mexico to study with Diego Rivera. He returned to Chicago in 1935 and was appointed as the Illinois State Supervisor of Mural Projects for the WPA. In that same year, Millman received the commission for the Water Bureau mural. This was his first project for the WPA.

Instead of a typical painted wall mural, Millman created a fresco -- a permanent medium to reflect a timeless message. Fresco is a process that dates back thousands of years in which the artist applies color to wet plaster and as it dries, the pigment becomes permanently ingrained into the structure of the wall. This makes the work very difficult to move without great cost and time.

Millman uses bold colors in *The Blessings of Water* and his heavy figures are reminiscent of the style of his mentor, Diego Rivera. Each figure is thick and robust while heavy lines distinguish the forms. Dramatic gestures emphasize the monumentality of the rendered moment. The background although comprehensible, is not realistic, but rather works as a frame for the figures. Combined, each of these stylistic choices highlight the severity of Millman’s theme – the devastation of The Dust Bowl during the 1930’s.

The Dust Bowl was a geographical phenomenon that brought desolation to the plains of the Midwestern United States. Drought was the root cause of this disaster that was then propounded by poor agricultural practices. Area residents relied heavily on farming to sustain their livelihood and many were left destitute. The Dust Bowl led many in the region to abandon their farms, and, on a macro scale, prolonged the economic results of the Great Depression.
On the left side of the fresco we see Millman’s epic rendering of the people discovering water. Crowds gather as water pours from a rock – a clear biblical reference to Moses’ miraculous discovery of water in the desert. The religious symbolism seems an unusual iconographic choice considering that this is a civic space. Perhaps the images in this mural result both from symbolism learned at the feet of Rivera and Millman’s youth spent in the wide horizons of the Midwest. In *Symbolism in Wall Painting*,

Millman wrote:

An example is the concern felt by the Midwestern mural painter to express the “squint” in the eye of the prairie farmer, for generations accustomed to gazing beyond the prairies. These squinting eyes, a weather-beaten face resigned to the constant struggle with the soil, gnarled, knotty hands ready to seize the plough for an assault on the earth—these are the elements which truly symbolize agriculture, and not…the prop symbol of the Greek goddess with cornucopia…

Clearly Millman was working to elevate the status of the Midwestern Farmer through his heroic imagery and iconography.

*The Blessings of Water’s* design suggests both the goals and the importance of the Water Bureau. These goals (described in a 1936 Water Bureau circular) asserted that: “Water is nature’s gift to man, beast and vegetation. It heals the sick and refreshes the thirsty. It cools in summer and warms in winter. Without it, life cannot exist.”

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3 Ibid, pg. 67 Written in 1936, this essay was solicited to all artists in defense of the WPA programs.
4 Ibid.
This was a time when politics and art converged to speak to the citizens of America. Public art funded by the WPA had a social conscience, appealing and resonant with the everyday viewer. Created in a public, civic building, the mural was likely to be viewed by a wide audience. Though *The Blessings of Water* is considered to be a piece of public art, opportunities to view this work were limited. Only when City Hall is open is this work accessible.

In 1970, the City of Chicago decided to cover *The Blessings of Water* due to a City Hall renovation. Unsure of the value of this artwork, the city looked to the Art Institute of Chicago for advice. The museum concluded that conservation and removal was too costly for an artwork by an artist as “obscure” as Millman, but the city didn’t want to destroy it completely and so, the path of least resistance was chosen. “We’re going to preserve the fresco for posterity,” said Jerome Butler, city architect, “by covering it up.” The mural remained hidden behind a false wall until 1995 when the wall was removed.

The mural was saved only because of this value as public art (bestowed during a time of public awareness) not because of the subject matter or the recognition of the artist. Thus, the value of *The Blessings of Water* is symbolic—a work of public art that represented a particular time for a particular public.

Marc Chagall was born in 1887 in the Russian city of Vitebsk to a Jewish laborer. Following orthodox teachings, Chagall’s family denounced the young artist’s practice as

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“the production of graven images” and so, lacking family support, Chagall left Russia to study in St. Petersburg and Paris. In 1914, he returned to his native city and established himself as the Commissar for fine art where he found his subject matter at odds with that of traditional realism, the style favored by the Communist Party. Hoping to find a more sympathetic audience elsewhere, the young artist left for France in 1923 where he would reside throughout his lifetime.⁸

Chagall’s *The Four Seasons* spans a rectangular block (10x14x70) to create nearly 2500 square feet of mosaic. Like fresco, the mosaic is another ancient artistic practice common among modern public works of art. Small pieces of colored glass or ceramic, called *tesserae* are arranged and cemented into tile or wall to create textured compositions.

Through his choice of subject matter, Chagall wished to create a “quiet and restful” work within the hustle and bustle of the urban landscape. Chagall’s mosaic depicts the four seasons through four expansive renderings. A sun form delineates the seasons, each of which possess indicative elements to assist the viewer in the reading of the narrative. Boats float about in Spring and a colored tree is present in Fall. Oranges are present in summer while conifers indicate winter.

While his symbols are readily understood, Chagall’s *The Four Seasons* conveys a much less explicit rendering of narrative when compared to Millman’s *The Blessings of*

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⁹ Gray, op. cit., pg. 60
*Water.* The only contextual clue offered to the viewer in Chagall’s composition is the small-scale skyline of Chicago. Rather than presenting an identifiable urban setting, Chagall offers Chicago a universal cityscape. The seasons, transient and momentary, change as we move through them, or in this case around them. Pastel colors prevail. Figures float around the surface of the composition. The technique of mosaic, with its non-standardized components, contributes to the “painterly” effect creating a dreamlike composition. The background is unstable and fluctuates along the course of the work. Chagall’s choice to set the four seasons in stone may be his commentary on the perplexing dichotomy between the ephemeral ways of Nature and the consistent patterns by which she abides.

*The Four Seasons* is located in the plaza adjacent to the Bank One (formerly First National Bank) building. The plaza was part of the overall plan for constructing the new First National Bank building. The entire block was razed, and the bank building was completed in 1969. The adjacent plaza was completed in 1974 with the dedication of the Chagall mosaic.

The politics that led to the inclusion of the Chagall mosaic began with the hiring of the architecture firms for the entire project. Originally, the board of the bank considered firms located outside of Chicago. Looking out for his own interests, Chicago-based Charles F. Murphy of C.F. Murphy and Associates personally asked Mayor Daley Sr. to request that the bank board to consider local firms only.  

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designed the O’Hare Airport expansion and the Daley Center. With Daley’s influence, the bank eventually settled on two local firms to collaborate on the project, with C.F. Murphy receiving 55 percent of design control, and Perkins and Will receiving 45 percent.\textsuperscript{11}

Carter Manny, one of the major contributors to the project, was instrumental in the design of the building, the adjacent plaza, and the development and coordination of the Chagall piece. The plaza was designed with the hope of creating an active and lively community space with music and cafes. Carter Manny describes this vision:

“We wanted them to have these community activities out there with entertainment…. Originally we had two sidewalk cafes…. It was a lively, community-oriented place.”\textsuperscript{12}

The original design for the plaza did not include any public art. A series of events connected Chagall to Chicago, which led to the commission of a mosaic for the plaza. Marc Chagall’s affinity for Chicago began in 1944; 3 years after his first visit to the United States when the New York Museum of Modern Art arranged his rescue from Nazi occupied France in 1941.\textsuperscript{13} The reason behind the artist’s visit to Chicago was to attend a retrospective exhibition of his work at the Art Institute of Chicago.\textsuperscript{14} While at a dinner party hosted by University of Chicago professor John Nef, Chagall saw two of his paintings hanging in the professor’s home – an event which facilitated a quick friendship


\textsuperscript{12}Manny, op. cit., pg. 293


\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.
between the two. Nef invited Chagall back to Chicago in the mid-50’s to lecture for the University’s Committee on Social Thought.

The chair of this committee was William Wood-Prince, a very wealthy Chicago industrialist and philanthropist, who was also on the board of directors of the First National Bank. The late Mr. Wood-Prince and his wife Eleanor (still living) were regarded as major supporters of cultural institutions including the Art Institute of Chicago (Prince Charitable Trusts). In 1971, the Wood-Prince’s traveled to the Nef’s Georgetown home. Chagall was also there to present the Nefs with a mosaic for their garden.

At this time, Mrs. Wood-Prince suggested that Chagall create a mosaic for Chicago. The dialogue lasted for over three months and culminated when Mr. Wood-Prince offered the site of the bank’s plaza. Chagall “donated his design as a gift to the people of Chicago” and the Wood-Princes agreed to fund the “materials, transportation and installation”. The mosaic’s design was donated to the public, but the actual work was paid for privately and was to be housed on private land owned by the bank. In order to receive a tax-deduction for this gift it was essential that the Wood-Princes donate the work to a non-profit organization. For this reason, the family devised the foundation “Art in the Center”.

Formed in 1972, Art in the Center states its main purpose is to:

15 Ibid.
17 Black, Edwin, op. cit.
“acquire and display preeminent works of art and display them in facilities continuously open to the general public”¹⁸

Art in the Center seemed like a good way to accommodate the rising interest in public sculpture as part of the revitalization of private land in the loop. Whereas the public holds title to the Picasso and Calder pieces because they are located on public land, the Chagall (besides the donated design) is on private land, but owned by Art in the Center.

Media coverage surrounding the mosaic’s dedication and the founding of Art in the Center garnered excitement for a “new way of paying for publicly displayed art”¹⁹ due to the heavy involvement of local architects and art patrons. However, there seems to be little if no evidence of any activity of Art in the Center after the Chagall donation.

Bart Ryckboschan, archivist for the Art Institute of Chicago says of Art in the Center:

“The involvement of the Art Institute was very minimal. I believe that one curator or possibly the director was part of that committee in an advisory capacity, but without explicitly representing the museum”. ²⁰

Mr. Ryckbosch also claims that past inquiries into Art in the Center have yielded little results as to the status of the foundation since the museum had no records pertaining to this organization. Jason Molchanow, curator for the Chicago branch of the JP Morgan/Chase Collection also claims the bank has no official records of the foundation.

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¹⁸ Willis, Thomas. “Loop Becomes Art Center; More Work is in Prospect”, Chicago Tribune, April 22, 1973, pg. 5
¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Personal communication, October 19, 2005
but does confirm the Art Institute was involved in the formation.\textsuperscript{21} George Kelm, a lawyer who was quoted in a Tribune article as corporate officer of Art in the Center is no longer alive and attempts to contact the firms he worked with were unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{22} Attempts to contact the Prince Trusts and Woods Charitable Fund were also unsuccessful.

There is no clear understanding as to what happened to Art in the Center after the Chagall acquisition. One can only draw conclusions about the fate of this foundation based on the lack of further activity. The Chagall project differed from other public art works in the loop in a few ways. First, the work sits on private property and is maintained by a private company. Typically, public art is located on public property (such as parks or civic building plazas) and is maintained using tax dollars. The banks (First National, Bank One and now JP Morgan/Chase/Bank One) that have occupied the building have always initiated and paid for major restoration projects of the mosaic in the past\textsuperscript{23} and currently maintain the mosaic with a yearly cleaning schedule.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, it seems fair to deduce with the lack of a presence by Art in the Center, and the financial support for the maintenance being assumed by the bank, the work is now privately owned by JP Morgan/Chase.

Second, it is rare to have a donation as large as this given with no reference to the donors by name (e.g. the Lurie Garen in Millennium Park). Especially considering the Woods-Prince donation was made in memory of family member Frederick Henry

\textsuperscript{21} Personal communication, October 24, 2005
\textsuperscript{22} Willis, op. cit., pg. 5
\textsuperscript{24} Jason M. Molcanow, personal communication, October 24, 2005.
There is no plaque or commemoration sign for the artwork, although there are plaques to commemorate past bank presidents and corporate name changes -- perhaps another indication of private influences on a seemingly public art piece.

One might conclude that the Wood-Prince’s formed Art in the Center for the specific purpose of acquiring a work for the First National Bank and the city of Chicago. Perhaps it was the fault of an overzealous media that gave the impression that Art in the Center was a revolutionary approach for tax-deductible gifts being made to private entities for public use. Or it could be that the structure of the foundation was attempting to reinterpret tax laws, which made it an unfeasible long-term solution. Ultimately, Art in the Center did serve the purpose of its original intent for this unique set of circumstances.

*The Blessings of Water* and *The Four Seasons* capture two distinct moments in the city’s mediation of art policy and each raises the question of what constitutes public art -- whether through public accessibility or through the politics inherent in ownership. As time passes, tastes change and works fall in and out of favor. The preservation of these two public compositions, although sometimes threatened, points to their importance to the city of Chicago.

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Bibliography:


Willis, Thomas. Loop Becomes Art Center; More Work is in Prospect. Chicago Tribune. April 22, 1973, Chicago, pg. 5