Chicago’s Lakeview and Uptown Post Office Murals

Introduction

The following paper contains six interlinked essays dealing with two Chicago post office murals, *Chicago Epic (Epoch) of a Great City*, 1937, by Harry Sternberg and *Portrait of Carl Sandburg* and *Portrait of Louis Sullivan*, 1943, by Henry Varnum Poor. These murals were created through Roosevelt’s New Deal work programs in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. The discussions of the murals that follow attempt to place them in historic, political, and social contexts by examining six facets of the works: the politics of New Deal Art, the role of the post office, the representation of Chicago and its place in the world, the two murals’ artists and the artist selection process, connections between the murals’ imagery and a Socialist Realist artistic tradition, and finally, the public perception of the post office murals today.

Politics of New Deal Art

Hillary Cook

The decade of the 1920’s was accompanied by a burgeoning museum culture, as well as the continued development of a thriving art market. In 1929, the crash of the stock market brought the growth of the art scene in America to a halt. By 1933, 14
million Americans, more than one fourth of the workforce, were unemployed.\textsuperscript{1} This number included approximately 10,000 American artists.\textsuperscript{2} David Shannon states “of the nation’s major cities, Chicago was one of the hardest hit, and had one of the worst records for relief.”\textsuperscript{3}

After President Franklin Roosevelt’s inauguration in 1933, his friend and former classmate, George Biddle, wrote the President a letter urging him to start a program sponsoring artists to create public artworks, similar to the Mexican government’s mural program, saying:

The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through; and they would be very eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government’s cooperation. They would be contributing to and expressing in living monuments the social ideals that you are struggling to achieve. And I am convinced that our mural art with a little impetus can soon result, for the first time in our history, in a vital national expression.\textsuperscript{4}

Partly in response to this appeal, and working under the guidance of Treasury Department official (and painter) Edward Bruce, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) was formed in December of 1933.\textsuperscript{5} PWAP was created as a relief program for unemployed artists, and it specifically employed these artists to create artworks in and for public buildings and recreational spaces. Out of the PWAP came the Treasury Department Section of Painting and Sculpture (Treasury Section, or later the Section of Fine Arts), the program through which the Lakeview and Uptown post office murals were

\textsuperscript{4} Illinois State Museum, 5.
\textsuperscript{5} Illinois State Museum, 4 -5.
funded. Because of previous difficulty in finding artists who were both able to prove a financial need and a level of professional artistic ability, the Treasury Section recruited and commissioned professional artists not on the relief rolls. Funding for the program was “constant and assured,” since monies came out of approximately 1/2 percent of the production costs for the new federal buildings to be decorated. Thus, the only federal arts program to emphasize quality of art production over relief was similarly the only one in which funding was not directly appropriated by Congress.

While the Treasury Section funded a large body of art during its run from 1934 to 1943, larger social problems of relief were still a prevalent concern for the country. In response, the President created the Works Project Administration (WPA), and stemming from the WPA, the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). 90% of the artists employed through these programs were required to be hired from relief rolls. As stated in the manual of the Federal Art Project (FAP), the goal of the project was to “…work toward an integration of the arts with the daily life of the community...”

In reality, most of the artists employed through the WPA were living and working in a few large cities. Increase Robinson, the state director of the WPA in Illinois, lamented that her inquiries about locating “downstate artists” for employment through the WPA were met with negative replies. Twenty-five cities in America, making up only

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6 Mavigliano and Lawson xix, 164-167.
7 Mavigliano and Lawson, xx.
8 Mavigliano and Lawson, xx.
twenty percent of the nation’s population, housed seventy-five percent of artists working for the FAP.\textsuperscript{10}

Important examples of artworks which were incorporated in public buildings across the nation are the hundreds of post office murals created and funded through the Treasury Section, including at least 60 such murals in Illinois alone.\textsuperscript{11} While presenting an opportunity to epitomize the goal of an integration of art and the everyday actions of the community, these murals were also a point of controversy and contention within many communities. The Treasury Section, in attempting to be attentive to local concerns and reactions to the murals, was specifically “sensitive to criticism from local communities.”\textsuperscript{12} This meant artists were sometimes forced to rework their sketches and plans for their murals. Painter Thomas Hart Benton, though approached, never worked for the Treasury Section because of this censorship, saying:

\begin{quote}
If you can never give me 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 I’ll work. Otherwise, I can’t be sure I’ll do a real piece of work.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Contrasting this negative view of the political and social demands on artists is the characterization, gleaned from personal narratives, that the government’s support for art and artists fostered a positive atmosphere and sense of community for New Deal artists. In a 1939 article written by Chicago artist Robert Jay Wolff, the optimism created through government support and unionization was expressed:

\begin{quote}
Over a period of four years the Project has enlarged what was once a small professional art community to include...a new patronage whose enthusiastic
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} Illinois State Museum, 9.
\textsuperscript{11} Mavigliano and Lawson, 162-171.
\textsuperscript{12} Bruce L. Bustard, \textit{A New Deal for the Arts} (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1997), 16.
\textsuperscript{13} O’Connor, 24-25.
acceptance of the Project’s work has given to the artist what the old, isolated art community could never give: vital encouragement and a respected and useful place in the scheme of things.\textsuperscript{14}

For example, the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, which offered free art classes, lectures, and workshops to the public, became a cultural meeting place for the black community of Chicago.\textsuperscript{15}

During the early 1940’s, the Federal Art Projects tried to remain relevant for both a government and a public occupied with wartime concerns. Some WPA artists shifted their focus to promotion of wartime industry or creation of murals with military themes, but many communities felt strong objection to using taxpayer money for the creation of murals during wartime. By 1943, all the Federal Art Projects were ended.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Post office in the Public Arts}

Eun Young Ju

Under the New Deal Art Program, the post office was one of the places to be decorated with the purpose of representing the American scene. The Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture gave out almost 1,400 commissions to decorate new federal buildings. Then 1,100 new post offices were built and decorated under this project.\textsuperscript{17} The reason that the post office could be the only place to represent the American scene in the 1930’s was that many post offices were built in the same time, but also that the post offices were an effective place to convey the pursuit of the “New Dealer” or the democracy. President Roosevelt and the New Dealer, especially Edward

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\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in Illinois State Museum, 9. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Illinois State Museum, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Bustard, 128. \\
\end{flushright}
Bruce, who took the responsibility of the Section, wanted to make an American art in the public in a democratic way. Because the post office exists in virtually every small community, the ordinary person could easily access it there. The post office could provide what people wanted, producing the American scene and pursuing democracy.

We can find what the post office means in society in the below description. The old Washington D.C Post office inscription describes the post office as:

- Messenger of Sympathy and Love
- Servant of Parted Friends
- Consoler of the Lonely
- Bond of the Scattered Family
- Enlarger of the Common Life
- Carrier of News and Knowledge
- Instrument of Trade and Industry
- Promoter of Mutual Acquaintance
- Of Peace and Good Will among Men and Nations

This described that the post office was a link between the people of different regions and the whole country. Before the Great Depression, the post office was the fundamental system for communication across America, like in the above description. However, the New Deal projects had an effect on the role of the post office, and made the mission of post office broader. The post office was not just the link of regions; it should represent the local village through the public arts on its walls.

As previously stated, a goal of the public arts project that the Roosevelt Administration pursued was to create an American scene. Below, an extract from the address by Roosevelt at the dedication on March 1941 showed how the post office was the place to pursue the purpose of the public arts project of the Roosevelt Administration:

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A few generations ago, the people of this country were taught by their writers and by their critics and by their teachers to believe that art was something foreign to American and to themselves—something imported from another continent… But recently, within the last few years, they have discovered that they have a part. They have seen in their own towns, in their own villages, in schoolhouse, in post offices…

The goal of the public arts project was developing and providing American art to the public. The U.S. government realized the necessity of the development of American arts for the public, so even though the New Deal project and WPA projects were partly focused on creating jobs, the goal of the public arts program was also focused on creating American arts. The important point is that what they pursued was not great arts, but public arts including the real American life, and the arts where people could identify with them. The public arts tried to contain what real people did and what real people felt. In this sense, post offices were the perfect place to represent real life, in that they were located in every community and available for viewing by all community people.

This pursuit of the American scene resulted in regionalism in post office murals. Although the Section pursued the nationalist ideals, to make the local people feel authentic, the regionalism was developed. Other public spaces such as the public schools and public buildings could represent the community. However, the fact that most communities had their own post offices where the whole community visited enhanced the significance of creating regional arts on their walls. Therefore, the post office could represent the village’s own identity. However, “this regionalism was neither localism nor sectionalism. It saw the country as a number of complementary areas defined their

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19 Park and Markowitz, 6.
distinct geography, economic, historical, and cultural identities.”20 Especially in the Mid-West, including Chicago, where “the settlers build sod huts and constructs a progressive and dynamic society,”21 was there a good example for other places to show that they could recover from the Depression.

Another goal of the post office arts project was to create democracy. This period was of the emerging concept of public in society. Therefore, the Section positively encouraged the participation of the public. The process of creating the post office murals included artists, patrons, and the people. The most significant part was that the people had an opportunity to make their voices heard. Of course, the involved people included the community leaders and local newspaper reporters. However, just normal people, amateur artists, student artists and community residences could make their voices heard as well. Sometimes, there was a huge protest against the proposals of the murals when people thought it represented the post office differently. The post office masters usually took the responsibility and delivered the opinions of the community. Therefore, in many places, the proposals received complaints and were changed. Because artists received payment after the whole project ended, they tried to make other proposals when the public spoke out. Also, they were in the process of discussion and negotiation about how to make the best description of local place.

Many cases showed that local citizens were too involved in their subject and if it was accurate. This was because in the small villages, the post office murals would be the first art works in their lives and the only place used to represent the villages. Therefore, community members wanted to see what they really desired. The involvement of the

20 Park and Markowitz, 68.
21 Park and Markowitz, 23.
people in the public arts project was a good point to accomplish the democracy, however, this was the factor that limited aesthetic meanings and artistic creativity. *Wall to Wall America*, written by Marling, cited the controversy of the few unclad or semi-clad figures in the post office mural projects.\(^2\) In the 1930s, the nude was not familiar in the daily lives of ordinary people. It had always been given aesthetic appraisal, but the public could not accept the nude in their local public space. Therefore, the pursuit to include American scenes and the democracy with the participation of the public remained the site of aesthetic limitations.

**Chicago: City of the Big Shoulders**

Bevin Ross

The aesthetics of the Uptown and Irving Park post offices are revelatory in their descriptions of Chicago. Chicago dominated the western United States in the first half of the 20\(^{th}\) Century. It had the most popular maker of men’s clothing, machine tools, telephones and farm equipment, as well as the first, and largest, mail-order catalogue with which to distribute the merchandise. Products were made by the millions in Chicago, not only to serve its population or the United States, but for the entire world.

In 1937 Henry Sternberg painted Carl Sandburg’s vision of Chicago on the wall of the Irving Park Post Office, and Henry Varnum Poor painted the man himself in Chicago’s Uptown Post Office. Carl Sandburg called Chicago the “City of Big Shoulders,” and the “Hog Butcher to the World\(^2\)” His poetry praised the roughness of the city and glorified its struggle. Part of this pride comes from the city’s re-birth after


the great Chicago fire that killed over two hundred people in 1871.24 “Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness…” the people of Chicago are strong and thru sheer willpower rebuilt the destroyed city, “…Shoveling, Wrecking, Planning, Building, breaking, rebuilding…” Chicago was truly the Phoenix rising from the ashes as rebuilding began within days of the fire and the city retuned to its former glory within three years.25

In Varnum Poor’s murals he depicts the architects that built Chicago’s fame, physically and metaphorically. Louis Sullivan was the first modernist architect, changing the face of Chicago by rejecting European influence and creating a style of architecture that was distinctly American and even more so Chicagoan. He built fourteen of Chicago’s landmarks, including working on the first skyscraper in 1885.26 In Varnum Poor’s mural, Sullivan holds up the Carson Prairie Scott building, to this day a beautiful piece of architecture, to show the new style of Chicago. Carl Sandburg’s poems reached international fame and praised Chicago to the world as a city that works for a living. In Poor’s mural the farmer and the poet work together on the same level. Carl Sandburg respects the farmer and all workingmen. They are the source of his poetry. He and Louis Sullivan created pride for the city for what it was—Chicago.

Sternberg took Sandburg’s image of Chicago and showed the city as a political utopia where the center yields endless growth for its citizens, represented by the steel and stockyard workers. The image of Chicago is arranged not unlike Foucault’s description of

panoptic power structuring that results in “homogeneous effects of power.”\textsuperscript{27} The central city represents Chicago’s powerhouse of Learning. The best of Chicago’s world famous skyline is shown rising from the flames. The structures are the quintessential representations of design, commerce, religion, wealth, culture, history, education and beauty. They include the Civic Opera, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Field Museum, and the Rockefeller Memorial Church, along with others. The Tribune tower, for example, was the result of an international design competition to create “the most beautiful and eye-catching building in the world.”\textsuperscript{28} This is Sternberg’s way of showing Chicago as a mighty city, the center of culture and production. The mural makes Chicago the exerciser of power in the center to guarantee order, “if they are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents.”\textsuperscript{29} The central figure of Chicago in Sternberg’s mural represents Chicago as the panoptic center of industry for the nation.

Chicago will also be the center of industry in the future according to Sternberg. The population passed the one million mark five years after the great fire\textsuperscript{30} and hosted the World’s Fair in 1933-34, entitled \textit{Century of Progress}.\textsuperscript{31} The city of Chicago was re-built after one of the largest U.S. disasters of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century to become one of the United States’ most economically important cities in the first part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{32} Sternberg predicts the future of industry in his mural by making the trains shooting out from its

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{29} Foucault, 201.
\bibitem{31} “Century of Progress,” \textit{History Files}, 5 October 2005, \url{http://www.chicagohs.org/history/century.html}.
\bibitem{32} “Century of Progress”
\end{thebibliography}
center of different chronologic eras. He begins with the steam engine and progresses to even more modern diesel engines than were in existence at the time the mural was painted. Sternberg paints to the future of Chicago, beginning with historically accurate depictions of the Illinois Central Railroad running along the beach in old Chicago and moving to the high speed futuristic trains shooting out from its center. They come from the central power of Chicago’s commercial and cultural center and deliver their cargo to the world.

**Artist Selection Process**
Kerry Schneider

The content of the murals was influenced by the selection process and the context of the federal commissions. During the nine years of its activity, from October 1934 to January 1941, the Section awarded 1,124 mural contracts for which it had paid $1,472,199. 289 contracts for sculpture were given costing $563,529. One hundred and ninety-three competitions were held, and 1,205 individual artists placed their work in federal buildings. The average price for the mural commissions was $1,356, $1,936 for sculpture and $393,516 for administrative costs.³³

Edward Bruce was named the director of the Section with Forbes Watson as his advisor. Olin Dows was in charge of states east of the Mississippi and Edward Rowan oversaw states to the west, including Illinois. According to Dows, the leadership “decided that competition was the fairest way to acquire work for the public. Although it was a wasteful method, and open competitions may not attract some successful artists, we believed it to be the best solution for our purposes.” They kept their juries “as varied as

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possible” and awarded contracts for “recommended but non-winning designs.” Their first major competition in DC used nominated candidates in the competition, as described below.

The first major competition was for the New Department of Justice and Post Office buildings in Washington, D.C. The project is mentionable since it put Henry Varnum Poor’s work on the Section’s radar. For this competition they “appointed a committee of nine museum directors, art experts and painters…and asked them for lists of twenty-two painters and fourteen sculptors…who in their opinion could best decorate the two important buildings.” The recommendations were confidential and those artists who received three votes or more were hired; Henry Varnum Poor was one of the painters hired. The remaining artists who had received votes were invited into a national competition and judged on anonymous sketches. These competitions were decided by a jury of appointed committee members, artists and architects. This competition process was also used for a national competition called 48 State Competition for commissioned work at new small post offices in every state.

Local competitions were also held and used a similar selection process. Typically, the Section would find a chairperson, possibly a head of a museum or an art association, who “in turn selected other members of the jury-art administrators, artists, architects, or prominent citizens,” and while the Section made the final decision it “encouraged as much initiative as possible on the part of the jury.” If the section staff had any questions about the locally selected art, they were discussed in letter. Both

34 Dows, 20.
35 Park and Markowitz, 12.
the jury and Section publicized the call for entries, the latter in its publication called *Bulletin*. In the case of Henry Varnum Poor and Harry Sternberg’s pieces, both were commissioned at the national level—both were from New York and not Chicago—while local appointees oversaw the installation.

Harry Sternberg’s mural was commissioned by the Section of Painting and Sculpture (SPS). SPS paid artists to produce more than 108,000 easel paintings, 17,000 sculptures, 11,000 print designs, and 2,500 murals. “SPS artists had a particularly public impact with the murals they painted in post offices and other government buildings across the country. In addition SPS operated over 100 Community Art Centers, and compiled a 20,000 piece Index of American Design. Its artists also produced models, photographs, and many other objects.”

The SBS Lakeview project is distinguished from other WPA projects in the wall text. Still, the end result was similar to that of a WPA work and for that reason, as the text explains, the work is often assumed to be a WPA project.

For all facets of the commissioning bodies, the Sections:

…attempted to take politics out of the selection process and make it as democratic as possible by initiating a system of competitions. The competitions were slow, complicated, and somewhat expensive, but, as President Roosevelt stated, this system gave ‘to all American artists equal opportunity’ and awarded ‘commissions on the sole basis of quality,…in keeping with our highest democratic ideals.’

Still, problems arose:

In the 1930’s, despite the general mobility of Americans, people in small towns had a strong sense of local identity….When it came to art, their expectations seem

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38 Park and Markowitz, 12.
to have been serious…They had well-formed ideas about their own history and about the distinctiveness of their own communities…They were sensitive to implied denigration of the heritage or achievements they took to be their own. …their contentiousness or outrage at times may have been provoked by the New Deal in general rather than by a particular mural.39

Often the postmaster and leaders of civic groups wrote to the Section requesting that the commission be given to a local artist, but sometimes this didn’t happen, for example in the south, where “more murals were painted by Northern artists.”40 In Henry Varnum Poor’s case, a local official cuttingly questioned Poor’s knowledge of “early Chicago” in his correspondence with the author. Henry Varnum Poor’s vision prevailed, but not without friction.

*Harry Sternberg*

Harry Sternberg was one such non-local artist whose commissioned mural in the Lakeview post Office depicted Chicago, though he was a New York native:

> The artist Harry Sternberg lived and worked in New York, but he spent time in Chicago making sketches and studies for his commission. He had to submit three studies before his design was approved. New Deal muralists were directed to create non controversial murals, and at first his supervisors wanted him to only use the center portion of the mural showing the history of the city….Typical of New Deal Art, Sternberg’s mural is one of the finest examples, displaying a pride in Chicago’s past and a sense of optimism for the future.41

Born in 1904, he was the youngest of eight children living on Manhattan’s lower east side. He took art classes at the Brooklyn Museum starting in 1915 on Saturdays and continued on to New York’s prestigious Arts Students League in 1922. His professional career began in 1928 when he consigned a group of early prints with dealer Frederick

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39 Park and Markowitz, 11.
40 Park and Markowitz, 12.
Keppel in New York. By 1933 he was an instructor at the Art Students League teaching etching, lithography and composition. At the age of 29, Sternberg was appointed the youngest faculty member in that institution’s history, and he would continue to teach there for the next 33 years.\(^{42}\) He painted his first post office mural in 1937. Entitled *Carrying the Mail*, it can still be seen in Sellersville, Pennsylvania.\(^{43}\) In 1937 he completed the Lakeview Post office mural, which is still intact today.

Sternberg was “an acclaimed member of a vital generation of American artists dedicated to exposing social injustices and offering support for an egalitarian society.” His paintings and prints done in mid-1930 on the plight of American coal and steel workers brought him notoriety and national prominence. “During the war, Sternberg went on to produce anti-fascist works of art in support of the war effort. Sternberg's paintings and prints addressing the labor movement and the war against fascism and racial injustice are among his most memorable images.” Sternberg, in a 1999 interview with Sally Yard, explained his philosophy on the importance of content in his art, stating: “Much of contemporary art has no content orientation. What they want to say is terribly unimportant, and it’s only when something is terribly important that great art is produced.”\(^{44}\) The two skylines he depicted in his murals—one of the ruins of the Great Fire of 1871 and the other of modern Chicago, ca. 1937—are, by deduction, terribly important.

\(^{42}\) Harry Sternberg Wall Text, Lakeview Post Office, 1343 W. Irving Park Road (see Appendix D).
\(^{43}\) Harry Sternberg Wall Text
} In 1990, he published a collection of prints, 
\textit{Sternberg: A Life in Woodcuts} one of which depicts his painting of the Lakeview post office mural. In 2000, his life and work were celebrated in a major retrospective exhibition, \textit{No Sun without Shadow” the Art of Harry Sternberg}, at the Museum, California center for the Arts, Escondido.\footnote{Harry Sternberg Wall Text.
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\textit{Harry Varnum Poor}

Harry Varnum Poor was a nationally recognized artist and ceramist at the time of his selection. The committee chose him over twenty-nine other artists. The tiles for the Uptown Post office were manufactured with a special manganese glaze, then decorated them and realized them in his own kiln in his studio in New York City, New York.\footnote{Gray, 262.} The standard New Deal post office had a budget of $650-750:

From the allotted funds the artist was required to purchase all the necessary supplies and pay the costs of installation and photographs. Payment to the artist came in three installments: when the initial sketch was approved, when a scale
drawing was approved, and when the final panel was verified as in-place by the local postmaster.49

Correspondence between Henry Varnum Poor and Edward B. Rowan, the Section contact for this area, indicates much back and forth of revised designs.

In one letter to Poor, dated May 4, 1942, Rowan writes “The revised designs are here and they have grown tremendously with this further study”50. Unlike Rowan’s courteous input, a letter two months later from the local representatives for the project, including the Postmaster of the city of Chicago, sent Henry Varnum Poor an acerbic critique stating, “This panel is lacking entirely in beauty, expressiveness, compactness and originality of panel #1.”51 The letter goes on to state that Chicago is “not the home of the banjo or the guitar”, lists a paragraph of distinctly “early Chicago” references and includes “some of the early scenes of the town”. Henry’s letter in response, two days later, explains his choices and adds, “I am confident, too, that you will realize that once the general plan is approved, an artist must work freely in order to do his best work.”52 It seems that while the selection process was “democratic, the on-going markers of approval kept the artistic expression and content under tight control.

**Chicago Post Office Murals’ Connection to Socialist Realism**

Elizabeth Chodos

The strict criteria that the review panels used to approve the murals for the Lakeview and Uptown Chicago post offices led them to select artworks that are very

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much aligned with the Socialist Realist movement that began in Communist Russia. These murals fall into the Socialist Realist category in two central ways; the first is that their subject matter exclusively represents the government and the working-class man in a positive light, and secondly they were created at the behest of a government agency that was more interested in furthering its political agenda than in creating outlets for free artistic expression.

The genesis of Socialist Realism can be found in Lenin’s essay, *Party Organization and Party Literature*, 1905, where he proclaims,

…[literature] cannot, in fact, be an individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat. Down with non-partisan writers! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, ‘a cog and screw’ of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class.\(^5\) He thus distinguishes those who are making art to further the rise of the working class from those who are not. Although the idea of the artist as a political promoter was presented in 1905, artists lived with general freedom to make whatever they wished so long as it was not directly in opposition to Communist ideals until 1946 under the Stalin regime. In reaction to post-WWII writer’s efforts to reclaim some independence over the craft, Stalin censored Mikhail Zoshchenko and Anna Akmatova, claiming that their work was non-political and resolved that:

The power of Soviet Literature, the most advanced literature in the world, consists in the fact that it is a literature which has not and cannot have interests other than the interests of the people, the interests of the state. The task of Soviet literature is to aid the state, to educate the youth correctly and to meet its demands, to rear a

new generation, strong and vigorous, believing in its cause, fearing no obstacles, and ready to overcome all obstacles. (qtd. in Demaitre 1:265)  

From that point forward the only literature and art allowed in the USSR were forms of Communist Propaganda. All literature had to ally itself with the ideals and morals of the Communist Party, and all visual art had to represent the leaders of the country in a positive light and in harmony with the workingman who built the nation. For example, the painting, Lenin With Villagers, 1959, painted by Evdokiya Usikova, shows Lenin sitting in a rural setting, surrounded by farmers, talking and sharing ideas. This painting portrays Lenin as an equal with the farmers, he is sitting on their level intently listening to their concerns. Another example of propaganda is Steel Workers, 1950, painted by V. Malagis. It portrays, in a glorified manner, the labor of crafting steel to build a country.

When comparing various Social Realist paintings to the two in the Chicago post-offices many thematic links are evident. The two murals focus on the worker’s role in society and present him as the city’s backbone. In Varnum Poor’s mural the worker is building and farming in harmony with an architect and an artist, which are both figures that represent the heart and soul of the state. The “artist” in this case is a stand in for a political figure, someone who provides the impetus and inspiration for the worker to build and create a nation. Just like the image of Lenin congregating with farmers in a village, as their peers, the architect and the musician commune with the builder and the farmer as equals. Similarly, in the mural Chicago-Epoch of a Great City the workers are in the foreground, larger than life, and the city is placed behind them. In each of these

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cases the worker takes on a privileged position in his relationship to the city. The message that these murals convey is that without the hard work of the average man Chicago’s infrastructure, and by extension, the city’s vitality and national importance, would not exist. Because the subject matter in these murals exalts the role of the working class they are attuned with the traditions and methods of the Communist propaganda machine. In fact, Harry Sternberg was a known communist sympathizer, and made a great deal of work relating to that theme.

The fact that these murals fit so neatly into the Socialist Realist movement implies that the true goals of the Workers Progress Administration and the Treasury Department Section of Painting and Sculpture were not simply to create work for any artist who was unemployed, but to carefully select artists that promoted their political agenda, and to give those artists funding as well as a forum to disseminate the political message.

Within the Public Works of Art Project, the Roosevelt state exhibited an administrative bias against abstract expressionist practices in American art. The prescriptions for what was called ‘representational’ as opposed to ‘nonrepresentational’ art achieved various degrees of insistence and clarity within the different programs and their activities. The situation was complicated by the preferences of avowedly communist artists for a ‘realist’ representational mode.  

When selecting artists for the program the government was not only looking for artists who were economically impacted by the depression yet showed some artistic promise, they were actively seeking artists who were capable of and desired to be “a cog and screw” in the political machinery.

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Although the practices, and even the representation, of the WPA were aligned with Socialist Realist practices, the Roosevelt administration was not necessarily communist. The USA was, and remains, a Capitalist society.

…in contrast to the accusations, perennially leveled at the administration up to the death of Roosevelt and beyond, that the New Deal was ‘communistic’ emerges the view that the interventions of federal state preserved and consolidated the dominance of monopoly capitalism during the 1930s. The state, reconstituted under Roosevelt, acted as a regulator, not the \textit{arbiter}, of economic and social relationships; its inability and unwillingness to atomize corporate power or threaten concentrated capitalist interests indicated ultimately conservative nature.’\textsuperscript{56}

What is similar in each case is that the state controlled and funded art projects were pointedly disinterested in artistic freedom and experimentation, and only interested in the role art played in furthering a specific image of the nation to the public.

\textbf{Community Reactions and Initiatives}
Stephanie Greene

The expectation of New Deal art projects, including United States Post Office murals, was twofold: to promote a positive national image while finding a site-specific relevance in the community. According to historian and preservationist Heather Becker, public art serves as a “historic record and generator of new meaning for various audiences at various moments in history.”\textsuperscript{57} The history of these New Deal murals is marked by long periods of opposition and neglect, as the artwork has been “criticized, ignored, or forgotten, whitewashed, destroyed, or stolen.”\textsuperscript{58} And despite their national

\textsuperscript{56} Harris, 23.
\textsuperscript{58} Becker, 3.
significance, contemporary preservation efforts frequently start with local, grassroots organizations, such as The Friends of the Lakeview Post Office Mural.

Although the Roosevelt administration attempted to minimize public hostility to this new, government-sponsored “art for the millions,” many Depression-era communities staunchly opposed programs like The Section. During this time of financial hardship, Americans could not understand why their tax money paid the salaries of “lazy bohemians.” Government officials encouraged artists to keep their audience in mind; the realistic subject matter catered to the tastes of ordinary, hard-working people and controversial imagery was eliminated during the proposal stage. The resulting murals were promoted as “substantial, educational, and...a lot of art for the money.”

With the mystique of the artist dissipating, supporters realized that government-sponsored mural making was exactly what American Art needed. According to Heather Becker, in her account of the New Deal mural preservation in Chicago’s public schools, the installation of these murals was a social event; teachers came with students, parents came with children, and workers came on their lunch break. In many communities, this was the first time people saw a painting up close and witnessed an artist at work. In a 1938 article from the Magazine of Art, Albert Gardner explains how artists benefited from their new public image: “the 19th century myth of the romantic bohemian genius [gave] way to a more modern conception of the artist as craftsman—a part of and

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60 Sorell, 10.
61 Sorell, 10. The Sternberg commission totaled $1,900. The amount of the Varnum Poor commission is unknown.
62 Becker, 3.
contributor to the life around him.”63 This artist-audience relationship was a necessity for public art, because communities wanted their mural to reflect their regional history, ideology, and beliefs. Without adequate research—on-site visits, interviews with local citizens, correspondence with the postmaster—artists inevitably faced a contentious drafting stage before creating an approved design.64

As stated in previous sections, 1,124 murals found homes in federal buildings and communities throughout the country. Following the end of New Deal art patronage in 1943, public opinions of the remaining murals ranged from indifferent to supportive. In Barbara Bernstein’s 1973 article, one Lakeview post office employee noted, “I’ve been working here four years, and I never even noticed that thing [Sternberg’s mural].”65 Some present-day Uptown customers expressed similar sentiments; Kelly, an accountant in her 30s, claims to never look at the Varnum Poor murals, because she uses the self-serve kiosks in the front of the building. These machines and other forms of technology—including at-home postage printing and email—have weakened the post office’s role as a community center; we visit the building, and therefore the murals, less often. Numerous customers cited the importance of these murals in describing Chicago’s history; Pavlo Shahim, a postal clerk at the Lakeview Post Office for over 15 years, thinks children particularly benefit from such visual reminders of history. Shahim hopes that “artists continue to take a sharp look at the city of Chicago: where it is and where it

63 Sorell, 10.
64 For more information on the debates between postmaster and artist, see the fourth section of this paper, Artist Selection Process.
is going." Others disagree; Willy, a store owner in his 50s, thought that “the farming [in the Uptown mural] seems too old fashioned, too different, like it's more about American history than Chicago's history.” He hopes to see newer public art installed in the neighborhood. Kristen, a student in her 20s, questioned whose past was being portrayed; she did not know how her neighbors would respond to Varnum Poor’s work, because “[the mural] doesn't reflect the current population [of Uptown], which is really ethnically diverse.” Carol, a customer of the Lakeview Post Office in her 80s, describes why she thinks preserving the historic art of the New Deal is beneficial to the community, “today we live and learn through television [and] historic reenactments, but this is a real piece of our past. This is the reality of what went on.”

National preservation efforts of New Deal art have remained unorganized; administrative restructuring in the United States Postal Service have allowed many New Deal murals to slip through the cracks of bureaucracy, leading to loss or destruction. Therefore, efforts to preserve these nationally significant murals typically start with an inspired local resident. Dr. David Baldwin Jr. wanted to learn more about the Lakeview mural in March 2001, upon noticing that its veneer-like frame had been cut back to reveal Harry Sternberg’s signature. After researching and eventually corresponding with the then 98-year-old artist, Baldwin became the founder and president of Friends of the Lakeview Post Office Mural in June 2001. This non-profit organization secured the necessary donations to clean the layers of varnish and cigarette smoke from the painting. The Friends raised $16,000 by soliciting their neighbors and local businesses; these

donations ranged from $10 to $2,000. When the Chicago-based Parma Conservation was hired for the job, Baldwin stressed the importance of completing the conservation work during business hours. Like the original installation of these murals, he wanted give the community the opportunity to connect with the project by watching and communicating with conservators. Baldwin also arranged a series of informational wall text and images in the Lakeview Post Office, so customers could learn more about the mural and their history. Considering the power of this local initiative in preserving the Lakeview mural, it seems that community support will determine the future influence of New Deal art.

Bibliography


