New Deal Murals in the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse

By
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements for the Art and Art History Department

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May 7, 2010

Acknowledgements

So many people have been kind enough to help me with my Senior Thesis. I first want to thank the Dickinson Art and Art History Department both for accepting my initial proposal and for reviewing the final product. Christine Bombaro at the Waidner-Spahr Library helped me numerous times with tracking down information on Kindred McLeary, Howard Cook, and Stuyvesant Van Veen. Pittsburgh Courthouse Clerk Robert Barth was kind enough to take the time to give me a tour of all three historic courtrooms and discuss his courthouse's murals. Francis V. O'Connor graciously answered my questions via email about the destruction and neglect of FAP materials during the 1950s.

I would also like to thank my family and friends who have supported me through every part of the thesis process. From Carlisle to Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, and Washington, DC they have helped me keep my head clear and spirits high. Thank you.

And, of course, I could not have completed my thesis without the guidance of Professor Elizabeth Lee. Nothing, not even the threat of swine flu, winter break, or maternity leave kept her from acting as my thesis advisor. Without her editing expertise, patience, and encouragement, my thesis would not be where it is today. I cannot emphasize enough how grateful I am to have her as my advisor. I owe her my warmest thanks.

Introduction

Research on the Section requires the use of both primary sources in the National Archives and Archives of American Art as well as a handful of secondary sources. Among the most useful secondary sources is Karal Ann Marling's *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*. In her book, the author considers two main questions while examining Section murals regionally and focusing on the reactions of various murals' surrounding communities: "What did New Deal art in Post Offices look like?" and "What did the imagery in these murals, and the murals themselves, mean to Americans in the 1930s?"

In addition to examining these key questions, Marling also cites the main problem present in New Deal literature: "...we know a lot about how murals came to appear on the walls of public buildings during the '30s, but very little about the ways in which patronage affected the perceptual character of murals." [1]

As Marling explains, New Deal scholars are fortunate to have a wealth of institutional research available in a multitude of forms but, while this information is helpful and valuable, very little has been said from an art historical point of view. Marling's book is essential to New Deal scholarship both as a cultural document and as a model of how to write about individual Section murals without becoming entrenched too deeply in the Section's bureaucratic process and plethora of data. In addition to Marling's 1984 book, Barbara Melosh's 1991 *Engendering Culture* has furthered the discussion by analyzing New Deal works in terms of gender and what that meant in America during the 1930s. However, very little else has been published within the last 10 and 20 years about the New Deal and the Section that is not primarily focused on the institutions' political and administrative aspects.

Due to the dearth of significant, art historical publications on the Section in recent years, virtually every contemporary work on the Section, from a catalog article to a thesis to an article, consistently relies on Marling and Melosh's works and a combination of five other books:

Richard D. McKinzie's *The New Deal for Artists* (1973) offers a detailed comparison of the Section and the Works Projects Administration's Federal Art Project. His main discussion revolves around how the United States federal government acted as a different kind of patron for these two large projects and how artists worked within the two systems. However, Marling notes that McKinzie is not concerned with, "the ways in which patronage affected the perceptual character of murals," a topic of greater interest to art historians.[2]

In Belisario Contrerras' *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (1983) the author mainly discusses the history behind the New Deal art projects. One of his interesting chapters details the background and policies of the two Federal Art Project directors, Holger Cahill and Edward Bruce. Contrerras illustrates how the two men's different professional backgrounds and opinions on art were a great source for controversy and conflicting opinions about certain projects.

Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz's *Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (1984) is one of the only books on New Deal art to solely discuss Treasury-funded murals hung in post offices. The two authors focus on a variety of issues plaguing the program including those of regionalism, identity both for artists and communities, and conflicts over artistic freedom. Additionally, the book contains the first complete listing of all Section commissions (including non-post office works) by state and municipality based on the General Services Administration's (GSA) 1970s survey of New Deal art. Park and

Markowitz's list is still used in contemporary New Deal scholarship as the official catalog of New Deal works.

Francis V. O'Connor wrote two influential books: *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now* (1969) and *Art for the Millions* (1973). In the former, O'Connor examines what happened to WPA/FAP artists financially after they finished their commissions. In the majority of cases, the author notes, artists did not fare exceptionally well. O'Connor hoped to seek reform in the NEH with this book; interestingly his goals are strikingly similar to those of Van Veen's Arts Bill.[3] Unfortunately, most reforms proposed by both men never came to pass.

In *Art for the Millions*, O'Connor collected essays from artists and administrators involved with the FAP. The book contains eleven essays on murals alone, covering everything from mural education, to murals as object for public use, to "The Evolution of Western Civilization" as reflected in FAP murals. O'Connor's collection of 1930s essays remains one of the most used sources on New Deal art programs to date.

These five books by McKinzie, Contrerras, Park and Markowitz, and O'Connor have, along with Marling and Melosh's works, become a sort of Section cannon, and are included almost mandatorily in the bibliographies of every book, article, or thesis on New Deal art published after 1984. However, though a limited number of new books, articles, and theses about the New Deal art programs have been generated in the past 26 years, these newer works and authors do not seem to take into account many of their contemporary peers' work as sources. Rather, most authors rely mainly on the same seven books and to create analyses of New Deal policies that, after a certain point, veer on becoming redundant. In addition to this phenomenon, there remains a significant lack of new sources in which the author

examines New Deal art programs from an art historical point of view rather than from American studies or political science.

In regards to the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse murals, very little has been said about the works or artists at all. Van Veen's hidden hammer and sickle in *Pittsburgh Panorama* is mentioned in passing in both *The New Deal for Artists* and *Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* as an instance of Section artists finding ways to subtly insert their own beliefs into their murals. However, neither book mentions Van Veen's other sketches or analyzes the mural as a work of art. Neither McLeary's *Modern Justice* nor Cook's *Steel Industry* have ever been mentioned in New Deal literature. Cook is mainly written about as a printmaker with little attention paid to his Pittsburgh mural while McLeary has not been written about since his death.

The only published work specifically on the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse murals was short, coffee-table style book released by the GSA in 2006. Titled *A Dialogue with the City: Works of Art from 1936 to 2006 United States Courthouse Pittsburgh Pennsylvania*, the book provided a brief passage on Van Veen and Cook's murals while McLeary and *Modern Justice* were only described as "no longer extant."[4] The book does put the three murals into the context of the courthouse very effectively, but does not offer an in-depth analysis of the murals. However, the GSA's goal in their book seems to be more commemorative rather than academic, so an art historical analysis may have not seemed necessary.

This lack of secondary sources mentioning McLeary, Cook, Van Veen, and their murals means that the majority of information about these artists and their work comes from primary sources held by the National Archives and the Archives of American Art.

Thankfully, the Section's official records are relatively complete and, in the case of the Pittsburgh commission, include all correspondence surrounding the contest. The correspondence of Rowan, Dows, Bruce, Watson, McLeary, Cook, and Van Veen have proved absolutely invaluable to this thesis, which combines the existing primary sources with secondary sources like those discussed here.

The Section of Painting and Sculpture

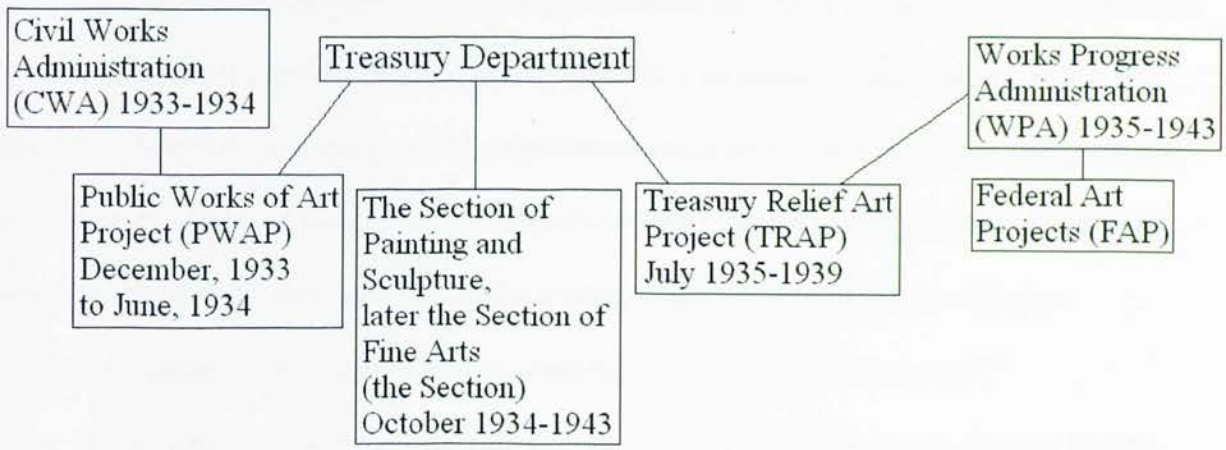


Table 1. Relationship chart of New Deal agencies.

The 1930s were a time of extreme financial difficulty, changing political views, and uncertainty for American citizens. American art was also in a state of extreme flux, with a variety of styles and movements coming into play. From abstraction to Regionalism, Surrealism, and Social Realism, the American public bore witness to a large variety of artistic styles. At the same time, the federal government developed ways in which American artists could find federally funded jobs through New Deal programs.

The Section of Painting and Sculpture, later the Section of Fine Arts, and always called simply, "the Section," was the longest lasting New Deal art program, existing from October of 1934 through 1943. Different from the need-based Works Progress Administration's and the Public Works of Art Program's need-based programming, which gave thousands of unemployed or needy artists work, the Section was not an institution whose mission was primarily about aiding American citizens who had fallen on hard times. Rather, the Section was created as a means to provide artists unable to obtain large commissions on their own with jobs that would jump-start their careers and decorate federal buildings at the same time.

In order to understand what the Section was and how it functioned, it may be helpful to examine its origins and peer programs. In November of 1933 President Franklin Roosevelt established the Civil Works Administration (CWA), a temporary employment program for the winter of 1933-1934 designed to create construction jobs. CWA positions were intended to remove as many people as possible from direct relief program and give them short-term, minimum wage positions on small public works projects, which would in turn give purchasing power back to these citizens, stimulating the "stagnant economy".[5]

That same year, painter and former Groton classmate of Roosevelt, George Biddle, returned to the United States from a trip in Mexico where he had been exposed to works made through the federally funded Mexican mural program. Impressed by what he saw, Biddle wondered whether something similar to the mural program in Mexico would work in the States. He soon wrote to Roosevelt to ask if he could paint the new Department of Justice building in Washington for "plumbers' wages" along with peers Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh, and Grant Wood, among others.[6]

Biddle's letter was then passed on to painter, lawyer, businessman, and advisor to the Treasury, Edward Bruce. Bruce agreed with Biddle and thought that given the federal government was already employing workers through the CWA, it would be appropriate to employ artists in the same way. With a few New Deal lawyers, Bruce outlined and established the first government program for the arts under the Treasury department and paid for by the CWA, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP).

Bruce directed the program from Washington, DC and called on Edward Rowan as an assistant, prominent art critic Forbes Watson as the program's advisor, and Olin Dows as a member of the local regional committee, all of whom would later work as Section officials

under Bruce. Though, like all CWA programs, it was intentionally short lived and lasted only 6 months, from December of 1933 to June of 1934, the PWAP accomplished a great deal. The program employed 3,700 artists and produced about 15,600 works of art while only costing approximately $1,312,000.

Following the end of the PWAP, New Deal art making was divided between the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Projects (WPA and FAP) and programs run through the Treasury Department. The WPA and its FAP were created primarily as relief programs, carrying on the PWAP's relief efforts in the arts. The FAP was defined as a, "large relief program devoted to the plastic arts,"[7] and was only one part of a larger project: Federal Project Number One. This project covered the relief-based drama, music, and writing programs along with the visual arts. The FAP lasted from August 1935 to June 1943, employed over 5,000 people at its peak and cost approximately 35 million dollars.

Operated separately from the FAP, the Treasury department oversaw three agencies in total: the PWAP, the Section, and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP). Out of the Treasury's three agencies, the only need-based organization was TRAP, in which funds were allocated from the WPA to the Treasury Department for the decoration of federal buildings. Administered by the Section but having the same relief rules as the WPA, TRAP employed 446 people, 75% of which were on relief. Though it was considerably smaller than the Section, both as an administration and as a commissioning body, it provided a more consistent source of work for Section artists who were also on relief. TRAP existed as an institution from July, 1935 to 1939.

The Section, founded by Bruce in October 1934, was established to take over PWAP's initial task of decorating federal buildings. However, the Section was much larger

and was also intended to become a permanent federal institution. Perhaps the Section's most significant difference from the PWAP was its policy to award commissions based primarily on open, anonymous competitions. Bruce and Watson reprised their PWAP roles as director and advisor respectively while Rowan was put in charge of competitions in states west of the Mississippi River and Dows was given the eastern states. Bruce, Watson, Rowan, and Dows worked as a team to organize both national and local competitions, enlist local judging committees, invite artists to participate, and work with commissioned artists as they produced their artworks. In continuing to decorate federal buildings, Section officials hoped to bring art commissioned anonymously and fairly to as many parts of the country as possible. Given that most towns in the United States had a federal post office, the majority of Section commissions were for spaces in post offices across the country.[8]

Figure 1. Unknown Photographer, *48 States jury in conference with Edward Bruce*, 1939, Photograph. National Archives. *Left to Right*: Maurice Sterne, jury chairman; Henry Varnum Poor; Edgar Miller; Olin Dows; Edward Bruce; and Edward Rowan.

The Section ran from October of 1934 through 1943, making it the longest lasting New Deal art program.[9] It awarded 1400 contracts to artists and cost approximately $2,571,000. The Section was a means through which artists across the country could obtain large scale commissions. It especially favored artists who were either just starting their careers or were not well known, making relatively unknown artists ideal candidates for the Section's commissions. If a Section commission could launch an artist's career, and if the public liked their art, then that was the ultimate success both for the artist and for the Section as an institution.

The Section did of course have its flaws. At times it failed to accomplish its goal of elevating the careers of lesser known and out of work artists. In addition, works were restricted based on content. For instance, Bruce did not allow the commissioning of abstract works at all. He did not believe that communities would respond to the style, did not think that it would stand the test of time, and, personally, did not care for it at all.[10] However, in spite of its flaws, the Section gave artists and their work an audience and put their work into context the surrounding community. During one of the most financially difficult periods in American history, artists all across America were suddenly able to share their work with the public in post offices, courthouses, and other federal buildings. Many artists, like printmaker and muralist Howard Cook were outspoken about how the Section affected their lives and careers. One year after the Section ended Cook reflected on his time with the Section, saying:

> Looking back over the years that the Section of Fine Arts kept so many young artists busy, pulled them out of their ingrown studio habits and made them realize the value of knocking around with a public which is ultimately theirs,

even if it does show raw edges but it is the material stuff of life an artist is concerned with. Just as important though, or really more important I guess, the Section did keep a hell of a lot of fellows alive and not only alive but able to continue in their own way – and one of its most valued contributions was the reaching out into the depths of the country and giving recognition there to artists who never before had had a chance in their lives…I also strongly feel that that sometime in the future it will be proved that there was a stream of rising American art at that time that took the stimulus and in a way got on its feet.[11]

Pittsburgh Post Office and Federal Courthouse

Figure 2. Unknown Photographer, Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, *The Pittsburgh Press,* date unknown. Courtesy of Courthouse Clerk Robert Barth.

The Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse (also known as The Federal Building) is located at Seventh Avenue and Grant Street in the downtown Pittsburgh Federal Community. The building was conceived and commissioned by Congress on June 30, 1906. At that time $1,000,000 was appropriated for the Treasury Department to buy land for a new post office and courthouse in Pittsburgh, replacing a 5-story building considered obsolete given current operational, sanitary, and crowding needs.[12]

After many legislative and administrative delays, the site at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Grant Street was purchased from the Pennsylvania Railroad Company on September 30, 1926. The location allowed construction of a train station on site, eliminating

transportation of the mail from the post office to the other Pittsburgh railroad station. The building itself was designed by the New York architectural firm Trowbridge and Livingston, which was selected by the Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon, a native Pittsburgher. Construction began on March 27, 1931 and ended on October 13, 1934 sixty percent over the initial $5,000,000 budget. The increase in expenses may be due, in part, to a labor strike that halted construction soon after it initially commenced.[13]

As a Treasury Department commission, which was also in charge of The Section, space was designated inside the building's new courtrooms for Section murals to be placed directly over the three judges' benches. In early 1935 Section administrators Edward Rowan and Olin Dows began to organize a contest for the three spaces. Their first step was to find a chairman based in Pittsburgh who would handle the initial judging and all local issues surrounding the mural projects.

Rowan and Dows' initial nomination was Homer Saint-Gaudens, director of the Carnegie Institute's Museum of Art. As the son of the famous American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens and a prominent figure in the Pittsburgh art world, Saint-Gaudens was the obvious choice for the job. However, upon asking Saint-Gaudens to participate as chairman for the Section's mural contest, Saint-Gaudens politely refused, citing the sheer amount of secretarial work and "sure complications" that would arise throughout the contest's duration.[14] In his place, Saint-Gaudens recommended Wilfred A. Readio, Head of Illustration, Interior Decoration, and Art Education at the Carnegie Institute of Technology. Readio readily accepted his nomination and Saint-Gaudens signed on as a judge for the competition.[15]

Saint-Gaudens' concern over "sure complications" proved to be right on target.

Problems arose beginning with the selection process. Dows outlined a complicated process for the local committee, whereby Section would be "influenced" by the local committee's selections and then the Director of Procurement, Admiral Peoples, would make the final selection. Dows remarked that, "The Section is, as you know, new, and I think you know as much about it as I do. At least, what I tell you is all that I know about it."[16]

Readio and Saint-Gaudens were concerned that Dows did not allocate much actual power for the local jury. Readio wrote on behalf of Saint-Gaudens that the Section "presents a completely unsatisfactory plan since it does not give the local committee any decisive powers with respect to the results of the competition nor does it account in any real sense for the final decision." Saint-Gaudens suggested, instead:

1. That the announced committee make the final decision on awards.
2. That the announced committee be empowered to name a jury to determine the awards.
3. That the announced committee have nothing to do with awards, acting only to advise as to and conduct the competition, and to give general oversight to the execution of the work (if it is produced locally).

Readio agreed, writing that options one and two were the only ones that seemed to justify having a local and threatened to withdraw from the chairman position if these conditions were not met.[17] However, when Dows stated that the Section would not revise its policy on local committees or their power and Readio hastily wrote back explaining that his previous conviction was fueled by Saint-Gaudens, who felt much more strongly about the

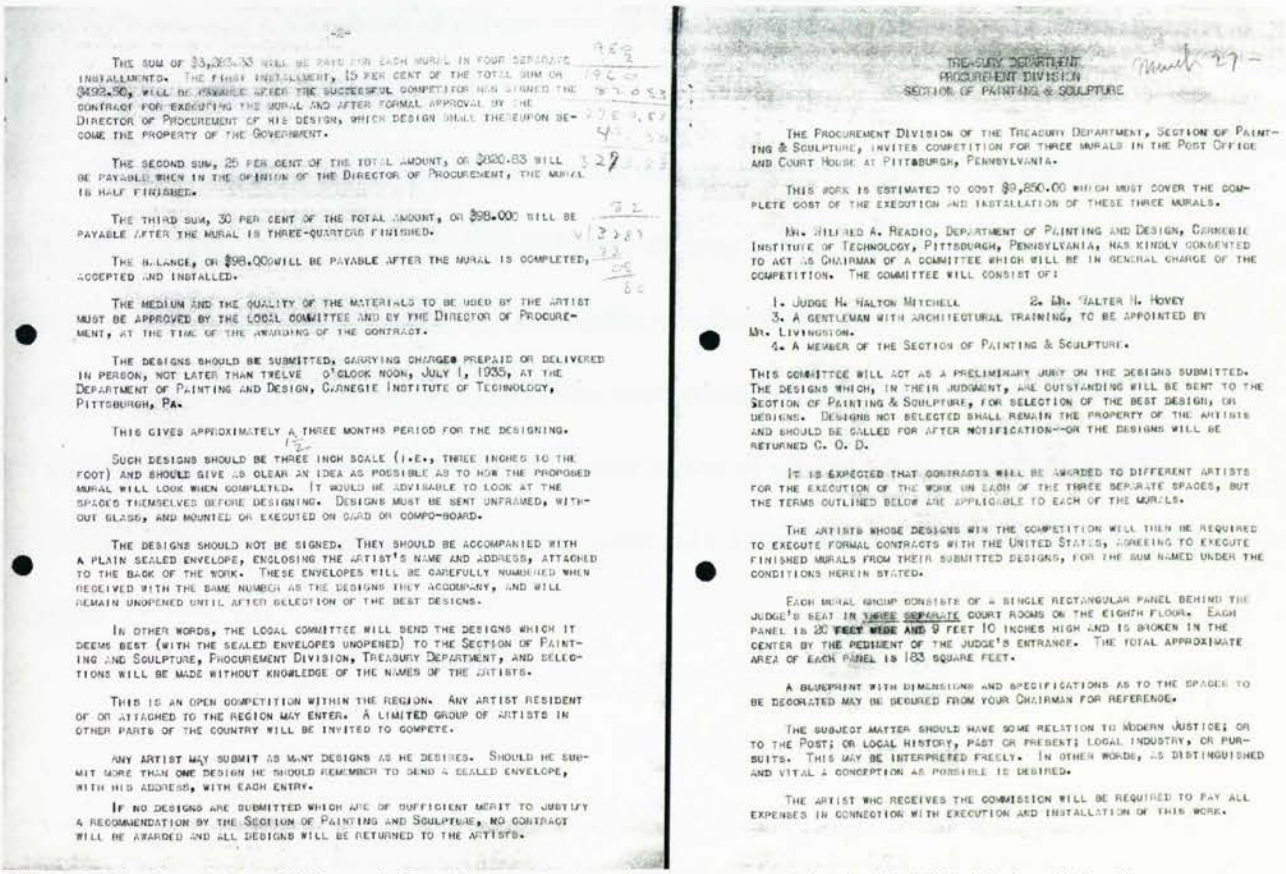
Section's policies on juries than Readio himself.[18] Readio decided to stay on as the Pittsburgh contest's chairman and the Section's policy on final decision making remained unchanged, but Saint-Gaudens, frustrated, gave up his local judge position.

Following the dispute over local jury versus federal Section power, architects Samuel Beck Parkman Trowbridge and Goodhue Livingston, partners in the firm that designed the Federal Building, refused to be involved in the mural project contest in spite of numerous pleas from Olin Dows.[19] The architects, while interested in the selection process did not agree with the Section's "method of procedure in inviting artists to submit their ideas without compensation" and went on to tell Dows that "[We] cannot take any part in such a form of competition without subjecting [ourselves] to the criticism of the Committee on Professional Conduct."[20]

Then, after the architects' absolutely refused to participate in any way, Readio discovered that the blueprint sent out to competing artists was blatantly inaccurate, prompting Readio and Dows to extend the submission deadline by fifteen days.[21] Despite these setbacks the contest was finally officially announced in April of 1935. The announcement called for works with subjects that, "have some relation to modern justice; or to the post; or local history, past or present; local industry, or pursuits. This may be interpreted freely. In other words, as distinguished and vital a conception as possible is desired."

According to the announcement, winning artists were required to pay all expenses associated with the execution and installation of their murals. Considering the winners were only paid $3,283.33 (in four installments corresponding with the work's progression), artists had to be careful when budgeting their winnings. All designs were required to be on a three

inch to foot scale and unsigned (but accompanied by a signed envelope for identification after the anonymous judging). Additionally, at the end of the announcement was a disclaimer that if no design of "sufficient merit" was submitted, the Section would not award any artists a commission and all sketches would be returned (see figure 3).[22] The local judges convened in July of the same year. The final list of judges consisted of Readio, Judge H. Walton Mitchell, Professor Walter Hovey, an architect appointed by Livingston, and either Rowan or Dows.[23] Unfortunately, Section records do not include the name of the architect, nor do they indicate whether Rowan or Dows ultimately served as a judge.



THE SUM OF $3,283.33 WILL BE PAID FOR EACH MURAL IN FOUR SEPARATE INSTALLMENTS. THE FIRST INSTALLMENT, 15 PER CENT OF THE TOTAL SUM OR $492.50, WILL BE PAYABLE AFTER THE SUCCESSFUL COMPETITOR HAS SIGNED THE CONTRACT FOR EXECUTING THE MURAL AND AFTER FORMAL APPROVAL BY THE DIRECTOR OF PROCUREMENT OF HIS DESIGN, WHICH DESIGN SHALL THEREUPON BECOME THE PROPERTY OF THE GOVERNMENT.

THE SECOND SUM, 25 PER CENT OF THE TOTAL AMOUNT, OR $820.83 WILL BE PAYABLE WHEN IN THE OPINION OF THE DIRECTOR OF PROCUREMENT, THE MURAL IS HALF FINISHED.

THE THIRD SUM, 30 PER CENT OF THE TOTAL AMOUNT, OR $985.000 WILL BE PAYABLE AFTER THE MURAL IS THREE-QUARTERS FINISHED.

THE BALANCE, OR $984.000WILL BE PAYABLE AFTER THE MURAL IS COMPLETED, ACCEPTED AND INSTALLED.

THE MEDIUM AND THE QUALITY OF THE MATERIALS TO BE USED BY THE ARTIST MUST BE APPROVED BY THE LOCAL COMMITTEE AND BY THE DIRECTOR OF PROCUREMENT, AT THE TIME OF THE AWARDING OF THE CONTRACT.

THE DESIGNS SHOULD BE SUBMITTED, CARRYING CHARGES PREPAID OR DELIVERED IN PERSON, NOT LATER THAN TWELVE O'CLOCK NOON, JULY 1, 1935, AT THE DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING AND DESIGN, CARNEGIE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, PITTSBURGH, PA.

THIS GIVES APPROXIMATELY A THREE MONTHS PERIOD FOR THE DESIGNING.

SUCH DESIGNS SHOULD BE THREE INCH SCALE (I.E., THREE INCHES TO THE FOOT) AND SHOULD GIVE AS CLEAR AN IDEA AS POSSIBLE AS TO HOW THE PROPOSED MURAL WILL LOOK WHEN COMPLETED. IT WOULD BE ADVISABLE TO LOOK AT THE SPACES THEMSELVES BEFORE DESIGNING. DESIGNS MUST BE SENT UNFRAMED, WITHOUT GLASS, AND MOUNTED OR EXECUTED ON GUAD OR COMPO-BOARD.

THE DESIGNS SHOULD NOT BE SIGNED. THEY SHOULD BE ACCOMPANIED WITH A PLAIN SEALED ENVELOPE, ENCLOSING THE ARTIST'S NAME AND ADDRESS, ATTACHED TO THE BACK OF THE WORK. THESE ENVELOPES WILL BE CAREFULLY NUMBERED WHEN RECEIVED WITH THE SAME NUMBER AS THE DESIGNS THEY ACCOMPANY, AND WILL REMAIN UNOPENED UNTIL AFTER SELECTION OF THE BEST DESIGNS.

IN OTHER WORDS, THE LOCAL COMMITTEE WILL SEND THE DESIGNS WHICH IT DEEMS BEST (WITH THE SEALED ENVELOPES UNOPENED) TO THE SECTION OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, PROCUREMENT DIVISION, TREASURY DEPARTMENT, AND SELECTIONS WILL BE MADE WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE OF THE NAMES OF THE ARTISTS.

THIS IS AN OPEN COMPETITION WITHIN THE REGION. ANY ARTIST RESIDENT OF OR ATTACHED TO THE REGION MAY ENTER. A LIMITED GROUP OF ARTISTS IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY WILL BE INVITED TO COMPETE.

ANY ARTIST MAY SUBMIT AS MANY DESIGNS AS HE DESIRES. SHOULD HE SUBMIT MORE THAN ONE DESIGN HE SHOULD REMEMBER TO SEND A SEALED ENVELOPE, WITH HIS ADDRESS, WITH EACH ENTRY.

IF NO DESIGNS ARE SUBMITTED WHICH ARE OF SUFFICIENT MERIT TO JUSTIFY A RECOMMENDATION BY THE SECTION OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, NO CONTRACT WILL BE AWARDED AND ALL DESIGNS WILL BE RETURNED TO THE ARTISTS.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT
PROCUREMENT DIVISION
SECTION OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE

THE PROCUREMENT DIVISION OF THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT, SECTION OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE, INVITES COMPETITION FOR THREE MURALS IN THE POST OFFICE AND COURT HOUSE AT PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA.

THIS WORK IS ESTIMATED TO COST $9,850.00 WHICH MUST COVER THE COMPLETE COST OF THE EXECUTION AND INSTALLATION OF THESE THREE MURALS.

MR. WILFRED A. READIO, DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING AND DESIGN, CARNEGIE INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA, HAS KINDLY CONSENTED TO ACT AS CHAIRMAN OF A COMMITTEE WHICH WILL BE IN GENERAL CHARGE OF THE COMPETITION. THE COMMITTEE WILL CONSIST OF:

1. JUDGE H. WALTON MITCHELL 2. MR. WALTER H. HOVEY
3. A GENTLEMAN WITH ARCHITECTURAL TRAINING, TO BE APPOINTED BY MR. LIVINGSTON.
4. A MEMBER OF THE SECTION OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE.

THIS COMMITTEE WILL ACT AS A PRELIMINARY JURY ON THE DESIGNS SUBMITTED. THE DESIGNS WHICH, IN THEIR JUDGMENT, ARE OUTSTANDING WILL BE SENT TO THE SECTION OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE, FOR SELECTION OF THE BEST DESIGN, OR DESIGNS. DESIGNS NOT SELECTED SHALL REMAIN THE PROPERTY OF THE ARTISTS AND SHOULD BE CALLED FOR AFTER NOTIFICATION--FOR THE DESIGNS WILL BE RETURNED C. O. D.

IT IS EXPECTED THAT CONTRACTS WILL BE AWARDED TO DIFFERENT ARTISTS FOR THE EXECUTION OF THE WORK ON EACH OF THE THREE SEPARATE SPACES, BUT THE TERMS OUTLINED BELOW ARE APPLICABLE TO EACH OF THE MURALS.

THE ARTISTS WHOSE DESIGNS WIN THE COMPETITION WILL THEN BE REQUIRED TO EXECUTE FORMAL CONTRACTS WITH THE UNITED STATES, AGREEING TO EXECUTE FINISHED MURALS FROM THEIR SUBMITTED DESIGNS, FOR THE SUM NAMED UNDER THE CONDITIONS HEREIN STATED.

EACH MURAL GROUP CONSISTS OF A SINGLE RECTANGULAR PANEL BEHIND THE JUDGE'S SEAT IN THREE SEPARATE COURT ROOMS ON THE EIGHTH FLOOR. EACH PANEL IS 20 FEET WIDE AND 9 FEET 10 INCHES HIGH AND IS BROKEN IN THE CENTER BY THE PEDIMENT OF THE JUDGE'S ENTRANCE. THE TOTAL APPROXIMATE AREA OF EACH PANEL IS 183 SQUARE FEET.

A BLUEPRINT WITH DIMENSIONS AND SPECIFICATIONS AS TO THE SPACES TO BE DECORATED MAY BE SECURED FROM YOUR CHAIRMAN FOR REFERENCE.

THE SUBJECT MATTER SHOULD HAVE SOME RELATION TO MODERN JUSTICE; OR TO THE POST; OR LOCAL HISTORY, PAST OR PRESENT; LOCAL INDUSTRY, OR PURSUITS. THIS MAY BE INTERPRETED FREELY. IN OTHER WORDS, AS DISTINGUISHED AND VITAL A CONCEPTION AS POSSIBLE IS DESIRED.

THE ARTIST WHO RECEIVES THE COMMISSION WILL BE REQUIRED TO PAY ALL EXPENSES IN CONNECTION WITH EXECUTION AND INSTALLATION OF THIS WORK.

Figure 3. Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Contest Announcement, March 27, 1935. National Archives.

It is important to note though that Readio and officials at the Section were sure that they would receive designs of "sufficient merit" because they had already invited a number of well respected artists whose work they already knew quite well. Readio, Rowan, Dows,

and Livingston, in spite of his refusal to participate, all recommended and extended invitations to artists both from the Pittsburgh region and from across the country, especially New York City. Some of these artists were personal friends, but others had done work for PWAP or had already participated in a Section contest.

Ultimately the Section selected sketches by Kindred McLeary, Howard Cook, and Stuyvesant Van Veen. Of the chosen artists, Cook and Van Veen had been invited to participate and McLeary had not, even though he was a professor at the Carnegie Institute of Technology at the time. Interestingly, Cook and McLeary tied unanimously for first place and Van Veen was selected out of a three way tie for third place by Section officials like Rowan, Dows, Bruce, and Watson.

I believe that in studying the three artists and murals involved with the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Section commission we may better understand how the Section dealt with artists and commissions. By examining one Section commission and placing it within the artist's larger career, we may better understand how the Section operated as an institution. Additionally, in exploring the Section's goal of giving American artists a full career through federal commissions we may more fully know how artists operated within the Section.

Kindred McLeary

Figure 4. Unknown photographer, *Kindred McLeary*, date unknown. Archives of American Art.

Though at the time of the Pittsburgh contest Kindred McLeary was both a resident of Pittsburgh and a professor at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, he was originally from Texas. And, though he did not consider himself a painter until the contest, he had always been exposed to the arts through family members, including his mother, who were amateur artists.[24] McLeary enrolled in the University of Texas as an architecture major after graduating high school. At the end of his junior year, he took a trip to the Ecole d'Art Américaine en France at Fontainebleau, which was a formative experience for McLeary who stated that, "Our group [of American students] was a revelation in ignorance to the French teachers. We had learned hardly anything of the basic principles of design at Texas. We floundered."[25]

Nonetheless, the following winter McLeary and a few of his peers followed the professor and first director of the Ecole d'Art Américaine, Jacques Carlu, to Rome where the professor was working as the recipient of the 1919 Premier Grand Prix de Rome in

architecture. McLeary wrote in his brief autobiographical passage in *Modern Painters and Sculptors*, "No better teacher could be imagined than M. Carlu and that winter with him in Rome was one of the most stimulating experiences of my life. As much painter as architect, he incited my first serious interest in painting."[26]

After Rome, McLeary returned to Texas, graduated from the University and briefly took a job in an architect's office in Florida. He then moved to New York City, where he worked in Joseph Urban's architectural studio. However, the position did not grant McLeary any opportunities to design anything on his own, so he left the job but remained in New York City for two years doing freelance design work while simultaneously aiding Carlu on a mural in Boston. McLeary then moved to Texas and his alma mater, the University of Texas, as a professor, but was caught brewing beer and, in light of prohibition laws, was asked to leave the position within the year.

Finally, McLeary found a position at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, where he remained a professor of architectural design there until his death. In addition to architectural design classes, McLeary co-taught watercolors, and, by his own description, did some "dabbling" in painting prior to the time of the Section's Pittsburgh Federal Building Mural competition.[27] His position at the Carnegie Institute of Technology is especially relevant given that the Section tried, when possible, to include local artists in site-specific contests.

However, in spite of McLeary's professorial position at one of the most prominent universities in Pittsburgh -- indeed, the same institution where contest chairman Readio was employed -- he was not specifically invited to participate. This was perhaps due to the fact that Readio may not have known that McLeary was doing more than "dabbling" in painting,

let alone completing works on a mural's scale. In any event, Readio, Dows, and Rowan must have been pleased that the anonymous jury wound up unanimously selecting McLeary; a citizen of Pittsburgh for the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse project.

As mentioned, McLeary was not trained as an artist but as an architect. Therefore, he was not familiar with mural painting or fresco at all. So, like many Section muralists, McLeary chose to complete his work on a large canvas that would be mounted onto the wall and positioned as a typical mural. McLeary also chose to paint with egg tempera, which, according to advice McLeary followed after reading Max Doerner's book *The Materials of the Artist* is recommended for permanence.[28]

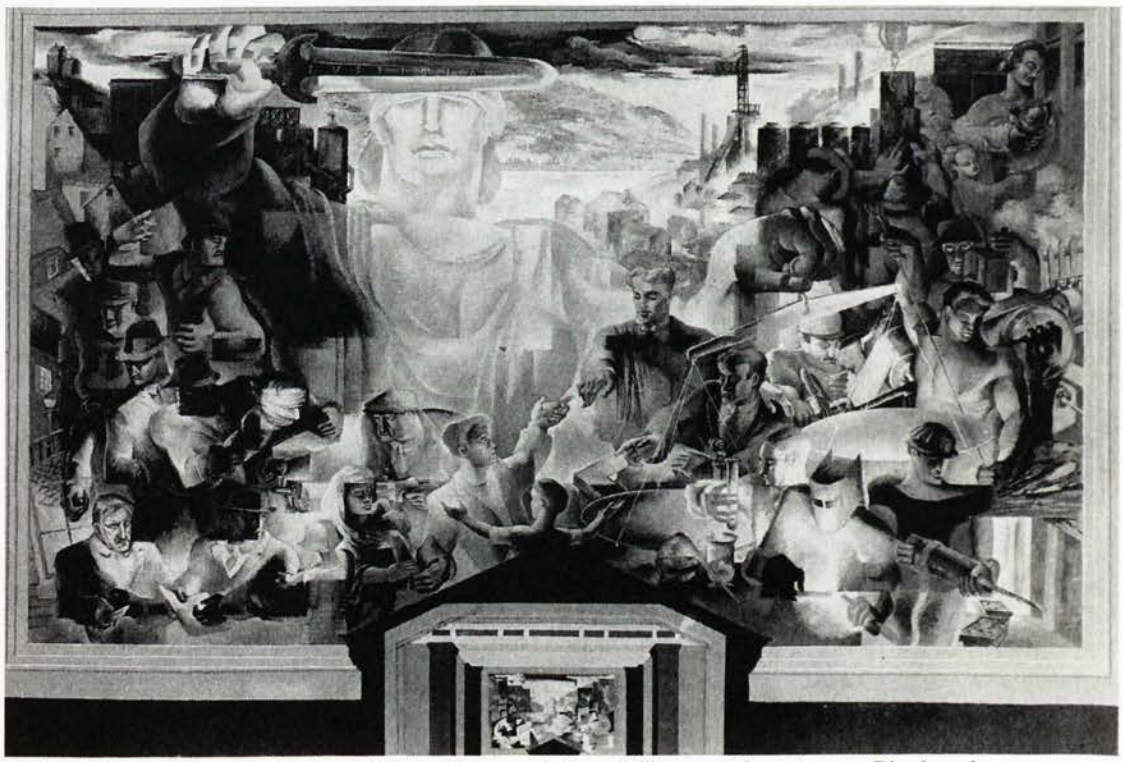


Figure 5. Kindred McLeary, *Modern Justice,* Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania,1937. Oil on canvas, 20 x 9.83 feet. National Archives.

McLeary's submitted sketch was titled *Modern Justice* (fig. 5) and clearly answers the Pittsburgh competition's call for "subjects that have some relation to modern justice."[29] Upon first glance *Modern Justice* is a relatively straightforward image. McLeary has

incorporated both aspects of the competition's guidelines into his mural, with the central, labeled Justice figure obviously serving as a symbol of the Justice system and the smaller civilian figures as symbols of Pittsburgh's history. By McLeary's own admission, the subject matter is not incredibly stimulating; in a letter to Watson McLeary wrote that he had never given the subject matter a great deal of attention and personally considered it, "quite banal." The painting is centered around a large, blindfolded Justice figure who holds a sword labeled "Justice" in her right hand. Behind the figure lies Pittsburgh, complete with factories and smokestacks that symbolize the city's well known industrial economy. Underneath Justice's sword is a group of figures, some of whom seem to be performing illegal acts. One of the most menacing figures in this group holds a blindfolded man in one arm and a gun in another, suggesting a possible kidnapping.

On the right side of the painting, by Justice's unbalanced, empty scales we see another group of figures. This group seems to be employed in peaceful and lawful activities. In the foreground, one can clearly see a figure hard at work in a welding mask, a scientist with test tubes, and a construction worker with a jackhammer, all of which relate to Pittsburgh's past and present role as a steel-producing city.

The two groups are tenuously joined in the center foreground with a touch between two male figures' outstretched hands. The elevated figure on the right may be a Judge as suggested by his robes, and the lower figure on the left may be a father due to his proximity to a woman and child on his right. This tenuous link between the seemingly upright group on the right and the criminally inclined group on the left underneath the tip of Justice's sword suggests a dichotomy between the role of Justice as protector and avenger of the citizens. On the one hand, the Pittsburgh justice system had to protect its law abiding populace and on the

other hand, punish its lawbreakers. Connecting these two groups beneath Justice's very weapon emphasizes the system's dual roles.

Figure 6. Stefan Hirsch, *Justice as Protector and Avenger*, Courthouse, South Aiken, South Carolina. 1938. National Archives.

The contrast between Justice's protector and avenger roles is not unique to *Modern Justice* among Section murals. In 1938 Stefan Hirsch submitted a sketch for the Aiken, South Carolina Courthouse titled *Justice as Protector and Avenger* (fig. 6). In this case, the artist clearly delineated Justice's dual roles by creating a triptych. In the center panel Hirsch painted a balancing female figure labeled Justice. The left panel was labeled "Protector" and showed a peaceful farm and family while the right panel was labeled "Avenger" and depicted a number of crimes taking place. While Hirsch depicted Justice's dual nature more literally than McLeary in *Modern Justice*, the theme remains the same in both works.[30]

McLeary was notified on August 9th, 1935 that he had won the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse mural contest. In the congratulatory letter, Rowan informed McLeary that, should he accept the commission, he would be paid $3,283.33 and have 730 days to complete

it. Rowan also told McLeary that, "One critic offered a suggestion which I would like you to consider, and that was the figure of Justice might be relegated a little further back into the picture. I, personally, am not convinced of the wisdom of that suggestion, but pass it on to you for what it is worth."[31] Apparently McLeary was not convinced of the critic's opinion either because the figure of Justice did not change in size or placement from his initial submitted sketch to the final mural.

McLeary worked fairly quickly on *Modern Justice* until May 2nd, 1936 when he was in a car accident and incurred several serious injuries that prevented him from painting. Within a few months, however, he must have returned to work since on July 25th, 1936 Readio reported to Rowan that McLeary was halfway completed with *Modern Justice* and on July 27th, 1936 McLeary wrote to Rowan that he was now, "working furiously."[32] McLeary moved work on the mural to his cabin outside of Pittsburgh and spent four and a half weeks completing *Modern Justice*, presumably before classes started at Carnegie Technological Institute in September.[33] By October 19th, 1936 Rowan reported to Dows that McLeary had approximately three quarters of the mural finished as determined by photographs that McLeary sent in to the Section.[34] After examining the photographs further, Rowan wrote to McLeary advising that Justice's face looked too foreboding and should "relax into impartiality," and so McLeary changed her face slightly, although the existing photographic records do not reflect a significant change in expression.[35] McLeary completed work on *Modern Justice* by early February 1937 but had to wait until that summer for the court to go on recess long enough for its installation.[36] On July 9th, McLeary sent photographs of *Modern Justice* installed on the courtroom wall to Rowan and on July 13th Rowan acknowledged that McLeary's mural was indeed complete.[37]

Figure 7. Kindred McLeary, *Modern Justice,* Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, 1937. Oil on canvas, 20 x 9.83 feet. National Archives.

Following its completion McLeary discussed his artistic process with Watson. Apparently, he approached his sketch as an architect, with an emphasis on shape and form, and with more concern devoted to his method of producing shapes than with the subject matter itself. Instead of carefully sketching figures based on real people, McLeary first began his composition by drawing many overlapping rectangles, with their placement based loosely on the courtroom's architecture. In order to relieve the work of too much angularity, McLeary also added some circles to his abstract sketch. Where he felt the intersections suggested figures, McLeary added them. He explained that, "By study, a composition of figures subordinate to the basic geometric frameworks was derived, and upon these figures were imposed sufficient literary implications to make them appropriate as elements of a mural for a courtroom."[38]

McLeary's reliance on abstract art to create a Section mural could not have pleased Watson. The Section, according to the philosophy of director Edward Bruce did not endorse,

commission, or allow abstract art. Bruce did not believe communities would welcome abstract art, nor did he think abstract art would stand the test of time. Watson could not have been happy knowing that the Section had inadvertently selected, unanimously no less, a painting in which the artist considered the abstract form superior to the subject matter. Considering their stance on abstract art, one may not be surprised to learn then, that the Section's official records do not include McLeary's reliance on abstraction in the description of his process. Rather, in McLeary's process and the Pittsburgh mural's subject matter are described as follows:

> The artist has succeeded in creating a design which relates unusually well to the architectural treatment of the court room. Dominating the mural is a figure of militant Justice who holds a sword of various criminal characters. In contrast to these sinister figures, the group to the right symbolizes honest production and labor.[39]

It is important to note that nowhere in McLeary never told what role the figures in *Modern Justice* actually play. Watson has made an art historical judgment that the central Justice figure holds her sword over "sinister figures" at the lower left, contrasting with the group on the right, which, "symbolizes honest production and labor." And, while Watson's assumptions about the figures are well informed by his knowledge of art history, he does not acknowledge McLeary's real focus, abstract form, at all.

But, in spite of their strict stance on abstract art, none of the Section's records contain any evidence of officials chastising or condemning the artist or his work. Although

McLeary's and the Section's analyses of *Modern Justice* differ greatly in focus, both do mention the importance of the courtroom's architecture. McLeary approached his mural as an architect, wanting it to be as integrated and site specific as possible as opposed to a mural that would be equally at home in any other courthouse in the country. Considering the Section's desire to please the building's architects, Trowbridge and Livingston, McLeary's attention to the mural's site may have outweighed his use of abstract forms in terms of importance and may have been one of the main reasons why he was not reprimanded for his reliance abstract forms.

Figure 8. Kindred McLeary, *Scenes of New York*, Madison Square post office, New York City, New York, 1939. Oil on canvas. Archives of American Art.

In any event, we know that the Section could not have been overly upset with McLeary since he was commissioned for other federal mural projects after Pittsburgh. Following the Pittsburgh commission, McLeary entered the San Antonio post office contest, but lost to his colleague Howard Cook instead. However, this initial loss did not keep McLeary from entering other Section contests: he won mural competitions for the South Norwalk post office in Connecticut, the Madison Square post office in New York (fig. 8), and a rather large commission for a mural in the lobby of what was intended to be the War

Department's building but is now the State Department's building (fig. 9).

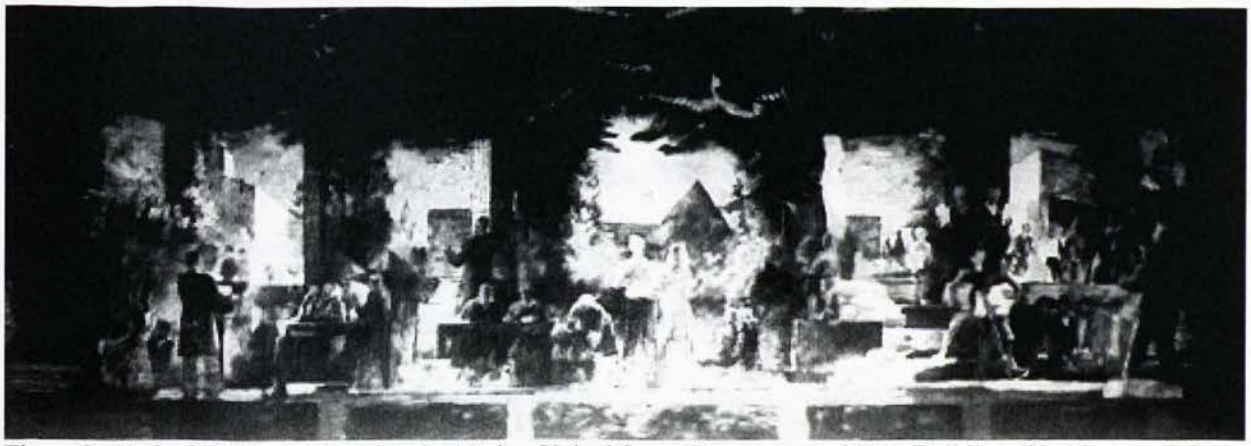


Figure 9. Kindred McLeary, *America the Mighty*, United States Department of State Building, Washington, DC. 1941. Oil on canvas, 12 x 50 feet. Archives of American Art.

These commissions brought McLeary a considerable amount of recognition within the Section. He was included in the Section-produced volume Modern Sculptors and Painters as an artist credited with changing the American art scene and the way the public thought about art forever.[40] In addition to winning more recognition within the Section his later commissions gave McLeary an entirely new career path in addition to his professorial position: that of an active painter and muralist.

Figure 10. Unknown photographer, *Judge Wallace Gourley*. Unknown date. Photograph. Pittsburgh Courthouse Photographs.

When McLeary died in 1949 from a fall in his studio outside of Pittsburgh his obituaries all mention the Pittsburgh mural as one of his greatest achievements. However,

Modern Justice has been missing from the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse since the mid to late 1960s. Former Courthouse clerk Paula Templeton tells the story that then-presiding Judge Wallace Gourley noticed *Modern Justice* peeling from the wall and was concerned about the safety of courtroom members and the judge himself; his position directly below the mural placed Gourley in a particularly precarious position. Exact circumstances of the mural's removal and destination after the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse are, as yet, unknown, though different opinions exist.

A 1972 survey of art in federal buildings noted that the area where *Modern Justice* had been was covered in plaster and a velvet curtain. Based upon what he saw, the surveyor, Professor Donald E. Gordon from the University of Pittsburgh, wrote that the mural was plastered over.[41] Yet, in the 2006 renovation of the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, the construction team excavated part of the plastered covered wall, attempting to recover the mural. According to their reports, no mural existed beneath the plaster wall, which makes sense structurally; not many people would plaster right over a painting on canvas that was peeling from the base of the wall itself.[42]

I believe that the plaster Professor Gordon saw in 1972 was actually part of McLeary's adhesive technique. According to the terms of the contest, all artists were required to give a detailed description of how they planned to attach and install their mural to the Section for approval. McLeary outlined his technique explaining that he, "had the panel plastered with a skin coat heavily gauged with plaster of Paris" and used, "a dextrive-asbestos preparation" instead of the white lead recommended by Section officials.[43]

Given McLeary had an additional layer of plaster placed on top of the acoustic plaster already in place, it is possible that once *Modern Justice* fell or was removed,

that this layer stayed in place. Perhaps, in 1972 Professor Gordon mistook that plaster for a new layer, intended as a cover up for the mural rather than its own adhesive. Sadly, with so little information garnered even in the 1972 survey, there is little hope that McLeary's mural will ever be recovered and returned to Courtroom Three in the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse. Additionally, the mural has all but been forgotten in contemporary scholarship. In a 2006 publication about the Pittsburgh courthouse, McLeary and *Modern Justice* were simply mentioned in passing as an, "allegorical depiction of *Modern Justice*...no longer extant" as if nothing else is known about the mural.

Howard Cook

Figure 11. Unknown Photographer, *Howard Cook*, 1940. Photograph. Archives of American Art.

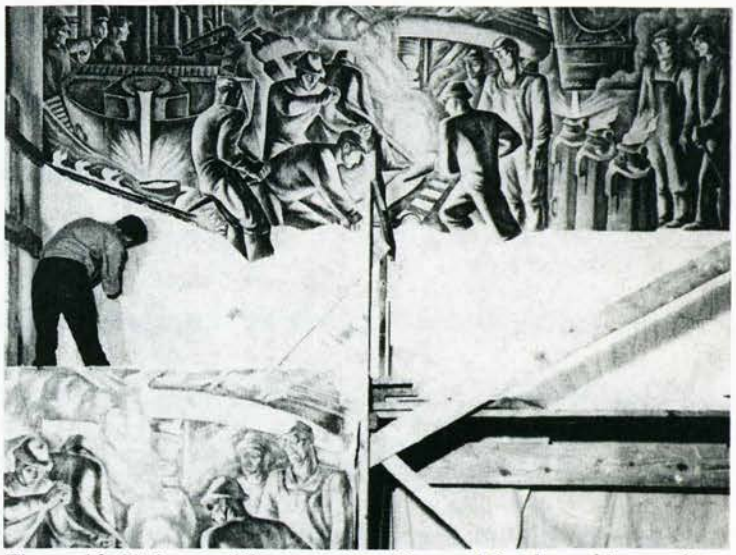


Figure 12. Unknown Photographer, *Howard Cook working on his fresco, Steel Industry*, 1936. Photograph. National Archives.

Howard Cook, arguably the most professionally successful of the three commissioned artists who worked on the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse commission, was primarily known as a printmaker and illustrator. After graduating from Central High School in Springfield, Massachusetts, Cook won a yearlong scholarship to the prestigious Art Students League in New York City. During his time at the League, Cook worked successfully under professors George Bridgeman, Andrew Dashburg, and Maurice Sterne, and received more scholarships to the League and for study abroad in Europe and Asia. Perhaps his most influential relationship was his apprenticeship under printmaker Joseph Pennell who both trained Cook as a printmaker and also helped Cook to launch his career as an illustrator at *Forum* magazine in 1924. Cook travelled frequently for the magazine, allowing him to produce a wide variety of prints based on many different parts of the world.[44]

By 1927 Cook had met and married artist Barbara Latham and had his first solo exhibition of prints at the Denver Art Museum, which was quickly followed by another solo

exhibition at the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe. In 1928 Cook drove from the west coast to New York in search of a dealer for his prints. He connected with Carl Zigrosser who included Cook in a group show at his Weyhe Gallery that same year.[45] Also in 1928, Cook gained more recognition when his woodcut *Boat Builders* was selected for the American Institute of Graphic Arts' *Fifty Prints of the Year.*

Following his New York debut and award in 1928, Cook continued to enjoy recognition. He had solo shows at Princeton University (1929), Pynchon Art Galleries (1931, 1932, and 1933), Weyhe Gallery (1929, 1931, and 1934), and the Museum of Fine Arts in Springfield, Massachusetts (1934). Between 1929 and 1935, he also won sixteen awards. Most notable among those awards were Cook's two Guggenheim Fellowships. The first Fellowship took him to Taxco, Mexico where Cook observed and learned from Diego Rivera's murals in fresco and learned to create frescoes himself.[46] Cook's time in Mexico seems to have been a major draw for Section officials, who may have seen American artists who worked in Mexico as more authentic or better trained. In fact, this trip to Mexico is mentioned in almost every Section-generated description of Cook, almost as if any association with Rivera or Orozco automatically marked Cook as a great artist who was well qualified to paint murals.[47]

On his second Fellowship, Cook travelled through the American south where he observed and drew Americans working on farms, in factories, and going through their daily routines. According to Cook, he created many portrait drawings, prints, and material that formed the basis of the designs that were later used for his Section frescoes in Pittsburgh and San Antonio.[48] We know that among these designs, Cook focused a great deal on drawing the activities of Alabama steelworkers in particular, which, according to Curator Donald D.

Keyes of the Georgia Museum of Art's American Painting Collection, were later used in the Pittsburgh mural.[49]

In between his two Guggenheim Fellowships, Cook was also awarded a Public Works of Art (PWAP) Commission in 1933 to do two frescoes in the new Springfield Massachusetts Courthouse building. This was Cook's first completed federal commission and it may have been the reason he was later invited to participate in the Section's Pittsburgh contest.

Figure 13. Howard Cook, submitted sketch for *Steel Industry,* Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, 1935. National Archives.

Cook sent in a sketch for the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Contest per invitation by the Section in 1935 and tied with McLeary as a unanimous first choice for the mural commission. Rowan congratulated Cook on his win by in August of 1935 with the one suggestion that, "your design might be improved somewhat by a slight simplification through the reduction of a number of your figures. It may be that you do not agree with this opinion, in view of the fact that the crowding may automatically be eliminated in the enlargement."[50] However, the mural's crowding must not have been a major issue as later that same month, Rowan wrote to Cook again, stating, "I am not sure but that you are entirely on the right track, and I am confident that you will create a mural of great distinction. Frankly, no design

that has yet come into the Section moves me more than yours."[51]

The design that Rowan was so excited about was called *Steel Industry* (fig. 13), which showed men hard at work on all different aspects of the steel industry that was so important to Pittsburgh as a city. Cook described the concept for his mural in a letter to the Section as presenting, "certain major processes in the manufacture of iron and steel."[52] The mural is crowded with male figures all hard at work in mines and factories, surrounded by clouds of steam and bursts of light coming from their work. The figures perform their specific processes in a counterclockwise spiral, beginning with workers in an ore mine at the mural's lower left corner, moving to coal miners at the lower right corner, up to the mill with Superheater machines and male "Puddlers" and ending with rollers and welders preparing raw steel in the mural's lower central section. Cook goes on to identify every single figure in the mural, what their function was within the larger process of producing steel, where they were located in the mural, and where their ancestors had come from.[53]

While Section officials were happy to receive Cook's thorough explanation of his mural's subject matter in the Section's records, the fact sheet on Cook's Pittsburgh mural described *Steel Industry*'s subject matter much more concisely, focusing on the particular types of machinery included in the mural.[54]

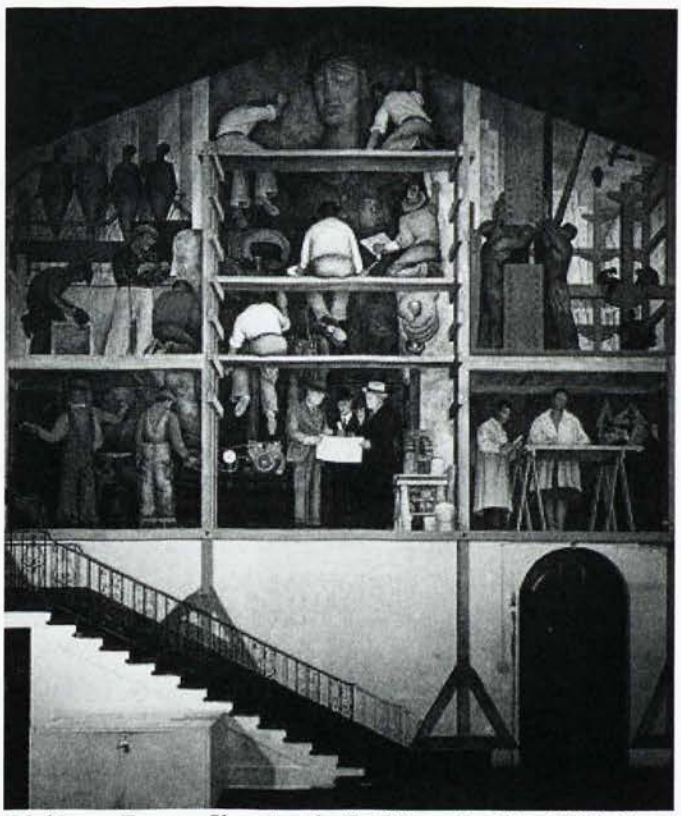


Figure 14. Diego Rivera, *Making a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City*, 1931. Fresco, 5.68 x 9.91 meters. University of California, San Diego Photo Archives.

Interestingly, Cook's mural resembles Diego Rivera's *Making a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City*, which was completed by Rivera shortly after leaving Mexico for a period of time spent in the United States. Rivera completed the mural in San Francisco while Cook was on his first Guggenheim Fellowship and, he surely would have been aware of it. The mural depicts workers creating a fresco that portrays the evolution of a city. In effect, Rivera has created two separate narratives, that of the mural workers and the one in the mural they are creating. The former narrative is told in a similar fashion to the way Cook shows the progression of steel in *Steel Industry*. That is, the city's progress moves from the lower right hand corner in a counterclockwise rotation up and around to the large, center worker figure, replicated almost identically in *Steel Industry*. While this method of depicting the passage of time is certainly not unique to either Cook or Rivera, Cook's exposure to Rivera's work while

in Mexico suggests that *Steel Industry*'s composition may have been taken directly from Rivera's work.

Additionally, Rivera's fresco was written about in the widely read *Art Digest*, and it is entirely possible that Cook may have designed *Steel Industry* with Rivera's recent fresco in mind. Form aside, the two murals also share themes like the worker in society, and unity found in labor. At the time of the *Making a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City*'s commissioning, Rivera's workers were controversial in their subtle references to his disdain for the local San Francisco government and bureaucratic system and towards his own personal, leftist, political beliefs. In contrast, Cook's workers are stripped of any reference to communism, and are meshed so deeply into Pittsburgh's local culture that they would not have suggested Socialist leanings as other sketches submitted to the Section did.[55]

Cook moved to the Pittsburgh suburb of Sewickley, Pennsylvania in October, 1935 in order to work on his fresco on site. His primary concern with the site revolved around the wall itself. In order to properly create a fresco in Courtroom One, Cook requested that,

> …the complete area of wall which is to be covered by the design (all that space within the Raised Plaster Moulding of the dimensions 17'5" by 10'6") will have to be removed down to the basic wall of terra cotta tile. That is, whatever layers of plaster, acoustic plaster, etc. that are laid on the foundation tile wall will have to be removed. When I start work I shall build my foundation wall of metal lath with an air-space between it and the tile foundation.[56]

Though the Section's records do not have a response from Rowan on the subject of wall removal, we may assume that Cook was given permission to strip the plaster after examining his detailed artist questionnaire sheet, in which artists were asked to describe their work's dimensions, subject matter, materials, and what was needed for its installation. These responses were held on file as a legal document, holding the artist to his or her initial plan. The questionnaire for the Pittsburgh commission includes the question, "What preparation of the wall is necessary for fresco?" Cook wrote in reply that he planned on creating a true fresco, in the style of the Mexican muralists, which, as he had stated earlier, required removing the acoustic plaster above the judge's bench in the courtroom.[57] Given that the Section allowed Cook to start work on the fresco, we can assume he was allowed to strip down the wall to the terra cotta level.

Because the court was still in session, and Cook would not have access to the room until the court went on recess he busied himself preparing his materials and perfecting the plaster mixture appropriate for the Pittsburgh climate. In Cook's Statement of Training and Experience submitted to the Section, he also writes that, as part of his process, he painted seven fresco panels, some of which were done on the intended scale of the larger mural.[58] By June 12th, 1936 Cook reported that his preliminary studies, cartoons, and pounce sheet had been done for "some time," and he had also completed test sections of the mural in true fresco at true scale. Cook chose a pure type of silica for all the plaster coats, and a haired-lime for the base coat. Cook estimated that he would be able to begin work in the courtroom with his plaster contractors and scaffold constructors, the McNulty Brothers, on July 5th but expected work to progress quickly thanks to his work completed over the winter and spring months.[59]

Cook's choice to make his mural in "true fresco" certainly presented the artist with problems and additional paperwork with the Section, but Cook was committed to his craft and believed that murals, if possible, should be made in a similar way to those produced in Mexico, even though this meant paying for his scaffold, assistants, and additional materials out of pocket since, as mentioned, all winning artists were paid the same regardless of required materials. However, the expense only proved to advance Cook's reputation within Section; officials were thrilled that Cook was creating a true-fresco mural, in part because it was a more substantial project but also because it was then associated even more with the larger, specifically Mexican, mural tradition but was inspired by American life.

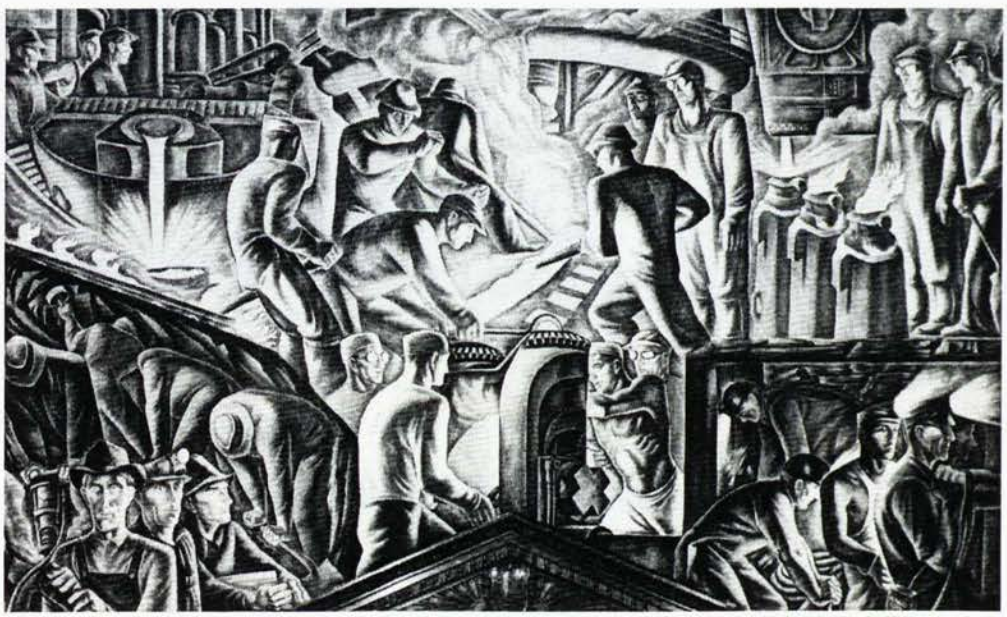


Figure 15. Howard Cook, *Steel Industry,* Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, 1936. Fresco, 20 x 9.83 feet. National Archives.

Medium aside, *Steel Industry* was also immediately recognized as a significant work both by the Section and non-federal art associations. Following its August 7th completion, The Architectural League of New York awarded Cook its prestigious Gold Medal in 1937, "for the finest mural painting done in 1937."[60] Rowan also wrote to Cook stating that, "Frankly, no design that has yet come into the Section moves me more than yours," while

local jury commissioner Wilfred A. Readio told Rowan that, "there will be few mural works of our generation that exceed [*Steel Industry*] in distinction."[61]

That same year, Cook won another Treasury-run competition for the San Antonio Post Office murals in Texas. Slightly different from the Pittsburgh commission, the San Antonio competition was run through TRAP, not the Section. It was also conducted nationally as opposed to the locally as seen in Pittsburgh, making the San Antonio contest more competitive. The San Antonio murals were intended to represent all of Texas' history to date in a series of 16 frescoed panels. Like *Steel Industry*, the San Antonio murals (fig. 16) were well received upon their completion in 1939.[62]

Figure 16. Howard Cook, San Antonio Post Office Murals, San Antonio, Texas, 1939. Fresco. San Antonio Post Office Photos.

Following his Pittsburgh and San Antonio commissions, Cook's reputation in the Section and in the larger art world rose significantly. Possibly because of his large works for the Section or Bruce's high regard for the artist, Cook first served on a Section jury to select mural designs for the St. Louis Post Office.[63] Then, in 1940 Cook won another Section commission to complete murals for the Corpus Christi Post Office in Corpus Christi, Texas, which he completed the following year.

In addition to this last Section mural, Cook also participated in a number of travelling Section exhibitions in which he exhibited watercolors, prints, drawings, sketches, and in one case, samples of his work in fresco. Publicity and large commissions in conjunction with his

solo shows at the Weyhe Gallery seem to have helped Cook acquire a profitable and prolific career in the arts. Up until his death in 1980, Cook was exhibiting in solo shows nationwide, serving as a guest professor at a variety of universities, and, later on in his life, winning lifetime achievement awards. Following his death, the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. even had a major exhibition of Cook's prints, a sure sign of a prolific and successful career.

Of the three artists discussed in this paper, Howard Cook was undoubtedly the closest to the Section's ideal artist. He was relatively unknown upon winning his first Treasury-run commission, and then became progressively better known after each successful Section and TRAP commissioned work. Eventually, Cook did not have to rely on the Section anymore; he was an artist in his own right and no longer needed to rely on the Federal government for all his commissions. Cook, in turn, held the Section in high regard, saying that, "the Section did keep a hell of a lot of fellows alive and not only alive but able to continue in their own way – and one of its most valued contributions was the reaching out into the depths of the country and giving recognition there to artists who never before had had a chance in their lives."[64]

Stuyvesant Van Veen

Figure 17. Unknown photographer, *Stuyvesant Van Veen with his painting, Death and Life*, date unknown. Photograph. Archives of American Art.

The youngest of the three commissioned artists was Stuyvesant Van Veen, who was born in New York City in 1910. Van Veen had already gained some publicity and fame following the selection of his painting *Below the Queensboro Bridge* in 1929 for the Carnegie Institute's 28th international exhibition of modern paintings. At age 19, Van Veen was the youngest painter ever to have work selected for the exhibition, and based on that fact alone, he received a great deal of press and was heralded as an artistic "prodigy."[65] When Van Veen quit his art classes at the City College of New York to paint professionally, newspapers in effect romanticized Van Veen as the traditional solitary genius working alone, outside of the art world's system.[66]

After his first major group and solo exhibitions in Pittsburgh and Chicago, Van Veen continued working in and New York. He returned to the City College of New York and graduated in 1931 and joined the Art Students League in 1933 to study under Thomas Hart Benton for a year. He also had one-man shows in Boston (1930, 1931), Chicago (1930, 1931,

1934), Minneapolis (1931, 1933), and Rochester, Minnesota (1931, 1933), presumably thanks in part to his established reputation in the press.[67]

Beginning in 1934 Van Veen moved away from his small drawings to work on a much larger scale. First he won a citywide, non-New Deal competition to paint three 7 by 9 foot panels for the Riverside Memorial Chapel in New York City. Following that commission, Van Veen was awarded a PWAP commission to paint a panel for Fordham Hospital in New York City of two large boats titled *Paracelsus, USA.*[68] Then, Van Veen completed a mural with undocumented subject matter for the library in the Carl Mackley Housing Project in Juniata Park, Pennsylvania.[69]

Following these commissions, he was also invited to participate in the Section's relatively large Newark Post Office and Courthouse competition. According to Van Veen he, "had trussed up all [his] social convictions" for his submitted sketch and attempted to submit a non-controversial work that would not upset the Newark community and which the Section would select.[70] In spite of his attempts to avoid any potential conflicts in his work and paint something that would please the Section, Van Veen did not win the contest.

Despite his loss in the Newark competition, Van Veen was given another chance with the Section as one of twenty nine artists directly invited to participate in the Pittsburgh Competition in 1934. Looking back on his two sketches submitted to the Newark and Pittsburgh contests, he wrote that he felt, "pretty ashamed of the attitude [he] had taken on the first one [Newark]" and submitted something closer to his personal ideals for the Pittsburgh contest.[71]

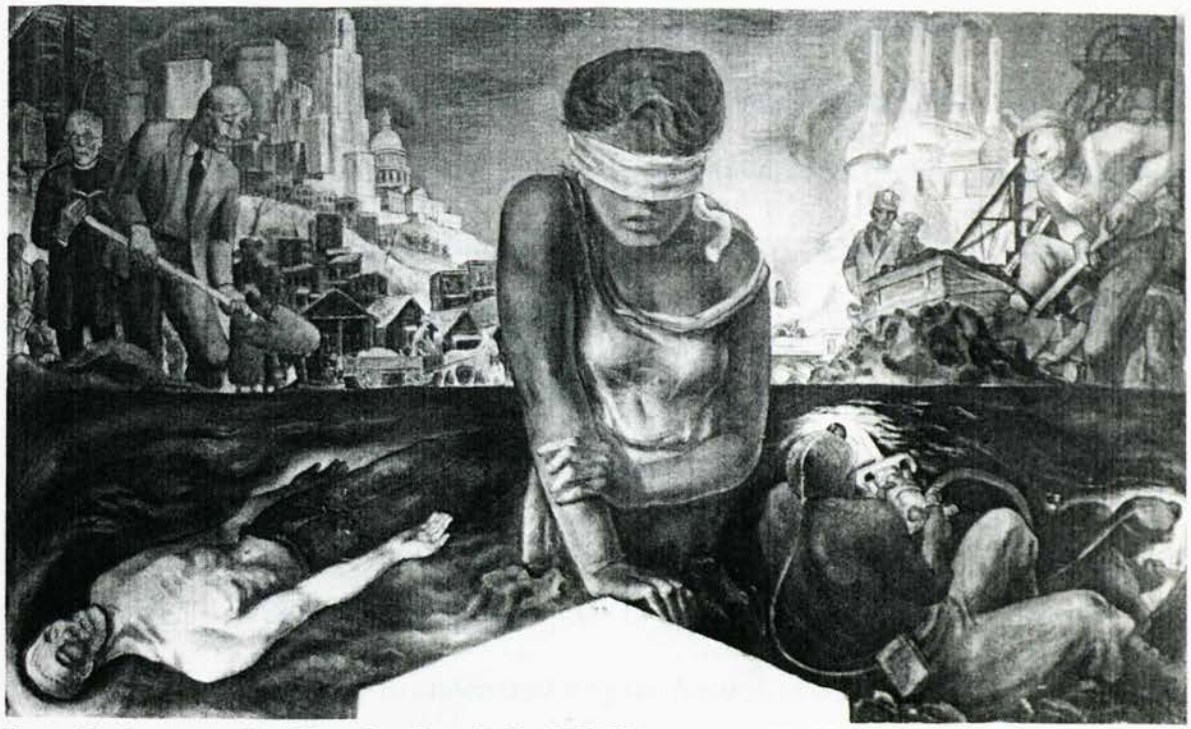


Figure 18. Stuyvesant Van Veen, *Death and Life*, 1935. Oil on canvas. The National Archives.

His submitted sketch was entitled *Death and Life*, which was tied with two other murals for the third and final spot in the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse. In his letter to Dows, Readio recommended Van Veen's sketch as the second choice out of the three, stating:

> There is some question of the advisability of the scale found in the work. Portions of the design are exceptionally able both as to design and painting, but the design as a whole does not integrate formally. It is vigorous to the point of being almost undesirably overpowering. There is a serious question whether its extreme somberness is desirable in a city which enjoys much less than the national [*sic.*] quota of sunshine.[72]

In looking at Van Veen's sketch, it is difficult to see examples of poor integration or

discern what Readio meant by his comment about the sketch's "unadvisable" scale. *Death and Life* is balanced compositionally and many other Section murals feature figures as large or larger than the figures seen here. It is, however, easy to see what Readio means in terms of "lack of sunshine." Instead of focusing on positive aspects of Pittsburgh and the justice system, as McLeary and Cook had done, Van Veen chose to depict the decaying, corrupt city of Pittsburgh of the 1930s on the left, and on the right, what Van Veen hoped the city would become. In between Van Veen's reality and imagined future, he painted a blindfolded, defeated looking Justice figure.

In reading Van Veen's 1937 description of *Death and Life*'s subject matter and meaning, it is relatively easy to understand why the Section as a Federal institution was not willing to use Van Veen's original sketch. As Van Veen explained to Watson, the original sketch was divided up into two main sections: the left, which portrayed the decaying, corrupt city of Pittsburgh that Van Veen knew, and the right, which was what Van Veen hoped the city would become. He went on to describe the future Pittsburgh as:

> ...a society of tomorrow (I hope) where labor and industry are united in the brotherhood of co-operation and sharing, where the workers are free to live well by what they earn, where they work happily and well, knowing they are rewarded for their labor.[73]

A comment like this would have signaled a hoped-for Socialist version of Pittsburgh, which, of course, the Federal government, and specifically the Section, was strongly opposed to. In that same letter, Van Veen openly discussed his Socialist political beliefs and, in a

1975 interview, even admitted that his work in the 1930s was politically charged "social realism." Given that the Section was an arm of the federal government, and represented all things democratic, Van Veen's obvious political leanings both in writing and in his work were not warmly welcomed.

Figure 19. Victor Arnautoff, *City Life*, Coit Tower, San Francisco, California, 1934. Fresco. Photo by Timothy Drescher, Community Murals Collection.

Two years before the Pittsburgh commission, the PWAP had dealt with an outpouring of controversy over Socialist images included in PWAP murals commissioned for the Coit Tower in San Francisco. Artists Clifford Wright, Bernard Zakheim and Victor Arnautoff were commissioned to paint "the American scene." Unknown to the Section, all three artists were Socialist and believed that the social changes of the 1930s were a large part of the American scene. In each artist's mural there were symbols of a shift from capitalism to Communism, which Wright defended as "another alternative which exists in the current

'American scene.'" One example of these subtle hints at a progression towards Communism within the Coit Tower murals is in Arnautoff's *City Life*. While he certainly followed directions, showing a typical American city street scene, he included a number of Communist Party publications including *Masses* and *The Daily Worker* on a newspaper stand and in the hands of its customers.[74] Ed Bruce was furious and the controversy made all New Deal art programs especially wary of covert Socialist imagery.

The amount of bad press generated by the San Francisco murals was too much to risk again. Instead, Dows and Bruce asked Van Veen to re-do his original sketch as a much simpler solution. This way, Dows and Bruce would not be forced to turn away a talented artist simply because of his political beliefs.

Apparently, Section officials were not interested in Readio's first choice for the third mural, a much simpler sketch that depicted Pittsburgh's history dating from the colonial period to contemporary Pittsburgh by the Pittsburgh native Lorin H. Thompson. Thompson's sketch was, in terms of subject matter, quite different from any of the three commissioned murals. His mural was much more closely tied to the "local history, past or present" as stated in the competition announcement. Readio relayed that the local committee's only issue with Thompson's work was that "its color would not be exceptionally satisfactory in relation to the room except in terms of its animation,"[75] and so, based on its overall color scheme, was not selected by the Section.

Readio's preference for Thompson aside, the local committee's third choice for the final mural was by Roy Hilton, also a Pittsburgh native. His sketch included steel workers, a plane, the University of Pittsburgh landmark, the Cathedral of Learning, and the same Westinghouse Bridge as Van Veen later used in his mural *Pittsburgh Panorama*. Readio

wrote that Hilton's sketch was "lacking in movement or focus" and recommended that the Section consider the three final sketches in order of descending quality, Thompson, Van Veen, and Hilton.[76]

Strangely, contrary to the local committee's and Readio's personal wishes, Rowan awarded the third Pittsburgh commission to Van Veen on behalf of the Section on August 9th, 1935. However, in the congratulatory letter, Rowan related and endorsed Readio's critique of Van Veen's sketch. Rowan also wrote that, in light of the issues found in *Death and Life*, the Section would not award Van Veen a contract for a mural based on the submitted sketch but, rather, would give him an opportunity to submit either a redesigned version or an entirely new sketch.[77]

Interestingly, when officials asked Van Veen to edit his submission or to create an entirely new work, the risks of including symbols alluding to Socialism and Communism were never mentioned. Instead, Van Veen's "poor composition" and "lack of flow" along with "sadness," were the only things Van Veen was explicitly asked to change. In other words, Section officials never directly mentioned the issue of Van Veen's political point of view, and so Van Veen sent in numerous revised sketches in which he altered the central Justice figure so that she would seem less distressed, less helpless, and less blind.

Figure 20. Paul Cadmus, *The Fleet's In!*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 30 x 60 inches. Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

This act of talking around the actual issue at hand in a work of art was not new to federal art programs funded through the Treasury Department. *The Fleet's In!* (fig. 20), a painting of United States Navy members on shore leave, by PWAP artist Paul Cadmus had caused a national debate only a few years earlier. The ordeal was started by the painting's removal from a Corcoran exhibition by an outraged, retired Admiral Hugh Rodman. The Admiral claimed that the painting was an inaccurate and disgraceful depiction of how sailors on leave acted. Instead of drinking heavily and making a scene as soon as they arrived on shore, the Admiral insisted that sailors took part in more wholesome activities, like visiting the local library or YMCA. Cadmus disagreed, saying that he only painted what he himself witnessed on Riverside Drive. As he explained, "'It [*The Fleet's In!*] was not artistic – but it was true.'" This disagreement then sparked a nationwide fascination with Cadmus, the painting, Admiral Rodman, and the United States Navy's sailors in general. Individuals who opposed the Admiral and his examples of wholesome sailor activity held up the painting as a symbol of normal masculinity and called the Admiral's "prettified" impression of United States sailors effeminate and blatantly inaccurate.

Richard Meyer argues that the Admiral and Cadmus' significant silence about what

specific activities sailors were participating in *The Fleet's In!* acted as a signal to readers that they were allowed to make their own assumptions. Many 1930s readers would, upon looking at the painting, immediately understand that Cadmus and the activities he refers to are homo-sexual. Meyer points out that the "fairy" and sailor figures exchanging a cigarette in the left corner are a particularly obvious homo-sexual pair. The shared cigarette and direct gaze between the two men hint at a possible sexual encounter later that evening. However, the Navy and Admiral Rodman never publicly called attention to the "fairy" figure or the homo-sexual undertones in the painting. In effect, the majority of the country, including PWAP officials, talked around the homo-sexuality issue in *The Fleet's In!* and instead focused on whether Cadmus' sailors were realistically portrayed as drunken revelers or a blatant slap in the face to the mainly wholesome sailors in the United States Navy.[78]

However, in the Pittsburgh contest's case, both Van Veen and Section officials finally decided that the Justice figure was superfluous and the Pittsburgh landscape was much more interesting and important to the design. Personally, Van Veen was conflicted about how changing his design would reflect his beliefs. It was not until January of 1936 that he realized, "one cannot do anything of that [politically radical] sort for the government, has no right to; and shouldn't try. That instead one should do the most thoroughly craftsmanlike and artistic job one can so that one builds up enough of a reputation and respect that in the future what one has to say is viewed with respect and not as adolescent howling."[79]

Figure 21. Stuyvesant Van Veen, revised sketch, *Pittsburgh Panorama*, date unknown. National Archives.

Figure 22. Stuyvesant Van Veen, final sketch, *Pittsburgh Panorama*, 1937. National Archives.

After nearly a year of negotiating redesigned versions of the original sketch and a slew of new sketches, Van Veen was awarded a contract based on his new sketch titled *Pittsburgh Panorama*. The image was organized around the new Westinghouse Bridge, a landmark that acted as an entrance into Pittsburgh both in real life and in Van Veen's sketch.[80] Through the bridge's arch, one can see a composite view of Pittsburgh with a steeply pitched perspective. Though geographically inaccurate, due to the perspective's manipulation, the Cathedral of Learning and other large buildings appear furthest in the background, the residential neighborhoods are in the middle-ground, and factories are below them in the foreground. On top of the bridge Van Veen painted a variety of Pittsburgh's citizens ranging widely in terms of their financial background whom he described as, "Smart cars and smart people, trucks and laborers, tramps and buses, everyone who made up the population of that industrial melting-pot of nations and classes."[81]

What Van Veen neglected to mention to Watson was that due to the steep perspective in the painting, the river had to be manipulated as well. This manipulation resulted in Van Veen subtly shifting the river's shape into the form of a hammer and sickle, a blatant Communist symbol. In a 1975 interview with Betty Chamberlain of *American Artist* Van Veen remarked that, "I wouldn't normally have done it...but I was mad enough to compose it

so that thrust of the steel mills across the river's curve slightly resembled – to me – the hammer and sickle."[82]

Figure 23. Stuyvesant Van Veen, *Pittsburgh Panorama*, 1937. Oil on canvas. National Archives

Hammer and Sickle

Unsurprisingly, none of Van Veen's comments that suggested Socialist and/or Communist sympathies were mentioned in the Section's fact sheet. In the "Description of Mural" portion there are only two sentences:

> The artist has made a composite view, arranging the city's buildings, bridges, islands and railroads in terms of design and tone, not geography. Above, on the Westinghouse bridge, which frames the panorama, are figures symbolical of the variegated population of Pittsburgh.

Presumably, no one at the Section noticed the hammer and sickle shaped river as *Pittsburgh Panorama* was approved and installed as initially planned. However, just as the Section had come to a decision about Van Veen's final design, Readio, who had not been shown any of Van Veen's revised or new sketches, was shown photographs of the revised sketch and became very upset. In a July letter to Hopper, Readio, stated:

> I presume that your invitation for comment from me was [*sic.*] simply a polite gesture. However, in response I would say that it is my sincere conviction that

> it is as common place a treatment of the space as could be found and one that I thoroughly regret. It is so utterly lacking in any trace of distinction, that I am quite at a loss as to why it was taken. I hope some way will be found to absolve the local committee from any connection with its selection.
>
> Whatever the defects of Mr. Van Veen's earlier design may have been, and I think there were some, it was certainly not touched with the banality with which this one is saturated. I can call to mind at the moment at least five designs which were sent to Washington, which as they were, without revision, ranked infinitely above this one. I cannot but repeat that I regret this with a sadness not unmixed with anger…I can only add that this is really a temperate understatement of my thoughts on this subject.[83]

Readio's critique of *Pittsburgh Panorama* certainly overemphasizes the perceived "banality" of the work. Van Veen may not have finally completed as controversial a painting as his *Death and Life*, but it is not "saturated" with triviality, nor is it more or less banal than McLeary and Cook's designs let alone the other sketches sent to Washington. But, considering Readio's earlier concerns about the local committee's lack of power in choosing the mural designs, which were more or less allayed by Rowan and Dows, one may easily understand Readio's anger. The local committee, finally, was not allowed to choose all the designs for the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse. While it certainly was and is a federal building, the local committee was formed in order to find designs which suited the surrounding community. In effect, in asking Van Veen to create an entirely new series of

sketches and selecting one on their own, the Section had completely bypassed the local committee's entire function, that is, to select works of art for their local building. In response to Readio's furious letter, Rowan stood firmly behind the Section's actions, writing:

> I respect your absolute frankness, with which, however, I cannot entirely agree. I wonder if some of your reaction is not due to the element of surprise in seeing this design after you have had Mr. Van Veen's first design in mind over so long a period. We in this office, including Mr. Dows, Mr. Forbes Watson, and the Supervising Architect, do not feel that the treatment is banal, but that Mr. Van Veen succeeded in an unusual way in offering the portrait of the physical aspects of Pittsburgh…I have again looked through the photographs of all of the Pittsburgh designs which were sent to Washington and still feel that Mr. Van Veen's is not surpassed by those you speak of in your letter.[84]

However, as 1936 progressed, and Van Veen made little to no effort or progress on his mural, one cannot help but wonder if Rowan remained as firm a supporter of Van Veen as he was in July. As 1936 drew to a close, Rowan was constantly writing to Van Veen, urging him to seriously concentrate on his Pittsburgh mural, reminding the artist that McLeary's mural was ready for installation and Cook's fresco had been completed for months.[85] Van Veen's seemingly unending series of delays continued into 1937. Virtually every few weeks Rowan received a letter from Van Veen complaining of another setback – from illness to the mural falling down and tearing in his.[86] Amazingly, in spite of all his delays, Van Veen did

have time to ask why his biography was not included in the Section's newsletter, *The Bulletin*. According to Rowan, there just was not enough room each month to include every Section artist.[87]

Van Veen finally started to work and receive paychecks for reaching the half and then three quarter completion marks on *Pittsburgh Panorama*. But then, in an uncharacteristic burst of action, he finished the mural sometime in August of 1937. Instead of notifying Section officials and receiving their approval to install it, he strapped the mural to the roof of his Chevrolet, drove to Pittsburgh and installed it in the courtroom himself. As a means of notifying the Section, Van Veen sent this telegram to Rowan:

> Congratulations to US Government on splendid mural now installed in courtroom three of Pittsburgh Federal Building. Government very fortunate how are you me too and what's more when do I get paid. Regards to you Leata and the kids as well as the Section gang.[88]

Section officials were not amused by Van Veen's surprise installation or his telegram.[89] In a December letter to Forbes Watson, Van Veen justified his sudden and unapproved installation by reminding the Section official that unless he had hung the mural that day, Van Veen and the Section would have to wait until July, nearly a whole year later, when the court went on recess again. While Section officials were obviously annoyed that Van Veen had proceeded without federal permission, *Pittsburgh Panorama* had already been hung, approved by Readio, and discussed in the Pittsburgh press. Van Veen could not be denied his final pay check without risking further attention from the press, and so he received

final payment in October of 1937.[90]

Five months later, the Section began to hear from Van Veen again -- this time not as a commissioned Section artist, but as the Secretary of the Mural Artist Guild, which was not a New Deal program but an organized group of mural artists who were classified as a part of the United Scenic Artists of America. While it may seem strange that a painter like Van Veen would take this position, organized artists' guilds and unions were common in the 1930s. In fact, FAP officials were working with unionized artists so often that the director for the New York region, Audrey McMahon, felt the need to write an essay titled *The WPA/FAP and the Organized Artist* in which she stated that artist unions play an important role, "in the understanding between the artist…and the administrative personnel of the Federal Arts Project."[91]

Van Veen first wrote demanding a Section definition for what constitutes a mural, which Bruce gave in April. Van Veen and the Mural Artists Guild sent back the definition they worked out on their own as well as the names and addresses of all members per Bruce's request. Thus began a somewhat pointed and argumentative exchange between the Mural Artists Guild and the Section that lasted until at least 1940.

One may wonder why Van Veen, who had previously been so casual and chatty in his last telegram was suddenly so argumentative and upset with the Section's officials and policies. I believe that his shift in attitude may have been due in part to the lack of attention paid to a Federal Art Bill, written by Van Veen and other members of the Mural Artist Guild, and first submitted to Bruce, Dows, and Forbes Watson at the Section in 1935.[92] Apparently Rowan wrote Van Veen a positive letter that gave Van Veen and the Mural Artists Guild's Federal Arts Bill Committee hope and encouragement to keep working[93] when, in fact, Bruce

had already dismissed the Bill in a memo to Dows:

> I don't know that I can get up anything particularly worth while as a reply to Stuyvesant Van Veen. I think on the other hand it might be a good plan to acknowledge it, thank him for it, and simply tell him that we need all the help that we can get from the artists of the country and that it is very helpful for us to have them take an interest in the matter and cooperate with us in the advancement of the movement.[94]

One wonders if Van Veen's actions and attitude during his work on the Pittsburgh commission, especially during the latter stages, affected Bruce's attitude towards Van Veen's bill. If so, then Van Veen's actions truly are regrettable -- his Federal Arts Bill, while not a polished legal document, contains ideas for permanent nation wide community arts centers, and a more established federal patronage program. The patronage program, in addition to providing larger commissions, would employ artists consistently who could then take on and train apprentices. Really, the bill was intended as a document that would expand on and make the Section a permanent institution.[95]

I could find no further mention of the Federal Arts Bill in Section documents following Bruce's dismissal. Perhaps the lack of progress on his Federal Arts Bill made Van Veen upset, or maybe it was the Section's censoring of his original design, or a combination of these factors that made Van Veen angry at the Section. In any event, in the years that followed the installation of *Pittsburgh Panorama,* Van Veen was not an advocate of the Section and was not asked to do another Section mural ever again.[96]

Van Veen continued to work and paint more murals throughout the 1930s but, in 1940 he wrote to Rowan asking for more Section work. Rowan sent out a memorandum to Bruce, Hopper, and Watson, asking whether they thought Van Veen deserved another commission. Bruce had no comment, Hopper agreed to a small job, but Watson was adamant in his refusal and said no in a way that prevented Van Veen from ever receiving another Federal commission:

> I am strongly opposed to giving further jobs to this artist unless he wins a competition. He has said many…things about the Section. He is…a painter completely without personality. Clever and Commercial. NO![97]

None of the Section records include reference to Van Veen's commercialism, so Watson's charge may have been a personal opinion, or may have been another instance of the Section talking around the actual issue of Van Veen's Socialist leanings. In spite of his rejection by the Section, Van Veen did go on to complete a significant number of other murals both in Pennsylvania and along the east coast. However, he never reached the career highs that Cook did with the Section's help.

In studying the three murals and artists involved with the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Section commission we may better understand how the Section dealt with artists and commissions. Here is a case of the Section awarding a large commission to three very different artists, ranging in levels of experience and style. When we look at *Modern Justice*, *Steel Industry*, and *Pittsburgh Panorama* together, the competition's required themes of justice, local history, and local pursuits are clearly evident as is each artist's attitude about

the commission, ranging from placid to subtly frustrated. And, though at first glance, these Section murals may appear, in the words of McLeary, "quite banal," they are actually testaments to what a federally funded commission can do for the careers of American artists. In studying Section murals we can understand how federal arts institutions went about managing artworks, artists, and their later careers. For instance, the Section gave McLeary a career based solely on this one commission, helped to advance Cook's career to the point where he exhibited at a major museum, and held Van Veen's career back by refusing him more federal work based on his actions and opinions surrounding the Pittsburgh commission. For better or worse, the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse commission, as well as Section work in general, had a significant effect on the way each of these artist's careers progressed.

Appendix A

Howard Cook to the Section of Fine Arts, 1936; Textual Records of the Section of Fine Arts, Letters Received and Other Records Concerning Completed Murals and Works of Sculpture and Their Artists; Textual Records Division; Record Group 121; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

This fresco is designed to present certain major processes in the manufacture of iron and steel. Beginning with the lower half of the panel the section at the left represents the interior of an ore mine, the foreground figures of which are portraits of miners in North Carolina. They are descendents of pioneer English families of the Cumblerland mountains, hardy stock who have been boring into the hills for generations.

At the lower right is a coal mine in Alabama, directly underneath the city of Birmingham. An electric power drill is cutting holes for the dynamite blast and loose coal is being pulled away from the side veins of the pocket.

In the upper left corner steel workers emerge from the mill with a background of gas superheaters for the blast furnace, whose arching form makes the central theme of the panel. The men in the upper center are grouped around the tapping and flow of a blast furnace which sends up from its mouth a glaring billow of heat and flame pierced with weak beams of sunlight. A puddler casts crystals into the stream of molten iron, others work the flow with long poles, and another pours a ladle full of iron into square sand moulds.

At the left of the blast furnace a worker wearing a steel mesh mask for protection against flying bits of hot metal is working the pour from a pig-iron machine which, electrically propelled, carries the charge of molten iron from the blast furnace to moulds running on an endless chain up an incline where the iron ingot cooks.

The great steel-pouring ladle on the upper right has just come filled from the open hearth and is discharging into upright steel ingot mouldes, the mouldes in front have been

filled, blue gasses burning through side vents, and a crest of flame from a bag of material such as the worker at extreme right holds.

The preparation of raw metal works down to a climax in the lower central section of the design where sheet steel is pressed through a rolling mill. Two foreground "rollers" with long pincers in their gloved hands put the multiple sheet of hot steel back into the machine as it jumps out from the mill rollers from one side to the other. This movement is very rapid and exhausting to the "rollers" but it presents a fascinating play of two tense bodies. Welders stand beside the machine because of danger and intense heat incident to work on hot metal men wear thickly padded clothes, bulky asbestos leggings, asbestos gloves and goggles. For this reason steel and iron workers present a robot like sensation, superhumans in control of terrifying bursts of flame and streams of molten metal, volcanic monsters, which make an awe-inspiring spectacle of beauty as a result of a routine process in daily industrial life.

Since my desire was to combine mining processes with the above finishing metal operations the underground crypts penetrate underneath a solid foundation for the upper part of the design to rest upon. Also the vague light of underground throws a cool veil over these sections, a weird pallor on faces. These cool parts contrast with and set out the general warmth and glow of color in the central and upper sections which in every instance result from the burning force of heat.

The rhythms of the design and patterning of color is intended to flow finally into the focal point of the composition, - the sheet rollers -, who symbolize the finishing process in the evolution of a steel product.[98]

Appendix B

Stuyvesant Van Veen. Federal Art Bill, 1937. *Edward Bruce Correspondence.* Archives of American Art. Reel DC 39.

A Federal Art Bill

A bill to provide for the establishment of federal art centers throughout the United States for the purpose of employing artists and for the purpose of developing the arts and culture of this country.

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled that this act shall be known by the title THE FEDERAL ARTS BILL.

1. There shall be created a department to be known as the Department of Fine Arts consisting of five members elected by the artists. There shall be called by the President of the United States a National Convention of Artists one month after enactment of this bill. This convention shall consist of regularly elected delegates from organized groups of artists in this country. Five members of the department shall be elected by this delegated body. They shall serve for the period of two years and shall be responsible and accountable only to this national convention which shall meet annually. One of these five members shall be designated to act as secretary of this department elected by this body of five.

2. There shall be established by the department hereby created regional territorial art centers which an operating center in each such division, from which center the said department shall administer its activities in the territorial divisions on the basis of the

recent Public Works of Arts Project established under the Civil Works Administration Act of December 1935. This department shall appoint executive heads for each of the art centers created under this act.

3. Each of said art centers shall register all artists within the territorial division which it serves who may apply to such art centers for employment and each of such artists who are registered shall be employed by the regional art center as herein after provided and shall be paid during the period of such employment by the regional art center at the rate of $2.00 per hour for a minimum of twenty hours a week. All those artists employed at the above rate shall be known as professional artists. There shall also be created employment for assistant or apprentice artists. They shall also receive a twenty hour per week minimum at the rate of $1.25 per hour. Assistant artists after serving apprenticeship of three years shall automatically be classified as professional artists.

4. A professional artist, as the word is used in this act, is defined as one who has gone through training as an artist and who makes art work his or her profession. The requirements for qualification shall be at least five years of art training and practice in his craft and to show work of professional competence that shall show active participation and development of his or her art. Artists not having qualification can show work to be submitted to duly appointed jury selected by the regional art administrator who may upon examination of applicants work, qualify him or her for work. All applicants who have practiced art unable to meet qualifications herein

provided for shall be employed as apprentice or assistant artists. There shall be no discrimination in the employment of professional or assistant artists because of race, creed, color, or political belief.

5. The regional art center shall employ the artists registered with it for any and all types of art work, including (a) mural painting in public buildings, (b) decorative and monumental sculpture in public buildings, (c) easel painting, (d) sculpture for exhibition in travelling and loan exhibitions, (e) lithography, etching, wood-cuts, and other graphic arts for travelling and loan exhibitions, (h) art research, and (i) teaching each of the above types of art work. Employment of artists shall be in the above state of divisions according to the qualifications of artists to such jobs and subject to the artistic and cultural needs of such regional district.

6. All work other than that done in public buildings produced by the artists employed by the regional art centers shall be classified and assembled in art lending libraries and they shall be available for exhibitions for schools, libraries, museums, hospitals, churches, or other institutions for public and private and to general public at nominal rental fees to be determined by the art centers.

7. Sales of art objects shall be made at nominal sale prices of works to public and semi-public institutions where its exhibition will be available to the general public.

8. Regional art centers shall engage in the education of the public within its territorial

division in the knowledge and the appreciation of art providing lectures, classes, preparation of monographs, brochures and other literature dealing with art and its appreciation.

9. The art center shall serve as a medium to provide artists to public institutions for purposes as outlined in section five of this act.

10. Funds for the maintenance and operation for each of the regional art centers and for the salaries to be paid to the artists shall be appointed by the heads of this department from funds provided by the Federal Government. Fees or percentages shall be charged and collected by each of the art centers for the rental of pictures, and exhibitions, from sale of literature, brochures, monographs, on art, from sale of art objects to public institutions, from nominal charges for lectures and classes, all of which shall be accounted for and turned over to the department. Additional revenue needed for the maintenance and operation of the art centers, shall be raised by an annual tax of two and a half per cent upon private art collections of the value of $25,000.00 and over, said tax to be levied and collected and payable similar to the method provided by the collection and payment of income taxes by the Internal Revenue Department. All other funds shall be provided by the income and property taxes regularly levied by the federal government.

I feel that the following changes should be made before further steps are taken:

1. Line 2. Department of Fine Arts and Education

   Line 2. Appointed by the President

There should be the convention but its work should be purely representative; the executive and resting in the hands of the appointed members.

3. Line 6. If artists are fully qualified, wages should be higher. (This would be feasible under a well regulated system.)

Line 8. Apprentices much be qualified, too.

4. Line 8. With limitations, or else anyone might apply.

5. i. In art schools established under such administration, or in colleges and high schools under Federal jurisdiction.

j. Employment in designing costumes, scenery, etc. on theater projects.

k. Employment in decorative and embellishment of C.C.C. Camps, Federal Housing projects and similar enterprises.

7. If they are paid by the government, some definite percentage should return to the government.

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Notes

[1] Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression,* viii.
[2] Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression,* viii.
[3] See Appendix A for Van Veen's Federal Arts Bill.
[4] General Services Administration, *A dialog With the City: Works of Art from 1936 to 2006* (General Services Administration, 2006), 1.
[5] Olin Dows, "The New Deal's Treasury Art Program: A Memoir," in *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs,* edited by Francis V. O'Connor (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 15.
[6] Dows, "The New Deal's Treasury Art Program: A Memoir," 14.
[7] Dows, "The New Deal's Treasury Art Program: A Memoir," 12.
[8] Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Tmple University Press, 1984), 11.
[9] Dows, "The New Deal's Treasury Art Program: A Memoir," 20. The Section really ended by fading out due to budget constraints necessitated by the advent of World War II beginning in 1941 and then finally ending the program altogether in 1943.
[10] Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 295-321. Cook served as a local judge in the New London, Ohio Post Office Contest and supported artist Lloyd Ney's abstract mural *New London Facets*, ultimately successfully getting one of the only abstract mural approved and hung by the Section.
[11] Cook to L. W. Rubenstein, March 4, 1944.
[12] The Vitetta Group Report on the Pittsburgh Courthouse, BD-1.
[13] According to GSA records, the strike ended and work on the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse resumed in 1932.
[14] Homer Saint Gaudens to Olin Downs, January 16, 1935.
[15] Letter to Saint Gaudens from Rowan, February 7, 1935.
[16] Dows to Readio, February 9, 1935. Dows also wrote, "The Section of Painting and Sculpture is going to be very much influenced by the recommendations that you and your committee make on each individual design that you send in to us. These designs as you know will be sent into us anonymously. The Section will make a recommendation to the Director of Procurement who is Admiral Peoples. The final decision will rest with him, but I strongly suspect that the recommendation of this Section will carry conceivable weight. This has not happened yet as no designs have come in."
[17] Readio to Dows, February 15, 1935. "When I acceded to Mr. Rowan's request that I serve as chairman of the committee here, I did so because I believe very much in the vitality of the program which you propose. However as I study the details of its execution, I am beginning to wonder whether the apparent intention of keeping control strongly centralized in Washington may not prevent my assistance being of appreciable value. With this possibility in mind I want to assure you that I am in no wise reluctant to withdraw my acceptance and leave you free to proceed as seems best."
[18] Dows to Readio, February 26, 1935 and Readio to Dows March 4, 1935.
[19] While not stated in any of the correspondence, we may guess that Dows and Rowan wanted the architects to be involved in the selection of the murals because their designs for the Federal Building so carefully allocated space for artwork. Given their level of

commitment to art in federal buildings Dows surely thought that the firm would support the Section's work wholeheartedly, giving both the firm and the Section good publicity. Dows probably also wanted to ensure that the architects, after all their hard work and careful designs, were happy with the ultimate end product.

[20] Olin Dows to W. A. Readio, March 29, 1935. Livingston is referring to the lack of compensation given to artists for their sketches submitted for the competition. As Dows explained in his reply to Livingston, no one else complained about the lack of compensation for sketches, but Livingston felt that participating in any way in a contest that did not compensate all artists for sketches would compromise his professional reputation.

[21] Readio to Dows, April 25, 1935.

[22] Section announcement for the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Contest, 1935.

[23] Unfortunately Section records do not include the name of the architect or whether it was Rowan or Dows who finally served on the local jury.

[24] Kindred McLeary, "Kindred McLeary" in *Painters and Sculptors of Modern America* (New York: Thomas P. Crowell, 1942), 64.

[25] McLeary, *Painters and Sculptors of Modern America*, 64

[26] McLeary, *Painters and Sculptors of Modern America*, 64

[27] McLeary, *Painters and Sculptors of Modern America*, 64

[28] McLeary to Rowan March 10, 1936.

[29] Section announcement for the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Contest, 1935.

[30] Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression,* 63-65.

[31] Rowan to McLeary, August 9, 1935.

[32] Readio to Rowan, July 25, 1936 and McLeary to Rowan July 27, 1936.

[33] McLeary to Rowan, September 30, 1936.

[34] Rowan to Dows, October 19, 1936.

[35] McLeary to Rowan October 22, 1936.

[36] McLeary to Rowan, February 8, 1937.

[37] McLeary to Rowan, July 9 1937 and Rowan to McLeary, July 13, 1937.

[38] McLeary to Forbes Watson, October 11, 1937.

[39] McLeary fact sheet on *Modern Justice*.

[40] Monroe Wheeler, introduction to *Painters and Sculptors of Modern America*, (New York: Thomas P. Crowell, 1942), iv.

[41] General Services Administration. *The Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Murals,* 1972.

[42] General Services Administration. *The Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Murals,* 1972.

[43] McLeary to Rowan June 21, 1937.

[44] Robert L. Gambone, "Howard Cook: From Drawings to Frescoes, January 28 – March 19," *Georgia Museum of Art Bulletin* 14 no. 3 (1989): 3.

[45] Cook to Gag, 1931. The two men became lifelong friends, working within the New York printmaking scene. There is also evidence that Zigrosser relied upon Cook as a reference for women printmakers. Upon Zigrosser's recommendation, Cook wrote often to American printmaker Wanda Gag, instructing her in the etching and drypoint processes via letter.

[46] Gambone, "Howard Cook: From Drawings to Frescoes, January 28 – March 19," 4. Cook was so inspired by the works of Rivera that he created a fresco for the walls of the Hotel

Tazqueno.
[47] Forbes Watson, *Soldiers of Production*. 1938. Cook fact sheet on *Steel Industry*.
[48] Gambone, "Howard Cook: From Drawings to Frescoes, January 28 – March 19,"4.
[49] Gambone, "Howard Cook: From Drawings to Frescoes, January 28 – March 19,"4-7.
[50] Rowan to Cook, August 9, 1935.
[51] Rowan to Cook, August 27, 1935.
[52] Cook to Section, *Mural in True Fresco by Howard Cook*, 1936.
[53] Cook's description of each figure can be found in Appendix A in his letter to the Section.
[54] Cook fact sheet on *Steel Industry*. At the lower right is a coal mine in Alabama, directly under the city of Birmingham. An electric power drill is cutting holes for the dynamite blast and loose coal is being pulled away from the side veins of the pocket. The men in the upper center are grouped around the tapping and flow of the blast furnace. A [puddler] casts crystals into the stream of molten iron, others work the flow with long poles and another pours a ladleful of iron into square sand moulds. The man wearing the steel mesh mask is working the pour from a pig-iron machine. On the upper right the steel-pouring ladle is discharging into upright steel ingot moulds. In the lower central section steel is being pressed through the rolling mill.
[55] *Death and Life,* Stuyvesant Van Veen (1937).
[56] Cook to Rowan, January 22, 1936.
[57] Section artist questionnaire for Cook March 25, 1936, Signed April 2, 1936.
[58] Cook's Statement of Training and Experience (for frescoes) March 25, 1936, signed April 2, 1936.
[59] Cook to Hopper, June 12, 1936.
[60] Betty Duffy, *The Graphic Work of Howard Cook* (Washington, D.C.: Museum Press, Inc., 1984), 159.
[61] Readio to Rowan, 1937.
[62] John Bob, "Last Friday…," *The Rotary Club: The Wheel of Fortune* 27, no.21 (1938): 1-3.
[63] Bruce's list of Recommended Artists, n.d. "I would recommend without qualification. A fine painter and a sincere personality of much intelligence."
[64] Cook to L. W. Rubenstein, March 4, 1944.
[65] "30 New Art Shows to Open This Week," *New York Times* (New York, NY), January 4, 1937. *New York Evening Sun* (New York, NY), October 17th, 1929.
[66] *New York Morning World*, (New York, NY), October 24, 1929.
[67] *Boston Transcript* (Boston, MA), March 8, 1930. *Boston Post* (Boston, MA), March 23, 1930. These articles about Van Veen's exhibition first take the time to write about Van Veen as the youngest artist ever included in the Carnegie Institute's exhibition and his age in general before discussing his drawings or the Boston exhibition.
[68] Van Veen Resume, n.d.
[69] It is unclear from Van Veen's records whether or not this mural was PWAP, Section, WPA or non-New Deal entirely.
[70] Van Veen to Watson, December 6, 1937.
[71] Van Veen to Watson, December 6, 1937.
[72] Readio, July 29, 1935.
[73] Van Veen to Watson, December 6, 1937.
[74] Marling, *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression,* 45-47.

[75] Readio to Dows, July 29, 1935.
[76] Readio to Dows, July 29, 1935.
[77] Rowan to Van Veen, August 9, 1935.
[78] Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth –Century American Art*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33-94.
[79] Van Veen to Rowan, January 6, 1936.
[80] Van Veen to Forbes Watson, December 6, 1937.
[81] Van Veen to Forbes Watson, December 6, 1937.
[82] Betty Chamberlain, "Censorship Some Day?," *American Artist*, 39, February (1975): 26. The article also mentions that Van Veen's anger was over being asked to change his initial sketch in the first place.
[83] Readio to Hopper, July 2, 1936.
[84] Rowan to Readio, July 6, 1936.
[85] Rowan to Van Veen, December 30, 1936.
[86] Van Veen to Rowan, February 12, 1937 and March 24, 1937.
[87] Van Veen to Rowan, June 13, 1937 and Rowan to Van Veen, June 25, 1937.
[88] Telegraph from Van Veen to Rowan, August 30, 1937.
[89] Hopper wrote back to Van Veen in September 1937 reminding Van Veen that murals need to be approved by the Section before being hung, but in this case, Van Veen should send a photograph for final approval. He also told Van Veen that Rowan was on vacation in Mexico and could not answer the telegram.
[90] Readio to Rowan, September 22, 1937.
[91] Audrey McMahon, "The WPA/FAP and the Organized Artist," in *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs,* edited by Francis V. O'Connor (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 260.
[92] Dows to Bruce, December 28, 1935.
[93] Van Veen to Rowan, January 6, 1936.
[94] Bruce to Dows, January 3, 1936.
[95] See Appendix B for the full Federal Arts Bill.
[96] December 12, 1940 memorandum. Forbes Watson's commented in an interoffice memo that Van Veen was not an enthusiastic supporter of the Section.
[97] December 12, 1940 memorandum.
[98] Cook to Section, *Mural in True Fresco by Howard Cook*, 1936.