

MY APPROACH TO MURAL PAINTING

by HAROLD LEHMAN

I have been asked to say something about my approach to mural painting. At the outset I would like to bring the question down to Earth by relating it to a concrete fact - the mural I am now working on at Riker's Island Penitentiary. Before setting a stroke to paper ~~taxpaper~~, I was required to submit a thesis concerning my mural plans for approval by the Commissioner of Correction. In order to illustrate some points which I will presently elaborate, let me quote from this thesis:

(QUOTE FROM THESIS)

The points to which I referred are:

First - The Mural's approach to me. Not only did I approach the mural. Of equal importance, I allowed the Mural to approach me. That is, the mural-situation imposed certain conditions which had to be observed. If I had attempted to bend these to my will, ~~an anarchic procedure~~, I would have violated the basis fact in Mural painting; namely, each mural is a matter of give and take. Let the artist bring to his wall the knowledge, the technical resources, the imaginative, intuitive and emotional faculties which he ~~has~~ as artist is aware of within himself. But he must never forget that a mural is at bottom a social experience whereby he communicates with other men.

Second Point - Conditioning Factors in a Mural. The conditioning factors present in every mural situation ~~form~~ ^{fall} mainly into two categories:- the psychological and the architectural-esthetic. (In the thesis these are given as subjective and objective) In the past these were "Form" and "Subject". Under the heading "Psychological factors" would come the following:

1. The general purpose or nature of the building as a whole.
2. The relation of the architectural unit containing the mural space to that purpose.
3. The general personality or type of the people frequenting the building.
4. The time-factor; very important in determining whether the mural must be comprehended at a glance(on the fly, as it were, as in subways) or

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in a more sustained cumulative manner as in hospitals, libraries, etc.

Under "Architectural-esthetic" these factors predominate:

1. The relation of the space to be covered to its immediate environment (room).
2. The relation of the space to the architectural whole -(building). This point is well exemplified by the Orozco mural in the New ~~York~~ School for Social Research.
3. The relation of the spectator to the wall (angle, height, movement and distance).

In addition to these factors there is the technical one, a primary consideration always. But, I need not dwell on it. We artists know how greatly tools and materials influence the method of our work.

The foregoing then are among the foremost factors conditioning a mural. Only with them as a starting point can it develop naturally, logically. The point is not whether ~~wholes~~ should or should ~~not~~ be made in walls, not whether the abstract method or the surrealist ~~is~~ the valid one, (or, for that matter, the realist, expressionist or all other "ists"). Elements of all of these can and should be ~~used~~ used if the mural-factor-situation warrants it. After all, the theoretical and technical developments in painting up to and including the XX century constitute the grammar of our craft. The mural painter today, granted favorable social and economic conditions, can and should be more articulate than ever before.

I hesitated a moment before putting down the last few sentences;
~~Not because of any weakness in the main point involved, but~~ because ^{some} many might think ^{is not so.}
that I am advocating an amalgam of theories and methods. This would be a mis-
~~interpretation~~. I believe it is necessary for the artist to forget as far as possible his accumulated systems and formulas when confronting his virgin wall. I simply mean to say that the wall itself shall largely determine what the artist

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will put upon it.

This is an organic method, a product of analysis ^{plus} ~~and~~ synthesis; analysis being the mural-factor~~s~~-situation; synthesis, the mural-factor-situation plus the artist's creative ability.

Third Point. Planning the Mural. (Composition)

It would be nice I suppose ~~it~~ if I were able to suggest a clear-cut, ready-made scheme for composing a mural. ~~The~~ Sort of a mural unit scheme as we~~x~~ now have theatre unit settings. Well, I cannot do so. I can only suggest certain points I consider valid in discussing mural composition. In the past there have been such schemes though it is true they were primarily used for disposing shapes on a two dimensional surface. I refer to dynamic - symmetry and the golden section. However, these left out of account the third dimension in mural organization. But more important, they also left out the psychological element, which today, more than ever, assumes a major role in any vital mural ~~C~~omposition.

I don't understand, when people say to me, "But a mural is a plane - two dimensions. We must face the fact and plan accordingly!" What these people forget is that a mural space is not a frozen surface, inviolate. It is a plastic, moving thing and becomes what the spectator's eye makes it at any given point. To the eye, a large rectangular plane, when faced at its center/^{close up} becomes a convex trapezoid. And as the spectator moves from one point to another the mural space changes its shape in rhythm. Furthermore any mural surface must also be considered as bounding space, thereby ~~forming~~ performing a plastic three dimensional function. For the mural space cannot be divorced from the rest of the architectural unit of which it is a part.

The devil of it is that mural painting, with few exceptions, such as

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cupolas, has for so long meant simply a flat wall that all theories of decoration have been developed on that basis. Conjure up in your minds the ~~infinite~~ infinite variety of three-dimensional shapes and their ~~then~~ even more numerous combinations possible for mural painting. Examples:

An unbroken cube set against a convex wall - or concave wall.

A cylinder set against a plane ~~surface~~.

I say, yes!! Let us remember the surface of our mural space . But ~~also~~ let us also remember its functions in space and ^{within} ~~in~~ our eye. These last notes have been concerned with architectural and sensory organization. Much, much can be said on these points. Before leaving them however, I must ~~point out~~ ^{make clear} that, taken together, they constitute only one phase of the design problem and solution. The other equally important phase is again the psychological. For a vital theme will impose its demands upon any design. Dynamic idea demands dynamic treatment . Which leads to two related points: the first is the question of personality, that is, the artist's personality. Since early in the XXth century we have heard the phrase "self-expression". A whole school was formed on that basis. For a long time it remained the root of all modern, progressive art education. Express yourself! That was the idea. What a person put upon a canvas and in what manner depended solely upon that person's individual mental and emotional makeup. Originally this was a reaction to the pretensions and dullness of 'official', academic art. The leaders of this movement found what they were after in the healthy unalloyed art of children and savages. Without doubt, they performed a beneficial service to the creative aspect in art. And the method of self-expression retains its value in easel-painting.

For the mural painter however it is a different story. What needs to be expressed is the idea which germinates and sustains the entire work. Color, drawing, texture, the very handling of the brush or whatever tool, will be determined

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in this manner. So that, in the mural referred to, at one point I show a mine-disaster with a group of rescuers entering the pit-head. Seated are two women, presumably wives of trapped miners. Now this is a very real, a very "it can happen" event. I therefore painted ^{it} with the utmost realism, almost exactly life size to bring the point home. Also, I have placed this scene at almost floor level in the mural, bringing it right down to the observers plane of experience. Prison inmates can and do come right up to study it face to face, as though this scene were merely an extension of their own ~~milieu~~ *milieu*.

On the other hand, at another point is shown a group of figures, symbolic in character. These are heroic in scale and painted stylistically. And they are placed like stones one atop the other, all above the inmates eyelevel. Here there is no perspective. Hardly anything to cause one to say "This is a man!"

But here I've almost encompassed the second point, consistency, in the above note on personality. Consistency in a mural is simply the sum-total of organization: Architectural-esthetic, psychological and technical. To be consistent one must simply pay attention to the mural's demands at each particular point. Consistency is not to me, as it is to others, the same color, drawing, texture, from top to bottom, ^{from} side to side.

Now three ~~more~~ points and I am finished.

~~First~~ - Literary Painting.

Another thing I cannot understand is why artists and others make such an issue of meaning in art. I can understand the revolt of the impressionists and the modern innovators against the banal, stilted, utterly-dead story telling of the official 'school'daubers. But there is a difference between telling a story and expressing an idea. And when the purists apply the epithet "Literary" to a painting they miss the entire point. Which is that the several arts, using different instruments, all have the same ~~view~~ *view* and in view, creative expression. Certainly it does the painter and sculptor little credit to concede all the brains to the writer. And since when have vital ideas become the sole property of the

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man with the pen? Incidentally, even writers themselves have not escaped the purist influence. It has come to such a pass that Andre Gide, in Verve of December 1937, can write, "Each of the arts has at its disposal its proper means of expression, its special eloquence, its own particular processes. (So far O K). I push this need for differentiation so far...that I have banished from my novels and tales ...almost all descriptions of scenery and people which seemed to me to belong more properly to painting." I must repeat. A mural is a social experience wherein the artist creates not alone for himself but for others. Especially in times like ours what is needed is significant idea as well as significant form. This does not necessarily imply the anecdote or narrative. Meaning must be implicit rather than explicit. We take the train - Emotion - and arrive at the station - Idea.

~~The second point~~ - The Machine Age.

How familiar is the cry, "This¹⁵/the Machine Age. We must express it as such, and in an appropriate manner." Here again, as with the purist, cubist, surrealist and other zealots, those who think thus are guilty of over-simplification. For is not this also the age of psychoanalysis, the age of terrific social, economic and political ~~re-~~adjustments? The machine plays its important part, yes. But it is not the dominant factor. To be strictly accurate, the machine's primary ~~part~~ function is to simplify the production of marketable goods and to make life more comfortable for all of us. Beautiful forms have come from the machine. No doubt. And excellent murals can be ^{inspired} by it. Let's get this straight. The possibilities for modern murals based upon modern concepts are so vast it ill behooves anyone to claim hegemony in the creative field for his particular sect. We want no Hitlers in art. We do want progress. Valid contributions of any kind we must accept. As to how their validity may be determined, what other way is there than by judging the results in each particular case. That is, how the conditioning factors have been met and solved. And as to ~~how~~ who will judge these things ... Well this can go on and on. Each must make up his mind for himself. Time will do the rest. For here we border on a hazy no-mans-land where psychologist, philosophers, critics and all ^{the rest} are in there tugging, mauling and opining. In the last analysis

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what can really be talked about? All is instinct. We are swayed or repelled.

All that has gone before are merely offered as accessories to the fact. Accessories to the act of committing a mural. And in the doing of that act lies the inner secret of mural painting. Brush to canvas, or whatever the tool and material. And from that ~~moment~~ moment, we are plunged into the nether world of sensation, perception and the rest of it, approaching mysticism.

Do I hear a voice - "But this is art for art's sake and self-expression! Just what you were condemning a minute ago!"

My answer is, yes. But remember there still is such a thing as ~~psychology~~, the study of the mind, the emotions, in fact everything about a man that cannot be seen, heard, felt, smelt. And it is the mural-painter's task to reconcile his natural inclinations with the inhibiting demands of the mural situation. *an important element in a person's* After all, ~~the essence of~~ maturity ~~in anyone~~ is his ability to adjust ~~to~~ what ~~they~~ he wants to do to what he ought to do. But it is an open question whether artists are mature people. Alfred Steiglitz insists that, at bottom, artists are anarchists - and perhaps they are.

More, much more needs to be said. But we could be here all night and tomorrow. So I will reconcile myself. Does anyone remember what this point started out to be? "The Machine Age". And here we are in the psychology department. Forgive me. I became side-tracked. But this jewel of ours has many facets and must be seen from every side.

I cannot close without mentioning one more point. A very vital one. And that is the question of American Mural Painting. I never ask myself while painting, Now am I being an AMERICAN painter? Am I expressing myself in an AMERICAN way? I consider such an attitude totally irrelevant. And the question unanswerable. For, as observed before, each mural will demand its own expression. It is a naive painter who assumes that when he paints the American scene, (mines, factories, dams, baseball, sharecroppers, etc,) that he paints an American mural. Not to mention the Giotto, Michaelangelo, Tintoretto, El Greco, Picasso or Orozco overtones which usually accompany it. The question of nationality in art is so bound up with those of tradition, geographical isolation

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political and social homogeneity, philosophy of life, tools and materials etc. that I can do little better than touch upon it during the time allotted to me. Suffice it to say that the desires, the needs of peoples in all lands are fundamentally so much the same that ultimately it will be impossible to say, "This is a French mural, or this is an American mural, or a British, Russian, Mexican." For the present, let us give visual shape to the living growing aspirations in American life as demanded in our own walls. In expressing these, we will express ourselves. How fortunate we are that 5 years ago our value to the community was recognized on so large a scale by government. And that today, through the Federal Art Project and the Section of Painting and Sculpture, we may prove our worth. -

In a word - every wall is a challenge. To meet it we must marshal all our weapons, technical, psychological, social, individual and esthetic. To favor one and neglect others is to duck the challenge and not meet it.

~~That~~