

## Myself and the New Deal Art Projects

The first New Deal art projects were launched in 1933. I was then in Los Angeles and had already worked with the famous Mexican muralist, D.A. Siqueiros- learning fresco technique and applying it to portable panels. So when the first mural project opened up I was ready for it. I worked on various assignments until 1935, when I came to New York.

Almost immediately I was accepted on the mural-project there, after showing some of my L.A. work to the mural supervisors. After designing some preliminary sketches for various sites I was asked to design a large mural for Riker's Island in N.Y. I had complete freedom to develop the design as I saw fit. But first I was asked to prepare a written proposal- a "Thesis"- for approval by:

- 1- the Project Director
- 2- the prison authorities
- 3- the Dept of Correction
- 4- the Municipal Art Commission

Having surmounted all these, I got to work on the mural itself. There was a lot of research to do and preliminary drawings. I haunted the Picture Collection of the New York Public Library ( as did all the other muralists ) and went into the field , doing direct observation, sketching and making notes. I was assigned two or three assistants to help with this. Also- I was given models to work from, sent from the Models' Project ( yes, there was a Models' Project too) The Gov't was a generous provider. But not, of course, where money was concerned. We had to do everything and pay all bills on \$23.86 per week. And that was for Master Artists. Our assistants got less- about \$21.50!

There were always some in Congress trying to smash the Art Projects. To appease this group Congress was always harassing

us with new requirements, the most infamous being the 18-month rule: everyone who had been working 18 months had to be laid off and reapply all over again- right in the middle of a brushstroke, as it were. So began the era of the Pink Slip, which led to a famous protest sit-in at the Project Headquarters by 219 artists. I was one of the 219.

But eventually- after many such delays- I finished the R.I. mural. I had painted many separate details, among them two large panels for the N.Y. World's Fair of 1939-40 and half a dozen smaller ones which were exhibited in many places- especially in a large mural show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1940. This was organized by the National Society of Mural Painters, of which I was a member. One of the two large details is now in the permanent collection of the Nat. Museum of American Art in Wash.D.C.

There was a lot of publicity and favorable reviews generated by these exhibits and as a direct consequence I was invited to paint a mural for the Section of Fine Arts in 1941. The Section had nothing to do with the WPA. It was a part of the Treasury Dept's Public Bldgs. Administration and awarded mural commissions in competitions and also by direct invitation. Quality was its chief criterion, not need. Inevitably, as in any Govt. agency, politics played a part, too, but it was 'political politics', not 'art politics'.

The mural I did for the Section was for a Post Office in Penn. and it is <sup>for</sup> there still, in perfect condition. The same can't be said/the Riker's Island mural. It was destroyed in 1962- wantonly, by the then Warden- without a word to anyone.

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