

November 21, 2005

Mr. Gary L. Porter
Regional Historic Preservation Officer
GSA National Capital Region
301 7th Street, SW, Room 7600
Washington, DC 20407

Dear Mr. Porter,

I am writing to comment on the potential action regarding the murals in the Ariel Rios Building. My name and contact information are at the end of this letter. My professional background is relevant to the issues in question for several reasons.

I have taught art history for over 25 years, most of them at Georgetown University, where I am the Wright Family Distinguished Professor of Art History and Chair of the Department of Art, Music, and Theater. My teaching in the areas of 19th and 20th century art regularly includes discussion of such concepts as art and cultural identity, censorship, and the roles of governments in the arts. Two of my seminars, "Art and Public Issues" and "Art Confronting Difference," encouraged students to grapple with issues similar to those the GSA is facing with regard to the murals. A seminar on "Art of the 1930s" introduced students directly to the goals and responsibilities of the U.S. government's art programs under the New Deal - and to the GSA as a repository of research materials. I have also supervised undergraduate theses in Art History and in the American Studies Program that dealt with WPA art and with controversy surrounding public art. As a member of the College Art Association, and former member of the Board of Directors, I have participated in several committee meetings dealing specifically with public art, intellectual property, and historical erasure.

At the most basic level, it would be unfortunate if the important murals in the Ariel Rios building were removed or covered. The murals were commissioned and installed in the original Post Office building as part of a tremendous government art project that is certainly one of history's most positive examples of state involvement in the arts. Changing needs and conditions have already resulted in the removal or over-painting of many WPA murals for reasons ranging from censorship to deterioration - to a degree that should make us treat WPA art as an endangered species. We can only hope that the GSA will not find it expedient to remove the Ariel Rios building murals in answer to complaints that they "stereotype" Native Americans. Such an action would be giving in to superficial, knee-jerk reactions to images that closer study would show to be the reverse of negative stereotyping. Ultimately, a government body would find itself in a position of censoring art of a previous era in order to cater to complaints that appear to be based on generalization rather than specific characteristics of the murals in question.

I do not mean to trivialize objections to negative stereotypes of any group in public buildings or media. The right to voice such concerns is fundamental. However, I would reply that the

complaints do not seem appropriate to the murals by Frank Mechau or the other artists represented in the Ariel Rios building lobbies.

Karl Free's *French Explorers and Indians*, in fact, seems to express generosity and cooperation on the part of Native Americans, as well as a nobility of stature and gesture adapted from 17th century explorers' depictions. In the two works by Ward Lockwood, Indians and pioneers are part of a visual medley of the peoples, animals, and natural forms that made up the American west; figures of the Native Americans are generalized and stylized in keeping with Renaissance-based art preferences, but certainly not stereotyped. In contrast, the other three murals, *Dangers of the Mail* and *Pony Express* by Frank Mechau and *Covered Wagon Attacked by Indians* by William Palmer, show Indians attacking whites. Palmer's work suggests violence most overtly, though still in a somewhat stylized manner based on battle scenes from Renaissance and academic art, and emphasizing the bravery of the white settlers through their central placement rather than vicious cruelty attributed to the Indians.

Mechau's two murals are probably the most significant of the group in terms of their content and quality. Their subject is the postal service, and they stand out among the numerous other WPA post office murals for their clear focus and their economy and elegance of form. As designed for the original U.S. Department of the Post Office, these murals embody the integration of imagery and setting intended by the commissioning program. Both works combine a monumental scene with a group of thematically related vignettes below within a framing border featuring horses, riders, abstract forms, and texts. The stylistic reference to early Renaissance art is significant because this invites American viewers to see episodes of our own history (that of Native American as well as Euro-American settlers) as part of a broad cultural continuum.

A sense of the original success of these works in stimulating awareness of our past struggles and encouraging confidence in the future might even affect visitors in our own day, although the general public no longer has ready access to the building and the murals. A proposal to provide informative material in the vicinity of the murals - including narratives and images related to the outstanding Indian leaders named on the border of the Mechau mural - and to increase opportunities for members of the public to visit this historic ensemble would have my support.

I hope that my comments will be of some use as you continue to gather information, and I will be happy to follow up in any way that might be appropriate.

Sincerely,

Alison Hilton, Ph.D.
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