

26 November 2005

U.S. General Services Administration  
301 7th STREET, S.W.  
WASHINGTON DC 20407

#### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I would like to participate in the process of considering the future of the public murals by artist Frank Mechau in the Ariel Rios federal office building in Washington (EPA headquarters), particularly "Dangers of the Mail" and "Pony Express" by offering the following written comments.

#### STATEMENT OF RELEVANCE

I am a publisher of books on the artists of Colorado and our region, in particular MODERN ART IN DENVER and MODERN SCULPTURE IN DENVER, write regularly on regional art, and also have owned a number of works by Frank Mechau. The Ariel Rios murals have often been discussed in our community. Our mailing list for historic Colorado art and artists is about 4,000 names and I would estimate this as the minimum size of the core group of knowledgeable and concerned members of the public who would expect those of us with a leading role in this arts community to express our views. The number of Coloradans who would have strong views if they knew about the controversy is, in my opinion, much higher.

#### COMMENTS

Frank Mechau is an extremely important artist in the history of Colorado, the West, and indeed, the history of public art in our country. Among many other points--he died tragically in his early 40s. Despite hardly having enough time to establish himself in a challenging profession, his importance was well-recognized even during his lifetime.

In a special issue of Life magazine on U.S. Murals (March 2, 1936), DANGERS OF THE MAIL is reproduced in the center spread of the magazine. This article discusses at length Mechau's art and working methods, not in specialized art terms but in a way that every American could understand. The article quotes Edward Bruce, founding chief of the PWAP who also presided over the founding of the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, and was himself a noted painter and student of Maurice Sterne, wrote:

``Frank Mechau's paintings alone would have justified the entire PWAP [Public Works of Art] program."`

Why are these particular murals of special importance? Because they represent the time in which they were created, with all that was great about the time and all that we wisely

reject today with the benefit of hindsight. As one of many possible examples, recall that the huge public works programs of the depression era--that put millions of Americans back to work and arguably saved the country--was soon followed by a second large federal program which affected American's lives--the wartime internment of Japanese Americans.

At the same time, Native Americans were contributing in a major way to the defense of the country as they donned uniforms and served honorably in the military--and in uniquely Native American ways like the code talkers.

The reaction of today's Native Americans to these murals is understandable and important. They are disturbing, hard to look at, and in significant ways they express misconceptions--and even what may be called propaganda--of the pioneer era that was still current in the public mind (and indeed in historical writing and literature) in the 1930s and 40s. But we cannot 'tell the truth,' educate the public, honor Native American traditions and culture, and be honest about oppression--by simply hitting the 'delete' button on a computer keyboard.

To remove or hide these murals would be the same kind of censorship that European-Americans used against Native-Americans when they, for example, attempted to suppress the use of Native American languages. And as my grandmother used to say--two wrongs do not make a right. If we owe it to today's Native Americans to redress the oppression of the past (and I believe we do owe it to them), we must take positive action--not negative action.

Placing plaques or informative materials to debunk misconceptions about Indian 'massacres' would be worth considering. In my opinion however, an additional initiative should be considered--to use the mural controversy as an opportunity to create positive images and more objective history about Native Americans through commissioning art by some of the great Native American artists working today--or by acquiring historic art by Native American artists that tell a more balanced story. I don't doubt that this could be done--and the US Government AND today's Native American nations have qualified and respected historians who could work together to establish the parameters.

Frank Mechau's murals in Washington, Texas, Colorado, and around the country are public treasures entrusted to today's civil servants--but they are also symbols of American historic and artistic aspiration. As such, they are integral to the national fabric . Future generations of all Americans, including Native Americans, NEED the opportunity to see these murals in order to take hold of their history in ways those of us alive today cannot predict--and with consequences we cannot imagine.

Sincerely,

Lee Ballentine  
Denver CO