Murals at Ariel Rios
Federal Building
1935 - 2006

Post Office Department, Washington, DC
Delano and Aldrich, Architects
The works of art commissioned for the Post Office Department Building serve not only as artistic interpretations of history, but also as catalysts for dialogue about the nature of public art and an artist’s freedom of expression. The artwork neither sanctions any specific event, nor censures any culture or heritage. Rather, these works of art offer an opportunity to juxtapose contemporary views of American history and expansionism with those prevalent in the 1930s, to question perceptions and stereotypes, and to explore the history and heritage of all Americans.

Front Cover: Letter From Home by Alexander Brook, 1939
THE GREAT DEPRESSION OF THE 1930s brought not only a
deflation of incomes but also of hope. The “New Deal” programs of
President Franklin D. Roosevelt offered federal relief, recovery and
reform, and restored the confidence and optimism of the American
people. As we approach the 75th anniversary of the “New Deal,” we
celebrate this unique period of federal patronage of architecture and
the visual arts.

THE SECTION OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, later the Section
of Fine Arts, was administered by the U.S. Treasury Department from
1934–1943. The goals were “to secure suitable art of the best quality
available” and “to bring about a more effective correlation of mural
and sculpture decorations with the architecture of the building.”
The Section awarded commissions through competitions, and paid
artists a lump sum for their works of art for newly constructed
federal buildings and post offices. The new Post Office Department
was designed by the New York firm of Delano and Aldrich in 1931,
and President Herbert Hoover laid the cornerstone on September
25, 1932. Bulletin Number 1 of the Section of Painting and Sculpture,
March 1, 1935, announced the First National Project to embellish the
building with “Romantic Subject Matter in History of Post” for an
expenditure of $95,128.

THE FINE ARTS COLLECTION OF THE GENERAL SERVICES
ADMINISTRATION (GSA) contains over 17,000 paintings,
sculpture, graphics, and textiles originating from the 1850s. Located
in federal buildings and public institutions across the country, these
civic works of art are preserved as part of our cultural heritage and as
a tribute to the important tradition of individual creative expression.
Letter From Home and The Family Letter
Alexander Brook, 1939

Alexander Brook wrote of his commission for the murals, “I prefer painting figures in space rather than action; simple interiors, and landscapes not over crowded. After some consideration I decided to take as my theme “The family letter – read away from home.”

Alexander Brook (1898 – 1980) was born in Brooklyn, New York, and studied at the Art Students League. A deep respect for human personality characterizes much of his work, often with overtones of wry humor or irony. He was hailed by Life magazine in 1940 as “one of America’s best painters.” Today his works are in such prestigious museums as the Toledo Museum of Art, the University of Nebraska, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.
Post Office Work Room and Transportation of Mail
Alfredo deGiorgio Crimi, 1937

In the words of the artist, the murals illustrate “A typical suburban railway depot where the produce of a community is gathered for shipping through various means of transportation, such as express truck, parcel post, etc. Human interest and the influence mail has on the development of industry are portrayed by the mailman receiving a letter from a child, and the messenger boy on a bicycle ready to be on his way again. Names of street signs such as Export Place and Rail Street were suggested by the panel itself and are indicative of how streets, places and communities sometimes acquire their names.”

Alfredo de Giorgio Crimi (1900 – 1994) was born in Italy and came to America when he was 10 years old. He studied at the National Academy of Design and the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in New York City, and at Scuolo Preparatoria all’Arti Ornamentali in Rome. He taught at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, City College of New York, and Pennsylvania State University. Today his work is in such noted museums as the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and the Art Institute of Chicago.
Arrival of Mail in New Amsterdam and French Huguenots in Florida
Karl Free, 1938

These two historic scenes represent the role of communication in the colonization of America. The first shows Peter Stuyvesant receiving post and trade from the from Holland. Peter Stuyvesant was the Dutch Director-General of the colony of New Amsterdam from 1647 until it was ceded to the English in 1664. The second mural illustrates the return of Rene Laudonniere and 304 French Huguenots to the original landing spot of the French, known as Ribault’s Pillar, at the St. John’s River near modern-day Jacksonville, Florida. The mural references a 16th century drawing by Jacques Le Moyne de Marques (c.1533 – 1588), an artist who accompanied the expedition.

Karl Free (1903 – 1947), artist and educator, was born in Davenport, Iowa, and studied at the Art Students League in New York City. He worked as Associate Curator of Graphic Arts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Today, his work is in such noted institutions as the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery.
Ben Franklin, Colonial Postmaster and Post Dispatch Rider, 1776
George Harding, 1938

Benjamin Franklin was the printer of the Indian Treaties, the Colonial Laws, the original charters of the City of Philadelphia, and the publisher of the Pennsylvania Gazette. He was appointed Postmaster General from 1775 – 1776. Post riders on their weekly trips north and south delivered their collected post to his printing shop. He is represented in the mural signing the Post Receipt Book.

George Matthew Harding (1883 – 1959) studied architecture and art at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He traveled worldwide as an illustrator and writer for the Saturday Evening Post and Harpers magazines, and was the official artist for the American Expeditionary Force during World War I. He headed the Department of Illustration and later Mural Decoration at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and also taught at the School of Architecture, University of Pennsylvania. His New Deal murals include the U.S. Post Office in North Philadelphia; the Montgomery County Courthouse in Norristown, New Jersey; and the J.J. Audubon Shrine in Mill Grove, Pennsylvania.
Mail Service in the Tropics and Mail Service in the Arctic
Rockwell Kent, 1937

The murals show the advent of mail delivery from Alaska to Puerto Rico, and caused a controversy when a reporter deciphered the Eskimo dialect on the envelope in the Tropics mural. The artist translated the message in a letter to New York Times on September 17, 1937, "To the people of Puerto Rico, our friends! Go ahead, let us change Chiefs. That alone can make us equal and free." He explained his statement as "stirring and beautiful a message as can be sent from anywhere at any time in history from one people to another. That is the American message of good will to a people in its aspirations for freedom." Six months earlier, in the "Ponce Massacre," Puerto Rican police killed 20 people and wounded 100 when a Nationalist Party parade for independence was stopped. The statement was viewed as supporting Puerto Rico's independence from the United States.

Rockwell Kent (1882-1971), artist, author, and political activist was born in Tarrytown, New York. He traveled worldwide painting vigorous, exotic landscapes, and his art is notable for its stark, powerful style. Today his works are in major museums including the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago.
General Store and
Post Office and Country Post
Doris Lee, 1938

The murals represent the importance of mail delivery and the post in rural America. Executed in a simple style, the scenes illustrate the role of the mail as a central part of the community. Rural ingenuity is represented by the mail boxes at the crossroads nailed to a wagon wheel mounted on a post.

Doris Emrick Lee (1905 – 1983) was an American Regionalist painter in a style that combined realism with modernism. She settled in Woodstock, New York, having followed her teacher and husband, Arnold Blanch. During the 1940s, her work became more flat and simple in appearance, reflecting the emerging abstract movement. Today, her works are in the collections of such prestigious museums as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Art Institute of Chicago.
Consolidation of the West and Opening of the Southwest
Ward Lockwood, 1937

The murals depict the westward advance of communication and settlement. They provide panoramas from the Native Americans represented by the Hopi Indian Snake Dancer, to the Spanish Conquistadors, buffalo hunters, and trappers in the left mural, and to the early settlers and “Peace with the Indians” in the right mural.

Ward Lockwood (1894 – 1963) studied at the University of Kansas, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Academie Ranson in Paris. He moved to Taos, New Mexico, in the 1920s and became a member of the Taos Society of Artists. He founded the University of Texas Art Department in the late 1930s, and developed the lithography program at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. He taught at the University of California-Berkeley, the University of Kansas, and the University of Washington. His style matured from academic realism to cubism.
Sorting the Mail and
Unloading the Mail
Reginald Marsh, 1936

Inspired by the railway mail service located under Penn Station in New York City, the murals capture the frenzied pace and movement of organizing the mail. The artist interviewed postal workers and spent hours sketching and photographing them while they unloaded and transferred mail cargo. The murals capture the rush, tempo, and mass of modern life.

Pony Express and Dangers of the Mail
Frank Albert Mechau, Jr., 1937

The Pony Express was a private commercial venture from April 1860 until October 1861. With hopes of lucrative federal contracts, financiers sought young, male riders to transport mail from Missouri to California. Riders traveled between 75 to 100 miles in one stretch, frequently changing horses along the way. The companion scene of the dangers of mail delivery is an artistic depiction of shapes and contours. As the artist explained, “No artist cared or wished to be considered an archaeologist or ethnologist. My intention was to create an imaginative reconstruction of a massacre into a pattern of forms simplified, and arranged and intensified into plastic inevitability.” The small predella paintings at the mural’s lower edge offer scenes of the historic West.

Frank Albert Mechau, Jr. (1903–1946) studied at Denver University and the Art Institute of Chicago. Raised in Colorado, he was influenced by the culture and history of the Western Slope and was the first Colorado artist to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1934. His work was acclaimed for its semi-abstract style, its use of perspective, and its sense of mystery. Today, his work is in major collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.
Mail Coach Attacked by Bandits and Covered Wagon Attacked by Indians
William C. Palmer, 1937

Artists were given subjects from the history of the U.S. Postal Service. One of these from the period “1800 – 1850s Methods” was Covered Wagons with Indians Attacking and Brigands, which is illustrated here. In 1867, the Postmaster General contracted with private stagecoach companies for mail service in the western territories. Stagecoach lines transported the mail, gold shipments, bank transfers, and cash in registered mail sacks. They were frequently ambushed and robbed. In 1881 alone there were 96 stagecoach hold-ups in the United States. Jewelry and other valuables were often taken from passengers at gunpoint.

William Palmer (1906 – 1987) was born in Des Moines, Iowa. He studied at the Art Student’s League in New York City and at the Ecole des Beaux Art de Foutainebleau in France. He also created New Deal murals for U.S. post offices in Boston and in Monticello, Iowa, and for the Queens General Hospital in New York. From 1941 to 1974, Palmer served as the director of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York.
The titles of the murals repeat the inscriptions that adorn the former Washington, DC City Post Office, now the Smithsonian Institution’s National Postal Museum. Entitled The Letter, they were written by Dr. Charles W. Eliot, educator and President of Harvard University from 1869 – 1909. The artist shows the relation of the mail to people in all circumstances, grave, happy, tragic. Wherever we go, whatever we do, whatever happens to us, the written message brings word from afar changing or confirming our thoughts.

Eugene Francis Savage (1883 – 1978) studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC, and the American Academy in Rome, Italy. He taught at Yale University and served on the National Commission of Fine Arts. His work is in many notable museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Los Angeles Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. His murals embellish Yale University and Columbia University.
FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, THIRTY-SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES FROM 1933-1945, assumed the Presidency at the depth of the Great Depression. He brought hope as he promised prompt, vigorous action, and asserted in his Inaugural Address, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."