Murals by American painters and photographers

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MURALS
BY AMERICAN PAINTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

NEW YORK :: 11 WEST FIFTY-THIRD STREET
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
FOREWORD

Stimulated in part by Mexican achievement, in part by recent controversy and current opportunity, American interest in mural decoration has increased astonishingly during the past year. Further to develop this interest and particularly to encourage American artists to study the possibilities of this medium of artistic expression, the Advisory Committee of the Museum has organized the present Exhibition.

Some sixty-five American painters and photographers, few of whom have made their reputation as mural designers, were invited to submit examples of their work. In order to approximate the difficulties of an actual commission, each artist was asked to design a horizontal composition in three parts, the whole study to measure twenty-one inches high by four feet wide. One section of the study was to be carried through to completion on a large panel to measure seven feet high by four feet wide. Any practicable medium was permissible. The subject was to be some aspect of "The Post-War World."

No other restrictions were placed upon the artists. The subject matter, its interpretation and the technique used are entirely the artist's own choice. The Committee has undertaken to make no selection among the pictures submitted, and no judgments are passed upon the relative merits of the themes chosen by the artists.

While the Exhibition will interest the general public, it is hoped that architects and others responsible for the selection of mural designers will study these paintings and photographs with special reference to the possibilities of beautifying future American buildings through the greater use of mural decoration.
The Advisory Committee, which was charged by the Museum with full responsibility for the organization and presentation of the Exhibition, wishes to thank the artists who have contributed their work. Thanks are also due to Mr. Julien Levy, who has generously given direction to the photomural section.

For the Advisory Committee,

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Chairman, Exhibition Committee
and Director of the Exhibition.

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THE decoration of walls by means of mural painting is as old as the stupendous bisons in the palaeolithic caves of Altamira, but the intention and function of mural painting has constantly changed. Prehistoric man recorded the giant bulls either as aid to an increase of power in their hunt or as some magic ward against the perils of famine, without much idea of making their caverns more “attractive.” The byzantine mosaics of Hagia Sophia and Ravenna are symbols of dogma and walls of incandescent praise. Giotto’s amethyst frescoes in Padua praise Christ the man and His mother, confirming the tradition for the decoration of wall surfaces in the West. As the Christian religion became more and more personalized, and abstract symbols of the Scripture took on everyday Florentine concreteness, mural painting shifted from its pure hieratic sobriety into the domestic academies of Benozzo Gozzoli and Ghirlandajo. The secularizing of the walls followed the popularizing of the Church, and people began to be satisfied with walls which were merely decorative backgrounds, a more congenially rich atmosphere against which to live. The element of praise and testimony was diminished and free decoration, the synthetic use of vegetable forms and fantastic classical fragments in Pompeian combinations culminated in Raphael’s Villa Madama and marked the emergence of that bastard form of adornment—interior decoration.

Mural painting, when used as an integral part of interior architecture, produces an atmosphere of increasing richness. The walls may vibrate with the fluid expression of a pictorial and dramatic background, an intense if subdued shuttling of the fabric of a lyrical design which can enhance in its increasing beauty, the breathing of the men who take this background as their home. White walls are as fair as painted ones, but there are certain casual rooms of ceremony or leisure where an organic decoration is as necessary as the sheltering roof. One remembers the Piccolomini Library in Sienna and the ballroom that Rubens created for Marie di Medici. A blank wall suits a cloister, but in a monumental vaulted hall, or in a room of state, the blankness merely refers to the blank imaginations of the men who conceived it.

Architects have often been reluctant to accept mural painting as an essential or even as a desirable element in their interiors. Most of their objections to mural painting come from the fact that in the past too many rooms designed as
bare boxes with a cornice, were thereafter delivered into the hands of a mural painter. Perhaps the room was inherently unsuited for his painting. Hence the certain discrepancies in scale which could never be resolved even by skillful painters. Often the murals were more important than the architecture of the room which enclosed them, as the Vatican Stanze or the Arena Chapel at Padua, or the Ministry of Education in Mexico City, the colonnades of which enclose the fine Riveras. The disadvantages of mural painting in public buildings are always cited more glibly than their advantages, but architects often forget that there are comparatively few rooms in the world which were designed to be decorated by specific works. The Scuola di S. Rocco in Venice, by Tintoretto, is a good example of one which was so planned.

It is to a great extent the responsibility of our architects whether the future of mural painting will be black or white. If the intention of the architect is clear, the painter can freely fulfill his commands. All the other objections to wall decoration can then be summarily disposed of. Architects, eager to delegate the responsibility for their chill marble halls have expressed the fear that if a painter is set loose he will "destroy the surface of the wall, and make the room look smaller," as if the first were a misfortune and the second made any difference. However, in those two objections can be found the root of the great restrictions from which mural painting too long has suffered.

Wall decoration is perforce applied upon the surface of the wall. It is not bas-relief. Nevertheless, suggestions of an enlarged atmosphere can be obtained without having the painting stand out from the walls. Masaccio did it imme-

AND MEDIUM

Robert Venturi
inspiring record. We have only a few brilliant exceptions to gainsay the tedium of academic memories of Venice and Rome, thinned out with the discreet draperies of the Columbian Exhibition of 1892. John LaFarge’s great bay in the Church of the Ascension on Fifth Avenue is perhaps the most distinguished religious painting of the Nineteenth Century; while, recalling Perugino and Raphael, it never depends on a stylization of their superficial attitude. John Singer Sargent’s vault and walls in the Boston Public Library have a richness of texture and a mesh of imaginative iconography that is unique in this country in its appropriateness to the locale. The Columbian Exposition, the Congressional Library in Washington, the Boston Public Library, the Appellate Courts Building of New York, the State Capitol at Albany, and scores of other public buildings were filled with pompous echoes of Venice and Rome, or genteel costume illustrations.

The Twentieth Century American Academy at Rome has produced a tradition of mural painting which means “murals” to most contemporary American architects. To say that they are academic hardly disposes of them. Ghirlandajo was academic and so is Rivera, insomuch as every piece of their work conforms to a more or less presupposed attitude of competent, formulized and rather abstracted rigidity. Each new panel is handled in the same intelligent and workmanlike way. There is none of the risky daring that might result in a “brilliant failure.” The School of Rome is academic but it is the academy of a particularly strangulated, debased and flat archaisticism—the dilution of models already diluted. Far more significant are the murals by Thomas Benton in the New School for Social Research, and by Boardman Robinson in the Kauffman Department Store in Pittsburgh.

Perhaps it is the problem of iconography which has crippled our artists. Robbed of the symbols of Christian dogma we have tried to rely on an imposed set of civic values. “Freedom,” “Justice,” “The Melting Pot,” “The Spirit of Liberty,” are as devoid of real meaning as the ideas which they attempt to convey. Sargent’s assumption of a frankly literary background, in the Boston Public Library, is far more satisfactory. Mexico has the advantage of a rich religious legend of Aztec, Conquistador and Socialist revolutions from which to draw. We too have the backgrounds of an exciting past, but without any real symbolic figures. The pioneering West, New Bedford’s whaling and our mechanical ingenuity are subject matter enough, providing we find artists with an organized imagination. Raphael had the ordered hierarchies of Aristotle to
help arrange the grouping of his figures in the “School of Athens.” We have
the anarchy of the tabloids, industrial implements and passing people in the
street, without any spiritual values to integrate them into a lyric expression of
our contemporaneity.

But whether or not we have universal symbols we have walls, and for the
present event, this is more important. Easel painting has become ingrown, in-
organic. The accidental vision on the private wall, bought by whatever patron
happens along, is as unsatisfactory to the ambition of an artist occupied with all
the potentials of a permanent appeal as with the great mass of people who, if
given such a chance, would look at paintings.

Our building methods, our subservience to the speed which property must
realize in order to triple its value are not very propitious to mural painting,
or even to architecture. The marble companies can offer their flat, chilly slabs.
These immaculate vitreous panels are shot up to the lobby ceiling quickly and
neatly, with gratitude for their lack of upkeep and no thought of their lack of
warmth or imagination. It goes without saying that if there were more interest
on the part of the architects there would be more mural painting in America.
It has taken Mexico to show us the way.

The scratch with a bone knife on the wall of a cave which outlined the antlers
of a prehistoric stag may have been the first means by which the decorations of
walls were realized. Later the rock’s surface was stained with earth colors. The
Egyptians incised their hieratic silhouettes into their sandstone walls and filled
in the shapes with flat fields of color which have mostly disappeared. Perhaps
the Cretans used buon fresco for the first time. Real fresco, the process of painting
in earth colors on a wet plaster wall which incorporates the pigment into the
very fabric of the building, is the most permanent and respected of mural
mediums and has been used by great decorators from the days of the Tauro-
machies of Knossos, through Giotto and Michelangelo to Rivera and Orozco.
The Byzantines inlaid bits of glass and stone to form mosaics upon their walls
and the gothic cathedral builders created, in piercing their walls, a flat decora-
tion of transparent pieced and colored windows. Since the Renaissance, for
practical reasons such as speed and portability, mural artists have chosen to
paint in oil on canvas panels that could be applied to the wall by nails or coat-
ings of white lead, and removed if the building was to perish. Recently, espe-
PHOTO-MURALS

The photographer is particularly well equipped to meet the problems of mural decoration as posed by the modern architect and builder. The photographers in the present exhibition were invited only three weeks before the preliminary sketches were due. In the time elapsing between filing the plans for a building and the final preparation of the wall, the enlargements would be executed, projected, developed, fixed, backed with canvas, and eventually mounted, or hung as wall-paper is hung, glazed with a transparent varnish by the house painter. The cost of execution for such murals would be minimum. When it is considered that the life of a modern building is usually something under seventy-five years, it is often desirable to secure the best possible decoration with the least expenditure. Furthermore, the photo-murals are mounted on canvas so that they may be stripped easily from the walls to be installed in a new location, or renewed every several years with decoration of immediate topical interest for our shifting modern life. Thus the new medium satisfies at once three primary requisites of modern building: speed, economy, and flexibility.

The use of photographs for wall decoration was made possible only recently by the perfecting of a sensitized paper in large sheets, which would reproduce,
when exposed to a projected image from a negative, the original tones with the original scale of values in enlarged size. This facility was extensively employed by movie directors in Hollywood as an economy to replace the painted backdrop, and by interior decorators to enlarge drawings, old engravings, etc. The history of photo-mural repeats in a condensed span of time the history of photography, first as a primitive in the service of economic realism, then self-consciously imitating painting and the graphic arts; yesterday using the actual photographic medium as basis for expression, and only today in this present exhibition inviting recognized artists in the medium to study the new problem and contribute their projects.

A good photo-mural is not merely the mechanical enlargement of a small photograph. The enlarged mural is a new and independent production, and the photographer who does not visualize in advance the final scale of his picture will usually be surprised and dismayed by the results. Not only must all the precepts of the mural painter be kept well in mind, but additional and unsuspected difficulties arise. For the original photograph may completely lose its identity when enlarged, the essential forms becoming almost unrecognizable when dissipated over a greater area. Conversely an unimportant shape in the small photograph may gain impressive dramatic force by progressive exaggeration. It is difficult to stretch a single, simple photograph over a large space and maintain interest, but it is dangerous to enlarge a complicated negative, as the photographer has little control over the minor bits in his picture, and just as the peculiar virtues of a photograph are dramatized by enlargement, so are any faults equally exaggerated. One solution may be the use of what is called "montage"... the cutting out and reassembling of parts from separate pictures. In this method there is always the chance that the result will appear disjointed and arbitrary.

As there exists no traditional solution to aid the photographer past these primary difficulties, an attempt has been made to divide the problem so that each photographer concentrates in the present exhibition more or less on one particular aspect of the photo-mural (while they must all answer one question in common: what can the photograph present that is not better rendered in paint?)

JULIEN LEVY

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MURAL PAINTINGS

Large panels measure seven feet high by four feet wide; the small studies, illustrated at bottom of each page, measure about 21 inches high by 48 inches wide.

**Large panel**

Tribute to Einstein
based on left-hand section of Study

**Study for three-part composition (below)**

left: A Tribute to Einstein
center: The Spirit of Peace
right: The Victory of the Conscientious Objectors

Medium: Oil on canvas
BERLANDINA


Large panel (illustrated at right)

Radio Publicity
based on central panel of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

left: Radio Music
center: Radio Publicity
right: Radio News

Medium: Tempera on presswood panel.
BIBERMAN

Large panel (illustrated at left)
Bodies of Men and Fabric of Building
based on right-hand section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
Genesis of the Skyscraper
left: Beginning of the Concept
center: Human Hands and Steel
right: Bodies of Men and Fabric of the Building

Medium: Large panel, oil on gesso grounded presswood; study, oil on canvas.
BIDDLE


Large panel (illustrated at right)

Plowing

based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

Labor—Black and White

Medium: Large panel, true fresco (watercolor on wet plaster); study, tempera on gesso-grounded wood.
BILLINGS


Large panel (illustrated at left)

Electrical Research
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

Electricity in Modern Life
left: Source of Electrical Power
center: Electrical Research
right: Electrical Amusements, particularly Television

Medium: Oil paint and metal leaf upon prepared wood.

Large panel (illustrated at right)

Locomotive Engine
based on detail of central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

The Apotheosis of Transportation
left: Automobile and Hydraulic Traction
center: Locomotive Engine
right: Shipping

Medium: Oil on canvas.
COLEMAN

*Large panel* (illustrated at left)
The Old and the New
based on central section of Study

*Study for three-part composition* (below)
Manhattan; the Old and the New

Medium: Oil on canvas.
JAMES E. DAVIS

Large panel (illustrated at right)
Boxing
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
Sport
left: Swimming
center: Boxing
right: Track and Field

Medium: Pastel on celluloid welded between two sheets of unbreakable glass giving a permanent and easily cleaned surface. (The large panel is in pastel on tracing paper.)
STUART DAVIS

Large panel (illustrated at left)
Abstract Vision of New York: a building, a derby hat, a tiger's head, and other symbols.
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
Abstract Vision of New York

Medium: Oil laid on canvas with palette knife.
EVERGOOD


Large panel (illustrated at right)
The Angel of Peace Offering the Fruit of Knowledge to the World based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
left: The Advance of Medicine and Agriculture
center: The Angel of Peace
right: Apotheosis of Ancient and Modern Learning

Medium: Oil on canvas.
FIENE

Large panel (illustrated at left)
Aviation
based on left-hand section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
Mechanical Progress
left: Aviation
center: Television
right: Steel Structure

Medium: Tempera on gesso grounded wooden panels.
GASSNER


Large panel

Abstract or Geometric Art
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

The Three Categories of Modernist Art
left: The Archaistic
center: The Mathematical Abstract
right: The Psychological

Medium: Oil on canvas.
YUN GEE

Large panel
Wheels: Industrial New York

Study for three-part composition (below)
left: Merry-Go-Round
center: Sun Bathers
right: Modern Apartment

Medium: Oil on canvas.

GELLERT

Large panel (completed too late for illustration)

Last Defenses of Capitalism
based on left-hand section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
The Triumph of Lenin

Medium: chalk on celotex sized with plaster
GOODMAN
Bertram Goodman, painter and mural decorator. Born in New York City, 1904. Studied drawing at the Art Students' League, 1923; with Mahonri Young, 1924; with Harry Wickey, 1925. Exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, 1925-29; at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1931.

*Large panel*

Pneumatic Drilling
based upon right-hand section of Study

*Study for three-part composition (below)*

Makers of Skyscrapers
left: Riveting
center: Excavation
right: Pneumatic Drilling

Medium: Oil on canvas

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GROPPER

*Large panel*

based on central section of Study

*Study for three-part composition (below)*

Class Struggle in America Since the War

Medium: large panel, oil on canvas; study, a photograph of drawings

Large panel (illustrated at left)
The Builder at Work
based on detail of central section of

Study for three-part composition (below)
Tragedy of the Builder

Medium: Large panel, true fresco (watercolor on wet plaster); study.
KANTOR


Large panel (illustrated at right)
Union Square, New York
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
left: Airways
center: Union Square
right: New York Harbor

Medium: Oil on canvas
KNATHS


Large panel

The Sea
based on right-hand section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

left: Architecture
center: Abstract Design
right: The Sea

Medium: Large panel, oil on canvas;
Study, watercolor on celotex.
KOPMAN


Large panel (illustrated at right)
   Parade
   based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
   Vision of the Militaristic State

Medium: Oil on cardboard.
LaFARGE


Large panel (illustrated at left)
Man's Eye and Telescopic Television based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
Telescopic Television
left: God's Eye
center: Man's Eye and Telescopic Television
right: The Resulting Comprehension of the Universe

Medium: Large panel, wax encaustic on composition board; Study, tempera on gesso ground.

Large panel
based on right-hand section of Study.

Study for three-part composition (below)
Broadway

Medium: Tempera on wood
LEWIS


Large panel (illustrated at left) based on detail of central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below) New York Holiday

Medium: Large panel, oil on paper; study, pencil on paper.
LITTLEFIELD


Large panel (illustrated at right)
Victory of Truth (David and Goliath)
based on left-hand section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
A Modern Allegory on Universal Symbols
left: Victory of Truth (David and Goliath)
center: Revelation (St. John and the Angel on the Island of Patmos)
right: Fraternity (David and Jonathan on the Eve of David’s Victory over Goliath)

Medium: Mussini transparent oil glaze on canvas.
MARSH

Large panel (illustrated at left)
based on right-hand section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
Post-War America

Medium: Tempera on composition board.
MATULKA

Jan Matulka, painter and graphic artist. Born at Prague, Czecho-Slovakia, 1892. Came to the United States in 1907. Studied at the National Academy of Design, winning the Pulitzer Scholarship in Columbia University. He traveled over the United States, Mexico, Canada, and the Bahamas. To Paris in 1918. Returned to the United States in 1924 and has held one-man shows in New York at Columbia University, the Art Centre, and the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery.

Large panel
Nudist Colony
based on a section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
Television
(Completed too late for illustration)

Medium: Oil on canvas.
NICOLAIDES


Large panel (illustrated at left)
Based on right-hand section of Study

Study for composition (below)
Manhattan Merry-Go-Round, a circular procession of wrestlers, New Yorkers, chorus girls, gangsters, etc., led by a jazz band.

Medium: large panel, color glazed over under painting of black and white.
O'KEEFFE


Large panel (illustrated at right)
   based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
   Manhattan

Medium: Oil on canvas.
POOR


Large panel (illustrated at left)
The Arts and Crafts based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
left: Home Life in the Country center: The Arts and Crafts right: The City

Medium: The Study is in glazed tile; the large panel, in true fresco (water-color on wet plaster). The artist proposes to do murals in glazed tile.
REISMAN


Large panel (illustrated at right)
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
The Post-War World

Medium: Tempera on wood.
SHAHN


Large panel (illustrated at left)
based on right-hand section of Study

Study for three part composition (below)
The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti

Medium: emulsion of oil and tempera on canvas sized with gesso and mounted on pressed wood
STERNE

Maurice Sterne, painter, sculptor and graphic artist. Born at Libau, Latvia, 1878. Studied art at Cooper Union 1893-94, National Academy of Design 1895-99. Paris 1904-07, Italy and Greece. Has spent much time in Italy and Dutch East Indies as well as in America. Represented in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Boston Museum of Fine Arts; Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; Corcoran Gallery, Washington; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington; Art Institute of Chicago; Cleveland Museum of Art; Brooklyn Museum; Detroit Museum; Worcester Museum; Rhode Island School of Design; Tate Gallery, London; Berlin Museum; Wallraf-Richartz Museum; Museum of Cologne; Ulm Museum; Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Large panel (completed too late for illustration)

Metal-Work
based on section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

Television

Agriculture
Textiles
Metal-Work

Medium: Oil on canvas.

Large panel (illustrated at left)
Riveting
based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)
The Excavation and Construction of Radio City
left: Pneumatic Drilling
center: Riveting
right: Excavation

Medium: Oil on canvas.
WATKINS


Large panel (illustrated at right) based on central section of Study

Study for three-part composition (below)

The Spirit of Man, Crushed by the Machine, Nourishing the Tree of Life

Medium: Oil on canvas.
WOOD


*Large panel (illustrated at left)*  
Based on left-hand section of Study

*Study for three-part composition (below)*  
Persistence of the West

Medium: Oil on canvas.
PHOTO-MURALS

The photo-murals are designed for a space seven feet high by twelve feet long.
ABBOTT

Photo-Mural
NEW YORK

Technique: "montage," the combining and mounting of sections of different photographs to form one composition; in this mural the photographs of steel girders and plates are mounted in relief.

Berenice Abbott, photographer. Born in Springfield, Ohio, 1898. Studied art in Paris and Berlin; photography with Man Ray in Paris. Her work has been included in many European exhibitions of photography. Photographs by her are in the Museum of the City of New York.
BRATTER

Photo-Mural

THREE NEWSPAPER SERVICES
Sports; Financial; Advertising


Technique: 3 photographs were selected and copied together to make negative A
Newsprint was photographed for negative B
Positive transparencies were made on A and B which were then superimposed to make a single negative C from which the sketch and panel were enlarged.
DURYEA AND LOCHER

Photo-Mural
METAL, GLASS, and CORK


Robert E. Locher, architect and mural painter, born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1888. After preparatory school, entered an architect's office as apprentice. Later employed as draughtsman and designer, working on interiors. Came to New York in 1914 to draw and design for periodicals, interior decorators, architects and theatrical producers. Has been practicing since 1920 as decorative painter, interior architect and designer of special installations and accessories.
GERLACH

Photo-Mural

ENERGY

Technique: montage and double printing; negative printing

LYNES

Photo-Mural

AMERICAN LANDSCAPE, 1933

Technique: central panel, photograph framed; side panels, the figures are double-printed from two negatives and mounted on the architectural background

William M. Rittase, photographer. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, 1894. Studied at the Maryland Art Institute. Was an engineer for ten years and Captain of Artillery during the War. Professional photographer for the last five years.
ROTAN

Photo-Mural
SKYSCRAPERS

Technique: montage of different photographs of the same building.

Thurman Rotan, photographer. Born in Waco, Texas, 1903. Studied photography with Ira Martin. His photographic designs were exhibited at the Art Center, 1932.
SIMON

Photo-Mural

LANDSCAPE AND CITYSCAPE

Stella Simon, photographer. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, 1878. Studied photography with Clarence White. In 1926 completed an experimental cinema film, Ballet of Hands. A series of photographic studies from the League of Composers’ production, Oedipus Rex, was exhibited in New York and Philadelphia. An exhibition of her work was held at the Art Center in 1931.
STEICHEN

*Photo-Mural* (9 feet 10 inches high by 8 feet wide)

GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE


SWANK
Photo-Mural
STEEL PLANT
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