

# Politics in Paint: The Creation, Destruction, and Restoration of the Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse Mural

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IN 2011 Iowa residents had the opportunity to glimpse part of a mural cycle that had been hidden from sight for nearly 50 years. Executed between 1935 and 1937 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's federal art programs, *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture* originally adorned all four walls of the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse (fig. 1). *Opening of the Midwest*, concentrated on the north wall, portrays scenes of western expansion, including pioneer settlements, Native American villages, farming, railroads, and industry. The remaining three walls trace the development of judicial and social order in Iowa by contrasting historical vignettes with aspects of contemporary 1930s life. Grisaille lunettes above the doors and windows depict Solomon, Hammurabi, and other ancient lawmakers and honor the historical origins of the American judicial system.

With its vibrant color palette, volumetric style, and explicit depictions of death and disease, *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture* generated sustained controversy over the appropriate role and appearance of public art in Cedar Rapids. Censorship won out in 1954 and again in 1964, when local judges determined

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*Figure 1 (cont. on facing page). Francis Robert White, Opening of the Midwest, 1936–1937. Oil on canvas, Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse (now Cedar Rapids City Hall), Cedar Rapids. Photograph in the Carl M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

that the offending imagery should be painted over. The mural was all but destroyed – covered and forgotten for decades, until the flood of 2008. Spurred to action by that natural disaster, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) worked quickly to prevent further damage to the historic artwork and to restore one wall of the mural to its original state. Additional preservation efforts on the part of the city of Cedar Rapids uncovered a second wall in 2013, and work on a third wall is currently under way.

Today, only the north and south walls of the mural remain visible. This state of preservation – the condition of being partially restored – embodies the long history and mixed fortune of Iowa’s New Deal art. In this article I explore multiple facets of the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse mural, including its conception and execution, its intended meaning, and its varied public reception from 1937 to the present day. As part of my analysis, I trace visual sources for the mural’s style and iconography, as well as consider the means by which the artists employed diverse subject matter – ranging from vigilante justice to indigenous Mexican pyramids – to construct a particular history and community identity for Iowa residents. I also consider the mural’s oscillating cultural value and state of preservation against the backdrop of evolving attitudes toward New Deal art, both during the Cold War and in the present day.

### **In the Shadow of Grant Wood**

*Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture* represent the collaborative effort of five Iowa artists – Francis Robert White (1907–1986),



Harry Donald Jones (1906–1995), Howard Johnson (1913–1963), Everett Jeffrey (1906–1983), and Don Glasell (1895–1965) – whose mural training and professional relationships grew out of their experience working with famed Regionalist painter Grant Wood.<sup>1</sup> The artists spent much of the early 1930s painting alongside Wood, first during the 1932 and 1933 summer art programs in Stone City and later during the short-lived federal relief program, the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). During that period the artists strove to emulate Wood’s celebrated narrative style and to embody the cooperative regionalist spirit he envisioned as the future of American art.

A native of Cedar Rapids, Grant Wood (1891–1942) rose to national prominence when his easel painting *American Gothic* won a bronze medal from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1930. Wood leveraged his newfound celebrity to promote Regionalism, a cultural movement that valued local scenery and small-town life as authentic and untapped sources for American art.<sup>2</sup> As a foremost practitioner of the style, Wood harbored hopes of establishing the Midwest as a significant art center. In 1932 he founded the Stone City Art Colony about 20 miles northeast of Cedar Rapids with his friends Edward Rowan (1898–1946), director of the Little Gallery in Cedar Rapids, and Adrian Dornbush (1900–1970), former director of the Flint Institute of Art and current

1. The scholarship on Grant Wood is extensive. For a general overview of his life and art, see James Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York, 1975); Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood, the Regionalist Vision* (New Haven, CT, 1983); and R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life* (New York, 2010).

2. In the 1920s and 1930s this approach to art was considered radical for its break from European and East Coast precedents in both form and subject matter. Wood’s success and personal popularity among younger artists elicited complaints from Iowa’s academic painters, particularly with regard to art judging at the Iowa State Fair. See Chris Rasmussen, “Agricultural Lag: The Iowa State Fair Art Salon, 1854–1941,” *American Studies* 36 (September 1995), 5–29.

art instructor at the Little Gallery. The program operated for only two summers — 1932 and 1933 — but its scenic location, close-knit social scene, and dedicated faculty of prominent midwestern artists left a lasting impression on participants from across Iowa and surrounding states. With courses in composition, figure drawing, lithography, sculpture, picture framing, and plein-air painting, the Stone City Art Colony instilled in its students both technical excellence and a distinctly Regionalist approach to art. Wood instructed younger artists to resist turning to Europe and the East Coast for artistic inspiration. He believed that regional artists should paint what they knew best — their local surroundings — and that in doing so they would help to create a truly native school of modern American art.

During the Stone City summer sessions, Glasell, Jeffrey, Johnson, and White lived on the grounds of Green Mansion, where they attended classes, shared meals, and socialized in the evenings. The painters developed personal friendships and mutual professional respect for one another. They also absorbed Wood's Regionalist doctrine and, enjoying the privilege of studying with the famous artist himself, endeavored to match his distinctive style of painting in their creative efforts. In that regard, the four men were very much like their peers. The tendency among the colony's aspiring painters to mimic their Stone City professor was quite common; the practice became so prevalent, in fact, that other faculty members grew tired of their students' production of "little Woods."<sup>3</sup> Despite its short duration, the summer program provided an unparalleled opportunity for Iowa artists to meet Wood and to demonstrate their talent and commitment to American Regionalism. For those whose skills he esteemed, like Jeffrey and Johnson, the Stone City Art Colony served as an informal audition for employment under the New Deal federal art programs.

Shortly after his inauguration on March 4, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted a flood of domestic reform policies and work programs to assuage the economic trauma of the

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3. Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life*, 164. For a fuller history of the Stone City Art Colony and the artists who attended its school, see "When Tillage Begins: The Stone City Art Colony and School," Busse Library, Mount Mercy University, projects.mtmercy.edu/stonecity/index.html.

Great Depression. Government support for the arts soon followed, and in December 1933 the administration established a short-term pilot program to employ professional artists, the PWAP. Employing language that paralleled that of the burgeoning Regionalist movement, Washington officials issued a memorandum that outlined their programmatic commitment to local subject matter and their optimism about the educational and uplifting effect of public art.

It is our belief that the Project will rescue many artists from their former position of isolation and will inspire them to create a record which will be of permanent value, of the American scene and of our American life today. . . . We believe that the PWAP is not only a 'putting to work' plan, affecting an important class of citizens in great distress but it is a Governmental step forward, toward bringing about a finer American civilization.<sup>4</sup>

Wood's established reputation as a Regionalist artist dedicated to painting rural landscapes and local Americana made him a natural choice to oversee the incipient federal arts program in Iowa. Edward Rowan, newly appointed technical director for the PWAP, nominated his good friend for the position, and Wood accepted. As state director, Wood maintained sole discretion in selecting artists for inclusion and in assigning them work.

Johnson and Jeffrey were among the earliest American artists to receive government support when they assisted Wood on the ambitious mural cycle *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow* (1933–1934). Premised on the idea that “farmers . . . are the founders of human civilization” — a quote borrowed from Daniel Webster's 1840 speech on agriculture — Wood planned an epic multi-panel composition depicting agriculture, the practical arts, and the fine arts to be installed in the library at Iowa State College.<sup>5</sup> For several months the PWAP artists worked in a repurposed swimming pool on the University of Iowa campus in Iowa City. Johnson spent endless hours painting on the scaffolding, trans-

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4. Memorandum, 12/20/1933, microfilm reel DC 3, frame 487, Public Works of Art Project Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as AAA).

5. Daniel Webster, “Remarks on the Agriculture of England,” speech, Boston State House, 1/13/1840, in *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, ed. Edward Everett, 18 vols. (Boston, 1903), 2:293–307.

ferring Wood's designs to canvas, and occasionally serving as a model for other PWAP artists. Jeffrey's contributions were more modest. He primarily produced easel paintings under the PWAP, but he also assisted with small jobs related to the mural. Des Moines artist Harry Donald Jones, a student at the University of Iowa, joined Wood's cooperative mural team in December 1933. One of the few artists associated with the mural cycle who never attended the Stone City Art Colony, Jones had proven his artistic skill the previous year by winning a prize at the Iowa State Fair. He worked alongside Wood, Jeffrey, Johnson, and more than a dozen other handpicked artists on the collaborative mural experiment.<sup>6</sup>

Although the expiration of the PWAP less than six months later left the work incomplete, glowing reviews in the national press declared Wood's cooperative mural a success.<sup>7</sup> The favorable reception of this high-profile project helped to secure additional funding for the arts. The federal government created the Section of Painting and Sculpture (1934–1942), the Treasury Relief Art Project (1935–1938), and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (1935–1943) to administer federal art patronage.<sup>8</sup> The popularity and prestige surrounding the PWAP mural

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6. Lea Rosson DeLong has published an excellent study of the PWAP mural cooperative in Iowa. For a more detailed account of this collaborative effort, see Lea Rosson DeLong, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals* (Ames, 2006).

7. The panels depicting the fine arts were never begun. For national press coverage of the mural, see the January 1935 issue of *Fortune* magazine.

8. Established in October 1934, the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture (later renamed Section of Fine Arts) hired artists to decorate newly constructed federal buildings. Unlike TRAP and the WPA, the Section was not a relief program. Instead, the agency awarded federal art contracts through a series of anonymous competitions intended to ensure standards of quality and equal opportunity for artists. TRAP, created in August 1935, was the smallest of the federal art programs and a sister program to the Section within the Treasury Department. TRAP hired relief-eligible artists to embellish existing federal buildings that lacked construction appropriations to finance such works. The WPA, established in May 1935 (renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939), also provided economic relief to artists during the Great Depression. As the largest and most far-reaching of the federal art programs, the WPA commissioned artists to decorate non-federal government buildings, such as schools and public libraries, as well as to create small-scale works of art, including posters, photographs, and paintings. For an overview of the federal art programs, see Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation*

cycle also inspired in Wood and his team a desire to see the project through to completion. As the *New York Times* reported, the Iowa muralists “decided that they were not stopping, pay or no pay.”<sup>9</sup> Placing the needs of the group above individual competition, the painters agreed to pool and reallocate their paychecks so that none of their peers would be laid off during the final weeks of the project. The artists also made plans to live in tents, to share meals, and to contribute outside income to cover expenses for the whole group after the program officially disbanded in June. Despite such idealistic pronouncements, the men did not maintain their altruistic measures for very long, if at all. The federal government granted only partial funding for the incomplete PWAP project, and by mid-summer the dozen-artist team had been reduced by half.

By autumn 1934, Wood’s promise that his former staff would resume their cooperative efforts under a permanent federal art agency began to feel impossibly far away. Several alumni had moved to Cedar Rapids in anticipation of renewed government support, but no commissions came. Howard Johnson lived at the Granby Building, where he shared studio space with fellow artists Arnold Pyle, Jack Van Dyke, and others from the PWAP mural project. These artists were in frequent contact with Stone City classmates Everett Jeffrey, who still resided in his hometown of Cedar Rapids, and Francis Robert White, who returned to Iowa after working several months in the Illinois division of the PWAP. Over the next year, the painters began to reflect more critically on their PWAP experience and to consider the implications of Wood’s continued leadership over mural commissions in the state. Waiting for the new federal art programs to take shape, the men grew increasingly impatient with the dearth of work available to their group. Wood’s national stature and steady employment no doubt exacerbated their frustrations. While their former

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of *Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana and Chicago, 2009); Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge, 1995); Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia, 1984); and Francis V. O’Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich, CT, 1973).

9. Edward Alden Jewell, “Quickenings: Visions That Stir the Mural Pulse,” *New York Times*, 5/27/1934.

mentor taught university courses and contributed paintings to contemporary art exhibitions across the nation, they remained unemployed, anxiously awaiting the return of federal work relief programs.

White's art philosophy, for example, grew out of and in resistance to his professional involvement with Wood. Born in Oskaaloosa, Iowa, in 1907, White was already an accomplished artist when he joined the PWAP employment rolls in winter 1934. He had attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the Art Students League, studied European art during his travels abroad, and received a prestigious Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1930 to learn glass and mosaic technique in England, Italy, and France. White also studied painting at the Stone City Art Colony, but Wood felt that the younger artist's talents were better suited to glass design than to his preferred medium of painting. He included White on the Iowa PWAP employment roster but did not recommend him for either easel or mural assignments. When Edward Rowan approached the state director on behalf of White, Wood proposed a compromise that would allow the aspiring muralist to transfer to Chicago and continue his painting studies there. Such an arrangement, Wood confided to Rowan, would relieve him of "an embarrassing position" because White was "bound and determined" to paint murals. "You and I both know he hasn't the qualifications for a designer of murals," he wrote.<sup>10</sup> Even though White could not have known his former teacher's opinion as baldly as this letter states, he must have suspected his job relocation resulted from Wood's low estimation of his mural ability.

Jeffrey experienced a similar rebuff under the PWAP. Wood had hired the Stone City alumnus at the earliest opportunity, but he assigned the younger artist to the easel division. Jeffrey harbored aspirations of becoming a mural painter and ran afoul of Wood by circumventing PWAP protocol to arrange mural jobs

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10. Grant Wood to Edward Rowan, 1/6/1934, Record Group 121, entry 105, box 2, Treasury Relief Art Project Papers, Records of the Public Buildings Service, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD (hereafter cited as TRAP Papers, NARA). Wood's commitment to American Regionalism probably shaped his assessment of White's talents as a painter, since the younger artist had traveled widely and experimented with a range of subject matter and styles.



on his own. According to Leata Peer Rowan, Edward Rowan's wife, Jeffrey had really "gummed things up" for Wood, forcing the older artist "to set on him" to keep him in check.<sup>11</sup> Wood's disciplinary actions no doubt left Jeffrey with frustrated ambitions as well as a bruised ego. To make matters worse, Jeffrey lived in Cedar Rapids and spent much of his time working on-site at Wood's Iowa City mural studio. Many of his peers considered him to be part of the PWAP mural team under Wood's direction, yet his name does not appear among the 14 men listed as contributors to the Parks Library project.<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey surely resented that omission, since it meant that he received no credit for his work. In light of Wood's earlier chastisement, he may have considered it a deliberate slight.

Johnson, Jones, and several of their peers also resented Wood's way of delegating work under the PWAP. As principal artist on the project, Wood closely supervised all aspects of design and execution, and he limited participation on the mural cycle to specific roles and tasks. Arnold Pyle, for instance, had sole responsibility for mixing paint so that all of the colors would remain consistent throughout the project. Other assistants enlarged the figures in Wood's preliminary drawings, transferred the full-scale cartoons to canvas, and painted mechanical details and lettering. In addition, the collaborative nature of the Iowa State College project required artists to emulate Wood's celebrated style of realism. Artist John Bloom likened the process of copying and enlarging Wood's composition to an elaborate, large-scale paint-by-numbers kit. "We started out with a small sketch [Wood's] in color. This was drawn to full size on brown wrapping paper and traced on canvas. Then we mixed oil paint and poured it in cans keyed to numbers on a tissue overlay of the sketch."<sup>13</sup> At every stage, Wood expected the artists to subsume their individual style and design ideas to maintain the pictorial

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11. Leata Peer Rowan to Edward Rowan, 12/28/1933, microfilm reel D 141, frames 71-73, Edward B. Rowan Papers, AAA.

12. The mural panel lists Bertrand Adams, Lee Allen, John Bloom, Dan Finch, Elwyn Giles, Lowell Houser, Albert Gregory Hull, Howard Johnson, Harry Donald Jones, Francis McCray, Arthur Munch, Arnold Pyle, Thomas Savage, and Jack Van Dyke.

13. John Bloom, quoted in Gregg R. Narber, "These Murals Were a New Deal," *The Iowan* 32 (Spring 1984), 13.



Figure 2. Grant Wood, "Engineering" from *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*, 1934-1935. Oil on canvas, Parks Library, Iowa State College (now Iowa State University), Ames, Iowa. Courtesy Brunnier Museum, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. Photograph © Carole Gieseke, 2015.

unity of the whole. While some artists did not mind Wood's oversight and considered it a privilege to work alongside him, others chafed at the creative restrictions imposed on their art. Jones, for instance, recalled painting only the brick wall in the "Engineering" panels (fig. 2).<sup>14</sup>

By early September 1935, more than a dozen of Wood's former students and colleagues had become severely disenchanted with his oversight. They believed that his continued administrative leadership would suppress creative expression under the new federal art agencies, and they worried about the fair distribution of assignments, since they felt Wood had abandoned team projects in favor of personal commissions in the year since the PWAP had ended. As Tom Savage later recalled, "We sort of had a split up with him. We were a little aggravated with him because he was a big shot and all that. He was able to acquire all this

14. DeLong, *When Tillage Begins*, 289. Several of the PWAP mural artists also took exception to Wood's celebrity, which frequently overshadowed their personal contributions in media coverage of the cooperative mural.

money and decide what to do with it. . . . He just forgot us after he got so far. We thought we'd like to keep on with him."<sup>15</sup> When it seemed that Wood would again assume a directorship position in the federal art programs, 16 artists mounted a formal protest against his appointment.<sup>16</sup> Striking out on their own, they organized an alternative cooperative society for the purposes of combining their talents and amplifying their collective voice to obtain mural commissions under the new federal art projects.

### The Cooperative Mural Painters and Progressive Politics

Francis Robert White scheduled an organizational meeting for Iowa artists on Labor Day, 1935. The previous summer White had accepted an offer from Edward Rowan to act as director of the Little Gallery and to assume responsibility for his weekly art column in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. In that capacity, White emerged as an influential leader on the Iowa art scene. In shared studio space at the Granby Building in Cedar Rapids, he gathered around himself a splinter group whose members shared a more radical political ideology and desire for personal artistic expression. There he formed an artists' union, the Cooperative Mural Painters Group (CMP). Other disillusioned classmates included Don Glassell, Everett Jeffrey, Howard Johnson, and Harry Donald Jones.<sup>17</sup>

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15. Tom Savage, interview by Lea Rosson DeLong, 4/16/1982, quoted in Gregg R. Narber, *Murals of Iowa, 1886–2006* (Des Moines, 2010), 124.

16. See, for example, Francis Robert White to Holger Cahill, 9/12/1935, reprinted in DeLong, *When Tillage Begins*, 367–68. White also followed up with a telegram to Cahill that included an explicit objection to Wood's leadership and 16 signatures representing the new organization's membership. He apparently neglected to ask members' consent before appending their names to the message, prompting some artists to feel misrepresented in the exchange. See Francis Robert White to Holger Cahill, telegram, 9/12/1935, RG 69, entry 1023, box 19, Records of the Works Projects Administration, Correspondence with State and Regional Offices, 1935–1940, Iowa, NARA; and DeLong, *When Tillage Begins*, 152.

17. "Explains Aims of New Group Painters," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 10/10/1935. As the primary spokesman for the group, White is often credited as founder and figurehead of the Cooperative Mural Painters; however, Jones played an equally strong role in spearheading the organization. Like White, Jones felt disillusioned with Wood's leadership in Iowa's arts community. A major impetus to form the group emerged through Jones's personal correspondence with Washington official Edward Rowan. Rowan encouraged Jones to organize a group of Iowa artists to paint murals with the promise that he would find them "walls to write on." Johnson, another founding member, may have assisted in planning the organiza-

As spokesperson for the newly formed cooperative group, White was eager to secure not only federal visibility but also eligibility for work-relief assignments. He wrote to officials at both the Treasury Department and the Works Progress Administration to inform them of the organization and to request federal patronage, particularly in the field of mural painting. Invoking the society's formidable adversary, White underscored that some of the members "had practical experience in assisting Grant Wood" and asserted that their collective expertise merited governmental consideration. "A mural team of this quality," he reasoned, which is both "state wide in representation and able to work cooperatively in small units or as a whole, presents a very competent instrument for the decoration of public buildings."<sup>18</sup>

White's direct appeal for government support worked. Less than a month later, the CMP received an offer from Olin Dows, head of the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), to create mural decorations for the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse. One of the new federal art agencies formed in the summer of 1935, TRAP was a work-relief program that hired professional painters and sculptors to create art for existing government buildings. Administrators considered TRAP a sister program to the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture. Like that agency, TRAP strongly emphasized "quality." Although relief requirements imposed some restrictions on the program, TRAP officials typically reserved federal commissions for artists broadly considered to have a high degree of skill.

Dows appointed White to serve as the official "master artist" who would oversee the design and execution of the mural project. The Iowan, however, was quick to emphasize the egalitarian working arrangement of the cooperative society. Invoking the founding principles of the CMP, White reminded Dows that the collaborative nature of the mural project would remain a paramount con-

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tion, since the inaugural meeting most likely took place in a studio he shared with Arnold Pyle and Jack Van Dyke. In all, ten of the artists who had worked with Wood on the Iowa State College mural joined the organization: Bertrand Adams, John Bloom, Lowell Houser, Everett Jeffrey, Howard Johnson, Harry Donald Jones, Christian Petersen, Arnold Pyle, Tom Savage, and Jack Van Dyke. For more on the origins and activities of the CMP, see DeLong, *When Tillage Begins*, 141-56.

18. Francis Robert White to Holger Cahill, 9/6/1935, quoted in DeLong, *When Tillage Begins*, 148.

sideration in its design and execution and advised him of the importance “of keeping in mind the development of more than one man’s ideas, of giving latitude to other competent designers, and of giving credit to their achievements.”<sup>19</sup> As these veiled critiques of Wood’s prior leadership suggest, White and his fellow artists viewed themselves as laborers whose concerns about wages and working conditions aligned them with other oppressed members of the nation’s working class. The artists had even scheduled their inaugural meeting for Labor Day to underscore that point.

Having endured unemployment and economic uncertainty firsthand, the members of the CMP – like many artists and writers during the Great Depression – were sympathetic to leftist political ideas and to the aims of Social Realism. A movement that flourished in the 1930s, American Social Realism represented a belief that populism, or the political appeal to ordinary people, offered a platform to revitalize American democracy and institute progressive social change. Although not affiliated with any particular political organization, Social Realism held special appeal for artists on the political left and center who united under the banner of the Popular Front to stem the rise of fascism in Europe and the United States. Many of these artists expressed admiration for the utopian ideals of Communism in the Soviet Union, but they were not necessarily committed to the Communist Party. Instead, they maintained informal political allegiance through their involvement in an array of affiliated cultural organizations. As art historian Pat Hills has observed, the Popular Front strategy called for coalition building, rather than local revolution, to support the global fight against fascism. A desire to foster a “united front of all people” produced a conciliatory rhetoric and a reformist agenda that permitted the Popular Front movement to collaborate with and integrate into various progressive platforms, including Roosevelt’s New Deal programs.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Francis Robert White to Olin Dows, 10/8/1935, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA. White made a similar pronouncement to the local press a few days later. Following the official announcement of his leadership status on the project, the artist clarified that the “fact that he has been named master artist does not constitute a personal commission.” “Explains Aims of New Group Painters.”

20. The Popular Front’s public embrace of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal was particularly appealing to artists. The impetus behind the 1935

Motivated by anger as well as by utopian Communist ideals for the future, Wood's former students embraced the intellectual and cultural activism of Popular Front politics. They mobilized politically by forming the CMP, by participating in labor protests and demonstrations, and by creating socially engaged art. White even echoed the movement's coalition-building rhetoric in a statement to the local press when he explained that one primary goal in forming the CMP was to present a "unified front in the national art field."<sup>21</sup>

As the group's members grew more confident in their opposition to Wood's administrative leadership, they also denounced his prescribed brand of Regionalism. In February 1936 White and Jones journeyed to New York City for the first meeting of the American Artists' Congress (AAC), a professional artists' union associated with Popular Front politics.<sup>22</sup> There White delivered a scathing lecture in which he described Iowa artists' oppressive working conditions under the PWAP and disparaged the federal government's handling of their complaints. Although he refrained from using Wood's name in his public address, White openly satirized the Regionalist's well-known essay *Revolt against the City* (1935) by calling his paper "Revolt in the Country."<sup>23</sup> White made frequent allusions to Wood throughout his presentation,

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formation of the American Artists Congress (AAC) was to replace more sectarian organizations such as the John Reed Clubs. Although its founding members belonged to the Communist Party of the United States, most of the officers of the AAC were not actual party members but merely left-leaning liberals.

21. "Explains Aims of New Group Painters."

22. White and Jones were the only two Iowa artists whose names appear in the "call" for the first meeting of the AAC. Jones reportedly left the conference early because he found the political tenor of the proceedings too leftist for his taste, but his account of the event does not seem to match the progressive politics he embraced in his public murals during this period. It is more likely that the artist later tried to diminish his engagement with the AAC because of Cold War assumptions about its "Communist" agenda. Don Glasell also was a member of the AAC, although he did not attend its inaugural meeting in 1936.

23. Attributed to Wood, the pamphlet *Revolt against the City* (1935) was most likely ghostwritten by his University of Iowa colleague Frank Luther Mott. Wood seems to have lent his name to the pamphlet as a personal favor to Mott, who issued the manifesto as the first installment in the "Whirling Wind Series," a platform designed to showcase Regionalist writings. Despite its dubious authorship, the essay does reflect Wood's philosophy and ambitions for developing a Regionalist school of painting. See Evans, *Grant Wood*, 232-33.

which celebrated the successful efforts of a group of organized artists—the CMP—to defeat the WPA’s appointment of Wood and thereby bring an end to his tight-fisted rule.<sup>24</sup> He underscored the group’s social consciousness and progressive art philosophy, which he juxtaposed against the seemingly apolitical, idealized portrayals of rural living so common in Wood’s Regionalist canvases. He noted that not all Iowa artists felt “prompted to make pseudo-romantic halos” out of present economic hardships, nor were they “necessarily corn-conscious in their approach to art.” “In presenting the case of Iowa,” he explained, “it is first necessary to discard the popularized version of the bucolic painter, milk pail in hand, and to realize that serious painters here as elsewhere are confronted with realities [of the Depression] and are responsive to them.”<sup>25</sup>

For White, Jones, and other members of the CMP, the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse project offered an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate their socially engaged mode of art. Not only was the TRAP assignment one of the largest federal commissions in the state, it was also the first significant New Deal mural project to advance without Grant Wood’s involvement. In

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24. The CMP’s activities did not actually dissuade Washington officials from extending a leadership position to Wood. In 1935 WPA administrators offered the regional directorship to Wood who, having been informed of the telegram lodged against him, declined the offer and refused any further participation in the federal art projects. For details of this exchange, see the correspondence between Grant Wood and Holger Cahill between October 9 and October 16, 1935, in RG 69, entry 11, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Central Files General 1935–1944, NARA.

25. Francis Robert White, “Revolt in the Country,” in *Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress*, introduction by Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986), 192–95. Jones also defined his artistic persona in opposition to Wood. In an interview following the acceptance of his painting *Country Gasoline Station* (1936) in the annual exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, he quipped that the work had been “painted without inspirational aid of milking cows, the recently published recipe for midwestern ideas.” Jones’s caustic remark ridiculed Wood’s observation, published just a few days earlier, that all of his best ideas had come to him while milking a cow. Jones’s pronouncement must be considered in light of his participation in the inaugural meeting of the AAC, presumably in support of White’s “Revolt in the Country” speech. By disavowing rural inspiration, Jones reiterated one of the central arguments White had made about Regionalism and its presumed dominance in Iowa art. See “Show Accepts Jones Painting: Iowa Fair Winner to Hang in Philadelphia,” *Des Moines Register*, 1/26/1936.

their collaborative organization as well as in their choice of style and subject matter, the CMP artists consciously modeled their ideal for an alternative and, they believed, more democratic system that would permit "the fine arts field of Iowa [to] be stimulated to its full promise and accomplishment."<sup>26</sup>

### Revolution in Paint

Between 1935 and 1937, the CMP completed the only TRAP mural project in the state, *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture*. Like many progressive artists of the 1930s, the CMP artists held that public art had a significant role to play in social transformation. In its subject, style, and method of execution, the Cedar Rapids mural cycle operated as a visual manifesto for the artists' New Deal optimism and Social Realist sensibilities. Measuring approximately 5½ feet tall by 216 feet long, the paintings wrapped the upper walls of the third-floor courtroom in an epic historical narrative meant both to celebrate and to advocate New Deal social reform.

The collaborative nature of the mural cycle demonstrated an idealized prescription for labor. The project was a "strictly cooperative" enterprise, as one newspaper put it.<sup>27</sup> Although the group collectively agreed on the general theme and color scheme, each painter maintained full control over the design and execution in his allotted wall space. Furthermore, the artists performed extensive manual labor on the scaffolding yet worked harmoniously side by side for the good of the entire project. A 1936 photograph, published in the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, captures the camaraderie and close working conditions of the CMP artists in the courtroom (fig. 3). Howard Johnson stands atop the scaffolding, at the far left of the image. Shirtless due to the summer heat and holding a sketch pad in his hand, he draws a pencil study of Bill Walters, the live model who stands before him. Don Glasell, kneeling at the far right, produces additional sketches of the model from an anterior view, while Francis Robert White, seated at the center of the scaffolding, transfers a charcoal sketch of his

26. Francis Robert White to Holger Cahill, 9/6/1935, quoted in DeLong, *When Tillage Begins*, 149.

27. "Eggs to Blend Mural Paints," *Des Moines Register*, undated [1936].



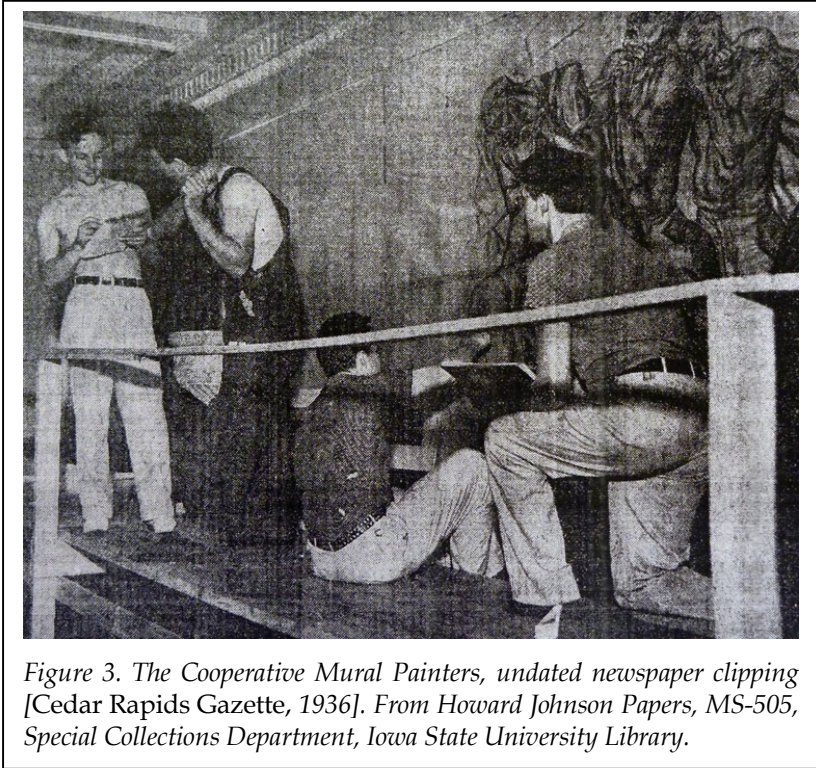


Figure 3. *The Cooperative Mural Painters*, undated newspaper clipping [Cedar Rapids Gazette, 1936]. From Howard Johnson Papers, MS-505, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library.

composition to the canvas before him. Explicitly comparing the CMP's egalitarian working arrangement to Wood's earlier mural project, the caption informed readers that "formerly . . . one man [had] directed the designing and the others merely did his labor." White, by contrast, "was not usurping all the creative glory for himself."<sup>28</sup>

Equally important, the artists' status as federal employees imbued them with the feeling that they belonged to a participatory democracy. Early correspondence between White and Dows

28. "Large Federal Art Project Under Way in U.S. Courtroom Here; Co-Operative Job," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, undated [1936]; "Eggs to Blend Mural Paints"; and Adeline Taylor, "Murals to Adorn Walls of Federal Court Room Here Will Depict Parallel Progress of Law and Culture; Large Relief Art Project," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 12/22/1935, all in MS 505, Howard C. Johnson Papers, Special Collections Department, Iowa State University Library, Ames (hereafter cited as ISU Library). The "one man" was, of course, Grant Wood.

at the TRAP headquarters in Washington, D.C., indicates that the CMP artists were keenly aware of the federal government's agenda for public art. On October 8, 1935, White sent the TRAP chief a note expressing his gratitude and enthusiasm for the project and assuring him that he would "do all that is within [his] power to encourage and to express fine workmanship and fine design." He admitted that the cooperative artists did not yet have a comprehensive outline for such a large-scale mural project but explained their ambition to paint an original concept based on "the growth of our concepts of justice."<sup>29</sup> In accordance with the federal art program's preference for American Scene subject matter, the theme would contrast historical incidents and figures with contemporary scenes of the judicial process.

The CMP soon extended its proposal beyond the development of justice to include the advancement of culture as well. In a letter outlining the dual theme, Harry Donald Jones articulated the idealistic notions that he and his colleagues held about the social meaning and purpose of public art.

The idea of the unity of all human knowledge as providing the foundation for law has appealed to me strongly from the first. I felt in considering the functions of a courtroom that I am in the presence of great issues, where men act, not alone in accord with the rules of present expedience but in obedience to an accumulation of values which is the measure of civilization itself. Under this general heading I feel that the two main subjects [of the mural] would be "Law and Culture," the former as representing the specific development of our institutions of justice, and the latter as instilling those concepts of order, humanity, beauty and moral responsibility which are the support of the law.<sup>30</sup>

The artists envisioned a compositional layout that placed White's design at the front of the courtroom, directly behind the judge's bench. His meditation on American justice would be balanced on the south wall with a consideration of American culture. Taking an archaeological view of the subject, Jones planned to portray scientists unearthing Mayan architectural monuments,

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29. Francis Robert White to Olin Dows, 10/8/1935 and 10/10/1935, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.

30. Harry Donald Jones to Olin Dows, 9/19/1935, microfilm roll DC 25, RG 121, frame 189, TRAP Papers, AAA.

Pueblo pottery, and Mound Builder burial remains. The side walls, designed by Jeffrey, Johnson, and Glasell, would unify the composition and its respective themes of law and culture by showing “the parallel growth of legal status with cultural progress.”<sup>31</sup>

Over the next several weeks, White carried out research and began to formulate preliminary designs for the group’s judicial theme. Time constraints forced him to relegate biblical law and other American judicial antecedents to the grisaille lunettes above the doors and windows. He also discarded “the most theoretical and elaborate ideas in favor of a very objective approach.” Focusing on the contemporary American justice system, White based his composition on his firsthand observations of daily court functions. He attended legal proceedings, interviewed deputies and judges, and produced sketches during visits to the county jail. To generate additional interest and appeal, White planned to incorporate individual portraits and local settings in his depictions of the court system and imprisonment.<sup>32</sup>

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31. Taylor, “Murals to Adorn Walls of Federal Court Room.” In late November White drafted a letter to Dows with an update on the mural. Jones had spent the past two weeks gathering research, drawing, and designing the section of the mural “for which his Mexican background particularly suited him.” Jeffrey, assigned a mural section on the east wall between two grisailles, was preparing a composition that contrasted “the summary justice of vigilante committees with the police protection afforded under an established legal form.” Glasell assumed responsibility for the six grisaille panels, which paid tribute to historical and biblical systems of law, while White took charge of the design and drawing for the north wall. In addition to that work, he was gathering material for the remaining wall spaces in the courtroom. Johnson, who split his time between the courthouse mural and a related mural assignment in the adjoining post office, performed a smaller but equally important role in the design process. He conducted research on historical fact, made drawings of inanimate objects, determined the layout, prepared tracing and transparency designs, and served as a model for various scenes throughout. There is no indication in the archival record whether Johnson completed the mural for the post office, located in the lobby of the federal building. The project remained still in the planning stage in late February 1937, when Johnson sent a detailed proposal to TRAP administrator Henry La Farge. Johnson, taking inspiration from American poet Walt Whitman’s “Carol of Occupations” (1900), envisioned a mural illustrating labor in agriculture and industry, with particular attention to the activities of Cedar Rapids federal workers and postal employees. See Francis Robert White to Olin Dows, 11/29/1935, and Howard C. Johnson to Henry La Farge, 2/23/1937, both in RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.

32. Francis Robert White to Olin Dows, n.d. [October 1935], RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.



Figure 4 (cont. on facing page). Francis Robert White, *Study for North Wall*, 1935. Photograph No. LC-USZ62-8436-8001 and LC-USZ62-84367001, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

On December 22, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* reported that White had nearly completed his preliminary sketches for the north wall. Rendered in charcoal on brown paper, the drawing highlights three social benefits of the American justice system: trial by jury; the law's protection of the individual; and the law's protection of society (fig. 4). In the left portion, White calls attention to the judicial tenet of "presumed innocence." The vignette contains an ensemble of bondsmen and defense counsel, who assist accused individuals during their imprisonment and trial. White expresses faith in the trial system by including an innocent individual's acquittal. The panel at right conveys the protection of society by showing the formal arrest process, in which accused criminals are removed from the streets, undergo fingerprinting, pose for a mug shot, and serve jail time. The central panel spans the architectural niche that designates the judge's bench at the front of the courtroom. Replicating the daily activities of the very room it adorns, the scene shows a judge presiding over a case.<sup>33</sup>

Having spent months on the design, White received a sharp blow to his artistic ego when TRAP refused to approve his sketches for the north wall. Worse still, Washington officials did not merely request revisions to the existing drawings, but recommended a complete overhaul in concept as well as design. In a letter dated February 26, Dows informed White of the agency's decision, noting that the artist might "use somewhat similar subject matter" in his next design, but conceded that "it would be simpler to

33. Taylor, "Murals to Adorn Walls of Federal Court Room."



change the subject matter itself and use something having to do with the development of the town” instead.<sup>34</sup>

However disappointed White felt upon receiving Dows’s letter, he agreed to the redesign and began conducting research on his newly assigned subject matter. In his compliance with TRAP recommendations, White nevertheless struggled to identify materials related to the “development of the town” that would remain in keeping with the ideological and thematic content of the rest of the room.<sup>35</sup> For one thing, the government’s suggested revision stripped the courtroom mural of its primary thematic anchor. Without an entire wall devoted to contemporary justice, the conceptual unity and didactic clarity of *Law and Culture* would suffer. Additionally, White understood that local civic history was ubiquitous in federal art commissions. A popular subject among Regionalist painters especially, the historical development of the town seemed not only trite but also uninspiring as a topic for socially engaged art.

Committed to the progressive ideology of the Popular Front, the CMP artists expressed a sincere belief in the progressive nature of Roosevelt’s administration. They considered the New Deal, in general, and the federal art programs, in particular, as a means to reinstate the founding tenets of American democracy, to restore economic balance and stability in the wake of corporate actions that had led to the stock market crash, and to effect positive

34. Olin Dows to Francis Robert White, 2/26/1936, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA. In his letter to White, Dows did not enumerate the reasons for the decision; however, Treasury Department officials probably preferred a simpler color palette and more orderly design. Dows’s request for full-color line drawings of the other three walls underscores a general concern that “the whole room will be crowded.”

35. Francis Robert White to Olin Dows, 3/3/1936, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.

social change without violence or revolution. Heralding the progressive actions of an enlightened federal government, the artists nevertheless set out to expose past and present injustices like poverty, racism, corruption, and greed.

To accomplish those goals, the muralists gravitated toward politically resonant subject matter, bold colors, and expressive line. They looked especially to Mexico's modern muralists, who garnered fame and popularity exhibiting and working in the United States, as inspiring examples for how to create socially engaged art. Between 1930 and 1934, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco executed major mural commissions across the nation, including the controversial and highly publicized fresco panels at Rockefeller Center and Dartmouth College. Gathering ideas and opinions for the courtroom murals in Cedar Rapids, White and Jones visited several of the Mexican artists' murals during their February travels to the East Coast. The duo made a special stop in Michigan to consider Rivera's *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle, and they consulted murals by Orozco, Rivera, and other Social Realists during their stay in New York City.<sup>36</sup>

Jones's contribution on the south wall represents the most obvious tribute to the Mexican muralists (fig. 5). At the far left of the composition, Jones depicts Orozco seated on scaffolding, actively drawing the base outline for his fresco at Dartmouth College.<sup>37</sup> The portion of the mural cycle that Jones reproduces in this scene is significant. In addition to being one of the most controversial and famous passages of the Mexican artist's design, the image of the flayed Christ figure destroying symbols of world religions serves as an economical, shorthand symbol of Orozco's overarching social critique. The Dartmouth College mural, *The Epic of American Civilization* (1934), conveyed a radical message that the artist-revolutionary was the redeemer of a morally and spiritually corrupt social order. Moreover, Orozco's hemispheric perspective on American history countered narrow U.S. nation-

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36. Francis Robert White to Olin Dows, 2/12/1936, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.

37. Jones underscores the manual labor behind mural painting by portraying an anonymous worker alongside the famous artist. The figure wears overalls and faces away from the viewer, his face obscured. Applying wet plaster to the surface of the wall, the worker stands as an everyman. Jones also may have conceived of the figure as a surrogate self-portrait.



Figure 5. Harry Donald Jones, "Our Inherited Culture" from *Law and Culture*, 1936–1937. Oil on canvas, Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse (now Cedar Rapids City Hall), Cedar Rapids. Photograph No. 121CMS-8A-IO-8B, *Photographs of Paintings and Sculptures Commissioned by the Treasury Relief Art Project*, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121-CMS, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

alism by presenting episodes ranging from pre-Columbian antiquity and the Spanish Conquest to the modern militarized nation-state.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps inspired by this example, the adjacent vignettes in Jones's composition, titled "Our Inherited Culture" and "American Archaeological Research," foreground the rich cultural legacy of Native American civilizations in the New World (fig. 6). With this prominent inclusion of American archaeologists studying the cultures of ancient Mexico and the U.S. Midwest and Southwest, Jones promoted a multiethnic, inclusive definition of American identity and underscored his belief in the central role of art in revitalizing modern society.<sup>39</sup>

38. For a thorough history and analysis of this mural, see Mary Coffee, *Orozco at Dartmouth: The Epic of American Civilization* (Hanover, NH, 2007).

39. American scientific developments such as archaeology had only recently introduced cultural relativism and bestowed aesthetic value on native accomplishments, particularly in architecture and craft. This interpretive shift was





Figure 6. Harry Donald Jones, *Our Inherited Culture from Law and Culture*, 1936–1937. Oil on canvas, Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse (now Cedar Rapids City Hall), Cedar Rapids. Photograph No. 121CMS-8A-IO-9B, *Photographs of Paintings and Sculptures Commissioned by the Treasury Relief Art Project, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121-CMS*, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

Jones's quotation of the Dartmouth College mural also acknowledges the aesthetic precedent behind the disjointed narrative and vivid color scheme evident throughout the CMP's design. The Cedar Rapids mural cycle exhibits the distinctive monumentality, bold outline, compositional movement, and roundness of form more typical of murals by Rivera and Orozco than of those by the artists' former mentor, Grant Wood. In addition, all of the walls employ a fluid montage of figures and episodes in the Mexican manner. By condensing past and present, history and fiction, the muralists achieved a dynamic composition that activates the public space as a site of historical memory. Viewers must make sense of the open-ended narrative sequence and, in doing so, reconcile the manifest social relations linking them not only to other

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concomitant with changes in the U.S. government's policy toward Native American nations. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs transitioned from a policy of forced assimilation to one of cultural preservation. The New Deal facilitated progressive efforts to study and renew indigenous traditions, especially in the arts. See Jennifer McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art: Indian Arts and Federal Policy, 1933–1943* (Tucson, AZ, 2009).



members of the community, but also to the identities and actions of residents in the past. By calling attention to one's place within an exploitative social order, the CMP artists hoped to radicalize ordinary Americans' thinking and compel positive social change.

The design plans for the east and west walls further demonstrate the group's leftist reform agenda. Prominently displayed polychrome vignettes by Everett Jeffrey and Don Glasell call attention to social injustices such as mob violence, slavery, corporate greed, and religious superstition. The most overt expression of these Popular Front tendencies is Jeffrey's graphic portrayal of a lynching on the western frontier (fig. 7). In 1935 leftist artists made lynching the subject of a targeted campaign. That year both the NAACP and the Communist Party's John Reed Club held anti-lynching exhibitions in support of political and legislative efforts to make lynching a federal offense.<sup>40</sup> In Jeffrey's treatment of the subject, a group of men and women gather to witness a criminal's execution in a nineteenth-century town square. Behind them, the accused man sits astride a pale horse. Facing away from the crowd, he leans slightly forward with his hands bound behind his back. A noose, attached to a nearby tree, hangs ominously around his neck. At the appointed time, the assembled crowd will startle the steed with a rifle shot and thus secure the man's grisly fate.

By mid-March, White found a design solution that would match his colleagues' progressive political stance yet also fulfill TRAP's requirements for the north wall. As White explained to Dows, his revised panel would take advantage of local source materials and complement the overall theme of *Law and Culture* in its portrayal of "the cultural development of the Mid-West from the days of conquest to the present settled and industrialized state." He had already worked out some of the ideas he would employ in his redesign, since he expected to incorporate

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40. Lynching was well established as a manifestation of racism by the 1930s. Detailed studies of lynching appeared throughout the decade, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) presented an anti-lynching bill to Congress in 1934, 1935, and again in 1938. For more detailed analysis of the 1935 anti-lynching art exhibitions, see Marlene Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," in *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*, ed. Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg (University Park, PA, 2006), 155-80.



Figure 7. Everett Jeffrey, "Evolution of Justice" from *Law and Culture*, 1936–1937. Oil on canvas, Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse (now Cedar Rapids City Hall), Cedar Rapids. Photograph No. 121CMS-8A-IO-6A, *Photographs of Paintings and Sculptures Commissioned by the Treasury Relief Art Project, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121-CMS, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.*

a previous competition mural sketch. Titled "Pyre of Conquest: The Opening of the Middle West," the award-winning design illustrated the forced displacement of Native Americans and the early struggles of white pioneers on the frontier.<sup>41</sup> White planned to elaborate upon this scene by adding a steamboat, a tugboat, and an early railroad as symbols of territorial expansion; a mid-western farm as a symbol of established agrarian settlement; and

41. The Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture did not provide work relief but rather awarded federal contracts to artists through a series of regional and national competitions. White had submitted the mural sketch "Pyre of Conquest: The Opening of the Middle West" as his entry in one such contest. Following a blind jury process, the Section awarded White a mural commission for the post office in Missouri Valley, Iowa; however, White's composition changed substantially from his competition design to the finished mural, perhaps because of his adoption of the theme "Opening of the Midwest" for the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse. Completed in 1938, the Missouri Valley post office mural takes "Iowa Fair" as its theme instead.

a diesel engine as a symbol of the technological and industrial conversion of natural resources in modern society. Addressing potential concerns about the chronological and spatial treatment of such a complex composition, White assured Dows that each stage of development corresponded to a historical era and that the narrative sequence would progress from left to right. He also outlined the formal elements of his proposed design, which he envisioned as a tripartite arrangement of figural areas separated by passages of landscape.<sup>42</sup>

TRAP officials and the supervising architect were amenable to White's proposed design. The committee unanimously agreed that the revised panel was "much more suitable for the court room than the first one" and asked White to submit a color sketch for formal approval. Characteristic of the close oversight that Treasury Department programs exercised throughout the New Deal era, Dows noted that officials were not entirely satisfied with certain details of the preliminary design. He instructed White to improve the naturalism of both the cow and the barn in his next composition. The committee considered the precise and accurate rendering of such details essential to public works of art, as local residents elsewhere had demanded revisions to federal artworks based on factual errors. Referring to the peak of the gable in White's sketch, Dows wrote, "I understand this is being projected as a gable, but would like to know definitely about this. Won't you, when you send in the finished color sketches, just add a note explaining what kind of a barn this is?"<sup>43</sup>

In the next phase of the mural project, TRAP officials turned their attention to the work of Jones, Johnson, Jeffrey, and Glasell. Upon reviewing sketches of the other three walls—which they had tentatively approved based on written descriptions—Treasury Department administrators expressed concern that the "conception and general vitality" of the designs did not match the quality of White's panel.<sup>44</sup> The inferior "conception and general vitality"

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42. Francis Robert White to Olin Dows, 3/15/1936, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.

43. Olin Dows to Francis Robert White, 3/24/1936, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.

44. Olin Dows to Francis Robert White, 6/10/1936, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA.

impugned in the letter no doubt referred to the overtly politicized imagery and expressive style woven throughout the painters' scale drawings. In addition to Jones's homage to Orozco and to Jeffrey's historical episode of lynching, Glasell's preliminary sketch heralded working-class solidarity and organized labor strikes in the fight against corporate greed. Moreover, their art, which had previously aspired to the naturalistic figuration and orderly precision of Wood's pastoral scenes, now employed a deliberately harsh color scheme, tilted perspective, and distortions of scale and perspective to expressive effect.

Dows encouraged White, as master artist, to assume a more supervisory role in the project. "It is absolutely essential in executing this work that you do the finishing and be responsible for the drawing of the entire room, for there are grave doubts in the minds of the Treasury Projects whether work that in sketch form is so doubtfully executed will be satisfactory at full size." Those instructions must have presented a significant challenge for White as he had disavowed his leadership standing and promised complete artistic freedom among the CMP group. Acknowledging the hierarchical implications of such close supervision, Dows nevertheless emphasized the seriousness of his request. "We are all aware that this is an interesting project from the social point of view and that your handling of it as a group project is to be greatly commended," he penned to White. "But we also feel that it is absolutely essential that work placed in a Federal Building should be of complete and undisputed technical efficiency."<sup>45</sup>

As Dows's final remark indicates, the itemized criticism handed down from Washington centered on technical and formal qualities of the work rather than its controversial subject matter. The Treasury Department approved of the general idea for *Law and Culture*, but the committee felt that the overall composition contained too many artistic points of view. The organization and draftsmanship, Dows explained, could be improved, par-

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45. Ibid. A comparison of panel descriptions and preliminary sketches reveals several thematic and compositional revisions for individual panels in the mural cycle. Jones, for example, substituted the scene on public health and the control of venereal disease for a proposed panel called "The Movies." See Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson, *Art in Federal Buildings: An Illustrated Record of the Treasury Department's New Program in Painting and Sculpture* (Washington, D.C., 1936), 224.

ticularly in the lunettes that appeared crowded and insufficiently naturalistic. Furthermore, the application of color looked unnatural and even garish in places. The Mayan serpent column on the south wall, for instance, seemed “unnecessarily bright and gaudy” to the committee, while the green-gray faux stone treatment of the grisailles recalled synthetic plasticine more than the intended granite or marble. With regard to the side walls, Dows observed only that the anatomical accuracy and scale of the human figures required attention throughout. His detailed analysis demonstrates careful looking on the part of Washington officials, yet the letter contains almost no commentary regarding the pictorial content of each scene. For all its efforts to ensure appropriate and noncontroversial works of public art, the Treasury Department’s silence regarding the graphic portrayal or placement of the lynching scene in the Cedar Rapids courthouse mural indicates that the subject matter did not raise alarm. Dows even made explicit reference in his letter to the vignette “Evolution of Justice” as an example where bodily extremities are rendered in a distorted and disproportionate manner. His recommendation to Jeffrey to draw correctly the hands of the lynched man reveals not only government officials’ awareness of the scene but also an implicit approval of its historical, albeit violent, subject matter.<sup>46</sup>

How can such a nonchalant response on the part of U.S. government officials be explained? At the very least, New Deal administrators tolerated a degree of social criticism based on the principle that a democracy licensed freedom of speech and because they believed that the federal art programs were helping to build a more democratic culture. In addition, the CMP artists tempered their critical social commentary with affirmative images of contemporary life. Jeffrey’s historical episode of lynching, for example, is followed by a contemporary scene of police protecting society by dispersing a mob (fig. 8). This balance of imagery was intended not merely to placate Washington officials; the artists espoused a genuine belief in New Deal social programs.

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46. Olin Dows to Francis Robert White, 6/10/1936, RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA. For deeper analysis of the ideological confluence of the New Deal and the Popular Front, see Andrew Hemingway, “Cultural Democracy by Default: The Politics of the New Deal Arts Programmes,” *Oxford Art Journal* 30 (2007), 269–87.



Figure 8. Everett Jeffrey, "Evolution of Justice" from *Law and Culture*, 1936–1937. Oil on canvas, Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse (now Cedar Rapids City Hall), Cedar Rapids. Photograph No. 121CMS-8A-IO-6B, *Photographs of Paintings and Sculptures Commissioned by the Treasury Relief Art Project, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121-CMS*, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

Although White's labor activism and open hostility to Wood earned him a reputation among much of the Iowa art community as a "radical" and "left-wing" artist, he considered himself nothing more than an ardent New Dealer. As he later put it, "I agreed very much with the philosophy of those days. It was very stimulating because for the first time artists became public figures. They worked with the community on public buildings and tried to give a medical, social and humanitarian message to the people of the United States. They became spokesmen . . . in the sense that they symbolized the New Deal in their art."<sup>47</sup>

47. Francis Robert White, quoted in Lea Rosson DeLong and Gregg R. Narber, *A Catalog of New Deal Mural Projects in Iowa* (Des Moines, 1982), 13. In addition to spearheading efforts to form the CMP, White led an artists' boycott against the Art Salon at the 1936 Iowa State Fair. The union objected to the practice of forcing artists to "gamble" for monetary prizes, arguing that the fair board should instead pay all participating artists a rental fee to display their art. When the board denied

The CMP viewed Roosevelt's social reform projects as a positive development in society and strove to create socially progressive public art to match. At once Social Realists and dedicated supporters of the New Deal, the artists did not shy away from publicizing historical transgressions and current social ills in American society; yet the mural design as a whole conveys idealism and optimism for a better future through New Deal reforms. Taking "community service" as his theme, Glasell crafted a panorama of contemporary 1930s life that included fire and police officers, a cooperative store, and a work relief office. In every instance, Glasell's community members place the good of the whole above their individual needs. The fire and police officers forgo security and physical safety; the cooperative store and work relief office privilege the financial comfort of all members of the community over personal greed. Jones similarly championed public social programs in his depiction of an anti-syphilis campaign. Located on the east wall at the rear of the courtroom, the collage-like scene highlights advancements in medical knowledge and the benefit of social health measures (fig. 9). An oval inset shows a doctor treating a nude patient, whose strategically placed hands preserve his modesty yet also allude to his affliction. Through proper education and treatment, Jones stresses, public health programs can eradicate venereal disease. Legible newspaper headlines, drawn from actual issues of the *Chicago Tribune*, underscore the point by announcing Sweden's success in eliminating the disease, while a woman stands with her arm outstretched in an oratory pose, directing the way to a better future through enlightened governance and social reform.

### Early Reception of the Mural

On December 17, 1936, Washington officials granted final approval of the mural cycle based on a series of black-and-white photographs submitted at the conclusion of the project. Dows confessed that he still did not like the lunettes of historical lawmakers, which he considered "brutal and out of scale" compared to the rest of the design. Apart from that component of the composition,

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their request, White and the other members declined to participate in the exhibition. See "Opposing Iowa Art Groups Aim Boycott at Fair Salon," unidentified newspaper clipping, 8/23/1936, Johnson Papers, ISU Library.



*Figure 9. Harry Donald Jones, "Public Health" from Law and Culture, 1936–1937. Oil on canvas, Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse (now Cedar Rapids City Hall), Cedar Rapids. Photograph No. 121CMS-8A-IO-8A, Photographs of Paintings and Sculptures Commissioned by the Treasury Relief Art Project, Records of the Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121-CMS, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.*

Dows and the other TRAP officials agreed that the completed mural project looked "considerably better than it did in the sketches." They singled out White's contribution for special praise, observing that the execution of the north wall seemed "particularly well done." The following year Dows's TRAP successor, Cecil H. Jones, reiterated the agency's favorable assessment of the mural cycle. In a letter to another Iowa artist, Jones declared, "The mural for the Court House in Cedar Rapids has been completed in a manner which is satisfactory to us. . . . The group of artists combined their talents and efforts on this job and, as far as I know, worked very harmoniously. The job was amazingly free from friction when one takes into consideration the manner in which it was done."<sup>48</sup>

48. Olin Dows to Francis Robert White, 12/17/1936, and Cecil H. Jones to Dorothea Tomlinson, 10/11/1937, both in RG 121, entry 119, box 11, TRAP Papers, NARA. The WPA's Federal Writers' Project also took note of the TRAP mural,



Local artists committed to Grant Wood's Regionalist philosophy nevertheless condemned the artistic inferiority of the courthouse murals. Such critical reception focused principally on aesthetic concerns. The CMP represented a deliberate departure from the flattened, decorative appearance and schematized naturalism made famous by the artists' former teacher. The fact that the cooperative had looked to Mexico for inspiration would have been clearly evident as well. In a manner consonant with American Social Realism and its Mexican mural precedent, the Cedar Rapids courthouse mural cycle employed figural distortion and a vibrant color palette to activate the image and to achieve expressive ends.<sup>49</sup>

The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* published a complete photographic set of *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture* in 1937. Employing stridently inflammatory language, the accompanying caption called attention to formal and iconographic elements that, over the next 30 years, would be consistently trotted out in service of negative assessments of the piece.

Eyes of prisoners, spectators, the jurors and the judge alike . . . nowadays never escape the highly controversial and vivid mural paintings which adorn the courtroom's four walls. . . . Frank treatment of such subjects as campaigns against venereal disease and lynchings brought forth a deluge of protest from federal court attachés when they first walked into the courtroom as the artists decamped with paints and brushes. Although most court officials said plaintively "we wanted something softer and more refined," [the] wittiest comment was attributed to Federal Judge George C. Scott, who purportedly glanced around the room and said: "I'm suffering mural turpitude."

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describing its location and identifying four of the five artists in its entry on the Cedar Rapids Federal Building. See Federal Writers' Project, *Iowa: A Guide to the Hawkeye State* (New York, 1938), 191.

49. These visual characteristics increasingly carried leftist political resonance for American viewers in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In an incident prefiguring the Cold War, Social Realist Edward Millman's public murals were subjected to accusations that they were "un-American in theme and design" and that they displayed "communistic influence." This reactionary rhetoric was typical of an orchestrated campaign against federal art funding. See Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven, CT, 2002), 172.

When the judge, his bailiffs and clerk look toward the back of the courtroom it is difficult for their eyes to escape the rear wall, painted by Jones. From a center composition of almost glaring red, depicting relics of Mayan culture, the composition moves into arresting masses of boldly colored form. To the left an overall-clad archaeologist excavates, next to him the Mexican artist, Joseph Orozco, works — a picture within a picture, showing a section of that artist's Dartmouth college murals. Jones' painting finally swings into a contemporary subject — the contemporary campaign for venereal disease eradication in the United States. This picture . . . shows a consultation, while a club woman preaches. Actual newspaper clippings are mounted on the wall in this section.<sup>50</sup>

Through evocative words and phrases that reveal a personal bias against the stylistic attributes of Social Realism, the author captures the apparent visual assault conservative viewers experienced while viewing the work. In addition to the prominent inclusion of challenging social imagery, the mural cycle exhibited "forceful color and form," with passages of "almost glaring red" and "arresting masses of boldly colored from."<sup>51</sup>

The same article described the CMP as "undismayed by the lack of public appreciation" for their courtroom decoration. Calling attention to the narrative of progress portrayed in the mural scheme, the artists predicted that "public taste will catch up with the murals and people will enjoy them."<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately for White and the other cooperative artists, the opinion most Iowans

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50. Unidentified newspaper clipping [*Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 1937], Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse Papers, Linge Library, Carl and Mary Koehler History Center, Cedar Rapids (hereafter cited as Courthouse Papers, Linge Library).

51. *Ibid.* The apparent difference between local and government opinions emerges in even sharper relief when we consider that White became Iowa's first state director of the WPA's Federal Art Project soon after completing this commission. Contrary to popular belief, the artists behind the TRAP mural were successful and influential leaders in the Iowa arts community throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. Jones supervised the Iowa Index of American Design project and later succeeded White as the Iowa state director of the WPA's Federal Art Project, while Glasell ascended to the assistant directorship of the Sioux City Federal Art Center. In addition to his tenure as state director for the WPA, White held the directorship of the Sioux City Federal Art Center and later worked as a recorder and artist for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), art supervisor for the Navajo Indian Agency, and administrator with WPA's Federal Art Project in Kentucky and Illinois.

52. *Ibid.*

held of the mural project would grow significantly worse before it improved.

### **Cold War and Cultural Controversy**

U.S. participation in the World War II produced a massive cultural and political shift. Despite New Deal efforts to put Americans back to work and restart the economy, it was the exigencies of the war that lifted the country out of the Great Depression. Defense contracts for steel, rubber, and other essential war materials restored corporate capitalism and returned the nation to full employment. As a result, the United States emerged from the global conflict not only victorious but also prosperous.

At the same time, the U.S. government grew increasingly concerned about the spread of Communism. The Soviet Union's successful detonation of its first atomic weapon in 1949 precipitated an arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union that would last nearly a half-century. The successful revolution of the People's Liberation Army in China that same year amplified U.S. fears of Communism creeping across the globe. Over the next decade, the prospect of Communists infiltrating the United States created a tense domestic climate of suspicion and unyielding social conformism. Cold War anxieties about enemy subversives produced an expansive political witch hunt in which the federal government interrogated the loyalties of its own citizens. This campaign of domestic repression, called McCarthyism after Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, issued false accusations of un-American activities and blacklisted suspected Communists from jobs in government, academia, the film industry, and the popular press. The so-called Red Scare especially targeted Americans previously involved in the Popular Front and labeled them Communists.<sup>53</sup>

The CMP artists' explicit engagement with Social Realism combined with their admiration for Mexican muralism and Popular Front politics supplied a distinctly politicized interpretive

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53. Ironically, Senator Joseph McCarthy considered modern (abstract) art symptomatic of "Bolshevism," the revolutionary philosophy underlying the Russian Revolution, and thus suspected contemporary artists of participating in a Communist conspiracy to subvert American values.

framework for the TRAP mural cycle. The leftist political ideals expressed in *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture* were not accepted universally even at the work's unveiling in 1937, but the conservative postwar political climate rendered the mural untenable as a civic monument. Conveyed visually in the artists' bold color palette, challenging subject matter, and didactic and anecdotal style, the social agitation underlying the New Deal project exacerbated prevailing negative perceptions of the federal courthouse mural cycle and ultimately decided its fate.

In Cedar Rapids the federal court received numerous complaints about the graphic imagery in the TRAP mural cycle. Of particular offense to Cedar Rapids viewers was one of Jeffrey's contributions, "Evolution of Justice." Located on the east wall of the courtroom, directly opposite the jury box, the design includes a detailed portrayal of vigilante justice (fig. 7). A criminal appears on horseback moments before his execution by lynching. His hands are bound, and a noose wraps around his neck. The artist juxtaposed this scene with one depicting the advent of the American court system; however, the majority of viewers experienced a strong emotional response to the lynching scene that overrode its intended historical narrative of judicial progress.

Complicating matters further, many Iowans misunderstood Jeffrey's depiction of police officers restoring order (fig. 8). When the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* reproduced the offending law-themed panels in 1956, the newspaper described the portion to the right of the lynching as another "scene of violence."<sup>54</sup> As Mel Andringa, a Cedar Rapids artist and cofounder of Legion Arts, recently observed, the protective actions of the state are ambiguously portrayed.<sup>55</sup> The vignette shows contemporary residents converging on the town square, where a police officer is leading a female criminal in handcuffs toward the courthouse. Several armed police officers, including two on horseback, stand guard among the angry townspeople to observe the prisoner's transport and to maintain order. Rather than reading the police officer's actions as the pri-

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54. "Federal Building Courtroom Murals Being Obliterated," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 5/2/1956.

55. "Old Federal Courthouse: Courtroom Mural History, An Interview with Mel Andringa," February 2012, Courthouse Papers, Linge Library. Andringa rightly notes that this scene might be interpreted as an expression of fascist oppression.

mary content of the panel, postwar residents apparently observed the gathering crowd as a threatening image of civil disorder. In particular, they seem to have combined the two scenes in "Evolution of Justice" to form a continuous narrative, one in which menacing throngs of townspeople stand as a precursor to violence. The formation of a lynch mob, seen in the right half of the panel, leads to social lawlessness and murder in the scene to its left.

Not surprisingly, lawyers and judges objected most strongly to the presence of these scenes in the courtroom, arguing that the narrative portrayal of vigilante justice was inappropriate and prejudicial during trial proceedings. Its placement on the east wall exacerbated the issue. Positioned across from the jury box, the lynching scene was "the one most likely to catch [jurors'] attention during the course of a trial."<sup>56</sup> Defense attorneys, expressing serious concern that the mural cycle would influence jurors' perceptions of the defendant, issued numerous complaints and called for its removal from the courtroom.

In addition to its legible politicized imagery, the Cedar Rapids mural cycle offended mid-century viewers for what was perceived as its inferior, "socialist" painting style. By World War II, the precipitous rise in European and New York abstraction made Depression-era figural styles appear conservative and outdated. Global warfare had left many American artists disillusioned and, as their dreams of New Deal reform dissipated, they eschewed the social and political engagement of 1930s art in favor of emotive personal expression. Postwar artists largely abandoned the formal language associated with Social Realism and the American Scene and embraced instead a self-reflexive, free-form aesthetic that they believed better reflected the modern age.<sup>57</sup> Critics likewise favored aesthetic experimentation and abstraction over the representational style and regional subject matter that proliferated in New Deal art. With its bold, slashing forms and open-ended meanings, Abstract Expressionism was promoted as the epitome of liberal individualism in a capitalist society. Critics lauded it as the epitome of American identity and independence, which in their view sur-

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56. "Federal Building Courtroom Murals Being Obliterated."

57. The untimely death of Grant Wood must have contributed to the declining status of New Deal art, since Regionalism lost its most prominent spokesperson and practitioner with his passing in 1942.

passed European avant-garde experimentation, and they touted New York as the new world art center.<sup>58</sup> As early as 1949, *Life* magazine posed the question whether Jackson Pollock, a foremost student of Thomas Hart Benton who had repudiated his mentor's style, was "The Greatest Living Painter in the United States."<sup>59</sup>

Political opponents of Roosevelt's social programs had long criticized New Deal art as a waste of public funds and as a propaganda vehicle advocating the federal government's political and social agendas. Conservative congressmen had condemned the federal art programs as a colossal "boondoggle" and campaigned for their dissolution even before the outbreak of World War II.<sup>60</sup> When the United States entered the war, the cultural example of Germany provoked a vicious backlash against American Scene painting, since its naturalistic and anecdotal qualities paralleled officially sanctioned Nazi art glorifying *die Volk* and *der Vaterland*. As a result, American artists' engagement with figural representation and regional themes appeared equally, and even dangerously, provincial, close-minded, and nationalistic. Avant-garde critics further disparaged American Regionalism as amateurish and sentimental, resembling lowbrow visual production like commercial illustrations and advertisements. Characteristics such as pictorial narrative, formal legibility, and decorativeness came to be viewed as evidence that New Deal murals typified "bad" art.<sup>61</sup>

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58. New York art critic Clement Greenberg shaped postwar reception of Abstract Expressionism and New Deal art. His influential essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," published in 1939, proposed a rigid separation of modern art and mass consumer culture. According to Greenberg, lowbrow or popular imagery was politically dangerous as its narrative style was ideally suited to political propaganda. Only abstraction could rid itself of illegitimate content, whether religious, commercial, or political. In this dichotomous paradigm, Abstract Expressionism symbolized American individualism, freedom, and self-expression whereas figural styles signified its polar opposite: totalitarianism and popular culture. See Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall 1939), 34-49.

59. "Jackson Pollock," *Life*, 8/8/1949, 42-45.

60. In 1938 the Federal Arts Bill, legislation that would have formed the basis for a permanent system of federal patronage, suffered a humiliating defeat in the House of Representatives by a vote of 195 to 35. Midterm elections consolidated and strengthened the conservative anti-New Deal bloc in Congress, which levied repeated attacks and budget cuts against the federal art programs until their official end in 1943.

61. Deteriorating U.S. foreign relations with the Soviet Union exacerbated the declining status of New Deal art. With the advent of the Cold War, American

Shifting attitudes toward New Deal art were evident in Iowa as early as 1946. That year, a large-scale mural painting at the Iowa State Fairgrounds by Howard Johnson and Dan Rhodes, completed under the aegis of the WPA just nine years earlier, was removed, sawed into scrap lumber, and converted into shelving and exhibition booths for the upcoming fair. When asked about his decision to remove a government-sponsored mural, Fair Board Secretary Lloyd B. Cunningham cast aspersions against the New Deal federal art programs and the aesthetic quality of their public works.

The mural wasn't art, it was WPA . . . It was a joke to have that thing on a fairgrounds that's devoted to glorifying the Iowa farmer and his accomplishments. And anyway I'm sure all [of] Iowa wants to forget the WPA. In fact, I hope that the fair board's move in ripping out this monstrosity may point the way for a lot of other libraries, railroad depots, post offices and other public buildings over the state which were saddled with these so-called art pieces.<sup>62</sup>

The painting, measuring 220 feet by 10 feet, depicted the displacement of Native Americans by white settlers, technological advances in farming equipment, and the cultivation of land. In his portrayal of contemporary life, Johnson featured a group of farmers gathering in front of a community center to discuss their shared agricultural plight. Characteristic of Social Realism of the 1930s, the mural acknowledged and also proposed a potential solution for negative social conditions through popular organization and progressive reform.

The public outcry over *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture* led Federal District Judge Henry N. Graven (1893–1970) to respond initially with a temporary fix. In 1951 he agreed that

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Social Realism was maligned especially for its visual resemblance to Soviet socialist art. In the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism was a representational style dictated by the nation-state, which did not permit any form of aesthetic experimentation or personal expression. Because the critical establishment and popular imagination elided American Social Realism and Soviet Socialist Realism in the postwar era, U.S. cold warriors condemned American paintings in this mode as being, at best, compatible with and, at worst, supportive of an oppressive and corrupt enemy regime.

62. *Des Moines Register*, 6/25/1946. Harry Donald Jones's mural at the Des Moines Public Library nearly suffered a similar fate in 1951. The actions of community art patrons saved the mural.

portions of the mural cycle were “inappropriate for a courtroom” and determined to cover the offending imagery behind temporary curtains. That physical barrier banished the panels from sight but did not remove them from the walls. Less than three years later, in 1954, he ordered the walls of the courtroom to be whitewashed. The judge reportedly knew very little about the mural cycle, since its commission predated the start of his judicial appointment in 1944. Nevertheless, he recognized the paintings as a legacy of New Deal federal art patronage. Having heard that they were painted “as part of a work relief project many years ago,” Graven may have associated the works with Soviet socialism and “bad” art. To be sure, one of the reasons the judge offered in support of his decision was the “realistic detail” in which the offending imagery was portrayed. He sent photographs of the mural to Archibald K. Gardner, chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals of the Eighth Circuit, and Henry P. Chandler, director of the administrative office of the U.S. courts, to solicit federal approval. Both endorsed Graven’s view of the controversial imagery and authorized the mural’s removal.<sup>63</sup>

White and Jones, former leaders of the CMP, probably had no knowledge of the proposed action against the mural cycle until it was too late. The court handed down its decision while White was living in Mexico, where he earned his MFA degree under the GI Bill.<sup>64</sup> Jones had served in the navy during World War II and then moved to San Francisco, where he enjoyed a successful career as a photographer. Even if the muralists had been in Iowa to witness the unfolding of the mural controversy, they

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63. “Federal Building Courtroom Murals Being Obliterated.” Although Graven ultimately supported the removal of the murals, he made some effort to salvage the paintings for posterity. He had hoped that the murals might be sent to the regional GSA office in Kansas City, but he received no response to his appeal before the city of Cedar Rapids began its redecoration of the court quarters two years later. When the contractors commenced painting in early May, Graven concluded that the GSA must have considered the removal of the murals to be “impossible or impractical” and granted permission for the whitewashing to proceed.

64. White did not return to Cedar Rapids until the following year, when he resumed working as an artist preparing stained-glass windows for the National Masonic Library. His presumed silence on the whitewashing issue is based on the lack of archival evidence to the contrary. He may have voiced his dissent in private or maintained silence because it was politically prudent. By 1956, he had moved to Chicago.



likely would have maintained a diplomatic silence. As former members of the AAC and the CMP, the artists found themselves especially vulnerable to red-baiting.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the hostile political culture of the Cold War had obliged many painters, including CMP member Howard Johnson, to accept the censorship of New Deal work. Reflecting on the 1949 destruction of his Agriculture Building mural at the Iowa State Fairgrounds, Johnson admitted that he “hated to hear that it had been torn down,” but he reasoned that “it can’t be put back together again, any more than you could put an egg back together.”<sup>66</sup>

Over the course of two days in early May 1956, painting contractors covered *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture* with base paint. The *Cedar Rapids Gazette* told local residents that the courtroom mural cycle was now “a thing of the past” and explained that its controversial subject matter had “led to its downfall.” To illustrate the point, the newspaper reproduced the portion that Graven had considered “most objectionable for courtroom walls.” The photograph encompassed the lynching scene as well as the mural passage immediately to its right.<sup>67</sup> Paradoxically, the offending imagery almost certainly reached a broader audience through the local media than it ever had in the courtroom. Nevertheless, its whitewashing carried broad public support and thus temporarily ended the controversy surrounding the mural’s style and content.

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65. By the late 1940s, conservative congressmen and their allies were targeting liberal artists as Communist sympathizers. In a speech before the U.S. House of Representatives on March 25, 1949, Representative George Dondero denounced Artists’ Equity, a self-described apolitical artists’ organization with more than 1,500 members residing in 38 states, for having “left-wing connections” and promulgating Communist ideas. In the characteristically inflammatory rhetoric of the day, Dondero described its members as “soldiers of the revolution—in smocks.” In his far-reaching accusation, the congressman did not distinguish between an individual’s involvement in Popular Front bodies such as the AAC and genuine commitment to the CPUSA. See Andrew Hemingway, “Between Zhdanovism and 57th Street: Artists and the CPUSA, 1945–1956,” in *The Social and the Real*, 265–66.

66. George Mills, “Mural Artist Grieved but Philosophical,” *Des Moines Register*, 6/27/1946. “The mural is all sawed to pieces,” Johnson is quoted as saying. “It’s water over the dam. You can’t do anything about it.”

67. “Federal Building Courtroom Murals Being Obliterated.”

Eight years later, the mural cycle again came to public attention when Judge Edward McManus had the overpaint removed and asked art experts to clean and evaluate the work of art. The paintings remained on view only briefly, since McManus determined that the mural imagery was prejudicial to any case being tried in the courtroom. Like his predecessors, McManus objected that jury members faced Jeffrey's graphic portrayal of vigilante justice for the duration of a trial. Furthermore, the hired art experts determined that the mural cycle had no aesthetic merit and little historical value. Specifically, the painting style was deemed inferior to that of other Iowa artists such as Marvin Cone and Edmund Whiting, who followed in the Regionalist mode of Grant Wood.<sup>68</sup> This professional assessment attests to the lasting effect of the CMP artists' public split from their famed teacher, since the critics no doubt responded to the deliberate figural distortion, spatial disorder, and other common stylistic traits of Social Realism.

In accordance with McManus's decision, the city of Cedar Rapids arranged to have the mural cycle photographed for posterity before painting over it again with gray latex paint. Local officials intended their decision to be permanent, as the use of latex paint indicates, and the censored murals remained fully hidden from public view until four years ago. Their deliberate erasure ushered in a period of cultural amnesia. The mural paintings and the artists behind them were not "worth" remembering, even within the Iowa art community. By the 1970s, when the General Services Administration (GSA) initiated a nationwide survey of New Deal art in government buildings, no one could identify the team of muralists beyond a list of their names.<sup>69</sup> It is

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68. Beverly Duffy, "Art World Detective Story," unidentified clipping [*Des Moines Register*], 6/18/1972, Courthouse Papers, Linge Library. See also Justin Foss, "History Comes with Courthouse," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 11/9/2009.

69. In the early 1970s the GSA launched an inventory project to locate and record all available information about artworks in GSA-maintained facilities. That nationwide survey represented the first stage of a historic preservation program that would evaluate and assign restoration priority to individual works of art. The program earmarked five Iowa New Deal murals for inspection. The state's sole TRAP commission—the fresco cycle at the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse—made the list. Robert Kocher, an art professor at Coe College, carried out the government study to the best of his abilities, considering that the mural had been painted over nearly 20 years before. Since the artwork was not visible for firsthand inspection, Kocher recovered a photographic record of two

hardly surprising, then, that the TRAP mural cycle remained untouched, buried under layers of paint, for decades still to come.

### **Recovery and Discovery: Iowa's Cultural Tradition and Historical Memory**

In the summer of 2008, a record-setting flood besieged much of eastern Iowa. Cedar Rapids was particularly hard hit as heavy rains and flooding closed roads, submerged portions of businesses and homes, and damaged civic infrastructure downtown. Water levels of the Cedar River rose even above the Time Check Levee, erected in the 1930s after the Great Flood of 1929, and crested at 31.12 feet, roughly 19 feet above flood stage, on Friday, June 13. The downtown area of Cedar Rapids, including the government complex on and around May's Island, sustained millions of dollars in damage from the deluge.

The flood devastation in eastern Iowa brought the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse to the attention of congressmen and government officials at the GSA. Discussions regarding the design and construction of a new edifice were already under way when the natural disaster struck, but the extensive damage to the Depression-era building made the project a funding priority. The original federal courthouse suffered substantial structural and mechanical damage during the 2008 flood. Flood waters rose approximately four feet above the first floor, and the basement, which contained most of the building's major mechanical and electrical equipment, was completely under water. When the flood waters subsided, the federal building had no power, no potable water, and no heating system. The federal government responded with a special emergency appropriation to construct a new edifice as well as to clean and repair the historic courthouse.<sup>70</sup>

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walls from the archival files at the Cedar Rapids Gazette. Local memory of the CMP had diminished to such an extent that, by 1972, Kocher was unable to identify any of the artists responsible for the courthouse mural project beyond their names. See Beverly Duffy, "Art World Detective Story," unidentified clipping [*Des Moines Register*], 6/18/1972, Courthouse Papers, Linge Library.

70. The circumstances forced the relocation of all federal court operations into a leased space. The GSA had identified a new federal courthouse for Cedar Rapids as a regional priority in a space-needs study completed in 1992; however, the project failed to receive adequate federal funding for more than a decade. In 2002 the city of Cedar Rapids received a disbursement of funds to secure a plot

In the immediate aftermath of the flood, the GSA acted quickly to minimize damage and to restore the Depression-era federal building to its original condition. Government contractors removed several tons of debris and waterlogged materials from the structure, and they cleaned and sanitized remaining structural materials for future occupancy. Water seepage persisted even after the flood subsided, requiring workers to pump more than 64 million gallons of water from the courthouse. The GSA also carefully cleaned and restored original finishes such as stone, wood, decorative metals, and decorative plaster both in the interior and on the external façades of the building. Exterior work involved chemically cleaning and patching stonework, refurbishing the original wood window frames, and new landscaping. Maintenance and preservation efforts for the interior of the building were even more extensive. The government agency repaired the plaster walls and ceiling, refurbished the metallic surface of cast iron vestibules, repainted the interior using the original 1933 color scheme, and reinstalled original doors, window frames, and trim that had been moved previously to storage. The GSA made upgrades to the ruined mechanical and electrical systems and restored the original mailbox system to the structure's former post office lobby.<sup>71</sup>

Once structural and mechanical repairs to the federal courthouse were complete, the GSA turned its attention to the white-washed TRAP mural cycle on the third floor of the building. As early as 1993 the federal agency had expressed interest in uncovering and restoring the paintings to their original condition. In a GSA memorandum to Regional Administrator Thomas Walker, Washington official Dale Lanzzone recommended mural conservation but acknowledged the potential for public backlash in response to the project's lynching and syphilis imagery. "If certain parts [of the mural cycle] are found to be objectionable," he wrote,

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of land and to begin design considerations for the new structure, but congressional budget cuts repeatedly stalled construction. The GSA began construction on the new federal courthouse in 2009 after the U.S. Congress had approved an emergency appropriations bill during its legislative session the previous fall.

71. Trish Mehaffey, "Courthouse Options Weighed," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 7/26/2008; Adam Belz, "Linn Supervisors Tour Courthouse," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 3/20/2009; "Cedar Rapids Federal Courthouse," unpublished manuscript [2010], Courthouse Papers, Linge Library.

“we would like to find another means of keeping them from public view.”<sup>72</sup> The agency would not act on Lanzone’s recommendation for more than a decade.

In 2006, when federal funding for a new courthouse for Cedar Rapids seemed imminent, the GSA renewed its preservation efforts. It hired Arthur Page of Page Conservation, Inc., to assess the condition of the mural cycle and to prepare a treatment plan and cost estimate for future restoration. That same year, the GSA struck an agreement with the city of Cedar Rapids for the “long-term preservation, public accessibility and stewardship of the Old Courthouse for future generations.” In addition to the Art Deco architectural features of the structure, the GSA made special mention of the courtroom’s site-specific murals, which “were created to enhance the architecture of the building at the time of its construction in 1937.”<sup>73</sup> The GSA considered the murals to be part of the historic fabric of the building and stipulated that they must remain in their current location. Moreover, the agency recommended a full restoration of *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture*.

Unfortunately, the GSA’s conservation plans for the original Cedar Rapids courthouse building suffered the same delays as its proposed new building, as congressional budget cuts stalled both projects until the flood of 2008. In conjunction with the post-flood repairs to the old courthouse building, the federal agency requested a second condition report on the mural cycle, which determined that the paintings had sustained no additional damage as a result of the natural disaster. It then began a series of test-cleanings to determine the feasibility of restoration work. The federal government also signed an agreement with the city of Cedar Rapids to transfer a parcel of city-owned land – the site of the new federal courthouse – in exchange for the renovated Depression-era structure. The official property swap took place in late August

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72. Dale Lanzone to Thomas Walker, 6/22/1993, “Iowa, Cedar Rapids, United States Courthouse Papers, White, Robert Francis (Law and Culture),” FA425-B, General Services Administration, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as White Papers, FA425-B, GSA).

73. Memorandum of Agreement between the General Services Administration and the City of Cedar Rapids, 3/21/2006, 30-33, “GSA Agreements: GSA Region 6 MOAs and PAs,” Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, [www.achp.gov/GSAagreements/GSA%20Region%206%20MOAs%20and%20PAs/index.html](http://www.achp.gov/GSAagreements/GSA%20Region%206%20MOAs%20and%20PAs/index.html).

2010. Although the GSA no longer owned the federal courthouse building, it upheld its contractual obligation to uncover the north wall of the mural cycle, which contained Francis Robert White's contribution, *Opening of the Midwest*. As GSA historic preservation officer Sylvia Rose Augustus explained to a reporter at the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, the federal agency hoped that its restoration of White's painting would stimulate local funding interest and facilitate conservation work on the remaining three walls.<sup>74</sup>

Washington-based Page Conservation, Inc., commenced conservation work on the courtroom's north wall in early 2011.<sup>75</sup> Water damage, unrelated to the flooding of 2008, had allowed mold to grow on the backside of the painting, and the canvas had separated from the wall in spots. Conservators treated the mold damage and reattached the mural to the wall. The company also cleaned and restored the surface of the artwork, which required gesso to fill in cut lines and in-painting to restore abraded passages and strengthen details and contrast.<sup>76</sup>

Soon after the restoration of the first wall was complete, the federal courtroom began a second life as the City Council chambers. City officials expressed appreciation for the historical and cultural significance of the mural cycle and embraced its restoration as a metaphor for the recent reevaluation of history, openness, and public discourse in civic government.<sup>77</sup> Local residents likewise praised the conservation project, viewing the CMP's social criticism as an "important historical balance" to the well-known art and ideology of Grant Wood and his followers.<sup>78</sup> Such attitudes

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74. Rick Smith, "Mural to Be Restored in Future C.R. Council Chambers," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 1/23/2011. The U.S. government did not apply Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) funds associated with the building's flood repairs to uncover the north wall. Rather, the GSA undertook the mural restoration project as part of its annual art conservation budget.

75. Rick Smith, "Wall-Length Mural Uncovered at the Cedar Rapids' New Council Chambers," KCRG.com, <http://www.kcrg.com/news/local/Wall-length-Mural-Uncovered-at-the-Cedar-Rapids-New-Council-Chambers-118281134.html>.

76. Page Conservation, Inc., to Kathy Erickson (GSA), 6/13/2011, White Papers, FA425-B, GSA.

77. Rick Smith, "Back in Town," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 4/26/2011; Smith, "Mural to Be Restored."

78. Rick Smith, "City Seeking Federal Grant to Uncover Second Mural in Council Chambers," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 2/27/2012.

reflect a recent groundswell in popular taste for Depression-era art, stimulated by the efforts of scholars who have worked to recover and redeem the history of New Deal public art.<sup>79</sup>

As Washington officials at the GSA had hoped, Cedar Rapids leaders and residents began their own campaign to uncover and preserve the remaining three walls. Working in collaboration with the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, the city pursued a historic preservation grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) that would allow them to remove an overcoat of paint from the courtroom's south wall. The application was successful, and in March 2012 the city of Cedar Rapids received a federal grant covering approximately half of the total cost of restoration. Later that spring, the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation (GCRCF) brokered a deal with the city to help cover the remaining conservation costs. Under that arrangement, the city of Cedar Rapids promised to match private donations raised by the foundation. A combination of community fundraising and city funds thus supplied the remainder of the project's budget, and the city began accepting contract proposals for the south wall's restoration before the end of the year.<sup>80</sup> Scott M. Haskins, an art conservator at Fine Art Conservation Laboratories, executed the second phase of the conservation project, which involved carefully removing several layers of latex paint, repairing and adhering the canvas to the wall, inpainting damaged and abraded mural surfaces, and applying a protective topcoat of varnish (fig. 10).

Community fundraising efforts have continued unabated in hopes of uncovering the remaining two walls of the mural cycle. Last spring, the city of Cedar Rapids and the GCRCF submitted a grant application seeking additional NEA funding to restore

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79. The archival research, exhibitions, and publications of Lea Rosson DeLong, Gregg R. Narber, and Kristy Raine have been particularly important contributions to the recovery of Iowa New Deal art. Publications by Erika Doss, Marlene Park, Karal Ann Marling, and Francis O'Connor have brought new perspectives to the history of U.S. federal art programs and helped to generate broad scholarly interest in Depression-era art.

80 Rick Smith, "City Seeking Federal Grant," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 2/27/2012; Rick Smith, "City Hopes to Uncover Second Mural," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 3/1/2012; "Cedar Rapids to Match Donations for Mural Project," *Ames Tribune*, 4/18/2012; Sarah Binder, "Preservation, Restoration Create New Council Home," *Corridor Business Journal*, 12/31/2012.



*Figure 10. Inpainting Damage on WPA Mural in City Hall, Cedar Rapids. Courtesy Fine Art Conservation Laboratories, Santa Barbara, California.*

the east wall of the mural. Although the city did not receive an award under that program, the NEA encouraged the GCRCF to submit a new proposal for consideration in a separate pool of funding. That alternate strategy was successful, and the city received notification of the grant award in August; however, the award amount of \$20,000 was much smaller than the GCRCF had hoped. A private donor contributed significant funds to help make up the deficit, but the total still fell short of the \$110,000 budget necessary to proceed with conservation work. The city of Cedar Rapids applied for additional assistance through the State Historical Society of Iowa's Historic Resource Development Program, which agreed to provide the remainder of the money.<sup>81</sup>

81. The restoration of the mural cycle's east wall is being funded with a \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment of the Arts; a \$22,770 grant from the State Historical Society of Iowa's Historic Resource Development Program; and \$62,500 from United Fire Group, Dee Ann McIntyre, and the McIntyre Foundation. See Rick Smith, "Hidden Art: Depression-era Mural to Return to Life in Cedar Rapids City Hall," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 2/27/2015; and "'History Re-



Conservation work on the third wall began in April 2015. Early in the process, conservator Scott Haskins made a surprising and unwelcome discovery about the mural's contentious past. In addition to spending decades beneath layers of latex overcoat, the painting suffered deliberate damage in an attempt to neutralize its offending subject matter. While restoring the far right section of the east wall, Haskins uncovered a glaring omission in Jones's tribute to public health programs. Specifically, the collage-like presentation of newspapers with provocative headlines had been excised from the piece.<sup>82</sup>

The east wall arguably contained the most controversial imagery of the mural cycle, including Everett Jeffrey's "Evolution of Justice" and Harry Donald Jones's call for the eradication of venereal disease. Even so, the intentional effacement was an unexpected find given the excellent preservation of the other two walls. Photographic documentation of the mural cycle shows the anti-venereal disease campaign intact at the time of its initial whitewashing in 1956, suggesting that the damage to Jones's panel occurred sometime during the paintings' brief period of visibility from 1961 to 1963. Conservators anticipated finding additional damage to the east wall, particularly the long-controversial image of vigilante justice. Fortunately, their predictions have proven unfounded as Jeffrey's infamous lynching scene remains still intact. Cedar Rapids resident Mel Andringa has speculated that court officials may have removed the offensive newspaper imagery to forestall a second whitewashing; however, the actual motivation and details surrounding this event remain murky at best.<sup>83</sup>

Because the selective removal of the syphilis content caused some residual damage to the physician figure and rendered the female orator floating in blank space, Haskins recommended that his team recreate the missing material. In keeping with con-

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stored' City Hall Mural Lecture Series," City of Cedar Rapids, <http://www.cedar-rapids.org/city-news/announcements/pages/history-restored-mural-lecture-series.aspx>.

82. Rick Smith, "Cedar Rapids City Hall Mural's Unveiling Reveals Surprise Absence," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 4/15/2015.

83. Rick Smith, "In City Hall Mural, Hanging Scene Remains Intact," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 4/17/2015.

temporary conservation practice, he proposed to restore the image using a monochromatic palette so that it will complete the scene yet also acknowledge its modern repair. On April 17, the Cedar Rapids Community Development Department approved an amended treatment plan for the mural's restoration. With the assistance of the city's Visual Arts Commission, conservators resumed working to reinstate the CMP's original vision for the east wall.<sup>84</sup>

In conjunction with its official unveiling, Iowa librarians, scholars, curators, and other authorities on the mural cycle led a special lecture series, "History Restored: Law & Culture in City Hall Murals," during the spring months of 2015. Each gathering will host a two- or three-person panel addressing the history of the mural cycle and the lives of its artists.<sup>85</sup> The community also envisions a permanent interpretive display for visitors to the courtroom. The proposed exhibition would contain photographs and narrative labels to help individuals decipher the myriad artistic and historical threads within the epic mural cycle. The Cedar Rapids Museum of Art also hopes to develop an online exhibition that will include a digital archive of videotaped community conversations and additional materials about the project.<sup>86</sup>

These ongoing efforts help to bring our contemporary lives into contact with the past and to cultivate community identity and memory through a shared appreciation for New Deal art. By fostering public dialogue and sharing archival documents, images

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84. Rick Smith, "Section of Cedar Rapids City Hall Mural Recreated," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 4/24/2015.

85. The first event in this series, "The Opening of the Midwest: Six Men and a Mural," took place on March 11, 2015, and featured presentations by Lea Rosson DeLong, guest curator at Iowa State University, and Kristy Raine, archivist at Mount Mercy University. On April 15, 2015, DeLong and Scott Haskins, president of Fine Art Conservation Laboratories, will deliver a lecture titled "A Cultural Inheritance: Cedar Rapids and Beyond—Highlighting the South Wall." The final lecture, "Images of Progress: Advances in Law and Science Depicted on the Newly-Restored East Wall," by Cedar Rapids Museum of Art Executive Director Sean Ulmer, will coincide with the official unveiling of the east wall. A complete lecture calendar, including paper abstracts, may be found on the City of Cedar Rapids website: City of Cedar Rapids, "'History Restored' City Hall Mural Lecture Series," <http://www.cedar-rapids.org/city-news/announcements/pages/history-restored-mural-lecture-series.aspx>.

86. Kristy Raine, e-mail messages to author, 9/10/2014, 3/3/2015, 3/6/2015.

of the mural cycle, and the mural itself with the broadest possible audience, the city of Cedar Rapids and the staff of the GCRCF are engaged in a democratic venture that replicates many of the social aims and educational ideals espoused in *Opening of the Midwest* and *Law and Culture*. Not only does the mutual aid and collaboration of governmental agencies, civic authorities, and local cultural leaders resemble the cooperative spirit of the New Deal federal art programs, but the educational framework surrounding the mural cycle's restoration and future display encourages an active art-viewing experience that, like the paintings themselves, enables the public to consider contemporary society within a broader historical landscape. Faced still with the partial restoration of the CMP's mural cycle, we are sure to contemplate the changing identity and attitudes of Cedar Rapids and Iowa toward local history, social reform, and New Deal art. That encounter offers us an opportunity to glimpse where the community has been, to reflect on the current state of society and our place within it, and, finally, to envision where our collective future might go.