

## **American Idealism: A New Deal Synthesis in Art**

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It is ironic that the man who symbolized early on the potential for art to challenge the political status quo in America in the 1930s was himself a man of ambivalent political commitments. When the great Mexican muralist Diego Rivera was first approached in 1926 about the possibility of creating a mural in San Francisco it must have seemed ironic in the extreme that corporate representatives of American industry, which had a virtual stranglehold on Mexican natural resources (Lee, p. 55) should seek out a man who was a member of the Mexican Communist party, MCP. Rivera's affiliation with the MCP, contrary to popular opinion, was never very committed and, as a matter of fact, he was expelled from the MCP not only once but twice (Lee, pp. 52-54). That Rivera was now hobnobbing with American industrialists and capitalists such as Rockefeller and Henry Ford essentially betraying the MCP for his own artistic ambitions (Lee, p. 55) certainly did not endear him to his former fellow travelers, and the fact that Rivera had agreed to a mural commission in the United States must have struck them as tantamount to treason. Whereas Rivera was an indifferent member of the MCP and had strange capitalist bedfellows as benefactors, the art that he created in the United States especially his highly controversial and subsequently destroyed mural in Rockefeller Center in New York City that depicted Lenin, Marx and Trotsky showed little embrace of the rich. That American capitalists first sought out Rivera was an attempt on their part at de-escalating Mexican-American tensions, for the less than noble purpose of further capitalist exploitation of Mexican resources, but the fact that they looked to Mexican muralists in the first place was indicative of

how powerful and influential Mexican public art was at the time. The American artist George Biddle considered it nothing short of "...the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance (McKenzie, p.5). " Of course, by the time Rivera finally arrived in America in 1930 the stock market had crashed and the United States was in economic chaos.

Rivera, along with Jose Clemente Orozco and David Siqueiros, referred to as Los Tres Grandes in Mexico (Lee, p. 52) epitomized Mexican public art. In yet another irony, those who would champion the triumph of democracy on the walls of America looked to the Mexican Communists for their inspiration. George Biddle believed in 1933 that the federal government could produce "a real spurt in the arts" and saw "the mural as a particularly important art form of the future." Inspired by the experiment in the 1920s of Mexican President Alvaro Obregon in which artists painted murals in public spaces praising the ideals of the Mexican revolution while receiving a modest stipend from the government in return, Biddle, who would become known as the "father of federal art projects," believed a similar arts project could be imported into the United States to not only keep artists employed in a time of severe economic crisis, but popularize Roosevelt's New Deal on the walls of America as Rivera and others had done in Mexico (McKinzie, p.5).

Rivera, however, brought not only his art to the United States but also his general philosophy, however estranged he was from the MCP, and his concern for the downtrodden and oppressed classes had a definite resonance in a nation that had a burgeoning unemployed population. Those who worked as his assistants in his American mural projects such as Seymour Fogel, adopted much of his philosophy and emphasized the plight of the homeless, the brutality committed against African-Americans and the impoverished victims of police abuse during the so-called "bread riots" in their art of the mid-1930s. Roosevelt himself was on record as calling

Americans to fight against “the forces of privilege and greed (McElvaine, p. 275)”, a stance which aligned him in the minds of some leftist ideology, the antithesis of regional conservatism. The school of Social realism crystallized around this focus, as well as representations of the proud union man and industrial worker, and such portrayals, and the Marxist-Communist philosophy that inspired them, became increasingly attractive to a growing portion of the population who probably would not have gravitated to such extreme views had not the stock market crash revealed the deep dichotomy of haves and have-nots inherent in the capitalist system.

If Rivera and the Mexican school had been seen by Biddle as prototypes for an artistic championing of Rooseveltian paternalism and the accomplishments of the New Deal, such an influence obviously came at a price. Social Realists saw the government as unresponsive to their cause. A 1935 article for the leftist periodical *Art Front* entitled “Morals and Murals” summed it up neatly: “The murals designed for public buildings...seem to meet with official approval in inverse order to their social and artistic worth (Kao, et al, p.58).” Social Realism was seen by many in the United States as a threat to what they perceived as traditional American values. Those who sought to defend these conservative values such as independence, self-determination, self-reliance, faith, the family and other principles of Jeffersonian democracy came to be known in the art world as Regionalists. The farmer and the land he farmed were the iconography of this school, as well as larger than life heroes of the American past and significant incidents in local history. Perhaps no area of the country was as staunchly regionalist as the rural South that held deep suspicions about the role of the federal government in local affairs since the days of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Beckham notes that northern artists were too often selected to paint murals in the South and that “...such enterprises as the TVA, the WPA, and the

CCC were instances of a Yankee governments' gentle reconstruction. All too often, though these projects brought jobs, new state parks and cheap electricity, outside bureaucrats were sent to administer them, once again depriving the South of control of its own affairs (p. 48)." The resulting desire on the part of the South to seal itself off from such perceived federal invasion could even be seen in much of Southern mural art of the time, where "the background is invariably circumscribed by buildings, forests, circles of people. The figures...are protected from each other, from the viewer and the world beyond the South by some natural, artificial or human barrier (p. 24)." As Anthony Lee observed: "Self-avowed regionalism in painting...generally takes shape when a threat is perceived on the horizon (p. 60)."

The problem the government faced in its federally funded art projects of the 1930s was how to bridge this divide between Social Realists and Regionalists, those who saw labor unions and the triumph of the industrial worker and those who were devoted to family, faith, and farm. In its largest context, this debate was not so much about left and right politically or even artistically, but about the federal government versus local autonomy, a debate which remains with us to this day. If Social Realists were seen as aligned with industry in this regard, it was due neither to their love of capitalism nor their allegiance to Washington politics but, rather, to the socialist iconography of the union man and the collective ideal that this implied as well as the proud industrial worker triumphing over capitalist exploitation. Rivera himself was "fascinated by economic and industrial development (Garreau, p. 61)." Regionalism, as it had its roots at least partly in nineteenth century Populism, was agrarian and staunchly anti-Wall Street, anti-big business (Park and Markowitz, p. 156) and, by extension, anti-big government. In their view the "farmer...is the backbone of the nation because he is the model of independence, enterprise productivity and traditional virtue (Park and Markowitz, p. 156)."

The government itself was largely responsible for this quandary in its insistence that public art approved either by the Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration or WPA (hereafter referred to as the “Project,” as it was in the 1930s) or the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (the “Section”) should be totally faithful to aspects of local history, geography, or industry in its broadest definition while attempting to please regional vanity and self-image by means of its dictum that “the public is the patron of the arts.” They obviously concurred with the Regionalist Grant Wood when he stated that “a work that does not make contact with the public is lost (Marling, p. 92).” The quandary lay in how, in McElvaine’s words, to carry out “Roosevelt’s Utopian scheme for moving workers and work into the countryside (p. 155),” to introduce aspects of Roosevelt’s program for economic progress, industrialization and modernization into rural communities whose firmly regionalist outlook was being catered to at the same time.

Edward Bruce, formerly head of the short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and then head of the Section sought to tackle this problem. Vowing that he would rid public art of personal and political agendas and “stop the Mexican invasion at the border (McKinzie, p. 57).”, he sought to be a centrist with respect to the two often warring camps. Park and Markowitz state: “The Section provided the patronage and in their negotiations with the artists and the public, moved the art toward the center (p. 176).” This “realist coalition” that Park and Markowitz identify produced a form of art that we have termed American Idealism, a melding of farm and factory, of region and modernization by means of industry that allowed the federal government to enter small town America while artistically praising the unique local genius of the region. It was no mean feat, yet the realist coalition that produced American Idealist Art (although such a

genre was not confined only to the Section) got “radicals and liberals” to work together in what they felt was a progressive cause (p. 179).”

What constituted American Idealism, as opposed to Regionalism and Social Realism? Simply stated it was the synthesis of the two. When Julian Woeltz painted *Gang Plow* for Amarillo, Texas, he combined the Regionalist theme of farming with modern machinery that made tilling the soil more efficient. Lee Allen created a similar composition in *Soil Erosion and Control* for Omaha, Iowa, where the horse, hand-sewn seed and shovel are combined in the mural with a modern tractor. Jean Swiggett's, *Local Industry* for Franklin, Indiana, pictured a factory at the center that is flanked by two groups of local citizens including a boy carrying a calf. The groups serve as almost a theatrical curtain, as if what is Regional is being drawn back to reveal the shape of the future.

Other artists that produced American Idealist art sought to incorporate the centrality of the American family as a metaphor for this synthesis: as if farm and industry connoted a single family unit of all Americans. This was nowhere more apparent than in Harry Sternberg's aptly titled composition, *The Family-Industry and Agriculture* for Ambler, Pennsylvania. At the center of the composition is a family consisting of a husband, wife, and small infant flanked to the left by a factory and to the right by a farm. It is tempting to interpret the infant in such works as symbolic of the fruit of this synthesis, the future of technology and the land can produce miracles of abundance, a theme that was very much part of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair. Seymour Fogel in, *The Security of the People* in what was once the Social Security building in Washington, DC again places a family-father, mother holding an infant, boy and girl-between a grid-work trellis on the left ( a stand-in for the farm) and the iron grid-work of a new

construction on the right. Mitchell Siporin also included the family unit prominently in his, *The Fusion of Agriculture and Industry* for Decatur, Illinois.

It must be pointed out that, despite their mutual animosity, there was a point of convergence between Social Realists and Regionalists, and that was the American worker. American Idealist works play to that convergence. Park and Markowitz underscore this: “The ideal of Social realism...is conveyed by the image of the worker in heavy industry. The worker, ideal of Social Realism...is conveyed by the image of the worker in heavy industry. The worker, as the source of national wealth, is often depicted as a heroic figure—large, muscular, strong, effective. When an agricultural worker appears in Social Realist work he is treated in the same way, and often the unity of interests of these workers is stressed (p. 158).” Thus in Seymour Fogel’s studies for, *The Nation-Security and Insecurity* do we see the proud industrial worker, lunch pail in hand and hammer slung over his shoulder, striding confidently toward the viewer, while in the same composition equally heroic images of farmers thresh wheat and gather corn. The American Idealist unity of factory and farm is depicted also as a unity, a heroic equality, of those who worked both steel and the soil.

Comparing and contrasting helps to clarify how American Idealist work sought to introduce technological progress into purely rural, and regionalist settings. Charles Thwaites, *Threshing Barely* for Clinton, Wisconsin, shows farmers using pitchforks and other hand held tools to accomplish the task at hand. Joe Jones, on the other hand, in his, *Men and Wheat* for Seneca, Kansas, depicts the use of modern machinery to accomplish the work. Natalie Henry’s, *Local Industries* for Springdale, Arkansas, portrays purely rural pursuits such as feeding chickens and picking and sorting fruit by hand, “industries” in its broadest sense. H. Louis Freund’s, *Paris, Arkansas-Gateway to Mt. Magazine* however, depicts along with piles of wheat

in the foreground, industrial plants and modern highways and vehicles. Whereas it could be pointed out that such representations merely represented “the mixed economies of certain towns” (Park and Markowitz, pp. 54-55), the “mix” itself is representationally significant. This is not to say that artists who executed American Idealist works stayed only in that genre. They did not. Joe Jones, whose work cited above, also depicted farming the old fashioned way with pitchforks and horse drawn carts in, *Harvest* for Charleston Missouri.

We are, thus, by no means stating that the genre we refer to as American Idealism was mutually exclusive of all others during the period of the 1930s. It was not. Despite the mutual acrimony between Regionalists and Social Realists the art world of the time was far more fluid than one might suppose. Whereas there were artists who never deviated from their philosophical camps—Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton among the Regionalists and Rockwell Kent and Ben Shahn among the Social Realists—there were a great many others who, because of the need to work in severe economic times, had learned to become philosophically flexible. The father of one of the co-authors, Seymour Fogel, is a case in point. Although a disciple of Rivera and a Social Realist throughout the Great Depression, his commissions from both the Project and the Section called for variability in styles. It must be kept in mind here that the federal government was keenly sensitive to the wishes of the local populace where the murals were to be installed and oversaw the work in progress every step of the way, making suggestions throughout. Fogel created a Social Realist mural for the WPA building at the 1939-1940 New York’s World Fair, Regionalist murals for Cambridge, Minnesota and Safford, Arizona (only after local furor forced the scrapping of the original Safford design) and American Idealist murals for the Social Security Building in Washington, DC. American Idealism was part of this fluid artistic spectrum, not something that could be neatly excised from it.



We are not stating that American Idealism was specifically a government formulation, an artistic directive if you will, although the centrist Bruce came as close as any to defining it. It grew naturally in response to the needs of the nation as a whole where continued divisiveness was clearly counter-productive to the overall good. If mural art was to be in the service of Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal policies and programs, as Biddle had envisioned from the very beginning, it had to allow for depictions of the progress Roosevelt had hoped for in the nation, even in strictly rural and regional settings. As Park and Markowitz aptly state: "...the identification of factory and farm workers and the recognition of their common interests could produce a better society in the future (pp. 54-55)." In this way the region could be honored while modernization and the government that promoted it would be seen not as an invader but as a new neighbor.

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