

THE POST OFFICE MURALS AS ART

by Will Ross

Since they were first unveiled the discussion about Rockwell Kent's Post Office murals has concentrated on their political significance. Lost in this debate is the fact that these two paintings were, first and foremost, art. Kent spent almost two years on this project, traveled to Alaska and Puerto Rico, and the end result is the murals that today grace the William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building.

Kent's murals were two of twenty-two murals painted for the Post Office Department headquarters building. The murals, as well as information about the eleven artists, can be found on the excellent General Services Administration (GSA) website.ⁱ The first thing that springs to mind when comparing Kent's murals to all the others is the fact that each of Kent's murals is in a different style. The Alaskan mural is much more realistic than the Puerto Rican panel. Every other artist used a similar style in each of their paintings. Excellent examples are Reginald Marsh's contributions - "Sorting the Mail" and "Unloading the Mail."

There are only two contemporaneous reviews of the murals that I have been able to find.ⁱⁱ One of the reviews is positive, the other distinctly negative. The positive one, which concentrates on the Puerto Rico mural, is by the Puerto Rican-American artist Rafael Palacios.ⁱⁱⁱ He states, "'The Delivery of Mail in the Tropics' is a painting of very definite and vigorous characteristics of harmonious composition wherein the figures breathe life into the whole. It is a picture filled with movement, where nothing droops or lags, where all seems to be kindled from the spark of that central inspiration which declares, 'There is a hope!'.^{iv} He goes on to describe the mail plane as using, "Picasso-like lines."

Palacios' description of the women in the painting is worthy of an extended excerpt:

This group of women, "a lot of half-naked negro bushmen", is the soul of the picture. They are women of flesh and blood, plethoric of life and energy, the soul of a people which does not yield up its racial inheritance nor its culture. . . . These sculptural women of bronze in white garments, with muscles strong, hard and tense, victorious in the struggle under the hot sun of the canefields, survivors of the wearying tasks of the plantation and the shop in competition with the best of the field and the machine - - these women are the heroism of our people made flesh, its living spirit, and no "bunch of half-naked negro bushmen." Their legs are a forest of living mahogany set firmly on their own strip of sunlit earth. Their lifted arms demand realities.

Beyond a heap of mail bags and parcel post packages other women and children form a group all grace and movement. The grace and movement of arms raised to greet the mail plane, the horse, and the rider; massive, vigorous arms that give the Puerto Rican the strength and solidity of Diego Rivera's Indians.^v This group of women with hair in topknots and plaited tresses, bunched like tropic fruits, have the freshness of the grass

and the forest; they may well stand beside Guagin's "Mahana no Atua".^{vi} This group so fresh and rested complements the other, that of the furrow and the threshing floor under the level rays of the tropical sun.

Leila Mechlin, the art critic of the Washington *Evening Star*, had a very different view.^{vii} She begins by saying that the murals, "have aroused a veritable tempest in a teapot not on account of artistic inferiority, which might have been reasonable, but because of an item introduced into one of these canvases which has been thought to have political significance."

Here an extensive excerpt from her review is appropriate:

Mr. Kent is not a politician nor is he a propagandist. He is an artist first and last, and artists today, of lively mind, as in the past, must occasionally have their little joke. Obviously these murals were not produced to convey a political message. Primarily they were to decorate a public building dedicated to the carriage and delivery of mail. Mr. Kent's joke was, undoubtedly, ill-timed, but it is greatly to be regretted that a mere incident of composition may so outweigh in public opinion the artistic significance of the work.

Still more unfortunate, however, is the fact that these paintings fall far short of the artist's best and but feebly represent the high achievement of which he is capable. They are almost in monotone, a monotonous, dull, gray, blue. In the Greenland (sic) scene and in that in Puerto Rico, the light is identically the same, equally cold, cheerless, and ineffective.

The reviewer goes on to discuss positively the original Puerto Rico design, which Kent and the Section rejected. It was the publication of the first rejected sketch in this review that upset Kent so much, as described in the main article.

She goes on:

Of course, there is the possibility that between the making of the original sketches and the production of the finished work the artist lost inspiration. It is also possible that from the first, inspiration burned low. For Rockwell Kent is not a man to produce to order. Almost all that he has done, and certainly the best he has done, has been the outcome or the expression of stirring adventures.

Finally, in rejecting the allegation that Kent's actions were an attempt at self-promotion, she quotes Kent himself, "'The highest merit and most moving quality that a work of art can have,' he has said, 'is integrity.' It is the integrity of his work which, even when it falls below his best in artistic standards, sets it apart and commands respect."

And what did the Section think? In July 1938 a Mr. Rivera wrote the Postmaster General complaining about the mural. He believed Kent's representation of the Puerto Rican people to be both "abusive and spiteful."^{viii} Ed Rowan penned the response:

The mural by Rockwell Kent of which you wrote has never been regarded by Procurement as a typical scene in Puerto Rico but was accepted as a symbolic representation of mail delivery in the tropics. It happens to be according to all the critics one of the best examples of painting and design by Mr. Kent. It was accepted by Procurement entirely on its aesthetic merits.^{ix}

Speaking just for myself, I find Ms. Mechlin's comments to be well-founded. When I viewed the murals in person a few years ago, I was surprised how dull they were. Where Mr. Palacios found life in the Puerto Rican mural, I found mere affectation. The Alaskan mural was lifeless, compared to Kent's work from Greenland. Certainly, both of these suffer when compared to his 1944 mural for the House of Representatives, "With the Dawn of Peace." ^x However, don't just take my word for it. When interested readers go to Washington, I urge you to contact GSA to arrange a tour of the murals. They are all fascinating and worth a trip. After you do that, please let me know your opinion.

ⁱ <https://www.gsa.gov/real-estate/gsa-properties/visiting-public-buildings/william-jefferson-clinton-federal-building/whats-inside/wheres-the-art>.

ⁱⁱ If any reader knows of other contemporaneous art reviews, please let me know. Preliminary sketches for the Puerto Rico mural can be found in the catalogs of two more modern exhibitions. *Painting America: Mural Art in the New Deal Era*, Midtown Galleries in association with Janet Marqusee Fine Arts, 1988, p. 23. Bruce I Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts*, National Archives and Records Administration in association with University of Washington Press, 1997, pp. 90-91. Thanks to my friend Scott Ferris for pointing me towards the former and providing a scan of the drawing from the exhibition. That drawing is, I believe, the only preliminary drawing from either mural in private hands.

ⁱⁱⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rafael_Palacios_\(artist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rafael_Palacios_(artist)).

^{iv} RKP, Rafael D. Palacios, "Rockwell Kent's Murals," *La Democracia*, 17 Sept. 1937, page unknown, reel 5224, frames 118-123.

^v See for example, "Sugar Cane," <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/48441.html>.

^{vi} <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/27943/mahana-no-atua-day-of-the-god>.

^{vii} Leila Mechlin, "Wrong Note In Artist's Mural Joke," *Washington Evening Star*, 16 Oct. 1937, p. B-3. It is noted that the reviewer, or more likely the rewrite person, consistently misidentifies Alaska as Greenland throughout the review.

^{viii} Record Group 121/133, Rivera to Farley, 6 Jul. 1938.

^{ix} Record Group 121/133, Rowan to Rivera, 22 Jul. 1938.

^x <https://www.aoc.gov/art/other-paintings-and-murals/america-peace>.