

ART NEWS

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MURALS FOR

By Jean Charlot

With the post-war prospect of a new deluge of mural commissions, both public and private, the author Jean Charlot, himself a muralist (see cover), delves into the requirements for mural painting in terms of the future. He himself has chosen for illustrations what he considers the good murals of today.

BEN SHAHN, in Charlot's opinion one of America's best contemporary muralists, has many walls to his credit. For the Resettlement Administration in 1936-38 he did a fresco for Jersey Homesteads, N. J., telescoping in paint the urban lives of the garment workers who were being transplanted. Winning the Section of Fine Arts competition in 1938-39, he decorated the Bronx, N. Y. postoffice, of which "The Spinner" here reproduced is a section. A Social Security fresco is illustrated on the facing page. Shahn's sense of scale, formal compositions related to architecture, monumental color, and willingness to tell a story win him Charlot's keen admiration.

TOMORROW

TO RAISE a flag in battle is heroic. Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima is a superb news photograph, a possible poster, an impossible mural and, begging pardon of Congress, an atrocious sculpture. In any branch of art, subject matter alone, however moving in real life, is a very weak lever with which to raise the work to grandeur. Each of the media has laws of its own, material and psychological, by which solutions are ratified or proven invalid.

The Mexican Coatlicue still stands, surviving the wreck of its temple, the death of its cult, the sinking of its culture. Time has

harden topical emotion into permanence.

Man, the little engineer, plays with blocks, sorts and piles them with the fierce concentration and vital intent of a child, and of course he also colors them. They are blocks to live in, to crawl into, as the hermit crab protects its soft body behind the armor of a borrowed shell. Each species of creature has its housing taste, its geometric affinity. The snail takes its ease in a spiral, the bee favors hexagonal shafts, man is partial to cubes. Though his body be far more complex in shape than are Euclid's solids, man feels it a good thing to be born, to live, and to die within a neatly packaged cube of space, its verticals and horizontals standing for the intellectual logical orderings that are his own.

It is the fate of mural painting to be a corollary to buildings, these rigid geometric

lent; its horizontals match floor levels, its verticals share the burden with columns, its diagonals ascend or descend with the stairs. The mural echoes the mesh of mathematical relationships that underlie even a mediocre architecture.

But the painting on the wall needs also to be the funnel through which much besides art is relayed to the onlooker. For its intended public, any man liable to enter a church, a ministry, a postoffice, art can be only the side dish—to be savoured imperceptibly as it were, while a major theme, patriotic, social or religious, is digested. The muralist must cater to this very real need of laymen for a familiar aperture to bring into focus the revelation of esthetics. Styles that do not allow of story telling lack certain mural requirements. The muralist must in-



FRESCO TECHNIQUE requires systematic successive manipulations—tracing, squaring, pouncing, mason and painter elbowing each

other on the same platform. Ben Shahn, a section of whose most recent Social Security mural is shown here, is a craftsman who

understands these processes as well as the aesthetic requirements of architectural decoration. Lines here show squaring.

skinned the monolith of gesso and paint, weather has eroded it like the flank of a mountain, but the derelict, inasmuch as it follows the logic of the matrix boulder and the proportions of an architecture now returned to dust, retains the same power to move us that it had in its polychrome prime.

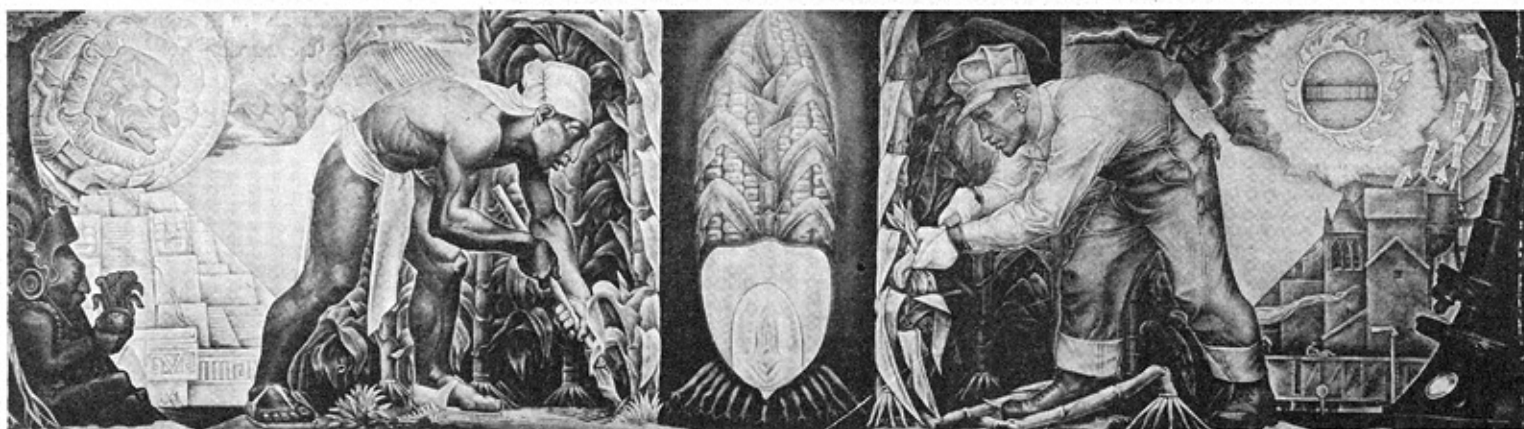
Let us hope that the war memorials that will soon mushroom across the land may prove of such sturdy vitality. A future United States may be incapable of feeling in retrospect the dynamics of today, the collective resolve that drives us towards one goal. A generation will be born for whom this war would be mainly a few pages of statistical logistics in a text book—if it were not for art. Only art may attempt the feat that the Indian sculptor once performed: to

complexes. Murals are the skin-thin, varicolored garment made to reveal architectural dross, as clothes bulge at the chest and pleat at the hip. A mural should answer the spatial cubes of rooms with a corresponding quartering of illusive painted space. If it is to be a mural, not just a painting on a wall, it needs to accept this subservient position to architecture, suck its strength from the main body as a remora from the shark. No passionate improvisation, no luscious brushstroke, can take the place of plain mural fitness, or explain the impact even today of Uccello's style.

A mural that "plays ball" with an architecture accepts in its makeup ingredients that could be called abstract—Vitruvius' canon of proportions finds in it an equiva-

deed be humbly prepared to deal with "Washington Crossing the Delaware," "Lincoln Freeing the Slaves." The backbone of mathematics should remain embedded in the flesh of an obvious subject matter, computations relay emotions. Artists too proud to do this need not adopt a genre so publicly displayed.

Critics would be wise to keep this popular element in mind. Venturi, in the follow-up to his *History of Criticism*, damns Mexican painters for academicians because of their obvious interest in social themes. Modern art, says he, probes problems of form by painting apples, has done so for the last eighty years and should continue to do so. Cézanne knew better. Distinguishing genres, he painted fruit pieces, but remained haunt-



POST OFFICE MURAL: Commissioned by the Section of Painting and Sculpture, U. S. Treasury Department in 1937 is the mural in the post office of Ames, Iowa, which was done by Lowell Houser. Oil on canvas, it is entitled "Development of Corn"; detail at right.

ed through life by mural themes, an epic vocabulary of nude bodies.

All through history form and content cohabitate in peace. Duccio and Giotto, Raphael and Michelangelo, Tiepolo and Goya, Delacroix and Daumier, all tell stories. The contemporary muralist need not excuse himself for being a story teller.

Murals are the personal apportion of the Americas to modern art. Marcel Lenoir, Gino Severini and others contributed frescoes to Europe in the early 1920s, but scarcely on the scale and at the pitch that marks their surge in Mexico, where murals smoked the artist out of his ivory tower and educated him to team work. In fresco painting, painter and mason elbow each other on the same scaffold. As the mason mixes mortar, trowels it in daily areas, the painter is reminded of the fact that his art is also manual work, that he should be at least as efficient as the mason. The successive ma-

nipulations inherent to the fresco technique—tracing, squaring, pouncing, dividing in daily jobs—check would-be flights of genius into good craft, which is safer.

Fresco is an ideal communal means. The word conjures guilds and mediaeval workshops, sand and lime, pestles and mortars, scaffolds rather than easels, overalls instead of smocks. Its executant learns not only a technique, but moreover an aesthetic. The shift of values and colors that takes place as the mortar dries into permanency, precludes a visual checkup of the work in course. This forces one to replace the sensuous means, overworked by Impressionism, by the classic discipline of mental planning. Felibien, praising Poussin circa 1670, wrote that his pictures were not pleasing to the eye. But that is an animal tool on which the thoughtful artist need not rely, an organ unfit to pass judgment upon masterpieces.

To insure in practice the worth of the finished mural, a system of traps and sundry obstacles has been devised in this country by well-meaning people, to slow, brake, dam the course of the artist's inspiration, in an attempt to cure him of a suspected case of bohemianism. The poor man is bid to flex his muscles, jump through hoops so often



before the start of the work, that he reaches the wall with little breath left, and less will. Suggestions, objections, and pressures submit him to an ordeal by despair. Competitions inflict what Villier de l'Isle-Adam called the ordeal by hope. The artist does sketches, perforce faked, to make sense to outsiders. In order to reach the wall, he dares the gauntlet of color schemes, reduced models, full scale details wrung out of con-



MURALS FOR A BAR: Alice Tenney uses true fresco on portable celotex panels to suit hotel needs in the "Jolly Miller" bar, Nicollet Hotel, Minneapolis. The historical "Explosion" scene is designed around 1878 millstone; detail of "Miller's Mid-Day Dream" at left.



STUDY, in oil, commissioned by Museum of Modern Art, 1932, for three-part mural by Franklin Watkins; central panel of "Spirit of Man, Nourishing the Tree of Life."

text. Finally he starts painting—while the man with a bucket of whitewash waits behind him, poised to spring forth into action.

Why not give the muralist the same confidence shown a plumber? Why use such archaic devices as that of the executioner with axe raised? That insures the correct diagnosis of doctors called to the sickbed of some barbaric chieftain.

That I plead for less fetters from the outside does not mean that I believe art is at its best when most free. It is the artist who should stake his own limits.

Long identified with sanctimonious tab-

leaus of ladies draped in cheesecloth, plucking, bestowing, blowing such operatic paraphernalia as lyres, crowns of laurel and gold trumpets, mural painting in the United States suffered in the last decade a life giving jolt. Patterned in part after the example of government sponsored murals in Mexico and partly to round up this deal of a brave new world, murals have rejoined with seven league leaps the trends in easel painting.

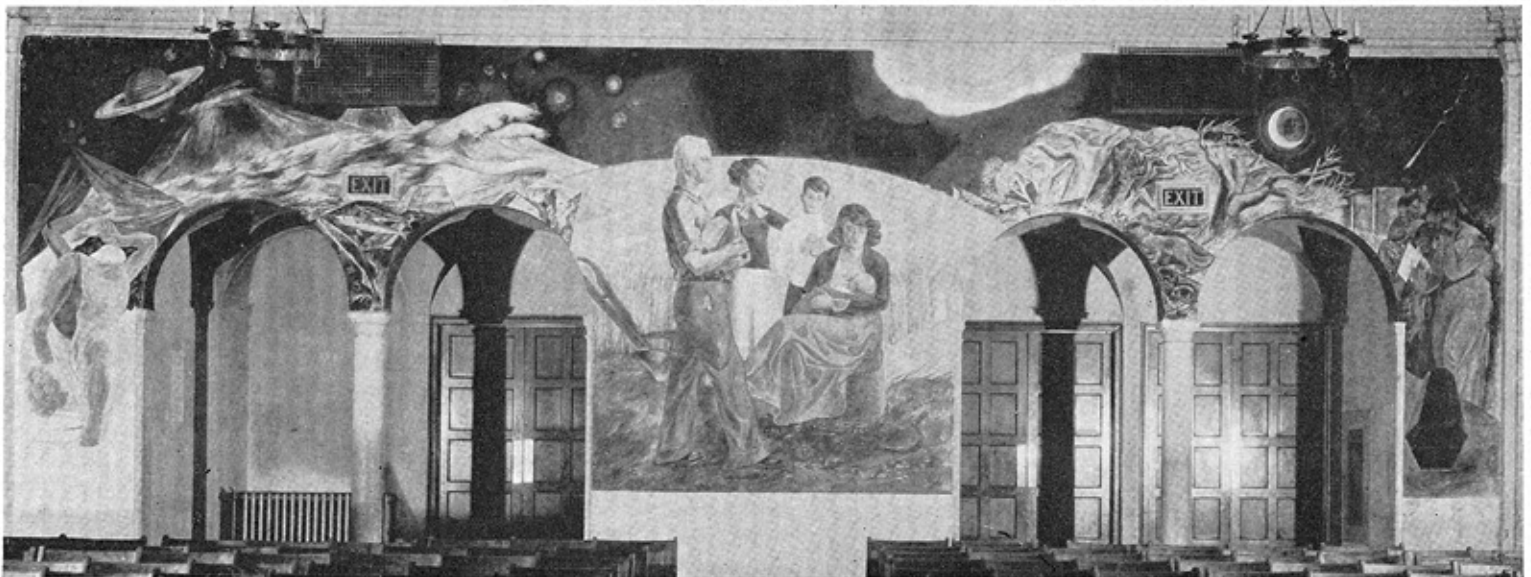
Its new patrons, government agencies or labor organizations, will have none of the clammy stuffiness that catered to conservatives. One does not question the soundness of the change, but perhaps that of its extent. The liberation of mural painting is a revolution on the aesthetic plane, apt to be messy as revolutions will be. The Victorian standards have been lynched with gusto. Surface finish, static dignity, nobility of theme, Classicism (even though it be only Neo-Classicism) are strung from lamp posts. The new standards, much alive and with the kick of a giraffe, are the same that reign over average modern art: individuality at the chore, distortion as the means, much pain taken to make the thing appear effortless. Slices of life; local incidentals, are favored over outmoded allegories.

Is such a style adequate for the murals that will vie with sculptures to commemorate this war? We may trust that a global war, fought in standard uniforms with standard weapons the world over, for aims that transcend the boundaries of a state, a nation, even a continent, will breed its own ample style, perhaps closer to the older point of view, now so thoroughly despised.

A return to a kind of Classicism, even to the depiction of ladies draped in cheesecloth, need not prove a tragedy. Many allegorical tableaux painted in this century are aesthetically worthless, but theirs is nevertheless a proud lineage. The beautiful muses, drapes, wreaths, lyres, that make us smile today were once hallowed by the

genius of Raphael and Poussin. The modern formula of avoiding formulas is rich in passion but short of breath. And a brave return to tested recipes may breed works that match Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* and Lebrun's *Battles* in long sustained inspiration and inventive dignity.

The best guarantee that war memorials be worthy of their dedication, does not lie in the small irritants of routine supervision, but in allowing free play to the heart, brain, and conscience of the artist. The intricacies of the craft, the exigencies of the genre, the seriousness of the purpose, are censors he scarce could escape.



MURAL CONTROVERSY: Stefan Hirsch volunteered decoration of the auditorium of the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association

building, finishing in 1937. The Association plans to redecorate this summer, whitewashing out murals which it considers "in-

appropriate," thus unloosing partisan discussion. Other walls show community activities, this one "Birth, Life, Death"; detail above.

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