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Members Meet Monthly

SHFG has a new social event. SHFG members and non-members have been meeting monthly following the Executive Council meeting at **Vapiano** in Chinatown, Washington, DC, at 5:30 p.m. (623-625 H St., NW). All SHFG members and nonmembers are welcome. It's a great opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with historians, curators, educators, and others from the federal community. The gatherings have proved successful for bringing in new members and even enlisting new officers. We hope to see you there. The next gathering is tentatively set for August 13, but they will be announced via the eBulletin. Contact SHFG President Carl Ashley at shfg@cashley.org for more information.



Indians at the Post Office: The Smithsonian American Indian Museum Addresses Native Themes in New Deal-Era Murals

Sandra Starr

The Wayne, Pennsylvania, Post Office displays a mural created in 1941 depicting an over-life-size “Mad” Anthony Wayne, who was recruited out of retirement in 1791 to become the commanding general of the newly formed Legion of the United States. (Fig. 1) The mural looms over the heads of post office patrons, crowning the top of the postmaster’s door. Wayne, draped in a wind-swept cape, sword in hand, and pointing toward the heavens, is accompanied by an admiring American eagle. He seems to stride victoriously out of the frame after having just stepped over the body of a fallen American Indian. President George Washington, in an effort to open the Northwest Territory to American settlers, had sent General Wayne to do battle with the Shawnee, Delaware, and Wyandot Indians who were standing in Washington’s way toward acquiring their land, which constituted much of Ohio. By 1794 Wayne had his victory, and the Indians were left with one-quarter of their homeland. The postmaster at Wayne, PA, recounts the story of a teacher who brought her young class to the post office on a field trip. The children pointed out the “dead Indian” whom Gen. Anthony Wayne was stepping over depicted in the mural. “He’s just sleeping,” she reassured.

In Tallahassee, Florida, in the original post office, now repurposed as the Federal Bankruptcy Court Building, the Creek/Seminole Osceola negotiates an 1837 truce with Brig. Gen. Joseph Hernandez of the U.S. Army while a calumet pipe of peace floats in the sky above them. (Fig. 2) Not depicted is the ensuing chapter in which Osceola is deceitfully captured there and taken to prison. And in Cordell, Oklahoma, the post office mural setting is a cowboy with herds entering stage left into a bucolic scene of farmhouse, crops, plow, and oil rig, while an Indian on horseback exits stage right leaving behind the land, the tipi, and the buffalo.

See “Murals” cont’d on page 4



Fig. 1 Anthony Wayne by Alfred D. Crimi, Wayne, Pennsylvania Post Office. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.



Fig. 3 Choctaw Ball-Play 1840 by Manuel Bromberg, Tahlequah, Oklahoma Post Office. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

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"Murals," continued from page 1

It was in 2009 that I happened on the mural depicting Anthony Wayne during research concerning Indian treaties. This discovery launched a continued interest in finding every post office mural created during the New Deal era containing images of American Indians, and inspired the project *Indians at the Post Office: Native Themes in New Deal Era Murals*. I also was to learn that the town of Wayne played a part in the choosing of the subject of Anthony Wayne to "decorate" their post office through a federal competition titled the "48 States Competition" held in 1939 under Franklin Roosevelt's Treasury Section of Fine Arts. Artists then submitted drawings for approval after conferring with the towns whose post offices would receive a mural. The mural creation and installation ran through 1943. Since the New Deal era, these images of American Indians and others in post offices across America have served as an enduring reinforcement, although subtle, to post office patrons and student tours, that our early nation was driven to gain territory through the concept of Manifest Destiny, even if that entailed the near extinction of the indigenous peoples residing there.

Published interpretations of these murals since their creation, written by non-Native scholars, discuss their place in art history and popular culture. Those critiques have considered the works as a "body" of cultural expression, not focusing on questions of specific minorities and their stereotyped place at any moment in American history. The singular long-range purpose for the *Indians at the Post Office* project would then be to provide a 21st-century, Native-informed critique for the research and writing of 21st-century art-historic, historic, and socio-cultural interpretation. The goal certainly reflects the mission described by the founders of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). These Native authors would not be restricted to Native "scholars," but would include young and mature American Indians in the discourse around historic and contemporary imaging and imagining of Natives by non-Natives. These Native interpretations would be displayed at the mural location, providing the post office patron an additional and contemporary Native point-of-view.

To accomplish this, I sought and obtained the endorsement and collaboration of the National Postal Museum (NPM) and the United States Postal Service (USPS). The project could not have been accomplished without the three parties working together. Thomas Lera, Winton M. Blount Research Chair at the National Postal Museum, whom I had assisted with his 2009 online exhibition *American Indians on Stamps*, enthusiastically joined me in early 2012 and offered to host a dedicated website for an online exhibition of the images and essays. He also brought Dallan Wordakemper, the Real Estate Specialist/Federal Preservation Officer for the United States Postal Service, into the collaboration. We met in the summer of 2012. Through Dallan, I was able to obtain rare access to archived USPS discs containing copyrighted images of over 1,600 post office murals, all black and white save a small group reshot for the General Services administration (GSA) in color. The enormity of the challenge then

became apparent. My little Research Department team then was composed of myself, RoseMaria Estevez (Zapotec), and my intern Meghan Navarro. We pulled in Krystal Adams, a Welcome Desk volunteer, to help us find (using magnifying glasses) images of American Indians in the over 1,600, 8½- by 11-inch, black-and-white mural printouts that RoseMaria had created from the USPS discs. We found exactly 360 such murals. Some murals illustrating Indian lifeways appeared to have been well-researched and beautifully executed by non-Native artists. (Fig. 3) Only 16 were created by American Indian artists (Fig. 4), all but one located in Oklahoma where most Southeastern tribes found themselves relocated after the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

By November 2012, we had cross-checked all the USPS database spreadsheets for locations and spelling, title irregularities, and artist names. We were developing notebooks based on the whole body of work and a subset of the 360 murals that included American Indians. We then re-worked the 360 to be bound in notebooks by state. Every page required a hand-created label. By that time, I had presented the possibilities for the project at conferences and meetings of the Society of American Indian Government Employees, the Department of Interior Parks Department's National Society for Interpretation, the National Gallery, and within NMAI, and wrote an overview that appeared in the NMAI's *American Indian Magazine*. We committed to the involvement of Native writers and to the acquisition of high-resolution photographs of 99 percent of the murals that were never recorded in color. The one percent had been shot by the USPS and held within their vault. One important recent development in linking with Native scholarship and education is a partnership with the Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas. The photography project shows promise of being resolved through the efforts of local historical societies and their desires to preserve these precious works of art as well as assistance from the USPS in finding not-for-profit photographers. Although there is much photography of murals by citizen-photographers, we could not rely on such "crowd sourcing," shot usually without permission from the USPS, and normally from the floor level of the postal facility, not directly at the mural, which requires a ladder and controlled lighting.

In early 2013, all collaborators agreed on the goal of launching the project on the NPM website by Native American Heritage Day, November 29, with an initial 27 murals and essays, to be followed with installments of 27 until all 360 had been published. We added NMAI staff member Patricia Jollie (Confederated Salish and Kootenai) and our Fellow, Rubin Noah (Choctaw/Kickapoo/Iowa) to the team. The online presentation would be ordered by the themes decided by the Research Department's director, and our final editor, Dr. Jose Barreiro. The themes selected were Indian Lifeways and the Native Artist, Indian Lifeways and the Non-Native Artist, Encounter, Trade and Commerce, Evangelization, Conflict, Treaties, Local Legends and Myths, and the Myth of American Indian Extinction. Dr. Barreiro expressed that the project serves to "add a layer of



Fig.2 (left) Osceola in Conference with Hernandez by Eduard Buk Ulreich, Federal Bankruptcy Court Building, formerly the original Post Office, Tallahassee, Florida. Used with the permission of the General Services Administration. Fig.4 (below) Grand Council of 1842 by Walter Richard West Sr., Cheyenne Nation, Okemah, Oklahoma Post Office. Image by Krystal Adams. Used with the permission of the United States Postal Service®.

interpretation, deepening the historical and socio-cultural context. Together, they [the murals] are a rich, high-quality, eighty-year-old historical snapshot, capturing social attitudes, good, bad and ugly, toward American Indians.”

Led by Marty Emery, the National Postal Museum’s project manager, the exhibition went live online as planned on Native American Heritage Day, at <http://postalmuseum.si.edu/indiansatthepostoffice/index.html> and was instantly picked-up by FOX, NBC, ABC, CBS and 25 large-city newspapers and radio stations as far away as San Francisco. In January 2014, we presented the project at the National Postal Museum’s Coordinating Council meeting consisting of the NPM, Smithsonian Castle representatives, and the Postmaster General and staff.

The first stage was accomplished without grant funding. We have 370 more murals to inspect, research, write about, photograph, and translate to an online format at the NPM website ensuring at least another five years’ life to the endeavor *Indians at the Post Office*. We are particularly enthused by our partnership with history faculty and students at the respected tribal college, Haskell Indian Nations University, and our continued collaboration with the NPM and the USPS.



Inspired by a mural depiction of “Mad” Anthony Wayne 220 years after the Battle of Fallen Timbers, *Indians at the Post Office* grows now of its own momentum. Most importantly, we offer that this collaborative endeavor will alert the public to the art-historic treasures that are the post office murals, and encourage them to study them closely for their value as momentary tableaux of American history.

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Osceola Mural—An Excerpt

In mural scene, Osceola in Conference with Hernandez, [Eduard] Ulreich portrays what appears to be a friendly visit on October 24, 1837 under a white flag of truce (not a calumet pipe as is depicted floating the sky) by Osceola, Maskoki-Creek warrior in his pursuit of a peace negotiation with Brig. General Joseph Hernandez of the U.S. Army. His tribal council as seen in the left background had agreed to the overture. A group of soldiers stand ready in the far right background, giving the viewer a feel for the authority asserted by Hernandez, and a hint at the imminence of a planned ambush. Their uniforms are colored in vivid blue, in contrast to the monochromatic grey used to color the Indians behind Osceola in the far left. The result of this attempt for peace near St. Augustine, and the ambush of Osceola, other head men, and

about eighty warriors, was a forced walk to their imprisonment at Fort Marion in St. Augustine. Within 2 months, Osceola, then ill, was shipped to Fort Moultrie, S.C. where he died a natural death. Osceola was then decapitated by his attending army doctor, who possibly kept the head to study or as war booty. The present location of his head is unknown. Another feature of the mural that should be noted is the presence of a calumet pipe suspended in the left of the mural’s background. Ulreich was probably trying to imply through this feature that the meeting he depicted was one of temporary peace, since calumet pipes were used as a token of peace. However, the white flag of truce that was far more likely present at Osceola’s arrest is not rendered here in the mural.

Kathryn Dantzierward