

U.S. Custom House Murals Painted by Reginald Marsh



Photo: Evan Kalish



Photo: Nara

Reginald Marsh, U.S. Custom House Murals: Reframed and Reseen
By Lisa Leavitt

The fate of Reginald Marsh's mural series created in 1937 for the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House of New York City, and considered "one of the most impressive creations in the history of American mural art," [1] was uncertain in 1968. The Customs offices were relocated from their home in architect Cass Gilbert's federal-style edifice, down the street to the modernist twin spires of the World Trade Center. Despite the plea of Francis O'Connor, an art historian noted for his extensive study of Roosevelt-era government-sponsored art projects in New York, to "save what is threatened" [2] of these powerful visual documents, Marsh's murals were neglected and unseen for almost twenty-five years.

With the relocation and opening of the new Smithsonian-owned National Museum of the American Indian in the Custom House last October, these murals are once again displayed in all their glory.

But, perhaps, "glory" is not the best term. The murals, depicting such appropriate subject matter for a custom house as the dynamic spectacle of a thriving shipping and trade industry, countless American flags, and larger-than-life size portraits of explorers like Amerigo Vespucci and

Christopher Columbus, is decidedly inappropriate for the building's new mission: to house one of the finest and most comprehensive collections of Native American art in the Western Hemisphere. Reframed by a contemporary federal art project concerned with multiculturalism, the murals' new context reflects not only our early "colonialist" attitudes, but it speaks to the Smithsonian Institution's present strivings toward egalitarianism.

In 1899, the U.S. government chose to build a new custom house on a site which was once the southern end of the Wiechquaakeck Trail, an old Algonquin trade route. New York's custom duties were the most lucrative in the country and Cass Gilbert created a structure attesting to that fact. Seven stories high, the building's exterior features forty-four Corinthian columns topped with the heads of Mercury, the Roman god of commerce.

Ascending the outside steps of this National Landmark building, visitors encounter a monument by sculptor Daniel Chester French (1850-1931), most recognized for his statue of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial. Here, French personified the continent of North America as an imposing female figure, comfortably enthroned and adorned with all the classical accoutrements of scepter, cape and mercurial wings. From behind her shoulder peers an American Indian, donned in elaborate ceremonial headdress; beneath her arm kneels an unclothed man of European descent. Both enclosed within her large, flowing cape, the fragile co-existence of the indigenous and the immigrant, not only belies the nation's beginnings, but foreshadows the building's function of commemorating both these peoples.

Entering the building, visitors step into a magnificent rotunda. Marble lines the oval room's walls, classical moldings grace arches and doorways, and fifty feet above is a circular spectacle, breathtaking in its splendor. Surrounding a 140-ton skylight are sixteen frescoes by the New York painter Reginald Marsh (1898-1954). In 1936, the Treasury Relief Art Project's Section of Painting and Sculpture -- a New Deal-era program employing well-known artists, regardless of their financial status, to decorate government buildings -- chose Marsh to paint the difficult elliptical spaces of the rotunda.

Designated as "one of the most challenging mural possibilities in the country,"[3] and left unpainted during the building of the edifice in 1907 due to the enormous expense and difficulty of the job, Marsh was "keen as hell to paint them at any price." [4] Upon receiving the commission, he wrote Olin Dows, one of the project's leaders, "I feel very proud that the honor to paint these walls has fallen to me. It's a man-sized job, with many problems -- all those curves, etc., etc. Here is a chance to paint contemporary shipping with a rich and real power neither like the storytelling or propagandist painting which everybody does. I have in the past painted dozens of watercolors around N.Y. harbor, and would like to get at it with some of this knowledge." [5]

A member of the Fourteenth Street School, a 1930s movement associated with social-realist depictions of New York City, Reginald Marsh found his niche documenting various urban spectacles with an uncritical, yet observant reportorial eye and quick wit. He captured the seedy burlesque houses of 42nd Street, the glamorous movie-starlet-wannabees who roamed 14th

Street, the degraded bums of the Bowery, and the grotesques of the Coney Island sideshow. However, none of these subjects appealed to Marsh as did the New York City harbor, evidenced by his numerous sketches of longshoremen, dock workers, tugboats, ocean liners, and cargo vessels in this vibrant port.

Marsh brought to the project his visual knowledge of the harbor and technical know-how of the fresco medium. The Treasury Relief Art Program, or TRAP, employed him to fresco the Washington D. C. post office a year prior to his Custom House commission. With his own meager income, Marsh employed Olle Nordmark, a European expert on the fresco technique, to advise him on the post office project. Despite objections from the higher-ups, Marsh insisted on using fresco for the custom house murals as well. He eventually won this battle and Nordmark joined him in New York City for this new, more-complex project.

After more deliberations with the authorities, Marsh decided that the sixteen mural spaces, comprising eight large horizontal and eight small vertical areas, would pay homage to and monumentalize the American shipping industry, that dynamic marvel just yards away from the custom house. Marsh rejected the superficial, rosy optimism employed in murals by his Midwest, "American Scene" contemporaries: WPA artists, Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. Instead, he and his eight assistants went into the "field" and gathered visual data in the form of countless studies. One of his assistants, Mary Fife, writes:

I would get up at three in the morning on a cold spring day and take the Broadway bus down to the Battery, where Reg would be waiting in the dark to board the tugboat which was going out to meet an incoming liner... In those days the harbor was very busy and we were sent down to Battery Park to make detailed sketches of rigging, tugboats, the Statue of Liberty, and the skyline from Governor's Island. We often accompanied Reg on trips to meet the "Queen Mary" or the "Normandie." ...Reg wanted details of lifeboats, davits, hawsers, ventilators, stacks, masts and rigging, sirens, bells, deck-chairs -- everything. [6]

Marsh and his assistants were determined to document the busy harbor on a daily basis and transfer the scenes to the custom house murals, devoid of any honkytonk blue-grass Americana. Despite striving for truthfulness, Marsh's passion for the waterfront makes these murals a celebratory vision of an early twentieth-century cityscape rather than any social-realist or critical depiction.

The larger sections of the custom house rotunda portray eight successive stages in the arrival of an ocean liner in the New York harbor. The ship passes the New York lightship, signaling the approach of the harbor; it meets with the coast guard boat, and discharges its cargo on a pier. These murals salute the order, regulation and efficiency of early American importing and exporting. They exude a proud patriotism in grandiose depictions of the Statue of Liberty and New York skyline, dozens of U.S. flags, and the virile, muscular American laborers working the docks.

One panel entitled, "The Press Meeting a Celebrity," includes a typical figure in the artist's oeuvre, the "Marsh girl," a modern day siren straight out of Hollywood. While in the 1990s, it is hard to believe there was ever a time without the potent presence of Hollywood and the media in American life, Marsh's generation was still defining what it meant to be an American with all of the restlessness, novelty, and constant need for stimulation. Indeed, viewing Marsh's cycle of murals is like watching a contemporary newsreel documenting American commerce and ingenuity.

The rotunda's smaller areas depict eight explorers whose names were inscribed during the building's construction in 1907. In most cases, Marsh attached the appropriate faces to the names of Amerigo Vespucci, Christopher Columbus, Giovanni da Verrazano and Henry Hudson. Marsh recreated old-master portraits of various upstanding citizens or royalty as those explorers for whom he had no visual records. He transformed such masterpieces as Titian's Duke of Urbino into specific explorers, adding instruments of navigation to identify them. Done in a trompe l'oeil technique, these larger-than-life, full-length portraits appear to step out of their sculptural niches, adding powerful punctuations to the mural cycle narrative.

Lack of historic visuals was the least of Marsh's mural problems. Each step seemed fraught with difficulty. After final approval of his subject matter by the Treasury Department, Marsh moved to prepare the mural walls for his fresco al secco application, a variation on the traditional technique whereby the tempera is applied to a dry wall rather than painted quickly on a wet gessoed wall. With his eight assistants, he spent the summer of 1937 scraping at the walls for a

clean slate upon which to paint. TRAP officials had manufactured a special scaffold specifically for the job, enabling the artists to reach the "sky-high" murals. Chief of the TRAP commission, Cecil Jones described some of the havoc:

We have had to replaster the whole dome of the rotunda. This has been a hell of a job, and we had to get a special Presidential order on it, in order to get it done. There had been all kinds of trouble. One of the men fell from the scaffolding, which is no patsy of a scaffold...and was seriously hurt. Now since the downpour of last night the darn roof is leaking. I have to go to New York tonight and try and straighten things out.[7]

By September 1937, however, the walls were prepared and the painting began. Marsh created slides of his detailed pencil drawings and projected them upon the corresponding wall space, tracing the outlines directly onto the plaster. He "pull [ed] in the longest hours I have ever heard of any artist working," praised Jones, "and has now completed in the course of about fourteen months a job that ordinarily would take three to four years." [8]

During the course of these difficulties, the threat of abolishing the whole project came not once, but two times. First in August 1937, when cuts in federal expenditure deemed the job too costly. Determined to complete the project, Marsh agreed to a position as "assistant clerk," earning a measly 90 cents an hour -- low even by depression standards -- while his assistants, artists on relief, took in a whopping \$1.60 per hour.

A second resounding blow hit in August as well. Seven months after the designs had been officially approved, Joseph P. Kennedy, Chairman of the U.S. Maritime Commission, protested Marsh's prominent depiction of two foreign liners, the "Queen Mary" and the "Normandie," in his shipping epic. Kennedy said Marsh's mural should garner support for U.S. super liners and encourage American rather than foreign trade. In a letter to Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Kennedy proposed changing one ship's name to "the new passenger liner which we will probably commence building" and which "will be superior in many respects to foreign flag vessels." [9] Morgenthau decided it was too late for such artistic changes, especially since no such American liner existed. Conceding, Kennedy requested minor changes to the vessels and the display of more American flags. The only change Marsh would make was to slightly blur the name, "Normandie." But even from its place fifty feet above ground level, the name is quite legible.

Despite these obstacles, Marsh completed the murals in December 1937. At a testimonial dinner dedicated to the achievement of the artist and his assistants, one speaker proclaimed, "No historian or artist of our time will be able to express the dynamic, throbbing, vibrant marine life of today as Mr. Marsh has done." [10] Almost sixty years later, these works are a glimpse into Marsh's age, an era replete with the propaganda common to American Scene mural projects. In Depression-era America, the government sought to fund public art projects portraying "dynamic, throbbing, vibrant" views of American life, despite the realities of a poor economy and despairing unemployment. Kennedy's protest reflected this intent to impart a strong, confident, imperialist vision of America. And, similar to Daniel Chester French's sculptural personification

of a mighty America, this strength partially comes from a sense of dominion over one's land and its indigenous people.

In light of the Smithsonian's new federal art project, the National Museum of the American Indian, colonialist attitudes come again to the foreground, rather than remaining unspoken understandings of birthright to this land. In this new context, Marsh's immense frescoes of explorers like Amerigo Vespucci or Christopher Columbus initiate a bittersweet dialogue with the precious Native American objects, their new and unlikely neighbors. The ever-present symbols of patriotic America employed by Marsh -- Statue of Liberty, and American flags everywhere -- appear deflated juxtaposed to the rich culture of a people who once considered this land to be solely their own.

Entries in Marsh's own journals refer to the "indian red" [11] color used in certain murals; they demonstrate the extent to which superficial stereotypes are internalized into our verbal and visual language. Most interesting in this regard is the fresco opposite the opening of the museum's galleries. Entitled, "Coast Guard Cutter 'Calumet' Meeting the Washington," this work depicts a small coast guard boat, adorned with two American flags, intercepting a huge American ship. "Calumet" is a French name for the peace pipe common among Indians of eastern North America. [12] These tobacco pipes functioned as flags of truce and were ceremonially smoked to bind or renew alliances and friendships.

Marsh's appropriation of a sacred Indian ritual to describe a U.S. government boat whose function was to greet foreign vessels and protect our harbor bespeaks a certain disregard for Indian culture. In addition, Marsh alludes to the uncivilized violence of the American Indian by attaching two bloody tomahawks to the stern of the boat. This is not to say that Marsh had a specifically racist attitude, but more that these beliefs were ingrained in the ideology of a nation, striving for power and superiority, despite its earlier inhabitants.

The Smithsonian confronts the Western colonialization of Native American peoples in its progressive museum display. Comprised of three gallery sections, these 500 objects of the 1,000,000 in the collection are described in text panels in which the Western voice is not only brought out of anonymity, but is also actually vanquished and replaced by a Native American voice. In the first gallery space titled, Creation's Journey: Native American Identity and Belief; 165 art objects were chosen by Western curators according to their beauty, historical significance, rarity, and quality. The narratives on the text panels are provided by named anthropologists, archaeologists and art critics, rather than statements of apparent, absolute truths by anonymous curators. This self-conscious approach to museum display reminds viewers of the subjectivity involved in presenting another culture's artifacts. The only voice unheard in these text panels are those of the Native American themselves.

However, in the next two galleries, Western curators surrender their voice of authority and, finally, the Native American controls the display and interpretation of their objects. The second gallery, All Roads Are Good: Native American Voices on Life and Culture, contains 300 objects selected by twenty-three Native Americans who each spent a week in the former National

Museum of American Indian. Text panels, devoid of common Western classifications like dates, historical significance and artist names, bear instead first-person accounts about what these objects mean to those who selected them, both culturally and personally.

The third gallery, *This Path We Travel: Celebrations of Contemporary Native American Creativity*, brings the museum's traditional display of the past hurtling into the present by inviting contemporary Native American artists to create a collaborative installation, bespeaking their experience of life in America. This section represents the vital pulse of a people forging their own identities despite centuries of conflict with Euro-American beliefs and culture.

For the October 1994 opening, one installation, "Profane Intrusion," recreated a typical federal-subsidized H.U.D. Indian home, complete with all the American amenities of television, couch, refrigerator and swinging screen doors. The television shows American Indian versions of popular American commercials and sitcoms on NTV (Native TeleVision), a spin-off of the pop cultural icon, MTV. And displayed on the kitchen shelves, one finds not only Mazola corn oil and Crazy Horse beer, but a box of Calumet baking powder.

The turn of events in which a building once glorifying the prosperous trade of capitalist America has become a site for indigenous art and contemporary installations evoking parody of that commerce, shows the degree to which America has changed in this past century. From construction of the Custom House, to its transformation as a repository for American Indian

artifacts; the evolving definition of federal art projects mirrors the ideological belief systems of the government that commissions them. In our multicultural age, the Smithsonian has made an effort to acknowledge the existence, diversity, and creativity of indigenous peoples. Though the employment of the "calumet" symbol by both Reginald Marsh and present-day Native Americans are vastly different in nature, perhaps the Smithsonian's present approach signals a peaceful "binding or renewing [of] alliances and friendships".[13]

Notes:

- 1 Lloyd Goodrich, *Reginald Marsh*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1972), p. 142.
- 2 Francis V. O'Connor, "New Deal Murals," *Artforum*, vol. VII (November, 1968): 49. The Customs offices were, in fact, abandoned in 1971.
- 3 Goodrich, p. 140.
- 4 *Time*, vol. 30 (August 16, 1937): 40.
- 5 O'Connor, p. 49.
- 6 Edward Laning, *The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh*, (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), pp. 104-105.
- 7 Cecil H. Jones to Bernard Roufberg, August 23, 1937, RG 121/119.
- 8 Cecil H. Jones to Mrs. Henry Morgenthau, Jr., December 27, 1937, American Archives of Art, reel D309.
- 9 Joseph P. Kennedy to Henry Morgenthau, Jr., August, 1937. As cited in Goodrich, p. 141.
- 10 AAA, reel D309.
- 11 AAA reel D309.
- 12 *The American Academic Encyclopedia*, online edition, (Danbury, CT: Grolier Electronic Publishing, 1993).
- 13 *Ibid.*

About the author:

Lisa Leavitt is on staff at the Danforth Museum of Art in Framingham, MA. She was previously associated with the Jewish Museum as Associate Curator in the Fine Arts Department and with the Prints and Drawings Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.