

Roosevelt's Rincon Annex: A Story of a Post Office and Communist Murals

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Despite much of my love for history coming from courses I have taken, a significant part derives from the environment in which I grew up. The Bay Area, particularly San Francisco, is a living museum filled with landmarks such as Fort Point and Alcatraz. Each district, whether it is Chinatown (where I went to grammar school) or the Tanforan Shopping Center in San Bruno, has its unique and sometimes sobering history. However, the most fascinating stories are the lesser-known ones—tales that one comes across accidentally when passing by a weathered plaque or hearing a local's account. These sites can be ubiquitous yet seemingly invisible. The pervasiveness of the public works project of the New Deal epitomizes our daily interactions with the past and present. By writing about the history of buildings such as Rincon Center, I hope to restore these stories to the public consciousness and facilitate a greater appreciation for the cities and towns in which we live.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In my course on U.S. history from World War I to World War II, I ask students to research and write the history of a "thing" created by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal—a bridge, dam, road, hospital, school, mural, play, or photograph. I urge students to choose something that they're really passionate about. Most of them gravitate toward the spectacular New Deal projects: the Bay Bridge, for example, or Hoover Dam. When Julianne told me she had chosen to research the Rincon annex, I had to admit that I'd never heard of it. She not only found an unusual and fascinating subject, she also went to archives in San Francisco on her own initiative to

do research in primary sources. The result is a very impressive piece of historical writing. She explains the historical context and significance of her subject—while also telling a great story.

– Kathryn Olmstead, History Department

At the corner of Spear Street off the Embarcadero, one is likely to overlook a building that epitomizes the city's character: Rincon Center. Home of a food court, the famous Yank Sing restaurant, and Google, its stucco façade and historical plaque can be simply passed by on the way to larger, more exciting attractions of downtown San Francisco.

Rincon Annex, however, played an important but now largely forgotten role in the Treasury Department; its murals remain today, exemplifying the pervasiveness and controversy of the New Deal in American society. Not only did Rincon Center—then Rincon Annex—serve as an outpost of the federal government, it also emerged as a case study of McCarthyism and the issues of freedom of expression long after the American people had recovered from the Great Depression. Anton Refregier's *History of California*, the New Deal's largest and final mural commission, powerfully presents the multifaceted stories of California and the federal government before and after the Roosevelt Years.

Located on the waterfront prior to the 1915 Panama Pacific World Exposition, Rincon Annex became well known to San Franciscans as a streamlined and elegant post office commissioned by the Treasury Department in 1939. In fact, San Francisco served as a popular venue for federal projects throughout the 1930s, heralding a series of commissions such as the frescos of Coit Tower, which were supervised by Diego Rivera. The post office was the first of the New Deal projects that graced Rincon Center from 1939 to 1948. The building was established on the intersecting corners of Mission, Spear, Howard, and Stuart, exemplifying its namesake, "inside corner" or *rincon* in Spanish.¹ With the Construction Act of Public Buildings (PBA), the George A. Fuller Construction company broke ground on June 1 with George Hale as

1 "Rincon Center—San Francisco CA," Living New Deal, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/rincon-center-san-francisco-ca/>.

Chief Engineer.² Originally, the post office was designed to distribute mail and parcel post, as indicated by the large, vertical ventilation ducts. Although intended for functional purposes, Rincon's post office reflected the iconic, streamlined, *moderne* look popular at the time with its interior of green, marble floors and silver, chrome accent and with its stucco exterior of bas reliefs of dolphins and the American eagle. The architect, Gilbert S. Underwood, who was renowned for his design of Yosemite's Ahwahnee Hotel and commissioned by the WPA for numerous projects, had popularized this simple yet elegant style throughout the 1930s and 1940s. On October 26, 1939, the post office officially opened, and remained in operation throughout World War II and well into the 1970s. With the downsizing of the U.S. Postal Service in 1979, the Annex ceased to function as a post office, paving the way for the construction of a food court and office space in the 1980s.³

The post office has been called the "democratic ethos" of the American character. For Gray Brechin, it is "the most important of the local buildings . . . seen daily by thousands, who have little opportunity to feel the influence of the great architectural works in the large cities."⁴ Indeed, when Harry Hopkins established the Works Progress Administration, (WPA) to replace the Civil Works Administration (CWA), he emphasized the importance of creating lasting projects that could be viewed and experienced by the American public.⁵ The WPA and its sister programs, the CWA, the Treasury Department, and the PWA—though intended to provide temporary relief to the numerous unemployed—thus set a precedent by creating institutions and monuments that transcended the

2 U.S. Department of the Interior. National Park Service. *National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form for Rincon Annex*. Open-file report 10-300, National Park Service (Washington, D.C., 1979), accessed May 24, 2017, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/71f080f2-84c3-4329-badf-0f36e39fbdbe?branding=NRHP>.

3 "Rincon Center—San Francisco CA," Living New Deal, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/rincon-center-san-francisco-cal>.

4 Gray Brechin, "The Fading Genius of the US Post Office," *The Guardian*, August 02, 2011, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/aug/02/us-post-office-new-deal>.

5 Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2009), 182-183.

Great Depression and the high rates of unemployment. Not only did constructing large public buildings such as airports, bridges, and post offices employ millions of workers, but these buildings also symbolized the lasting extent to which the New Deal impacted virtually American people, from the “Haves” to the “Have-Nots.” In this sense Rincon Annex, like numerous other projects across the country, embodied American democracy.

Nevertheless, the post office is only one of the three commissions of the New Deal in the modern Rincon Center. Most notable are the twenty-nine murals that cover the upper walls and ceilings of the Annex, providing a colorful contrast to the dark green and silver hues of the marbled interior. In 1941, Russian-born painter Anton Refregier won a contest among eighty-two artists, including Wendell Jones, to paint the interior of the Rincon Annex Post Office.⁶ After seeking approval for his designs by the U.S. Treasury, the artist began painting the largest New Deal commission in the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture.

Although the major artistic works of the New Deal were under the auspices of the Federal Art Project as managed by Holger Cahill, the WPA was not the first federal attempt to invest in public art commissions. George Biddle, a friend to President Roosevelt, urged the creation of the Public Works of Art Project,⁷ which was unsuccessful and subsequently replaced by the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture, simply known as the “Section.”⁸ The latter eventually served as the agency that commissioned the Rincon Annex Post Office in 1939 and Refregier’s murals in 1941. Despite becoming less extensive and well known than the FAP, the program employed over 1,200 artists by the time it ended in July of 1943, with three-quarters of its budget directed towards murals that averaged fourteen dollars per-square foot.⁹ With almost half of

6 “Rincon Center—San Francisco CA,” Living New Deal, accessed May 24, 2017, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/rincon-center-san-francisco-cal>.

7 Nick Taylor, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 2009), 270.

8 Justin Wolf, “Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration WPA,” The Art Story: Modern Art Insight, 2016, accessed May 24, 2017, <http://www.theartstory.org/org-wpa.htm>.

9 W. J. Barber, ““Sweet Are the Uses of Adversity”: Federal Patronage of the Arts in the Great Depression,” *History of Political Economy*, 4th ser., 31, no.

its commissions gracing the walls of post offices, the Treasury brought the New Deal, its art, and its cultural history to the American public. Although the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture merged with the WPA's Federal Arts Project in 1939 under the Reorganization Act to form the Public Works Agency,¹⁰ the "Section" and the "Federal One" greatly differed both in ethos and organization.

Led by George Bruce, the Section, unlike the FAP, did not emphasize the need to hire artists who were unemployed. Instead, the program prioritized the final products that would be displayed on post offices, in train stations, and on other federal buildings. As Bruce suggested, "what counted was quality in production, not an artist's financial circumstances."¹¹ Therefore, the program heavily emphasized the importance of style and theme in each of the commissions, holding competitions prior to awarding contracts.¹² For such reasons, Anton Refregier, a renowned artist celebrated for his work at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, acquired the commission for Rincon Annex rather than unknown, unemployed artists such as Jackson Pollack.

Another notable distinction—one that would remain a sticking point in the 1953 Congressional hearings—was the right of artists to select their own themes and styles. With the founding of the FAP, Cahill extolled the numerous artists who "engaged in a rediscovery of the American scene," and had made a "clear return to the interest of the average man."¹³ Indeed, Hopkins greatly emphasized the importance of not hindering artists and writers by dictating styles and subjects.¹⁴ Although the WPA tended to favor figurative pieces rather than the emerging styles of abstraction, the Section required that each commission satisfy specific criteria.¹⁵ Before he began painting in 1941, Refregier made ninety-two changes to his initial design as requested by the Treasury.¹⁶

Supplement (Winter 1999):244, accessed May 31, 2017, doi:10.1215/00182702-31-supplement-235.

10 Ibid., 244.

11 Barber, 242.

12 Taylor, 270.

13 Barber, 246.

14 Taylor, 396.

15 Barber, 247.

16 "Rincon Center Murals—San Francisco CA," Living New Deal, accessed

Despite working within the confines of the Treasury Department's guidelines, Refregier broke with traditional artistry and emphasized new, populist themes. Like Rivera and others who had embraced Social Realism, Refregier had not intended to romanticize the past with a standard rendition of the "Glorified West," but instead created a series that reflected "the living present . . . shaped by the trauma of depression, strikes, and impending war."¹⁷ Spanning four-hundred feet, the murals tell the history of California, focusing on the significance of San Francisco Bay Area with the arrival of the Californios and the miners of the Gold Rush. However, Refregier also depicted unsavory aspects of this history, including the lynching of Chinese immigrants, the "Vigilante Days," and the struggles of labor unions. Vivid and audacious, the murals hence share in the contentious, artistic revolution that occurred amidst the New Deal.

While Refregier had commenced the project in 1941 for a fixed fee of twenty-six thousand dollars, the American entry into the Second World War delayed its completion until 1948.¹⁸ However, the conditions under which the project had begun were vastly different from the ones under which it was completed. Prior to 1948, numerous groups in San Francisco expressed concern and even outrage over the murals, reflecting a common trend of conservative backlash with the rise of the Federal Art Project. Indeed, throughout the 1930s, critics of the new art projects argued that the funding for such programs was wasteful and conducive to "Marxian class warfare."¹⁹ Consequentially, the expansion of the federal government also prompted the rise of an active, conservative wing of Congress, who, as led by Texan Representative Martin Dies, formed what later became the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The fear of communism and the commencement of the Cold War heightened

May 24, 2017, <https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/rincon-center-murals-san-francisco-ca/>.

17 Gray Brechin, "Trial of the Rincon Annex Murals," FoundSF, accessed May 25, 2017, http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Trial_of_the_Rincon_Annex_Murals.

18 Gray Brechin, "Trial of the Rincon Annex Murals," FoundSF, accessed May 25, 2017, http://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Trial_of_the_Rincon_Annex_Murals.

19 Taylor, 396.

concerns about “subversive” materials. The HUAC had “declared war”²⁰ on the WPA’s theatre, writing, and other art programs, and its efforts to prevent the rise of communism increased after the war with cases such as Alger Hiss. What had been controversial prior to World War II became further suspect under the watchful eye of McCarthyism. In this context, a collection of modern murals that undermined the patriotic story of California and was painted by an artist from Moscow could have scarcely avoided controversy. Therefore, on May 1, 1953, Congress launched a hearing that investigated Refregier’s background and intent in creating pieces that appeared sympathetic to labor unions and minorities.

Ninety-one pages of transcripts reveal the extent to which Refregier’s work, despite having been subject to rigorous criteria and a plethora of revisions by the Treasury Department, was deemed anti-American. Testimonies from numerous groups, including the Sons of the Golden West, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the American Legion, and the Associated Farmers of California, clamored for the removal of the murals, suggesting that “the murals [did] not truly depict the romance and glory of early California history” and that they “ridicule[d] the American people.”²¹ Even when Congress established that Refregier did have his citizenship at the time of his commission, the Society of Western Artists captured the opinion of many critics by claiming that his work was “artistically bad, historically absurd, and politically corrupt.”²²

Nevertheless, with statements issued by state representatives and the defense testimonies by local art societies such as the Legion of Honor, Congress could not produce a viable reason to remove the murals. As Representative John Shelley concluded, “judging either the painter or the style of art used would be putting the Congress in the same position as the totalitarian governments who refused to allow music to be played if the composer’s politics do not suit them.”²³ The House Committee on Un-American Activities was dissolved in 1975, closing a door on a generation galvanized by paranoia and dissent. The murals, meanwhile,

20 *Ibid.*, 396.

21 U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, *Rincon Annex Murals San Francisco: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds*, 83rd Cong., 1st sess., 1953, 40.

22 *Ibid.*, 5.

23 *Ibid.*, 54.

remain on the walls even after the decommissioning of the post office in 1979—representing a victory for freedom of expression and the memory of the New Deal. As Representative Mailliard stated in the 1953 hearings, “History is something which can be written and seen through many eyes, or . . . regarded in many lights.”²⁴

Every day, thousands of people, including legal secretaries, PG&E executives, techies, and tourists, pass by Rincon Center. Some enter through the silver doors, passing the wooden telephone booths on their way to the bustling food court reminiscent of the 1980s. Few, however, stop to pay tribute to the green, marbled Annex, gleaming as if expecting parcels and telegrams as it did seventy years ago. Like many of the forgotten niches of San Francisco, Rincon Annex today epitomizes the irony imbuing the city’s history. Along the corridor, a passerby will see Refregier’s colorful yet sobering murals of California’s immigrants and the labor strikes of the 1930s, while nearby rest the artifacts of Indian clay pots, Victorian silver, and bricks from the 1906 Earthquake—a complicated history contained within the stylish simplicity of Underwood’s design. As seen through the eyes of Refregier, this narrative remains on display; like much of work of New Deal programs such as the WPA it often goes unnoticed. Nonetheless, these pervasive federal programs fulfilled Hopkins’ and Roosevelt’s ambitions of impacting the whole of society. Perhaps this ubiquity testifies to the profound degree of the New Deal’s influence on America. On the other hand, perhaps it represents a forgetful America, which passes by an era of extensive physical, political, and social transformations on its way to a glistening future, unconsciously shaped by the past.

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²⁴ Ibid., 43.

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