

The Campus as a Pedagogical Agent

Herman B Wells, Cultural Entrepreneurship, and the Benton Murals

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The visionary educator Herman B Wells indelibly transformed Indiana University in his service as President (1937-62) and University Chancellor (1962-2000). Under his leadership, the university grew from a provincial hub into a cosmopolitan center of learning with an international reputation. Shrewd, charming, and energetic, Wells possessed an immense social network and ample sound judgment to find and create opportunities to improve the fortunes of IU. People were his passion, and he cultivated contacts with all members of the university community as well as with many groups beyond the campus. Although he strengthened the university's focus on research and advanced training, he made an extraordinary effort to cultivate the arts as well. Wells's unwavering commitment to academic freedom was put to the test by his protection of Alfred Kinsey's controversial research on sex, and he set into motion the expansion of international academic programs of many kinds.

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IU Auditorium, 1941. Home to the Benton Murals and centerpiece of Herman B Wells's vision for a new Fine Arts Plaza, the Auditorium stands as a monument and living legacy to both men.

Courtesy IU Archives

Wells understood that learning took place whenever and wherever consciousness existed, and he was devoted to building a creative and nurturing environment for the entire IU family. His vision reflected his belief that, in addition to the intangibilities of morale and spirit, the campus landscape—"our precious islands of green and serenity"—played an important role "in their ability to inspire students to dream long dreams of future usefulness and achievement."¹ Every aspect of the physical campus, from its woodland landscape and limestone architecture to its and tasteful interior furnishings, could play a dynamic role in education and learning.

But that vision did not spring into action fully formed when Wells became the eleventh president of IU beginning in 1937. Rather it developed over time, pieced together from his family background and life experiences, combined with on-the-job training. A 1924 IU alumnus, Wells had joined the faculty as an instructor in economics in 1930, was promoted to assistant professor in 1933, and then was named Dean of the School of Business Administration in 1935, at the age of 33. Two years later, he became Acting President.

¹Herman B Wells, "State of the University," June 2, 1962, President Herman B Wells Speeches, 1937-1962, IU Archives, Bloomington, Indiana.

One of the acknowledged early triumphs of the Wells administration was the acquisition of Thomas Hart Benton's Indiana Murals and their placement in the new Auditorium, dedicated in 1941. What tends to be forgotten is the controversy surrounding the murals, originally created for the Chicago Century of Progress International Exposition in 1933. Depicting the industrial and cultural history of Indiana, Benton used an exaggerated representational style of individuals and events that some thought unbecoming to Hoosiers and their state. Commissioned and owned by the State of Indiana, the paintings became a white elephant after the fair closed at the end of October. The gigantic canvases were taken down, crated, and transported to the State Fairgrounds in Indianapolis. There they were stored in the Manufacturers' Building, the only structure with doors large enough to accommodate the eighteen-foot packages, which weighed a total of six tons. And there the crates sat for over five years.

The current appreciation for these dazzling jewels of beauty and culture on the IU campus should not blind us to an obvious question: Given their near-forgotten status in 1938, why on earth did President Wells want them for the university? By exploring how and why Wells was sensitized to art in general, and to the Indiana Murals in particular, one can appreciate his role as cultural entrepreneur for the university and his determination to nurture the entire campus as a dynamic pedagogical agent.

The very physicality of the campus provides a "cultural glue" to attract and fix the loyalties of its academic community and a social setting where university norms, rituals, and customs are enacted. Through generations, Wells knew, the campus had been "culturally instructive, introducing the individual to the rich set of information, values, principles, and experiences which art, landscape architecture, and architecture are capable of embodying."² The roots of his vision can be traced to the remarkably deep and fertile appreciation of the cultural landscape of Indiana University that he had begun to cultivate as an undergraduate.

ENCOUNTERING ART ON CAMPUS

Wells first encountered the IU campus in the fall of 1921, as a nineteen-year-old student. At that time, the campus was a fraction of its cur-

²Sheldon Rothblatt, "A Note on the 'Integrity' of the University," *Aurora Tonalis*, eds. Marco Beretta, Karl Grandin, and Svante Lindqvist (Sagamore Beach, Mass., 2008), 280.

rent size, with a few limestone buildings arrayed in a crescent around the remnant of Dunn's Woods. Although the campus was less than forty years old, it was developing, like universities everywhere, "the indispensable innumerable symbols and structures: buildings, gardens, bridges, walks, avenues, glades, statues, plazas, fountains, statuary, towers, gateways and also follies, quirky leftover inheritances in the form of inscriptions, unlikely structures and almost unusable ones," such as the Rose Well House.³ Wells was struck by the physical beauty of IU's wooded landscape, dotted with graceful monoliths of native stone, and eagerly partook of the culture of its academic community. The gregarious young man joined Sigma Nu fraternity, finding the brothers he had never had growing up as an only child.

Receiving mostly B's and C's in his coursework, Wells pursued a business degree in IU's new School of Commerce and Finance. Very active in extracurricular affairs, he distinguished himself in college (as he had in high school) by serving as treasurer or business manager of nearly all the groups he joined, ranging from his high school yearbook staff to the IU chapter of the YMCA. His engagement with the arts had begun even earlier. Starting as a nine-year-old, he played horn—first alto and then baritone—in a succession of local brass bands, and was a member of the IU Band during college. Never achieving virtuosity in his playing, Wells nonetheless stuck with it for the group solidarity and civic pride it engendered in him.

Wells took some music appreciation courses in the new School of Music, but did not avail himself of formal training in the visual arts, which were the province of a small department. He could not help noticing, though, the presence of Indiana artist T.C. Steele, who was serving as "honorary professor of painting" at the behest of President William Lowe Bryan. At the center of the Brown County artists' colony, Steele had begun his association with IU in the 1890s, when he received commissions to paint portraits of several professors. In 1907 he got to know Bryan during the course of several weeks when the then president sat for his portrait in a temporary campus studio. Steele's fame increased, and in the spring of 1916, an exhibit of his paintings appeared in the Student Building in conjunction with the centennial of Indiana statehood. At commencement that year, Steele received an honorary doctorate, a mark

³Ibid., 278.

of distinction that the university had bestowed only two times in the preceding decade, first to James Whitcomb Riley (1907) and then to David Starr Jordan (1909).

When Steele came to campus in 1922, a large studio was prepared for him on the top floor of the Library (now Franklin Hall). There were no stipulations about his activities save that he would be in residence six months of the year. "I believe we need beauty as much as we need truth," Bryan contended, adding that "the University needs artists as much as it needs scholars." The president's idea was that Steele's very presence would help to advance art appreciation on campus, thus contributing to the moral uplift of the student body. For his part, Steele rendered his mission in simple terms: "to see the Beautiful in nature and in life."⁴

The artist was modest and unpretentious about his work, and was unperturbed if visitors dropped in when the studio was open Thursday, Friday, and Saturday each week.⁵ Sometimes he continued painting, other times he took a break. In an article appearing in the *Indianapolis Star*, one student observer commented:

when Mr. Steele stops his painting to speak to the students informally in this way, they learn many interesting facts in an entirely painless fashion. During the pleasant days of the spring . . . the artist plans to do most of his painting outside on the campus. The students will not be permitted to paint with him, but they may watch his work.⁶

Wells was one of the many students who observed Steele at work. On at least one occasion he found him painting *en plein aire* on campus, next to the Jordan River, and looked over the artist's shoulder at his canvas. Steele painted a prolific array of campus scenes, often using the stately limestone buildings to accentuate his trademark interpretations of the natural landscape.

⁴Selma N. Steele, Theodore L. Steele, and Wilbur D. Peat, *The House of the Singing Winds: The Life and Work of T.C. Steele* (Indianapolis, 1966), 161.

⁵Frank C. Senour, *Art For Your Sake* (Bloomington, Ind., 1924), 2.

⁶Quoted in Steele, et al., *House of the Singing Winds*, 162.

Writing in the *Daily Student*, IU English professor Frank Senour exhorted students to take advantage of Steele's presence on campus:

I want you to go to the studio that you may see Mr. Steele, and catch his joy—a quiet unobtrusive joy it is—in the artist life. I wish I could tell you about his life and what it has meant to be faithful to seeing things steadily and seeing them whole. His art is his life, and he, as you meet him and talk to him is the best commentary upon his pictures. He puts into his pictures not only what he sees, but what he believes in. . . . The artist's view of the world is worth while.⁷

In the spring of 1923, the Union Board bought six of Steele's paintings, to be hung in the Student Building. That acquisition served as the nucleus of the impressive art collection now in the Indiana Memorial Union building. That fall, Wells was elected and served as treasurer of the Union Board. No doubt he was aware of these purchases.

Wells received his BS in Commerce at the 1924 IU Commencement, held in the Men's Gymnasium. The utilitarian space was spruced up and decorated with a special art display. Pride of place went to a large oil painting representing "Alma Mater" and the fight against ignorance. It was the work of Edwin Howland Blashfield, an IU alumnus, who was well known both as a muralist and for his allegorical, figurative style. (Among his other commissions was the interior dome of the Library of Congress in the nation's capitol.) Presiding over his twenty-second commencement ceremony, President Bryan titled his remarks, "Alma Mater and the Dark Ages." Despite the glories of the Gothic cathedral built during the Middle Ages, he said, the Dark Ages are "eternal," located in the hearts and minds of all of us. Bryan went on to describe the painting:

Alma Mater appears as a woman of splendid beauty. In her arms and at her feet are the books which stand for the learning created and cherished by the University. At her feet is a monster devour-

⁷Senour, *Art For Your Sake*, 31-32.

ing the books. The monster is barbarism, the spirit which scorns and tramples under foot what is fine and loves what is base. The monster is the never-dying spirit of the Dark Ages. A flock of angels strive in comic distress to save the books. A youth with a sword stands ready, we hope, to fight for the good cause at the command of Alma Mater. When I saw this youth with the sword, I thought of our boys who chose to spend their money for the pictures of Theodore Steele.⁸

Noting that the youth “carries the shield of Indiana University,” Bryan, along with his wife, gave the picture to the university “in the hope that its beauty and its meaning may help in the good fight far into the future.”⁹

During his three-year undergraduate career, Wells had ample opportunity to sample the riches of the visual and musical arts. Already sensitized to the natural beauty of southern Indiana and its seasonal variations, he later declared that he fell in love with the university in that time.¹⁰ That love was built on his unusual capacity for affinity and empathy not just with people but also with places. Indiana University—its physical and cultural landscape—provided a beneficent matrix for Wells’s intellectual and social development, and it would serve as a true *alma mater*.

THE SHAPING OF A PUBLIC SERVANT

After graduation, Wells returned home to Lebanon, Indiana, where he worked for two years in a local bank. Restless, he missed the excite-

⁸William Lowe Bryan, “Alma Mater and the Dark Ages,” reprinted in Bryan, *Farewells* (Bloomington, Ind., 1938), 21-22.

⁹“Commencement 1924,” *IU Alumni Quarterly*, 11 (1924), 355-78. Currently the painting is located on the balcony of the IU Bookstore.

¹⁰“For me it was an efflorescent period when my mind was open to receive a myriad of new ideas. It was also a time when my senses were so keen that they eagerly absorbed the beauty of the changing seasons in southern Indiana, the delicate pastel colors of spring, the drowsy lushness of summer, the brilliance of the fall foliage, and the still but invigorating atmosphere of winter. Music, literature, and art—my whole being responded to the stimuli of collegiate life, in and out of the classroom. It was for me a time of response, growth, transformation, and inspiration.” Herman B Wells, *Being Lucky: Reminiscences and Reflections* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), 42.

ment of learning and the immersion in university culture, so he returned to Bloomington to pursue a master's degree in economics. A year later, with a solid thesis published in *The Hoosier Banker* in 1927, he was on his way to the University of Wisconsin, enrolled in their doctoral program in economics.¹¹ Although Wells enjoyed academic work, he was lured back to practical matters a year later when he took an attractive position as Field Secretary of the Indiana Bankers Association (IBA).

Wells crisscrossed the state, visiting nearly every one of Indiana's 1,100 banks and publishing a monthly column in *The Hoosier Banker*, the IBA's house organ. These dispatches, under the title "Hoosier Highways," contained descriptions of banks and bankers, sympathetic statements of local problems, and shrewd promotion of better banking practices, along with a running travelogue of country hotels, the passing scenery, and the never-ending quest for a good meal. Wells's evident love for the state and its culture was on display, as this example from a stop in Covington suggests:

After the Ford was comfortably stabled at its customary curb-stone box stall, we walked to the Wabash river—watched the sun, as a beautiful red ball of fire, sink behind the river and day dreamed of the days of long ago when the Indians used the river for their canoes, and then its later part in pioneer commerce, when on its bosom each year it bore a burden of whiskey and molasses on the way to New Orleans and the world. And also of the man who made it famous and immortal, Paul Dresser, of his tragic life and of his brother Theodore's biography of him.¹²

Wells remained in touch with his IU mentors and, in 1930, joined the faculty as instructor, keeping his connection to the Bankers Association.

One year later, as the economic situation worsened, Wells was appointed as Secretary and Research Director of the Study Commission on Indiana Financial Institutions. So, in the early 1930s, Wells was both teaching economics and working hard for the state reorganizing the banking industry. He had come to believe that the state played a signifi-

¹¹Herman B Wells, "Service Charges for the Small or So-Called Country Banks," M.A. thesis, Indiana University, 1927.

¹²"Hoosier Highways," *Hoosier Banker*, 15 (March 1930), 30.

cant role in social progress through its sponsorship of education and its fiduciary management, among other areas. Both bankers and teachers had a special moral obligation to their clientele: to strive for benefits to each individual while ensuring the collective good. Public servants were thus agents of the state, charged with preserving and enhancing the commonweal for all citizens.

In 1933, the Study Commission's report, authored by Wells, served as the basis for reform legislation brought before the Indiana General Assembly under the new administration of Democratic Governor Paul V. McNutt, formerly Dean of the IU Law School, who had swept into office with the New Deal landslide. Wells accepted McNutt's offer to oversee the implementation of the new banking regulations, and took leave from his university duties to serve as Supervisor of the Division of Banks and Trust Companies and of the Division of Research and Statistics in the state's Department of Financial Institutions. In addition, he filled the role of Secretary of the Commission of Financial Institutions. In filling this triple role in state administration he demonstrated a remarkable managerial talent. In 1935 President Bryan tapped Wells as the Dean of the School of Business Administration, where he got his first taste of academic stewardship. Two years later, Dean Wells was appointed Acting President following Bryan's retirement.

FINDING A HOME FOR THE MURALS

February 8, 1938, was a fateful day in IU history. Wells, in his eighth month as acting president, had won the confidence of most of the faculty and some members of the Board of Trustees based on his competent performance on the job. He juggled a punishing travel schedule to replace depleted faculty ranks while also working with the trustees to refurbish the physical plant and launching a comprehensive self-survey. Wells proved to be a tremendous workhorse, managing all of this and more with tact and charm.

Meeting in executive session on February 8, the eight IU trustees talked again about the presidential search. In a surprise maneuver, one trustee formally moved to appoint former governor McNutt as Bryan's permanent replacement. The vote was split four to four. Voting in favor were the trustees appointed by McNutt during his term as governor. Of the opposition, three trustees had been elected by the alumni. The fourth, J. Dwight Peterson, was a gubernatorial appointment by McNutt's successor, Clifford Townsend, and had served only one month.

Peterson, an Indianapolis banker, had known Wells for a decade. The newspapers picked up the story of the trustees' split over McNutt.¹³ For more than two weeks the imbroglio continued, until McNutt quieted the uproar by removing himself from further consideration.¹⁴ Now the stage was set for the trustees' unanimous vote for Wells on March 22.

Meanwhile, a front-page story in the *Indianapolis Times* had also appeared on February 8. Under the headline, "Six-Ton, \$20,000 Mural History of State Decaying at Fair Grounds Awaiting Home Big Enough to Hold It," the article described how Thomas Benton's narrative murals of Indiana, painted for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, were languishing in storage. Wilbur D. Peat, Director of the John Herron Art Institute, opined:

Certainly art patrons would like to have this history where it could be seen. But there seems to be no place to put it. Not even the World War Memorial. Looks to me like there'll have to be a building built for these paintings or at least a part of a new building set aside for them.¹⁵

In a follow-up story the next day, Richard Lieber, the father of the Indiana state park system and director of the state commission originally in charge of the murals, declared that the paintings must be preserved. Lieber had hoped that a proper display could be found somewhere in the planned expansion of the statehouse complex or, if not, that the state would entrust the mural to the Indianapolis Art Association and pay for a wing to house them at the Herron Art Institute.¹⁶

When he heard the news about the uncertain fate of the murals, Wells was immediately taken back to 1933. He had been on leave from his university post at the time, living at the Claypool Hotel in Indianapolis and working on banking reform for the McNutt adminis-

¹³Gary Post Tribune, February 25, 1938.

¹⁴Ora L. Wildermuth to John S. Hastings, March 14, 1938, Wells Papers, C213, Box 135A, IU Archives.

¹⁵Leo Daugherty, "Six-Ton, \$20,000 Mural History of State Decaying at Fair Grounds Awaiting Home Big Enough to Hold It," *Indianapolis Times*, February 8, 1938, 1.

¹⁶Leo Daugherty, "Suggestions for Preservation Of Murals Given by Lieber," *Indianapolis Times*, February 9, 1938, 3.



After “languishing in storage” at the Indiana State Fairgrounds for years, Benton’s murals arrive at Indiana University, December 1939.

Courtesy IU Archives

tration. With frequent business in Chicago, Wells several times took the opportunity to visit the World’s Fair’s spacious Indiana pavilion, with its Benton murals arranged high on the walls (p. 131). “Essentially, it was a place for people to sit and look at art,” Wells recollected.¹⁷

Visitors were treated to a vigorous interpretation of the “Social History of Indiana” from Indian times to the present, with matched panels displaying industrial progress and cultural advancement, respectively, on facing walls. Benton’s Regionalist narrative style was instantly recognizable, with oversized figures, drawn from life, painted in vivid colors and arranged in successive tableaux representing events in

¹⁷Herman B Wells interview with Kathy Foster and Nan Brewer, October 13, 1989, IU Art Museum Library.

Indiana history. The murals, writes Erika Doss, “celebrated the producerism he heard expounded by newly elected President Roosevelt and his Indiana backers.”¹⁸ Wells resonated with the “story” that Benton presented: the Hoosier State “was an industrious and cooperative commonwealth.”¹⁹

Wells likely lingered at the mural’s concluding panels, “Indiana Puts Her Trust in Work” and “Indiana Puts Her Trust in Thought.” [plates 5, 10] The former depicted limestone quarries, smokestacks, concrete and steel, trains and trucks, and featured a black construction worker, with businessmen rapping at the door of a closed bank. The “Thought” panel contained basketball players, Indianapolis 500 racecars, an employment relief line, an architect and a chemist, and a portrait of handsome Paul McNutt. The governor was portrayed surrounded by newspaper headlines, including “State Reorganization,” “Banking,” “Unemployment,” and pointing to a question mark above the dates of 1933, 1934, and so on. Benton narrated his belief “that a combination of racial equality, progressive politics, and scientific engineering (in part, the ‘story’ of the New Deal) *could* help end the crisis of the Depression, but only if Indiana renewed its faith in republicanism.”²⁰ Wells identified with the collectivist aspirations signified by the murals, recognized several of the persons that Benton used as models, and thought that the paintings were “earthy enough” for “the typical Hoosier” to appreciate, as he did.²¹

In the intervening time between 1933 and 1938, Wells had worked for the state government to restore confidence in Indiana financial institutions, protecting Hoosier workers and producers. Now he had authority over the state’s flagship university, to nurture higher education, research, and service to all citizens. He was well aware of the responsibilities entailed by serving as an agent of the state. Those enlarged responsibilities came with commensurate opportunities as well, and Wells lost no time in finding ways to make improvements, despite his temporary status as acting president. After reading about the uncertain

¹⁸Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, 1991), 101.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 102.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 107.

²¹Wells interview with Foster and Brewer, 1989.

fate of Benton's Indiana Murals, he thought that the university might provide a lasting home on the Bloomington campus.

Within the month following the February 1938 newspaper article, Wells talked with University Comptroller Ward Biddle about finding a place for the paintings in the still-growing Indiana Memorial Union. Biddle, a decade older than Wells, was the young president's closest confidant and key ally among the administrative staff. Biddle, who had graduated from IU in 1916, was also a Sigma Nu brother, and had served as chapter advisor when Wells served as fraternity president during his senior year. Biddle had mentored Wells since their first meeting in 1923, and the two men shared a deep dedication to the welfare of their alma mater.

MANAGING CULTURAL ASSETS

In April 1938, a month after being named permanent president, Wells wrote to his friend Ralph Thompson, an Indianapolis insurance agent, seeking accurate information about the dimensions of the murals. Under some pretext, Thompson visited Ross Teckemeyer, the state employee who had custody of the murals, and obtained the information. "It will take a room 75X35 without any openings to hold these canvases," Thompson reported. "Any room, however, with 220 linear feet of wall space can be made to do the job, providing the ceilings are 18' high."²² In the months following, a search for an appropriate space on campus proved futile. The new Business and Economics building (now Woodburn Hall) might hold a few mural panels, but accommodating the whole sequence would increase construction costs significantly.

By now, the trustees had learned of Wells's determination to obtain the paintings. In early August, Wells heard that Benton "would be delighted to see the murals go up at the university," in a message relayed to him by Fine Arts Professor Harry Engel, a friend of the artist. Jokingly, Benton added, "Whatever is decided upon for the murals is O.K. with me and I will do what you wish, even to the extent of talking my head off."²³ But the question remained: where to put the gigantic canvases?

An unexpected possibility opened up during the summer of 1938. President Wells and Purdue University President Edward Elliott made a

²²Ralph Thompson to Herman B Wells, April 16, 1938, C213, Box 67, Thomas Hart Benton—Murals, IU Archives.

²³Thomas Hart Benton to Harry Engel, August 4, 1938, *ibid.*



Architect Otto Eggers's 1938 rendering of Wells's "audacious" vision: IU's Fine Arts Plaza

Courtesy IU Archives

request to a special session of the Indiana General Assembly to construct a multipurpose auditorium on each of their respective campuses. After a month-long debate, funds were appropriated to build new "Halls of Music" for both universities.

Wells and Biddle had already selected Eggers and Higgins, a leading architectural firm in New York, to consult on campus development. They were sensitive to the idea that collaboration from Hoosier architects would maintain good relations with the Indiana architectural profession and supply essential knowledge of local circumstances. Thus Eggers and Higgins would be in general charge of the design, with local architects executing working drawings. In the case of the Auditorium, Eggers and Higgins drew the original design, with A. M. Strauss of Fort Wayne as the associated architect.²⁴

Although the chance to build the Auditorium was unexpected, Wells knew at once that it might solve the challenge of providing a home for the Benton murals. As he continued to make legal arrangements to transfer the murals to IU's custody in the fall of 1938, the auditorium architects were drawing plans to incorporate the paintings within the interior of the structure. In September, the Benton murals were formally

²⁴Wells, *Being Lucky*, 197-98.

transmitted to the university by the governor's office.²⁵ Over the next several months, the Hall of Music architects drew and redrew plans, and consulted with Benton to obtain his approval of the presentation.

Meanwhile, Wells's ambitious plan to improve cultural opportunities throughout the state received welcome national exposure in the March 1939 issue of the *Reader's Digest*. The reporter explained Wells's philosophy:

But the *most* unusual thing about him is his belief that a modern state university should not be a cloistered stay-at-home; that it should not only educate those who seek it out, but go out and aggressively carry its message to *all* the people. Through forums, music, drama, movies, radio, he is pushing the university influence to the farthest corners of the state. As a result, not only those seeking academic credits, but thousands of plain Hoosier housewives and workers with no thought of diplomas are dipping into culture.²⁶

The story described Indiana University's ambitious plans for extension work around the state, including its support for music and drama groups in various localities or traveling art displays and film rentals. Conversely, the university was also sponsoring conferences in Bloomington, inviting different groups of businessmen, professionals, and women for talks by experts and scholars. "The University fulfills its true purpose," Wells stated, "not only in the classroom, but also by affording facilities and trained personnel to cooperate with all citizens in the solution of their particular problems. It is in this spirit that Indiana University invites you."²⁷

This comprehensive program was summed up:

It is this welding of culture and the counting room, business and erudition, art and economics, that Indiana believes it is pioneering. Where many other schools, working toward the same ideals,

²⁵Dick Heller to Herman B Wells, September 27, 1938, C213, Box 67, Thomas Hart Benton—Murals, IU Archives.

²⁶Karl Detzer, "Culture to the Crossroads," *Kiwanis Magazine*, 24 (March 1939), 136. Condensed as "This College Campus is the Whole State," *Reader's Digest*, March 1939.

²⁷Detzer, "Culture to the Crossroads," 137.

reach out cautiously in a few directions, Wells is seeking to widen the cultural front until every taxpayer in every county gets some intellectual return from his state university.²⁸

Service to the state's citizens, supplied with gusto.

In late March 1939, with the *Reader's Digest* article in wide circulation, Wells wrote to Governor Townsend that most of the murals could be placed in the capacious foyer of the Hall of Music, with a few in other parts of the structure and in the adjacent Business and Economics building.²⁹ Not only was IU revivifying cultural opportunities around the state under Wells's administration, it was also acquiring cultural attractions and making capital investments in Bloomington. Perhaps emboldened by his success in constructing a facility that would house Benton's Indiana Murals, Wells unveiled his audacious aspiration to create a new campus precinct devoted to the fine and performing arts, to be anchored by the new auditorium. University architect Otto Eggers sketched the Auditorium as the focus of a future group of fine arts facilities, with a fine arts building to the north and a Greek-style amphitheatre to the south, built on a natural slope. "His original design called for a centerpiece," Wells wrote, "a fountain it was hoped." A striking rendering of the plaza proposal was used in presentations to prospective donors.³⁰

A HOME FOR THE ARTS

Dedicated in March 1941, the IU Auditorium attracted several notables to its opening, Thomas Hart Benton among them. Several days of programming followed, to put the building through its paces. Wells was in his element—officiating at ceremonies, hosting dinner parties, enjoying the musical and dramatic performances. As George M. Logan

²⁸Ibid., 137, 181.

²⁹Herman B Wells to Clifford Townsend, March 23, 1939, C213, Box 67, Thomas Hart Benton Murals, IU Archives.

³⁰Wells, *Being Lucky*, 200. Nearly forty years in the making, the district was later named the Fine Arts Plaza, and included—in addition to the Auditorium (1941)—the Fine Arts Building (1962), the Lilly Library (1960), and the IU Art Museum (1982), all surrounding the monumental Showalter Fountain (1961). By filling in a blank area on the campus map, Wells played a major role in creating a distinctive twentieth-century counterpart to the nineteenth-century Old Crescent.



In March, 1941, Benton (third from left), Wells (fourth from right) and other luminaries gathered to celebrate the IU Auditorium dedication.

Courtesy IU Archives

has written in his history of the IU School of Music, “With the opening of the Auditorium the University suddenly had a cultural facility that rivaled or surpassed that of any other American university, and most commercial halls.”³¹

The IU Auditorium proved to be a splendid venue for performances and lectures, and a boon for the embryonic program in theatre and drama. It also played a special role in the evolution of the opera program of the IU School of Music. The Metropolitan Opera Company of New York City had made annual tours to Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, and Atlanta, but it had never appeared in a small university town. In a bold move, Biddle and speech and theatre faculty member Lee Norvelle successfully lobbied the Met to visit Indiana University on their midwestern tour. When Edward Johnson, the Met’s general manager, “declared that

³¹George M. Logan, *The Indiana University School of Music: A History* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), 113.

no college facility in America could accommodate the Met," he was quieted by a look at the Auditorium's blueprints. When Johnson claimed that the cost would be prohibitive, the university came up with a plan to meet the budget. "And so," writes Logan, "one of the most unlikely and charming events in the history of American music was contracted: the Metropolitan Opera Company, making its first appearance on a university campus, would perform in Bloomington, Indiana" in 1942.³²

Biddle and Norvelle asked for *Aida*, "an especially splashy opera," to mark the historic occasion. On April 13, with the new auditorium just past its first year, townspeople, faculty, and out-of-town visitors from as far away as Chicago and St. Louis flocked to the Met performance. Among the guests was Josiah K. Lilly, scion of Indianapolis's venerable family-run Eli Lilly and Company.³³ The event was a great success, even netting a small surplus over budget. Met manager Johnson enthused, "the Metropolitan likes Indiana University and Bloomington. So we are not saying 'goodbye' but only 'au revoir.'" The advent of World War II a few months earlier would curtail the opera company's touring schedule, "but when we again leave New York, Indiana University need only beckon."³⁴

The war years passed, and the Met came to Bloomington again in April 1946, beginning a continuous string of annual IU performances that lasted until 1961. Two operas were staged during the Met's 1946 visit, *Tannhäuser* and *La Bohème*, and their programs contained a note by Wells:

The visit of the world's greatest opera organization and your presence here are a part of a plan and of an objective of Indiana University. Both are steps in the program of the university to make the whole state of Indiana its campus, and to that ever-widening campus to bring the best in music and the finest in artistic expression. There are larger universities in America. There are older universities in America. There are none, howev-

³²Ibid., 114.

³³More than a decade later, Lilly gave his valuable collection of rare books to IU and funds to create the Lilly Library, located next door to the Auditorium.

³⁴Logan, *School of Music*, 114.

er, more typical of the American ideal of educational opportunity for all youth and cultural leadership for all citizens.³⁵

Thomas Benton's 1933 murals bespoke a vision of Indiana and her history that Herman Wells was fortunate to have observed in person when he was an ambitious junior professor working to reform the state's banking laws. A few years later, Wells was still working for the state, now as President of Indiana University, and was able to reposition the university as a center of art and culture. He made bold moves to acquire cultural heritage, reframing and incorporating it into the liberal arts context, and thus made it available for the education of all citizens of the commonwealth.

Part of Wells's brilliance in obtaining the murals for the university was to marry them to an impressive and functional architectural monument. Dedicating the Auditorium, Wells felt, "was truly the beginning of the fulfillment of a special university obligation to light a spark of creativity in Hoosier youth."³⁶ In a manner analogous to President Bryan's presentation of the "Alma Mater" painting at Wells's graduation 17 years before, Wells's presiding over the Auditorium dedication underscored the role of the arts in the university while at the same time exemplifying changing aesthetic tastes. Bryan, who was present at the 1941 dedication, commented gnomically to a *Daily Student* reporter: "It is with our Hall of Music as with every first-rate thing that men do—it is old *and* new. Builders of genius in Egypt, Babylon, Athens, Canterbury were present within the man who conceived of this home of beauty."³⁷ Wells's great gift as a cultural entrepreneur was already apparent: being lucky was knowing what to do with the chances that came his way.³⁸

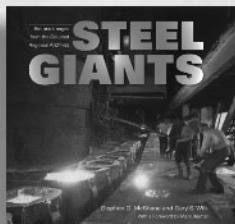


³⁵Herman B Wells, in program of the Metropolitan Opera Association, 1946, IU Archives.

³⁶Thomas D. Clark, *Indiana University: Midwestern Pioneer* (Bloomington, Ind., 1977), v. 3, 470.

³⁷Quoted in *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

³⁸Donald J. Gray, personal communication with author, April 24, 2008.



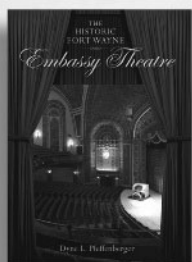
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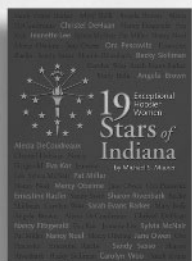


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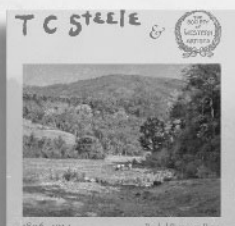
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