
Book Reviews

A Simple and Vital Design: The Story of the Indiana Post Office Murals. By John C. Carlisle. Photography by Darryl Jones. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1995. Pp. viii, [104]. Notes, illustrations, bibliography. Paperbound, \$24.95.)

The New Deal offered many opportunities for unemployed artists, but the only art program with a major presence in Indiana was run by the Treasury Department's "Section of Painting and Sculpture." From 1934 to 1943, the "Section" handed out commissions for murals in new federal post offices, using an innovative "one percent for the arts" scheme that carved the cost of the mural out of the total construction appropriation. In Indiana, thirty-seven mural commissions were undertaken. Astonishingly, thirty-six murals remain.

John C. Carlisle, a professor of English at Purdue University Calumet, has studied these post-office murals for twenty-five years. In *A Simple and Vital Design* his reckoning is thorough and affectionate. The main body of the book is a catalog of the extant murals arranged alphabetically by town for easy reference as a "field guide." Each site entry gives a quick registry of important facts and a few pages of illuminating commentary based on archival research. At the head of this catalog, Carlisle's introduction explains the history and method of the Section. He shows a fine understanding of the lofty intentions of the program and the comical, delicate, and frustrating negotiations played out between artists, communities, and bureaucracy in the name of "public art."

Unlike the government's first and largest job-creation schemes for artists, which were Works Progress Administration programs run with an emphasis on the relief of the workers rather than their artistic skill, the Section awarded contracts to artists on the basis of merit. This system sought local talent by soliciting entries only from artists born or residing in the region of the new post office. The program also offered the community a work of art in a highly visible, public space and so cultivated both emerging artists and the "national taste." To ensure that the artists and the public met on common ground, the winning artist was asked to fine tune his or her design with either the Section administrators or a local arbiter (often the postmaster). This procedure promoted sensitivity to the local history, economy, and geography, but it also encouraged conventional concepts and a stock "regionalist" realism; a modernist such as Milton Avery found it hard to paint something suitable for Rockville. Nonetheless, high standards generally prevailed. All of these murals were competent, and some of them were very good.

The appeal of the murals is enhanced by the clever design of this book, which features Darryl Jones's color photographs. Traveling around the state with an old-fashioned panoramic view camera, Jones teetered on ladders, struggled with architectural obstacles, and prayed for sunny days. He photographed most of the murals in daylight to capture them as they appear to visitors today. The resulting color plates are truthfully dingy, and they make a valuable addition to the book's documentary mission. Both Carlisle and Jones remarked that their work drew the attention of post office visitors who would admit that they had never noticed the murals before. This book should awaken others to see them as well, visit them in person, and appreciate the social, cultural, and economic benefits that flow from government support of the arts.

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A Home of Another Kind: One Chicago Orphanage and the Tangle of Child Welfare. By Kenneth Cmiel. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. viii, 243. Illustrations, notes, tables, index. \$24.95.)

A commissioned history of an orphanage seems to promise a dull read, but Kenneth Cmiel has used the voluminous records of the Chicago Nursery and Half-Orphan Asylum to illuminate the history of child welfare in Chicago over a hundred-year period in a well-written study that has much wider implications for social welfare history than the story of a single institution.

The orphanage was founded around 1860 and by 1880 housed one hundred children, all aged less than ten years. Children were generally admitted because of family crisis; they were often brought in by a mother and stayed an average of two years. Thus, in its first five decades the orphanage served "dependent" not delinquent children. It was an institution for the working poor founded and closely managed by upper-class matrons, the wives of Chicago's business, legal, and medical elites. Chartered by the state in 1865, the orphanage was privately run and funded until the 1960s. It began excluding black children after World War I but readmitted them in the 1960s.

The traditional, custodial orphanage was put on the defensive by Progressive-era child welfare innovations such as the juvenile court and the "cottage homes" idea; nevertheless, the orphanage survived with little change until the 1920s and 1930s, decades Cmiel calls "the end of the nineteenth century." The home was still nominally managed by elite women, but these suburban matrons now lacked the confidence of the nineteenth-century managers (often their