

This Day in History... October 16, 1934

The Section of Painting and Sculpture

On October 16, 1934, Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Section of Painting and Sculpture (later known as the Section of Fine Arts). The Section, as it was called, invited artists across the country to beautify public buildings, including many post offices.

After taking office in 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt created the New Deal, a series of programs to help boost the economy during the Great Depression. Over time, there were several programs that focused on the arts. Among these was the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), proposed by artist George Biddle, which ran for six months in late 1933 and early 1934.

The program was replaced later that year with the Section of Painting and Sculpture. Established on October 16, 1934, the Section, as it came to be known, was led by Edward Bruce, who had previously led the PWAP. The Section's stated goal was to "secure suitable art of the best quality available for the embellishment of public buildings." Managed by the Treasury Department, the Section's staff largely consisted of artists and people with knowledge of arts administration. One staff member later recalled, "with the exception of Ned [Edward] Bruce, we were all inexperienced in government procedures, but we did our best to conform to them. Treasury officials seemed to respect our efforts and were amused by the Section, which struck an eccentric, casual, free and easy note in the administrative machinery of procurement."

While the Section was run by several of the same people, it differed in many ways from the PWAP. Unlike the PWAP, it wasn't a relief program. The artists weren't granted work based on their income or employment status. Instead, artwork proposals were reviewed blindly, so officials wouldn't know anything about the person submitting the work. They hoped this would encourage women and lesser-known artists to participate. The Section also hoped that it would create new interest in art in the country and engage residents. Selected artists essentially became independent contractors, receiving a set amount of money for the project, rather than a regular salary.

Most of the Section's projects were for Federal buildings, including many post offices and courthouses. Many of these works were created for new buildings, with about 1% of the construction cost allocated for these embellishments. Generally, the murals cost about \$1,300 and the sculptures about \$1,900. Once a site was selected, a local committee was established to announce the competition and accept and judge sketches. The committee then turned their selections over to the Section officials in Washington, DC, who made the final decisions.

Post office murals measured around 12 feet by 5 feet and were most often oil paintings. Artists were recommended to visit the town or city they were to create a mural for in order to get a good idea of the area's cultural values.

In many cases, artists received commissions for buildings they didn't apply for. If an artist sent in a sketch that wasn't selected for a project, but officials were impressed by it, they would find another project to reward that artist's work. As one official said, "the fact that we awarded additional commissions as a result of sketches submitted in this competition made it clear to the artists that they were not wasting their efforts in a one-shot raffle. These awards helped to mitigate one of the greatest drawbacks to the competitive system." Of course, sometimes this bothered locals, who might openly criticize an outsider being brought in to depict their community's history.

In 1938, all the Treasury's Works Progress Administration arts programs were merged into the Federal Works Agency. However, the outbreak of World War II brought an end to these programs, and the Section was officially dissolved in 1943. Over the course of its operation, the Section commissioned 1,300 murals and 300 sculptures. In 2019, the USPS issued a set of stamps depicting some of these murals. The stamps honor the history of these murals as well as the artists who painted them. Some post office murals have been lost to the ravages of time. That is why the USPS has taken steps to renovate and protect these striking pieces of the past so they may be enjoyed for years to come.



These stamps picture the murals Kiowas Moving Camp, Mountains and Yucca, Antelope, Sugarloaf Mountain, and Air Mail.

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