DESIGN AND EXECUTION OF AN
INDUSTRIAL MURAL

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DESIGN AND EXECUTION OF AN
INDUSTRIAL MURAL

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the 1960 summer school session at Drake University, the writer was searching for a graduate project to be done in the summer of 1961. He decided that his first choice would be to paint a mural as a creative project for his Master of Fine Arts degree. This hope came one step nearer reality in the following spring when the writer received a letter from Karl Mattern, Drake University professor of art, regarding the possibility of obtaining a mural commission from Charles Lundahl, then president of the John Deere Des Moines Works, Ankeny, Iowa. Lundahl had written to Mattern asking for his recommendations of mural artists.

The possibility of combining this commission, if it could be obtained, with a field report into a thesis project was discussed with Leonard Good, Head of the Art Department, Drake University. Good gave his approval and suggested that the writer should consult with the interior designer of the new John Deere offices concerning the mural.

After having made an appointment with Mrs. Virginia Piggott, who was in charge of the interior design, to discuss the possibility of painting the mural, the writer accompanied Mrs. Piggott to the John Deere Plant for an interview with Lundahl. In this interview Lundahl explained the position of
the John Deere Plant in relation to what was wanted in the mural. It was his desire to incorporate a mural based on some of the John Deere implements into the design of the plant cafeteria. This wall decoration was to be the type that would show the three main types of farm implements manufactured at the Des Moines Plant.

Lundahl also explained that this proposed mural would be seen by many people other than John Deere employees because the cafeteria was available to many special interest groups that hold meetings there. He explained the plant's position in wanting a mural that would hold interest for employees of the plant, visitors both local and from outside the state, and a mural that would be interesting to the varied groups using the cafeteria.

To facilitate planning the sketches in regard to subject matter the writer was taken on a guided tour of the plant. Information concerning the manufacturing and use of implements was made available by demonstrating the machines in operation in the test plots and in the form of brochures and pamphlets from Lundahl's office. An example of the brochures appears in Figure 1.

The cafeteria was visited and measurements were taken of the proposed mural area. Lundahl indicated that several artists had been considered as candidates for this commission and so he requested that the writer submit a small scale drawing that could be considered by himself and his staff.
FIGURE 1

SAMPLE OF YOUR DIRECT MAIL PROMOTIONS USING ILLUSTRATING DRAWINGS
A study of murals and mural painting prior to the rendering of the preliminary sketches was conducted. Information that proved very valuable in terms of solving the mechanical problems came through research. This research was in the form of comments by world famous mural painters such as Jean Charlot, who in his book *Murals in Georgia*, made the following statement:

Mural painting cannot afford the optical protection of a frame. It has to vie in the allotted space with windows, doors, ventilators and pipes; nor is normal vision and single point of view its lot. It caters to a public busy with practical pursuits rather than esthetic ones and catches its eye more often sideways. It cannot count on the pinning of the hypnotized amateur to the horizontal and vertical cross bars of the median lines that is taken for granted in viewing small paintings. The average distance from which a wall will be apprehended depends on the width and length of the room, the place and number of entrances, the graded level of the floor, staircases and balconies a complex planned by the architects and over which the painter has no sway. Mural paintings have to look well both in centered and lateral vision, from a worm's eye view as well as in a plunging perspective. Such a postulate, distinct from the "peephole" assumption of easel painting, makes it impossible to attain any realistic intensity. A certain amount of artificality, a style, imposes itself on the mural painter as a corollary to optical postulates.¹

After having done a considerable amount of study and research at Cowles Library, Drake University, and at the Art Center Library, a study was made of existing local murals. Excellent first hand information was available at the Art

Center in the form of a fresco, painted by the same Jean Charlot who was quoted above, and who is now Head of the Art Department at the University of Hawaii. This mural had been painted in 1956 when Charlot was artist in residence at the Art Center. The mural was painted by Charlot with the help of his artist friends from Drake University and the Des Moines Art Center. Other first hand information was available in the work of Professor Stan Hess, Drake University, who has many outstanding murals in the Des Moines area.

A study of these murals was made in regard to the solution of problems of over-all design, pattern, composition, mood and portrayal of subject matter. Murals used by Hess in this study are located in the Des Moines Art Center at Greenwood Park, the Y.M.C.A. Building at 101 Locust, National Travelers Life Insurance Company at 820 Keosauqua Way, and in Mercy Hospital at 5th Street and Ascension Avenue, all in Des Moines, Iowa.

As the writer continued his study it became evident that each particular mural that has withstood the test of time is one in which several all engrossing and unifying factors were adhered to. These factors are well presented in a comment from his book, Fresco Painting its Art and Technique, by James Ward.

The arrangement and composition of line restfulness of the masses of form and the harmonic balance and purity of color are among the primary essentials of mural painting, and all these indispensable requisites of this form
of art are due to its contact with architecture. While bearing this in mind, we must not forget that painting has its special functions apart from those of architecture, which include a controlling power over form and colour, and the faculty of illustrating ideas by means of the representation of a theme or incident, a subject or a story.¹

Information accumulated from various libraries and from the studies of local murals was used in putting into visual terms the drawings of farm implements produced at the John Deere Plant. These drawings after many submissions and revisions were incorporated into a scale model drawing of the proposed mural which was taken to Lundahl at his plant office. After some minor changes had been suggested and accomplished Lundahl approved the drawing and made arrangements to have it sent to the Headquarters Office for final approval. In a letter received at Drake University the writer was informed that approval had been granted, and that arrangements could be made to begin the large scale drawings on the wall area.

Arrangements were made with the building and maintenance engineer, to furnish scaffolding, ladders and drop cloths necessary in painting the mural. These necessary items were set up by plant maintenance men, and work on the mural commenced.

Interest by employees of the plant became so great upon beginning the mural that the artist was hampered in his work. So many questions were asked about the proceedings that

Lundahl wrote a letter explaining the situation and had it fastened to a large drawing tablet on which the writer drew a cartoon character of a muralist painting a wall. This was set up near the work in progress to explain that the mural was a graduate project for a Master's degree by a Drake University art student. This tablet together with the letter, as placed immediately inside the cafeteria door, relieved the writer from repeating over and over the same answers to many of the observers' questions.

I. THE PROBLEM AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS

The problem involved in this project was that of designing and executing an industrial mural twelve feet high at the left end and forty-two feet wide. This mural was to be painted on an irregularly shaped, buff colored wall in the cafeteria of the new John Deere Plant Administration Building, Ankeny, Iowa. This mural offered the writer a very challenging project for in a discussion with Lundahl, at that time President of the Des Moines Plant, it became apparent that many unique requirements would need fulfillment in the design of such a mural.

Function of the mural. Bertrum D. Wolfe in writing about Diego Rivera's murals advanced a theory that a painter's intention must not lie outside the function of the place in which his painting has its being, else his work will be lacking
in both objective and subjective correctness and truth.\textsuperscript{1} The intention and function of a mural artist according to John Canaday is that a first rate mural painter is necessarily a decorator, no matter what else he may more significantly be.\textsuperscript{2} The function in the case of the mural painted for this project is one of depicting by a visual means the fact that the John Deere Des Moines Plant is a producer of three distinct types of farm implements. Implements produced at the plant include cotton pickers, corn pickers, and a variety of earth tilling equipment such as cultivators. A mural has other functions to fulfill over and above those of conveying subject matter. This thought is stated in a comment from the same book by Wolfe who, in writing about modern murals in comparison to historic works, makes the remark that today as well as in earlier eras mural painting must help in man's struggle to become a human being, and for that purpose it must live wherever it can; no place is bad for it, so long as it is there permitted to fulfill its primary functions of nutrition and enlightenment.\textsuperscript{3}


\textsuperscript{3}Wolfe, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 11.
Organization. One facet of the problem that needed consideration was that of depicting the machines in a general manner of simple construction. Keeping the lines as economical as possible was necessary because too specific a rendering of a particular machine would neither add to the art quality nor would exactness of details help in depicting particular implements since they would too quickly become outdated. As stated by Charlot, "In spite of complex subject matter the muralist must preserve in the total view a certain simplicity, for complexity can be absorbed by the human eye to saturation, but past that point becomes confusion."\(^1\) Similarly one of the aims of organization is to limit the amount included in a subject by not letting the diversification growing out of an idea to get out of control. An individual can attend to a limited number of things at one time. He cannot look at a dozen unrelated colors or a dozen isolated forms at the same time, and no art object should impose such a strain upon him.\(^2\)

Aside from the idea of preserving simplicity it was also desirable for the company's sake that these machines have no recognizable characteristics as to specific year or model. The mural was to incorporate machines that were not limited to any

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\(^1\)Charlot, op. cit., p. 35.

particular geographical location but machines that would hold recognizable qualities for people from all sections of the country.

A problem that presented itself at the outset was that of color. The color scheme of the cafeteria and its furnishings had already been determined which partially restricted the colors available for use. Color schemes, which in many instances would have afforded possibilities, in this particular case were impossible because of the trademark colors used on competitors' implements. The use of certain of these colors would have implied another brand of farm implement. When it was pointed out by representatives of the John Deere Plant that employees there were sure to associate certain colors with implement companies unrelated to John Deere, it seemed reasonable and proper to avoid the use of these hues. Another problem of color that warranted careful consideration was that of abstaining from those colors which produce gastronomical and emotional responses which would be undesirable in a cafeteria.

*Compositional requirements.* The main problems in designing the mural were encountered in compositional factors which could be listed as follows:

1. To compose a mural as interesting from a distance of twenty feet as from the end of the room over a hundred feet away. In other words the mural must have elements powerful enough to carry the length
of the room and yet not so powerful as to become overbearing at close range.

2. To compose a mural that would be partially obscured in some instances by large poles in the center of the room, but to make sure that the mural would hold interesting features of subject matter and continuity under those circumstances.

3. To compose a mural that would still hold recognizable features of subject matter when viewed from a severely acute angle.

4. To compose a mural within the confines of an irregularly shaped wall containing lighting and heating equipment.

5. To render a mural in a medium that could be applied over painted plaster, and a medium that could be cleaned by washing.

6. To design a mural so that the final effect would provide a strong but pleasant background for meetings by special interest groups, such as Lions, Rotarians and other clubs without seeming offensively propagandistic.
CHAPTER II

DESIGN OF THE MURAL

Having done considerable research at the Cowles Library at Drake University and at the Art Center Library, the writer combined the information with that gathered from the study of local murals. This information was used in drawing preliminary sketches for the proposed mural.

In an effort to solve the problem of designing the mural for its best visibility from all possible viewpoints a floor plan was drawn. This plan was used in developing various methods of designing around the large poles in the center of the room, as well as studying the traffic patterns of those entering the cafeteria. The floor plan also proved a definite help in planning the mural in regard to viewing areas and distances.

A solution to the problem of designing around the poles that obscured the mural was accomplished by dividing the area into three panels which provided a variety of combinations for viewing the wall. It was found that by breaking up the space into certain areas, a person could always see, at any one time and from any given position, at least one segment, and sometimes two, or even all three of the panels. From nearly every position in the room two sections were in full view, and in many cases all three of the panels were perceptible.
Dividing the wall into three parts also provided a suitable format for presenting the trio of implements produced at the plant. The pattern of traffic entering the cafeteria was noted on the floor plan. This traffic pattern indicated that workers entering the cafeteria lunch line, whether during the regular lunch period or during break-times, followed a path that led them directly in front of the mural area at a distance of about twenty feet. These arrangements are shown in Figure 2.

At the outset the mural was planned to contain design features such as small interest areas that would attract attention at fairly close range. Another plan was that of a strong horizontal motif inserted throughout the design in the early stages of development in an effort to unify the long rectangular format of the area. This predominating horizontal motif was also desirable in that the initial exposure to the mural was from a severe oblique angle. This consideration is also indicated in Figure 2. The idea of dominant horizontals as optimum design features for those areas viewed from acute lateral angles was discussed by Jean Charlot.

Giotto is so conscious of this that bodies he paints are padded, Eskimo fashion, with improbable layers of clothes, their bulk further augmented by thick over-all cloaks, their posture stooped until some personages occupy an area as wide as their height. Such stout shapes retain their apparent mass at much wider angles of vision than would normal realistic forms.¹

¹Charlot, op. cit., p. 32.
Another facet of the mural which presented a physical problem was that of composing within the peculiar shape of the wall area. A diagram of this irregular surface appears in Figure 3. This unique shape, coupled with the heating and lighting apparatus on the wall presented limitations that dictated certain design features. Composing within the odd shape of the wall was accomplished by selecting photographs of machines from the brochures which Lundahl furnished which best fit the particular shape of each panel. Because the photographs displayed machines in a variety of operations and came in a number of sizes, standardized drawings were made by combining parts of many of the photographs from the pamphlets. (See Figure 1.) These drawings were made on tracing paper which enabled the artist to reverse the direction, and to enlarge or diminish parts or whole photographs with ease. Heating apparatus and light switches present on the wall were incorporated into the composition as parts of the machines portrayed.

The writer was aware in designing the mural of certain decorative schemes that were present in the room. Decorative motifs that were incorporated into the design at an early stage were those of repeating the verticals that were prevalent in the full wall paneling on the one wall, the similar lines of the center uprights, and the perpendicular lines present in the window shades that occupied another wall. A theory of "honesty of materials," was adhered to in order to
take advantage of the inherent quality of the wall in conveying the pictorial message.

John Marin, one of this country's most famous watercolor artists, indicates a respect for this theory in his comment, "I feel that I am not to destroy that flat working surface. . . . that exists for all workers in all mediums."¹

An equally famous artist, Henry Varnum Poor, who for many years held the position of President of the Skowhegan School of Art, Skowhegan, Maine, and who was guest artist at the Des Moines Art Center under the joint auspices of Drake University and the Gardner Cowles Foundation, during the summer of 1962, also advocates the idea of honestly using the inherent qualities of materials. In writing about one of his frescoes, Poor commented:

As for wishing to have the whole under one skin, that skin is the sense of the surface which comes from the love of your material for its own sake, not just as a medium for representation; so your material, your surface, is always there and even though you represent depth and roundness, it is just a symbol of the qualities.²

The theory of stressing the surface on which a painting has its being is also shared by others. John Canaday, art editor of the New York Times, wrote:

Painting occupies a plane surface. The plane surface is integral with the physical and psychological being of the painting. Hence the plane surface must be respected,

¹Faulkner, Ziefeld, and Hill, op. cit., p. 128.
²Ibid., p. 134.
must be allowed to declare itself, must not be falsified by imitations of volume, by perspective. Painting must be flat as the surface it is painted on.¹

In the design of each of the model panels the wall area remained as a plane surface on which the writer depicted a farm implement in burnt sienna lines on a background of buff colored paint sold under the brand name color of "Champagne." Examples of the color scheme are shown in Figure 4. These lines, used in a variety of characteristics and boldness, represented the machines in a stylized manner, not representational altogether but rendered in lines that were rewarding as art elements in themselves. A preliminary lay-out is illustrated in Figure 5.

Since these implements were to be viewed from a variety of angles and distances the lines used were distorted to be convincing visually rather than to be a factual representation. John Canaday aptly expressed the idea of intrinsic values in art elements themselves in the statement that "Line and color are the essence of painting. Hence they must be freed from their bondage to the imitation of nature and allowed to exist for themselves."² The size and quality of lines used in each section of the mural were calculated by the artist to conform to the adjoining section and to the over-all continuity of the design.

Because the wall was in most cases to be viewed intermittently during lunch periods, the writer planned a simple

¹Canaday, op. cit., p. 421. ²Ibid., p. 430.
FIGURE 4
EXAMPLE OF PAINTED LINES IN ACTUAL SCALE, JOHN DEERE MURAL
format with embellishment by repetition and progression of
design elements that could be readily noticed. The short
viewing period was also taken into consideration in selecting
the color scheme. Because the design would in most instances
be seen for only a short period of time, considerable contrast
was planned in color. This contrast would produce a suffi-
ciently stimulating effect when viewed intermittently. In
this contrasting color scheme a motif of three circles used
in a diversified manner together with vertical and horizontal
lines forms the basic method of depicting the implements
chosen. Equipment chosen for use in the mural included a
mounted corn picker, shown in Figure 6, a self-propelled
cotton picker, Figure 7, and a rear-mounted row crop cultivat-
tor shown in Figure 8. These specific machines were chosen
because they best fulfilled the stipulations of the company
which are listed as follows:

1. They hold recognizable qualities the country over.
2. They represent machines produced at the Des
   Moines Plant.
3. They are machines that need not be shown in profile
to be recognizable.
4. They are machines that shroud the tractor. This was
good because the tractors themselves are not
produced at the Des Moines Plant.
5. They illustrate both self-propelled and tractor-
   mounted equipment.
6. They are self-contained units which lend themselves to individual presentation.

The actual transfer of the design from the lay-outs to the wall was accomplished by enlarging the drawing from its scale in inches, with one inch representing one foot, to that of feet. Full size drawings were sketched directly on the wall in a good grade of stick charcoal. It was found in using charcoal that excess amounts of the medium or superfluous lines could be removed by using a chamois skin or by simply blowing on the lines. This method of drawing produced a faint line that was sufficiently perceptible as a guideline, and a method that enabled the writer to transfer the design without disturbing the finish of the wall. Facile methods of transferring the drawing were achieved through the use of tools such as a chalk-line, a level, a T square, a folding rule, a straight-edge, and a compass. These instruments are photographed in Figure 9. The writer was assisted in transferring the design by a colleague, Thomas Tynan, whose help was necessary in measuring certain areas, and in holding equipment.

Painted lines of the mural were applied directly over the faintly visible charcoal lines in "Liquitex" which is a highly versatile paint designed for use on all surfaces. "Liquitex" is a brand name for a polymer emulsion which was chosen because of its durability, its waterproof characteristics, and its alkali proof ingredients which make it specifically adapted for use over plaster.
Because this mural was a decorative line design in which the variety of linear effects would exclude other art elements it was necessary to render specialized kinds of that particular feature. Lines were to be rewarding not only as a means of conveying subject matter but, as one of the design elements informative and gratifying to the viewer in terms of character, quality and boldness. In striving for kinds of lines needed to evoke different feelings the writer happened upon a method of painting that proved both economical and satisfying. By experimenting with different methods of applying paint in a linear manner the writer found that conventional methods of applying the medium to the wall area were unsatisfactory. Using a brush for painting was undesirable if not prohibitive because of the number of lines required in rendering this mural.

The writer, because of past experience as a worker in auto body repair shops, was aware of an automotive paint stripner designed specifically for painting lines. This method was tried and chosen as a means of applying the polymer. The paint stripner finally selected consisted of a small glass container with a brass roller attached to the opening. Paint deposited from the bottle to the roller was carried by little crevices in the roller to the surface to which it was applied in much the same manner as water passes over a waterwheel. Thickness of line was varied by changing the width of roller used or by applying a series of lines side by side. The
character of line produced by the painting device mentioned was one of a precise nature which made it a desirable method of depicting the mechanical subject. Straight lines of the design in instances where painting was difficult, because of the amount of room available, were accomplished by using the special guide device attached to the tool. Curved lines in the decoration were rolled on with the aid of a piece of cord fastened to the striper on one end and held in position on the wall with the other hand.

All other lines of the design were applied free-hand directly over the original charcoal lines of the drawings. Applying the paint in a free-hand method with the striper achieved a dual effect; the lines because of the mechanical nature of the applicator were precise and orderly but were also lines that contained a certain nervous personalized character.

Other special or unique devices employed in painting the lines were tools which came in a variety of widths and styles of manufacture containing the same design principles. These tools were of a swab nature, designed primarily for window screen painting. They were constructed of foam rubber with a surface of nap fastened to a metal handle. These tools were designed to paint an area up to an inch in width. By dipping the tool in paint and drawing it across the surface the artist could paint a substantial line without fear of its dripping or running. The extra speed acquired through the use of such tools made them very practical.
CHAPTER III

SUMMARY

Designing and executing an industrial mural for a manufacturer of farm implements led to many conclusions. One such conclusion would be that a mural must fulfill the function for which it was intended. With this idea in mind it is reasonable to assume that care must be exercised in choosing the information depicted in a mural in regard to the people for whom it exists. The artist cannot suppose that others have shared the same experiences as he, and therefore must simplify the information he wishes to advance by stating it in terms that will be understood by all. Simplicity is also desirable in rendering subject matter, for complex arrangements are not easily understood by a fast moving public.

Planning the design for a project such as a mural must include a well thought out plan of the psychological as well as the physical aspects which the artist wants to promote in the work. A detailed plan of the possible vantage points for viewing the wall, combined with the placement of parts in relationship to those vantage points and to the entire format of the area, must be foremost in the mind of the artist as he designs. This plan, coupled with the idea of respecting the surface to which it is applied, comprises the major physical limitations to which a mural painter must adhere if his work
is to be honest, satisfying and powerful. Portrayal of subject matter, method of rendering, and stylization must be altered in a mural painting to the place of becoming a common denominator of expression between the artist and his viewers. Subject matter combined with the decorative manner in which it is conveyed enables the artist to promote both the psychological and physical aspects that fit the occasion. Limitations other than those dictated by the area and the shape of the wall are to be considered by the muralist who must adhere to the decisions of those for whom the mural is being painted. Very exacting restrictions were imposed in some instances which left the artist with very little free rein.

It was found by the writer that new and unique methods of applying paint could be incorporated into a project with favorable results. Experimentation revealed that unconventional methods of rendering proved to be very successful ways of achieving a satisfying effect in an economical fashion. Trial of a paint striper which ordinarily renders lines that are flat and lacking in vitality disclosed that under other circumstances, and in different methods of application rendered lines that became personalized and lively. Use of a swab type paint applicator provided a unique method of applying bold lines in a facile manner without fear of running or dripping paint. Results showed that transferring the design directly to the wall in a free-hand manner with charcoal was an
expedient and economical way of accomplishing the cartoon drawings without disturbing the finish of the painted wall.

A study of the painting medium led to the conclusion that "polymer emulsion" is a desirable and inexpensive paint which can be applied to nearly any surface with full assurance that it will remain durable, non-fading and washable. Ease with which polymer can be used also makes it a desirable medium of expression. Because its make-up is such that it can be thinned with water, polymer is easily mixed and cleaned from equipment.

Conclusions as to the success of the mural and its probable appeal can be objectively studied in this instance, for at the time of writing of this creative project the mural has been in existence for nearly one year. Desirability of favorable acceptance upon completion of the mural can at this time be replaced by a stated report of favorable acceptance by a large number of the administrators and employees of the plant for whom it was painted. A photograph of the completed mural appears in Figure 10.
FIGURE 10

VIEW OF COMPLETED MURAL, PLANT CAFETERIA, JOHN DEERE DES MOINES WORKS
BIBLIOGRAPHY


