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ART; W.P.A. Murals, Aging With Grace and Growing in Value

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

MURALS made for various relief agencies during the Depression were considered a form of workfare, and not valuable art. This attitude led to gross negligence, and tales abound of ambitious work being painted over or thrown away in the course of a building renovation.

As the 1930's grow more distant, the value of the murals as art and as social history, is increasingly understood; when they can get their hands on them, restorers are painstakingly saving them.

These days one looks for the personality of an individual artist behind a mural cycle. Nevertheless there was a sort of formula followed by most of the artists. The purpose of the murals was to uplift a country in the middle of a Depression, so brave role models from history, as well as ordinary folk doing ordinary work, were prime subject matter.

Exaggerated musculature is another feature, as if the message is that Americans have the innate strength to overcome hardship. And the murals are usually composites of many, sometimes oddly juxtaposed vignettes, which conveys the notion that unity can come from diversity.

Such is the context for the absorbing exhibition, "Heroic America: James Daugherty's Mural Drawings from the 1930's," at the Stamford Historical Society. James Daugherty is intensely associated with public art in Connecticut. Many of his murals were made for public buildings in Fairfield County, and they have shared in the general neglect. That's why it's cause for some celebration that the show includes the actual, brightly restored, three-paneled "The Life and Times of General Israel Putnam of Connecticut," originally in the Selectman's office in Greenwich Town Hall.

Putnam was a local Revolutionary War hero known for many exploits and brave deeds, and Daugherty stuffs many of them into his panorama: on the left panel, Putnam saves Greenwich from a menacing bear while on the right he is being burned alive during the French and Indian Wars. He miraculously escaped.

Daugherty made several changes in his composition between a preliminary sketch and the completed mural: the major one is that in the finished work the young Putnam, at the bottom of the central panel, now looks out at viewers involving them in the spectacle. The mural remained in the town hall for only four years before it was relocated to the gymnasium at the Hamilton Avenue School. The General could overcome wild animals and fire, but could not withstand decades of volleyball hits.

Greenwich at least has taken pains to preserve its mural. An extensive cycle for the Music Auditorium of Stamford High School was tossed into a Dumpster during a renovation of the school during the 1960's. A former student passing by rescued them; they wound up in the hands of by the man hired to restore them when the City of Stamford would not meet his price. He has allowed the current principal of Stamford High School to make a copy for display.

Most murals do end up becoming just part of the wallpaper, but this could never have been the case with the Stamford High School cycle. It is truly an instance of horror vacui, with seven surfaces of the room covered with densely packed scenes documenting the frenzied pace of high school life (Daugherty used actual students and teachers as models) as well as other aspects of American culture.

With Daugherty these more allegorical portrayals turn out to be every bit as clamorous as high school life. For instance when he portrayed the many aspects of American music, Indian drummers seem to blend in with a jazz band, and this group is separated from figures representing classical music by a tall figure singing a spiritual.

Unlike Thomas Hart Benton, whose mural style his most resembles, Daugherty was not hostile to modern or abstract art. In fact he was an accomplished abstractionist, before he turned to figuration. Understanding Cubism no doubt helped him to instinctively make figures overlap, and Futurism might have encouraged him to keep up the relentless dynamism that is one of his hallmarks.

One of his most ambitious Fairfield County undertakings (current whereabouts unknown) was for the Social Room of Fairfield Court, an early public housing project built by the W.P.A., and here he displays a kind of ease and laconicism as if he understood that the room would be a place to unwind.

Appropriately there are more looping and rounded forms in the sketches for this project than previously that fit in with the comfortable themes he undertook to illustrate, "Home From Work" and "Social Life." But as usual he included all segments of society and every age group, but he seems especially accepting and sympathetic, and the incidents portrayed are true to life. A group of young boys plays cards on their knees, while their mothers play cards around the table. A man chatting up a telephone operator while leaning on her switchboard is pursuing an acceptable form of leisure.

Before becoming immersed in Connecticut projects (he moved to Wilton from New York City in 1939), Daugherty entered competitions to decorate the interior of the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center and the United States Custom House in Lower Manhattan. His Rockefeller Center proposal was energetic, inspired by Art Deco; that commission went to Barry Faulkner, whose decoration, still visible, is listless and bland. But Reginald Marsh, who got to decorate the Custom House, is unknockable and also a major influence on Daugherty.

Daugherty lived until 1974 and after the Depression had a successful career as a children's book illustrator and occasional author of children's books on heroic topics like Abraham Lincoln and the Magna Carta. He easily imported his style and verve into this smaller scale pursuit.

The exhibition minus the actual Putnam mural was organized by the Loeb Art Center at Vassar College.