Current Comments

Fine Art Enhances ISI's New Building: A Ceramic Mural by Guillermo Wagner Granizo and a Sgraffito Mural by Joseph Slawinski

Three years ago, when ISI® made its decision to build a new headquarters on Market Street in Philadelphia,[1] I never dreamt that one of the most time-consuming aspects of the decision would be the selection of an artist to execute a 10'8" x 33'6" (325.12cm x 1021.08cm) mural for our lobby. Our new office building is constructed on land purchased from the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. We are thus subject to the Authority's various stipulations. One of their requirements—and it is a good one—is that a minimum of one percent of the construction budget of a new building be devoted to publicly accessible art.

To fulfill this requirement, a work of art must be a permanent, integral part of the building. Forms of art that are acceptable to the Authority include sculptures, stained glass windows, and murals—such as bas-reliefs, mosaics, and frescos. Generally, paintings on canvas do not qualify. The reasons are varied. However, the inclusion of paintings that are not a relatively permanent part of the building would condone the purchase of existing works rather than encourage newly commissioned works. Another consideration that eliminated such works at ISI is that our publicly accessible mural would be located in the building's lobby, an area used as a fire exit. Hence, this mural would have to be constructed of fireproof materials.

I ultimately decided that a mural, rather than other art forms, would best satisfy my aesthetic preferences and also meet the legal requirements. The special affinity I had long ago developed for Mexican mural art—especially as practiced by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco—greatly influenced my decision. So it is not surprising or coincidental that one of the artists mentioned below was greatly influenced by these great Mexican artists.

According to A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques, a mural is a painting that is executed directly on a wall or ceiling, done on canvas and then cemented to the wall, or painted on a panel of some kind that is then made an integral part of the wall. "A successful mural is not merely a superimposed embellishment: it must be appropriate to and partake of its architectural setting."[2] (p. 256)

A mural presents formidable problems in perspective and composition to an artist. A mural—unlike an easel painting, which generally is intended to be viewed at or near eye-level—contains a vast amount of area to be covered. Often, all or part of the mural is elevated above eye-level. The surface of the mural should ideally have a lusterless, or "mat," finish, so that it can be viewed without glare from any angle.[2] It should also be able to withstand periodic cleaning. In fact, a mural should last without noticeable change for the expected life of the building. All these characteristics and more, such as lighting, must be considered by the artist.

A commission to do a large mural, or even a large painting, is a relatively rare occurrence in the life of many artists.

Therefore, a mural—or any large work—becomes precious in the sight of both artist and viewer alike. Pablo Picasso himself, for instance, in spite of the tremendous number of works he created during his prolific lifetime, is perhaps best-known to the public for his 11'5" x 25'5 ¾" (349.3cm x 776.6cm) oil-on-canvas work, "Guernica."

Deciding to commission a mural for our new building was easy. Selecting an artist certainly proved more difficult than I ever imagined. I am unsophisticated with respect to the history and philosophy of art. Like most people, I enjoy a variety of beautiful paintings. However, I have never been obsessed with the idea of owning the hundreds of masterpieces I have seen in museums throughout the world. And though I occasionally visit art exhibits, I do not do so as compulsively as some of my close friends. Though I will readily confess to a special weakness for the colorful and primitive yarn paintings of the Huichol Indians,[3] of which I have a large and unique collection, I had never given much thought to the process by which the professional artist creates a painting or mural. I knew what I liked and let it go at that.

So, when the plans for our building were completed, I began to search for an artist who could create a mural on an "information" theme of one kind or another. What did I have in mind? Without being prescriptive, without dictating that it be either representational or abstract, I wanted the mural to be an outstanding, unique statement about the information world into which we are all rapidly moving.

The well-known architect Robert Venturi seems to have accomplished just this in his design for our new headquarters. Many people think that our building's facade reflects the bit pattern so typical of computer punch cards. I certainly didn't tell Venturi to use bit patterns, but he knew that I wanted something reflective of what we do here. That's what I wanted in our mural.

But there are no obvious symbols for information and information science; though there are many artifacts associated with information, none necessarily suggests the human element behind them. During the course of reviewing the work of a number of artists, I realized that there were any number of valid statements about information that could be made. Each would be different according to the artist chosen. Each would be great art, but in the final analysis, my choice had to be subjective. All the artists were talented, all their work was interesting, but in the end, I had to limit my choices. It is both stimulating and depressing to realize that there is so much talent in the world that much of it doesn't find the opportunity to express itself. So I decided to select four artists—each using an entirely different technique. Out of these, I would select one to do a mural in the lobby, but the others would do murals elsewhere in the building.

While all this was going on, I did at one point imagine the kind of painting that could embrace the fundamental aspects of the information world. My inspiration was a painting by the Russian-born painter Pavel Tchelitchew (1898-1957) called "Hide-and-Seek."[4] This painting hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and combines the elements of abstract and representational art in a way that is unique. Although Tchelitchew was avowedly anti-abstractionist for most of his career,[4] he developed a style of painting that combined representationalism and abstractionism in a unique way.

According to J.T. Soby, this style created the impression of multiple images merging and flowing together.[4] Tchelitchew wanted the viewer to be able to go back and forth with ease between smaller component images hidden in a larger composition containing them, never losing the one in the seeing of the other. This quality seemed to reflect the true spirit of the scientist-scholar who is constantly seeking and

probing for the as-yet-unseen-but-see-able aspects of nature and mankind. It was in just this way that I had hoped an artist could somehow combine the abstract with the human side of information. Had I met Tchelitchew, I might easily have commissioned him to do this work.

The two-year search for the artist to do our lobby mural finally came to an end when I commissioned New York artist Jennifer Bartlett to execute a 10'8" x 33'6" (325.12cm x 1021.08cm) mural on the east wall of our building's main lobby. Though this single mural was enough to satisfy the literal requirements of the law, I saw no reason why we should restrict ourselves on that basis. As a matter of fact, since these murals are part of the building costs, they are amortized over several years and have only a minor impact on our annual operating budget. I consider this a good investment that enhances our working environment enormously. So we also awarded three other commissions. The artists chosen were Guillermo Wagner Granizo, who was born in San Francisco and still resides there; Joseph Slawinski, a Pole residing in Niagara Falls, New York; and Handel Evans, a Welshman, now residing in Ramsgate, England.

Granizo's work, "The Cathedral of Man," consists of 625 glazed terra-cotta tiles, covering an area of 310 square feet (28.8 sq.m). It was completed and installed at ISI at the end of September 1980. A graduate of the San Francisco College of Art, Granizo is known for his tapestries and poetry as well as his work in ceramic paintings. He is an intuitive artist with a vast love of life, and his joyousness and sense of humor run strongly throughout all his work. His credits include four ceramic paintings at the San Francisco International Airport, a major mural commissioned by the California State University at Los Angeles, and a number of West Coast exhibitions. I spent many wonderful hours discussing ISI and information

with Bill, both in San Francisco and New York. I felt a great sense of participation in the evolution and creation of this unique work of art.

"Cathedral," shown in Figures 1-5 in the center insert in this issue, wraps around the door, main wall, and right stairway approach to the third floor landing of ISI's main stairwell. The mural is in the form of a triptych—a picture consisting of three interrelated panels side-by-side. In the center (Figure 1) is the largest panel, entitled "Modern Technology and Communication," to its left (also in Figure 1) is "Dawn," and to its right (Figure 3) is "The Age of Exploration and Expansion." Each panel is in the form of an arch. Beyond the boundaries of the arches are portraits of some of the people, especially scientists and librarians, who have been influential in the progress of humanity through the ages. Einstein, Gutenberg, Aristotle, Babbage, Newton, Michelangelo, and Bach are included, as well as many who have influenced the development of ISI. As this essay is being completed, another panel is in the works which will complete the list originally submitted to the artist.

Panel one of the triptych, "Dawn," depicts humanity's beginnings, from the days of the simple hunter/gatherer tribes of nomads to the engineering achievements of the complex societies of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. "In the beginning, Man was prey who found himself naked and cold," writes Granizo. "Survival demanded thought, giving birth to creativity.... Walls became picture galleries and libraries with information about human struggle."[5]

In panel three, "The Age of Exploration and Expansion," humanity begins to expand its boundaries and knowledge, both on the meridians of the globe and of the labyrinths of the mind. New lands became available, new ideas made their circuitous way to the various peoples of the earth. Advances in science, painstakingly slow at first,

began to increase more and more quickly, until the pace became dizzying. Human culture was transformed.[5]

Of the main panel, "Modern Technology and Communication," Granizo writes, "Sandwiched in ever-flowing exotic tripe, reality gasped for recognition...."[5] As humanity prospered, technology flourished, and communication in particular became increasingly more efficient and immediate. Today, a mountain of information tumbles forth from the print and electronic media, from computers and satellites.

It is in the central panel that Granizo expresses an allegorical vision not unlike my own perception of the World Brain:[6] "As mental energies are pooled," he writes, "a giant brain, housed in the dome-shaped structures of the future, is formed. That which is, that which was, and that which someday will be, is stored in the new libraries incorporating storage techniques that have evolved, and will continue evolving, for the benefit and/or survival of humankind."[5]

Words and printed color pictures cannot adequately substitute for the impression one obtains as one walks up the stairs to the huge wall on which this mural has been affixed. In fact, the impact is so great it makes the other floors seem desolate by comparison. That is why I hope we can add additional ceramic art on the remaining floors in the future.

In contrast to my immediate impressions of Granizo, when I first met Joseph Slawinski, I seriously doubted he could execute a mural that would express comprehension of the concept of information. Most of his experience had been with church art. But after a visit with him in Niagara Falls, New York, I had a chance to see a mural he had done in a Buffalo high school. I admired his technical expertise, but I still had my doubts about the ultimate theme. These were removed when he executed two different cartoons from which he and I selected the ultimate components of the final work.

Slawinski's 8'6" x 30' (208.28cm x 914.40cm) mural "Communication" (Figures 6 and 7) was installed in September 1980, on the fourth-floor of ISI. The mural portrays the transfer of information from pre-history and into the future, encompassing such developments as writing and the printing press, as well as such breakthroughs as radio, television, computers, satellites, and lasers. Beyond its style and subject matter, however, "Communication" is particularly interesting because of the technique by which it was created.

Slawinski is one of the few remaining artists in the world today who can be considered a master of sgraffito, a technique which dates back to the Etruscans. The technique involves applying several layers of pigmented plaster to the surface of a wall, and then scraping through the layers to reveal the colors underneath. The plaster consists of sand, lime, cement, and special earth-mined pigments. If shading is desired, the artist must work the various lines with his fingers until the proper color is achieved. Originally, only black and white were used in sgraffito. But Slawinski, who pioneered the use of additional colors, works in shades of black, red, yellow, and white.

Over the centuries, the sgraffito technique fell into disuse, but Slawinski is hopeful of reviving it. "Out of the wealth of materials now available [to the architect]," writes Slawinski, "the resources of the artist have yet to be explored to their fullest extent. Lacking so far [in modern architecture] is the sense of history, the beauty of human context, the pride in our epoch and its background, faith in our identity and confidence in our historical survival as creators of this age."[7] Slawinski feels that architects must turn increasingly to artists to achieve these effects in modern buildings, and that sgraffito is ideally suited to that task.

Before coming to ISI to begin final work on and installation of the mural, Slawinski had spent several months creating two preliminary working sketches.

After our discussions he combined elements in these sketches to produce a full-sized cartoon. Following another discussion with me, Slawinski then traced the outlines of the cartoon onto heavy transparent paper. He then made myriads of tiny perforations all along the traced outlines of the design.

At ISI, Slawinski prepared one section of wall at a time. After layering the surface of that section with four coats of plaster, he laid the perforated paper over the entire area, then sprinkled it with fine charcoal dust. The dust filtered through the perforations and left an outline for Slawinski to follow as he worked. After scraping through the cement, he added more colors to the mural by working in the fresco technique—that is, by applying pigments to wet plaster. The on-site work was completed in about three weeks—an incredible accomplishment considering the size of the painting involved.

Slawinski is a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. He also took advanced courses in France, Austria, and Italy. He has completed art works for more than 150 churches, theaters, palaces, homes, and municipal buildings in Europe, and his credits include the famous "Peace" mural at Our Lady of Fatima Basilica in Youngstown, New York. I enjoyed seeing these works and spending time with Joseph and his wife Wanda while we discussed the future information society. Wanda happens to be a librarian at SUNY in Buffalo, and was a key figure in the development of this work. Without her it would have been difficult if not impossible because she acted as interpreter for her husband, who spoke in Polish.

Commissioning these murals and other works of art for ISI's building was a great adventure for me. I can only hope that those who view these works receive as much pleasure from them as I do. Not everyone will like all these works of art. In fact, some people may not enjoy any of them. But I thought it might be interesting to readers to find out what went into the choices and decisions of an artistic neophyte who suddenly found himself cast into the role of a patron. We often hear what the artist or the critics think about a work, but rarely do we hear from those who commissioned the work.

In a future essay, I will discuss the work of Jennifer Bartlett, Handel Evans, and that of Emeteria Martinez Rios, the artist who executed for ISI the largest yarn painting ever created. I made this separation for the sake of brevity, and also to emphasize the representational/abstractionist dichotomy of the various works involved.

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