NEW DEAL RECKONING

Depression-era artists forged beauty throughout New Mexico, but a dominant perspective left too many stories untold—or told poorly. In Gallup, a national-caliber project aims to preserve and reinterpret the art of another time using the power of a community.

BY KATE NELSON

Photography by: Gabriella Marks
In the darkest days of the Great Depression, new roads, bridges, dams, hiking trails, and rock-solid schoolhouses appeared throughout New Mexico.

The national goal was simple: Put people to work creating things every community needs. But not every worker could swing a hammer. So the engineers of the New Deal created a different kind of army for a different kind of need. This one wielded paintbrushes, clay, pencils, cameras, and guitars.

From 1933 to 1945, a variety of Works Progress Administration programs paid artists to paint murals in courthouses and schools, build decorative furniture and tin chandeliers, and nurture traditional crafts among Indigenous and Hispanic people. In New Mexico, writers collected oral histories, photographers captured scenes of daily life, and musicians transcribed songs previously passed on only by whispering.

"I doubt there was a family that wasn't touched by all of the WPA programs," says Kathryn Flynn, a co-founder of the National New Deal Preservation Association and its especially vibrant New Mexico branch. "The contrast between these programs in big cities and New Mexico—the economic difference, the geographical difference, the kinds of economies that held our towns together—it was different here. We had people who were so dedicated to this."

Throughout New Mexico, more than 35 murals, 650 paintings, 10 sculptures, and numerous Indigenous and Hispanic artworks sprouted. The roster holds names like Peter Hurd, Eugene Shoumatoff, Bernt Thidell, Raymond Jensen, B.J.O. Nordfeldt, Gustave Baumann, and Ernest L. Blumenstein—artists who set a template for what Southwestern art "should" look like. The programs boosted the careers of Native standouts like Allan Houser, Paulina Velarde, Pop Chalee, and Maria Martinez. Elicio Rodriguez not only painted but learned how to make straw appliqué crosses and retablos, an all-but-lost craft at the time that today garners admirers at every Traditional Spanish Market.

Many artists and craftspersons—likely Hispanic or Indigenous—received no credit for their work. But regular people did get to view travelling exhibits and even create works of their own at federal art centers in Roswell, Las Vegas, Melrose, and Gallup.

In retrospect, it all seems like a brilliant fire of creativity swept the nation before a dreadful downturn doused it. When the United States entered World War II, New Deal programs ceased overnight. Construction workers were pulled into military service. National attention shifted, and the artistic momentum stalled out. As the decades piled on, buildings were abandoned, artworks were lost, and those paintings and murals that survived faded into something like dated wallpaper—still there, but ignored and sometimes restored.

Except for Flynn’s efforts to bring attention to New Deal legacies, there was little to connect the things that stood in Gallup, until a plucky non-profit began eyeing the paintings and murals in its western New Mexico midst. When it did, its members noticed that something was not only off but offensive about some of the city’s 51 paintings and 10 murals.

Images of conquering heroes and primitive Natives bedecked the walls of a courtroom in the McKinley County courthouse and in the Gallup High School library. Paintings by Indigenous people were forced into the "flat style" pioneered by Dorothy Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School. Hispanic villages were rendered in pastel hues that camouflaged—or ignored—the real lives within them.

The more Rose Eason looked, the more concerned she became. As executive director of Gallup Arts and a woman who married into a Diné family, she lamented how the works are "rife with stereotypes and inaccuracies." In a war "when it is over," she said, "it's time to look at things differently."

The McKinely County Courthouse murals in Gallup have become a focus for Rose Eason, executive director of Gallup Arts.
Building New Mexico
FIND THE LEGACY OF DEPRESSION-ERA CONSTRUCTION PROGRAMS THROUGHOUT THE STATE.

From 1933 to 1943, the “alphabet soup” of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs employed hundreds of thousands of New Mexicans who helped create schools, roads, hiking trails, courthouses, and women’s clubs. Programs included the Works Progress Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and Rural Electric Administration.

In 2012, Kathryn A. Frym, executive director of New Mexico’s chapter of the National New Deal Preservation Association, compiled nearly 400 pages of such projects in Public Art of the New Deal Legacy in New Mexico: 1933-1943: A Guide to the New Deal Legacy in New Mexico (Burstone Press). Here are a few you might recognize:

**ALBUQUERQUE**
- Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico, north side of Smith Plaza.
- Albuquerque Little Theatre, 224 San Pasquale Ave. SW.
- Bernalillo Coronado Historic Site Visitor Center, 485 Kussa Road.
- Carlisle Pecos River Beach Park and Riverwalk, off Park Dr., east of downtown.
- Sitting Bull Falls Recreation Area, picnic sites, 724 Sitting Bull Falls Road.
- Los Alamos Road to Bandelier National Monument and Its Visitor Center, 15 Entrance Road.
- Raton Road at Capulin Volcano National Monument, 46 Volkano Road.
- Santa Fe National Park Service regional headquarters, 1100 Old Santa Fe Tr.
- Tucumcari Conchas Dam and Visitor Center, 200 Capt. Kramer Lane.

**ALAMOGORDO**
- White Sands National Park Visitor Center, 19955 US 70 W.

**NEW MEXICO**

The 1860 Pueblo Revolt, where tribes drove out the Spanish colony for its treatment of them, is summed up in a scene where warriors scalp a priest. Even as the 20th century’s tourism era cranks up its mural's chronicle, a Native child is depicted as naked and seedy underfed.

"Paint it over," Brown says, his discomfort evident. The notion, he says, that a Dine' person would stare at such images or that Native people would seek environmental justice there seems purely prejudicial. "What I'm seeing here is death," he says. "Why is this acceptable?"

Rason agrees with him but hopes to see a new narrative. Her long-held dream is to turn the courthouse—"a 1939 Trost and Trost–designed Spanish Pueblo Revival building—into an art museum. It would include the first floor, currently occupied by the district attorney’s office, where New Deal decor blends sand painting-style murals, tile fixtures, and brightly colored tiles with Southwestern graphics. The courtroom, she says, screams out for contemporary interpretations.

"My inclination would be to preserve the mural as a door into the attitudes of the time," she says. "In a place like Gallup, where the Long Walk is just three or four generations past, we still need to address that. People give lip service to intergenerational trauma, but until you can see how that trauma was erased or written off, you don’t see how powerful it is."

The Long Walk was the 1963-68 forced relocation of the Pueblo and the Navajo Nation to the Bosque Redondo Reservation in Fort Sumner, far from the tribes’ sacred mountains. The Navajo eventually escaped, while the 300 survive conditions before a landmark treaty returned them to their homeland, with the tribe concealing they would adapt to American life. Economic depressions still mark the tribe, which drew national attention (though hardly a scholastic) during Covid, when the virus hit the Navajo Nation disproportionately and a lack of utilities, including clean water, hampered its recovery.

In 2018, well before the pandemic demanded a switch to virtual programs, Rason took a leap of faith and applied for a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. Just 8 percent of applicants succeed, and they
tend to bear names like Harvard University. Her proposal was to create a virtual museum of New Deal art, then developed online critique and analysis from Indigenous, Hispanic, and Anglo artists, historians, and scholars.

The gallery opened in 2010, the work began. Still in the development stage, the website (galpaparts.org/newdeal) already guides users through the city's New Deal holdings. A beta site that could go public in 2023 gathers contemporary voices in guided "tours," lectures, and Q&As. Participants include Diné artists like Brown and Eric Paul Riebe, Pueblo poet Ronan Ahbala, Laguna Pueblo historian Terri Frazier, and Latin American educator Madelina Salazar.

New Deal art conservators aren’t unique to Gallup. The University of New Mexico has struggled for years over what to do with the Bennet Adams murals in the University Libraries. If you look past their welcoming pastel hues, the paintings show Hispanic and Indigenous people as workers, with Anglos as both scientists and the centering force uniting New Mexico’s cultural tropes. At present, the murals are shelved by donors.

State Historian Robert Martinez remembers seeing the murals while attending UNM in the 1980s and ’90s. “They were controversial then,” he says. “They were controversial then.” While they have some challenges, he thought they were a way of teaching a serious attitude back then.

As debates over public art mount, Martinez has found himself struggling for an answer to issues that, he admits, must come from a community of voices, much as Gallup is attempting to do.

“Public art should speak to everyone,” he says. “But you have to give it the context of history. History is a teacher. It’s not supposed to make us feel good. We’re supposed to learn from it. We need to approach it with open minds and open hearts.”

The example set by the New Deal’s commitment to public art remains bright in Gallup. Walking from Gallup Art’s Art.123 Gallery, on Coal Avenue, you can see murals that date back to the 1930s and 1940s, painted by local artists and federal employees. The murals cover a wide range of subjects, from portraits of community leaders to depictions of local landscapes. Some of the murals are in excellent condition, while others are in need of repair. The murals are located on the sides of buildings throughout the city, and they add a unique and colorful touch to the local landscape.

Creative Composition of New Deal Art Throughout the State

Over the years, the New Deal murals have been preserved and documented. Many of the murals have been restored and are now housed in museums throughout the state. For example, the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe holds a collection of New Deal murals, including works by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and other prominent artists. The museum also hosts exhibitions and educational programs that focus on the history of the New Deal and its impact on American art.

Amalgamating Diné, Hispanic, and Anglo perspectives, these murals offer a unique window into the history and culture of the state. They remind us of the importance of art in shaping our understanding of the past and our place in the present.

Evaluating the New Deal Murals

The legacy of the New Deal murals is a subject of ongoing research and debate. Some critics argue that the murals perpetuate stereotypes and marginalize certain groups, while others see them as valuable contributions to American art.

The Gallup Art.123 Gallery is just one example of how the community is engaging with the murals. The gallery hosts regular exhibitions and workshops that focus on the New Deal and its impact on American art. The gallery also offers a range of educational programs for students and families, including tours and classes that explore the history of the murals.

By preserving these murals and encouraging public engagement with them, we can continue to learn from the history of the New Deal and the role of art in shaping our understanding of it.