NEW DEAL RECKONING

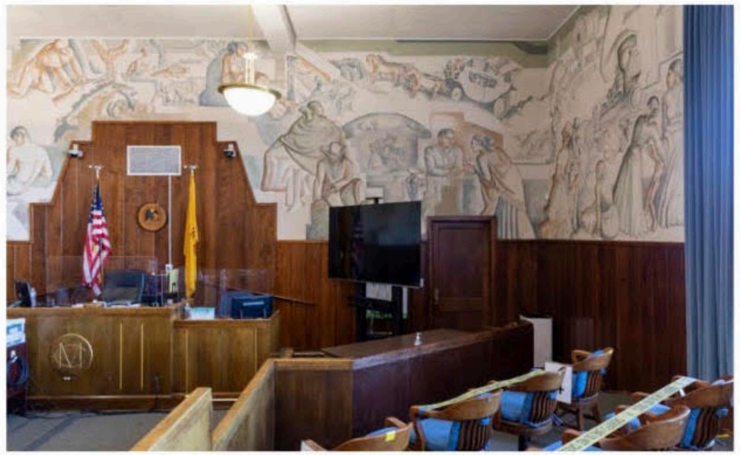
Depression-era artists forged beauty throughout New Mexico, but a dominant perspective left too many stories untold—or told poorly. In Gallup, a national-caliber project aims to preserve and reinterpret the art of another time using the power of a community.

BY KATE NELSON

Photographs by
Gabriella Marks

Modern murals carry on the New Deal spirit in Gallup. Jerry Brown (Diné) stands with one of his at the city's Veterans Memorial.

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. And so the engineers of the New Deal sent forth a different kind of army for a different kind of need. This one wielded paintbrushes, clay, pencils, cameras, and guitars.

From 1933 to 1943, 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 hearing them.

"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 geographic difference, the kinds of economies that hold our towns together—it was different here. We had people who were so dedicated to this."

Throughout New Mexico, more than 65 murals, 650 paintings, 10 sculptures, and numerous Indigenous and Hispanic artworks sprouted. The roster holds names like Peter Hurd, Eugenie Shonnard, Bert Phillips, Raymond Jonson, B.J.O. Nordfeldt, Gustave Baumann, and Ernest L. Blumenschein—artists who set a template for what Southwestern art "should" look like. The programs boosted the careers of Native standouts like Allan Houser, Pablita Velarde, Pop Chalee, and Maria Martinez. Eliseo 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 craftspeople—likely Hispanic or Indigenous—received no credit for their work. But regular people did get to view traveling 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 downpour 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 resented.

Except for Flynn's efforts to bring attention to New Deal legacies, that's largely where things stood in Gallup, until a plucky nonprofit 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 swoops that camouflaged—or ignored—the real lives within them.

The more Rose Eason looked, the more concerned she became. As executive director of gallupARTS and a woman who married into a Diné family, she lamented how the works are "rife with stereotypes and inaccuracies." In an era when "tear it down" arises more and more as the only option, she saw a different opportunity. What gallupARTS did next could serve as a national lesson in

The New Deal in New Mexico

Learn more about New Deal–era projects in New Mexico at ***livingnewdeal.org/us/nm***. Focus on Gallup's contributions at ***galluparts.org/newdeal***. Visit gallupARTS' ART123 Gallery at 123 W. Coal Ave.

The McKinley County Courthouse murals in Gallup have become a focus for Rose Eason, executive director of gallupARTS.

how to grapple with the flaws of history and forge a better path forward.

"The art itself is so provocative," she says. "It's significant in American history and New Mexico art history, and the issues it raises are ones we still face today—how Native art is defined, what the market is for it, who has the authority to tell the stories. This is a chance to do community building, to have tough conversations, and to learn about our past."

> "Public art should speak to everyone. 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."
> –ROB MARTÍNEZ

Jerry Brown attended Navajo boarding schools that were "more about pushing sports than art." He wasn't exposed to the simplistic paintings that Dorothy Dunn began promulgating in 1932, which came to define Indigenous art nationally. By the time Brown enrolled at the Institute of American Indian Arts, in Santa Fe, that style was mainly a topic for historical discussion. "They told us to leave our baggage at the door," he says of the school's aim to draw out the students' individual styles. "I said, 'I am here as a Navajo abstract artist,' and I still am."

One of his works, a glass-and-tile mosaic of the nearby landscape, sits high on the south face of the recent courthouse addition. Now 50, Brown had never set foot in the old courtroom where, in 1940, Minnesota native Lloyd Moylan painted a 2,000-foot-long mural from the top of the dark-wood wainscoting to the ceiling on all four walls.

On a winter day, Brown accompanies Eason past two security stations to see Moylan's courtroom mural, *The History of McKinley County*, a collage-like creation in washed-out tones of blue, green, and brown. It begins in one corner with poorly outlined dinosaurs before creeping past warring tribes and the arrival of Spanish conquistadors and then American soldiers, followed by mountain men, miners, railroad workers, tourists, and archaeologists.

The 1680 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 in the mural's chronicle, a Native child is depicted as naked and sorely underfed.

"Paint it over," Brown says, his discomfort evident. The notion, he says, that a Diné person would stand trial among such images or that Native plaintiffs would seek environmental justice there seems plainly prejudicial. "What I'm seeing here is death," he says. "Why is this acceptable?"

Eason agrees with him but hopes to seize 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, tin light 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 excused or written off, you don't see how powerful it is."

The Long Walk was the 1863–68 forced relocation of the Diné and the Mescalero Apache to the Bosque Redondo Reservation in Fort Sumner, far from the tribes' sacred mountains. The Mescalero eventually escaped, while the Diné endured squalid conditions before a landmark treaty returned them to their homeland, with the tribe conceding they would adapt to American ways of life. Economic deprivations still mark the tribe, which drew national attention (though hardly a solution) 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, Eason took a leap of faith and applied for a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. Just 8 percent of applicants succeed, and they

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. Flynn, executive director of New Mexico's chapter of the National New Deal Preservation Association, compiled nearly 400 pages of such projects in *Public Art and Architecture in New Mexico 1933–1943: A Guide to the New Deal Legacy* (Sunstone Press). Here are a few you might recognize:

ALAMOGORDO

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

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 Kuaua Road.

CARLSBAD

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.

RATÓN

Road at Capulin Volcano National Monument, 46 Volcano Road.

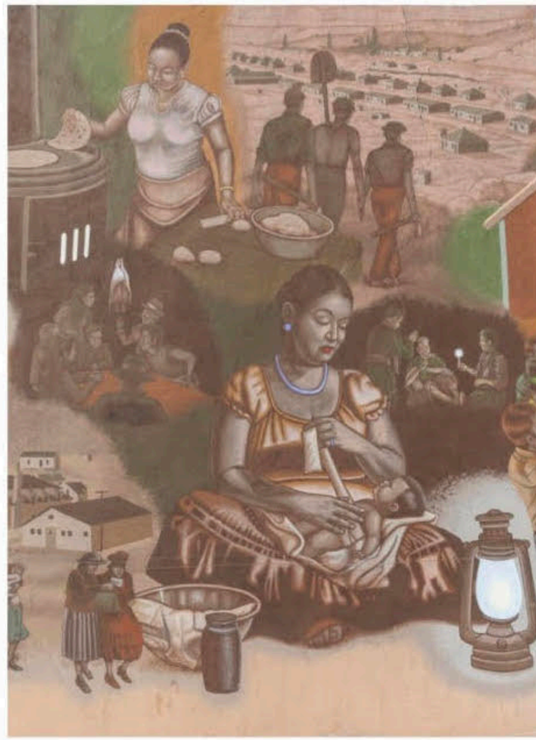
SANTA FE

National Park Service regional headquarters, 1100 Old Santa Fe Tr.

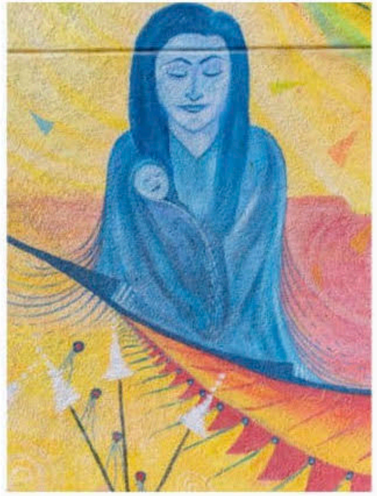
TUCUMCARI

Conchas Dam and Visitor Center, 200 Capt. Kramer Lane.

COURTHOUSE: BILL STENGEL/NMTD



Clockwise from top: The Navajo Code Talker mural, by Be Sargent. The Hispanic Heritage mural, by Ric Sarracino. The WPA courthouse. *Multicultural Women*, by Erica Rae Sykes.



Clockwise from left: A detail from *Multicultural Women*, by Erica Rae Sykes. *Oódáát/Everyone Moving Forward*, by Marina Eskeets. A courthouse stairway.

tend to bear names like Harvard University. Her proposal was to create a virtual museum of New Deal art, then develop online critiques and analyses from Indigenous, Hispanic, and Anglo artists, historians, and scholars.

The grant got picked; the work began. Still in the development stage, the website (galluparts.org/newdeal) already guides users through the city's New Deal holdings. A beta site that could go public in fall 2024 gathers contemporary voices in guided "tours," lectures, and Q&A's. Participants include Diné artists like Brown and Eric-Paul Riege, Diné/Zuni Pueblo poet Roanna Shebala, Laguna Pueblo historian Teri Frazier, and Latina art educator Madalena Salazar.

New Deal art conundrums aren't unique to Gallup. The University of New Mexico has struggled for years over what to do with four Kenneth Adams murals in Zimmerman Library. If you look past their welcoming pastel hues, the paintings show Hispanic and Indigenous people as laborers, with Anglos as both scientists and the centering force uniting New Mexico's tricultural trope. At present, the murals are shielded by drapes.

State Historian Rob Martínez remembers seeing the murals while attending UNM in the 1980s and '90s. "They were controversial then," he says. "The question was 'Do we paint over them or preserve them?' While they have some challenges, I thought they were a way of teaching us about attitudes back then."

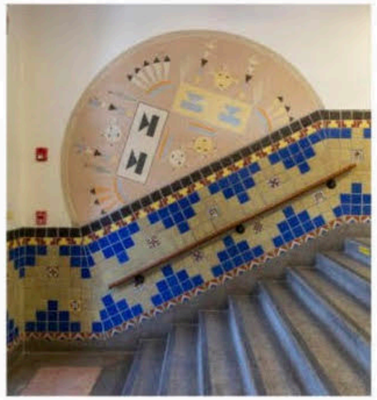
As debates over public art mount, Martínez has found himself struggling for an answer to issues that, he admits, must come from a community of voices, much as Gallup is attempting to do.

"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 gallupArts' Art123 Gallery, on Coal Avenue, to the courthouse takes visitors past contemporary murals and even painted trash cans. In 2018, gallupARTS built on the mural craze by establishing its alleyway murals program. Diné artist Marina Eskeets took over two right-angle sides of a building for *Óódáát/Everyone Moving Forward*, which shows bubble-blowing, gum-chewing kids tending sheep. It draws on a childhood memory of helping her grandfather with his flock, she says in her artist's statement, and brings her a pang of nostalgia.

"A few years later," she writes, "my grandparents would sell all their sheep and instantaneously I didn't walk across the land like I once did."

Eason says local kids have showered this mural with their love. "They say it's the only one that looks like them as they are today," she says.



MARINA ESKEETS MURAL: COURTESY OF GALLUPARTS

Seeing yourself in art and being seen by artists hits at the profession's most fundamental purpose—to define us and unite us. In that, Lloyd Moylan's courthouse mural holds a glimmer of hope.

In the section where he illustrated the Long Walk, Moylan showed rifle-toting U.S. soldiers above a huddle of Diné women. The women curl forward, their bodies wrapped tightly in blankets, their hair tied in buns. One of them angles her head toward her left shoulder and delivers the only example in the entire mural of a person with a direct gaze. It's hard to say precisely where she's looking—at a juror, a prosecutor, a defendant? It changes depending on where you stand.

Perhaps she speaks to something else, something too important to erase. With one focused eye, she has become history, an eternal reminder. She knows what was done. She remembers. She sees. NM

Managing Editor **Kate Nelson** *is perpetually astounded by the power of art.*

Will Shuster murals, New Mexico Museum of Art. **Below:** Oliver LaGrone bronze, Albuquerque Museum.

CRAIG LOVELL/ALAMY, COURTESY OF ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM

Creative Combustion

WHERE TO SEE NEW DEAL ART THROUGHOUT THE STATE.

Over the years, many public buildings obtained or commissioned artworks created under the Public Works of Art Project (1933–34) and the Federal Art Project (1935–43). Here are some that hold outstanding examples.

ALAMOGORDO

Otero County Offices, 1101 New York Ave. Four exterior frescoes by Peter Hurd.

ALBUQUERQUE

Federal Building, 421 Gold Ave. SW. Lobby murals by Loren Mozley, *Pueblo Rebellion of 1680*, and Emil Bisttram, *Justice Tempered with Mercy—Uphold the Right, Prevent the Wrong.*

Albuquerque Museum, 2000 Mountain Road NW. *Mercy*, a sculpture by Oliver LaGrone.

CLAYTON

Herzstein Memorial Museum, 22 S. 2nd St. The state's largest collection of New Deal–era art, including the Clayton Public School Art Collection of locally made furniture, ironwork, and colcha embroidery, plus paintings by Jozef Bakos, Gene Kloss, Regina Tatum Cooke, B.J.O. Nordfeldt, Helmuth Naumer, and others.

FORT SUMNER

DeBaca County Courthouse, 248 E. Ave. C. Three murals by Russell Vernon Hunter, *The Last Frontier.*

LAS CRUCES

Branson Library, New Mexico State University, 1305 Frenger St. Two 15-foot paintings by Tom Lea, *Conquistadores* and *La Mesilla*.

RATÓN

Arthur Johnson Memorial Library, 244 Cook Ave. Paintings, etchings, and lithographs by such artists as Jozef Bakos, William Penhallow Henderson, and Gene Kloss.

Shuler Theater, 131 N. 2nd St. Eight lobby murals by Manville Chapman depicting the region's history.

ROSWELL

Roswell Museum, 1011 N. Richardson Ave. The only remaining portion of the state's four New Deal Federal Art Centers (Las Vegas, Melrose, and Gallup were the others). Holdings include *Archangel Gabriel*, a bulto by Juan A. Sanchez, and paintings by Olive Rush and Regina Tatum Cooke.

SANTA FE

New Mexico Museum of Art, 107 E. Palace Ave. Six courtyard frescoes by Will Shuster with scenes of Native life.

Federal Courthouse, 106 S. Federal Pl. Six murals by William Penhallow Henderson, including *The Old Santa Fe Trail*, *Monument Rock—Cañon de Chelly*, and *Taos Mountain.*

Not the Main Post Office, 120 S. Federal Pl. Interior murals by Gerald Cassidy are often given New Deal provenance but were in fact created in 1929 for a private commission.

TAOS

Former Taos County Courthouse, 121 N. Plaza. Ten frescoes in the second-floor courtroom, by Emil Bisttram, Ward Lockwood, Victor Higgins, and Bert Phillips, including *Avarice Breeds Crime/Avaricia Engreda Crimen* and *Reconciliation/Reconciliacion.* (Currently closed for renovation; taoshistorical society.org has updates.)

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

U.S. Post Office, 300 Main Ave. Lobby mural by Boris Deutsch, *Indian Bear Dance.*