"Tennessee Valley Authority:" The Survival of a True New Deal

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The mid-30s of the twentieth century was a time of struggle for survival. In 1937 Balcolm Greene, in his essay "Society and the Modern Artist," made the comment that "the problem of every citizen contributing to the national and the general human good is matched in importance, dramatically as never before by the individual's problem of subsistence."

Indeed, survival was on everyone's mind as the national economy faltered, farm prices dropped, the jobless rate doubled and war in Europe seemed imminent. The country was reeling under all these adverse conditions. The net worth per family in 1935 was only $291.00, and just securing enough food, clothing and shelter seemed uncertain.

According to Chet La More, "To the artists, 1929 does not represent an abrupt change, but merely a point of intensification in the process which has slowly been forcing them downward on the economic scale". Both the art market and the stock market had collapsed. The art market collapsed because it had come to depend solely on the upper economic group. The artists were really at the bottom of the economic ladder and from that vantage point they at last realized that it was necessary to have support from the entire population. This realization led to the first Artists' Union, which demanded and received government support for art through
the Public Works of Art Project. All over the country artists were organizing themselves into unions, but no record could be found of such groups in Huntsville.

Economic conditions in Huntsville were the same as those in the rest of the country. There had been a bumper cotton crop, but the grade was bad. Huntsville was experiencing bread lines and strikes. Some banks had folded and construction was almost at a standstill. The only building of importance was the construction of the Post Office in downtown Huntsville, which was completed in 1936 at a cost of $180,000. The architects were Miller, Martin and Love of Birmingham. Mr. Love lived in Huntsville and served as building superintendent.

October 1937 saw Huntsville in the throes of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which he and Congress had implemented in an attempt to relieve the United States of its economic hardships and to renew its faith in the democratic systems. Several New Deal agencies were represented in Madison County. One of these, the Farm Security Administration, reported that the net worth per family in 1937 had risen to $371.53. Another was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Its policy of taxing the processors of farm products in order to pay farmers not to produce as much as before had been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Two Civilian Conservation Corps camps on Monte Sano were hard at work building cabins for the state park, while another CCC Camp at McClung Avenue built a rock wall around Maple Hill Cemetery. The public welfare office and the Works Progress Administration Officers were moved to the Elks Building in October. The
National Youth Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority were two much-needed and highly appreciated agencies. All these agencies helped speed recovery from the economic ills, provided help for those in need due to the depression and promoted reforms in financial, agricultural, business and industrial practices. The TVA, in particular, developed north Alabama's resources and stabilized the area to a degree.

Franklin Roosevelt's prevailing sense of noblesse oblige, the rationale of political radicalism and the strong spirit of nationalism all influenced the federal government to subsidize artists through two of the New Deal agencies, the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP) of the Treasury Department and the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. The President's chief concern was helping others and bestowing a feeling of art appreciation, while political radicals wanted to create cultural awareness in the masses and establish an art form which reflected their radical ideology. Those Americans experiencing patriotic self-examination thought art could create a new concern for locale and the vernacular and promote a uniquely American art culture, by using as subject matter American scenes. Even though there were differences of opinions among these two agencies as to their aspirations regarding art, generally they both served to sustain the skills of artists during a time when there was no private support of art and not much public feeling that federal art patronage should be considered.

The Treasury Department's Division of Procurement, Section of Painting and
Sculpture, was always interested in securing the best quality of art for the embellishment of public buildings. They rejected the more didactic art of the modernists and Social Realists, who advocated freedom from the past and chose instead to use their art to depict the misery of the day. The Section of Painting and Sculpture, which had evolved from the PWAP, wanted to use art work that would reflect the progress made by the New Deal programs. On July 21, 1936, the Sections' Superintendent, Edward B. Rowan, approached Mr. Xavier Gonzalez regarding a commission to paint a mural to be placed over the judge's bench in the Federal Courtroom in the Huntsville Post Office, providing he would submit a 2" scale color drawing of a suitable subject.

One wonders at this approach to Mr. Gonzalez. One of the avowed goals of government subsidy was to relieve a numb and desperate artistic community, indeed, to protect skills that might otherwise dissipate through disuse. Mr. Gonzalez was gainfully employed in a field wherein his talents were put to use, for he was professor of art at Sophie Newcomb College, Tulane University. He also was teaching at State Teachers College, Alpine, Texas, during the summer.

The Treasury Department had previously announced that it would select and supervise artists and foster local initiative through competition. Mr. Gonzalez, definitely not a local artist, was an immigrant from Spain, naturalized as a citizen in 1930. There was no competition for this art work. Mr. Gonzalez had won honorable mention in the competition for decorating the Courthouse and Post Office at Jackson, Mississippi. Indeed, Superintendent Rowan considered Mr. Gonzalez
an artist of recognized talent and entitled
to receive this commission for a mural
without competition.

Certainly his willingness to use the
uplifting aspects of art to portray the
uplifting aspects of the New Deal did not
lessen Mr. Gonzalez' chances of receiving
this commission. This was a time when other
artists' paintings were showing the ugly
incidents in American life, such as police
brutality and evictions, in an attempt to
dramatize the injustices to the working
class. The first prospectus offered by Mr.
Gonzalez showed symbolic characters
surrounded by the four visual elements of
air, earth, fire and water, done in
semi-abstract, stylized design and form.
The Treasury Department's response to this
idea was to say that the water and other
elements tended to cheapen the value of the
work and to suggest that it was too much like
the decoration of a hotel lobby. Mr. Rowan
wrote back asking if Mr. Gonzalez could not
put in more emphasis on the realities of
life.

Mr. Gonzalez was clever enough to use
information secured through the local Chamber
of Commerce in his next scale drawing. Bit
by bit the Treasury Department office in
Washington deleted and added to the subject
of the painting. After the fifth proposal
submitted by Mr. Gonzalez, the Treasury
Department granted the commission for
"Tennessee Valley Authority" on February 2,
1937. Its subject matter reflects the
agency's conservative, academic point of
view—a viewpoint that abhorred any
contemporary art and embraced art that
possessed universality, beauty, classical
ideals and the newer idea of promoting
American patriotism. The mural-painting was intended to further a sense of local history and show the progress made in the area due to government programs.

"Tennessee Valley Authority" met the governmental ideal of the American scene. More precisely, it portrayed the ideal North Alabama scene. The final product is a large painting rather than an actual mural 14 feet by 15 feet, and weighing 135 pounds. Weighty in subject matter and large in scope, it captivated the viewer with its symbolism and statement.

Total understanding of the statement the artist wished to make and his ability to involve the viewer were readily evident. He used strong frontal placement of the central figures and sharp perspective to place locations in the background. These arrangements were both visually and symbolically important. The inclusion of locations was easy to understand. The presence of TVA was indicated by the two dams, Wilson and Norris, and this made the viewer aware of the important government work and progress in this area. Beautiful mountains, plenteous valleys and the Tennessee River reminded one of the area's natural resources. The land, shown plowed and planted in furrows and surrounded by rock walls, was also used to call attention to government work in the areas of soil conservation, erosion prevention and reforestation. Important government work in the area of business services and banking were symbolized by buildings such as The Times, First National Bank (First Alabama) and the Federal Post Office.

The people, their poses, their
placement, their pursuits, were indicative of the state of affairs in the Tennessee Valley. Male/female, child/adult, black/white, standing/sitting, front view/side view/back view--every variation was useful to the artist. The grouping was also interesting in that the people were huddled or related in space and perhaps symbolized a need for closeness, yet at the same time each was looking outward in a different direction, to indicate a seeking quality. The frontal view of one male figure, immediately behind the apical placement of the corn stalk, served to thrust agriculture, and scientific agriculture at that, in the very face of the viewer. This male figure held the blade of the corn as if it were a book, thus symbolizing the progress made in agriculture through new scientific methods. The other male figure showed the viewer his broad, muscled back in order to remind one of the hard and back-breaking labor entailed in various industries, represented by the iron anvil and shop hammer.

The standing young girl with a basket of fruit represented rising youth and fertility. Even in 1984 one could think of the National Youth Administration and good farm produce just by looking at her. Work in the arts was implied by the inclusion of one woman decorating pottery. A patchwork quilt represented home crafts and served to draw the viewer's eye back to the frontal plane. There one could dwell on the other central female figure holding a baby, which illustrated those most-American ideals of motherhood and happy home life.

Any critique of the mural painting would be incomplete if the somber colors used by the artist were not mentioned. Somber colors
for somber times, perhaps? And the inclusion of cotton as an agricultural product could only reflect the government's plea to the farmers to diversify, diversify! By his use of people and local lore Gonzalez considered man's place in the social order and commented on the area's development due to government influence.

Mr. Gonzalez shipped the large painting to Huntsville and came to install it himself. He usually used a mixture of white lead and varnish to glue a mural to a wall. He stated in his correspondence to Mr. Rowan that he would use the new method suggested in Government Bulletin #13. The new method was a formula of Dextrine and asbestos. However, when he arrived he discovered the wall was made of cork and plaster and he decided to use his own formula of lead and varnish. Ten days later Mr. Gonzalez' final payment was held up because it was reported to the Treasury Department that the mural was becoming detached, and he made a second trip to Huntsville to re-hang it.

The government subsidy of artists and artwork in truth did aid the artist in question. This commission helped Mr. Gonzalez develop his talent, both as an artist and as an art teacher. During the 300 days it took to complete the work, he informed Mr. Rowan he had used the experience to set up a workshop atmosphere for his students. He set up problems for them whereby they were to compete for projects for the Treasury Department. They had to research the subject and prepare scale drawings and color charts. Five of his students actually entered competitions in El Paso, Texas and Miami, Florida, some of them sucessfully.

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During that time Mr. Gonzalez won First Prize in an exhibition of paintings by Southern Artists, and was invited to exhibit at the International Watercolor Show in Chicago. Indeed, his career took an upward turn from that time forward. In 1946 he received the Audubon Artist Gold Medal of Honor, and was awarded the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1947. He was granted an American Academy of Arts and Letters Grant, and a Ford Foundation Grant in 1965. In 1963 he was awarded the prestigious commission to complete a 10-panel mural, The History of Technology, for the school of Engineering and Architecture at the City College, University of New York. By 1978 his work was in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York City, the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Boston Museum, plus others. In 1978 he was the recipient of the National Arts Club's 79th Annual Award. At that time he was a member of the faculty at the Art Students League. In the summer of 1984 the 86-year-old artist was honored at a three-day celebration of the reopening of the Lakefront Airport in New Orleans, where his three-panel mural entitled The History of Flight was the principal decoration.

Madison County benefited from many of the New Deal's programs, such as the National Labor Relations Act, TVA, and Social Security. Bridges, beautiful rock walls and cabins built by the Works Progress Administration remain to this day for all to enjoy. Public awareness of their origins could help to see that they remain for future generations.
Throughout the years not much notice was taken of the painting "Tennessee Valley Authority". When the architect of the building, Mr. Hugh Martin, was consulted about the placement of a work of art he said, "The space behind the Judge's bench will not be seen very often by the general "run" of citizen as the Court is only in session two weeks of each year". Mr. Martin was right. Some of Mr. Gonzalez's other WPA works and the works of other WPA artists were painted over or otherwise destroyed by unappreciative people. Interested citizens should devise a way for an important work of art such as Xavier Gonzalez' "Tennessee Valley Authority" to be seen and appreciated. Only interested citizens could ensure its survival.

THE END

ENDNOTES


2 The Huntsville Times, October 8, 1937.


4 The Huntsville Times, October 5, 1937.


6 Edward B. Rowan, letter to Xavier Gonzalez, August 18, 1936, (Record Group 121, Records of the Public Building Service,

7 The Huntsville Times, October 8, 1937.


9 The Huntsville Times, October 5, 8, 18, 1937.


11 Ibid., p. 52.

12 Rowan, letter to Xavier Gonzalez, July 21, 1936 (Case File No. 1657).


14 Edward B. Rowan, letter to Malty Sykes of Rockville, NY, November 4, 1936 (Case File No. 1657). Mr. Sykes had asked to be considered for this job and was refused.


16 Xavier Gonzalez, letter to Edward B.
Rowan, November 4, 1936 (Case File No. 1657).

17 Edward B. Rowan, letter to Xavier Gonzalez, January 14, 1937 (Case File No. 1657).


19 Treasury Department Contract, signed by Xavier Gonzalez, February 15, 1937 (Case File No. 1657).


22 Xavier Gonzalez, telegram to Edward B. Rowan (Case File No. 1657).

23 Xavier Gonzalez, letter to Edward B. Rowan (Case File No. 1657).


25 Xavier Gonzalez, telephone interview with Freeda B. Darnell, November 26, 1978, New York

26 Xavier Gonzalez, telephone interview with Freeda B. Darnell, October 8, 1984.

27 Hugh Martin, letter to Edward B. Rowan, October 19, 1936 (Case File No. 1657).