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Abstract
Most people think that the old murals they see in old post offices where painted by out-of-work artists, hired by the WPA (if they can even recall that alphabet agency), during the Great Depression. Mere make-work for hard times, they think. That’s not quite correct.

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by Michael Martone

Most people think that the old murals they see in old post offices where painted by out-of-work artists, hired by the WPA (if they can even recall that alphabet agency), during the Great Depression. Mere make-work for hard times, they think. That’s not quite correct.

The Winesburg post office was a standard design for 1934, a scaled down Greek temple on the outside with fluted columns and smooth limestone walls quarried in Bedford, Indiana, where you can see the quarrying of the blocks of Bedford limestone for the Winesburg PO depicted on the mural in the Bedford PO.

All those murals are in all those lobbies. Terrazzo floors. Walnut trim. The three walls not the wall with the front doors have the windows where the clerks work and the rest is bricked with the tarnished PO box doors. Each door is studded with combination locks, knobs that spin a pointer from letter to letter inscribed above the little glass window with the golden decaled number.
I was born in Winesburg in 1930. The first thing I remember is the lobby of the PO. My mother brought me to the lobby and showed me the picture on the stamp she bought. It was a picture of a woman sitting in a chair. The stamp was all pink, the image etched on the paper of the stamp in pink whorls. My mother told me the stamp pictured a painting of an artist’s mother. She showed me how to lick the stamp. I remember her pink tongue behind the pink stamp licking its back. She showed me how to stick the stamp to the big white envelope. She let me lick another stamp she tore from a sheet of stamps. I tried to see my tongue lick the glue. The glue tasted like glue.

On the wall to the right of the mail slot mother pushed the mail through was the massive scaffolding, the only thing in the brand new lobby not neat and orderly. It was rickety even then when it was new. It had been thrown together as the building was built, lattices and buttresses and cross-bucks and beams that made some room around the Postmaster’s door (it said so on the fogged glass and still does: POSTMASTER). There was a man up on top of the nest of the scaffolding, sitting on an egg that wasn’t really an egg but a paint can of white paint. He was looking closely at the blank wall way up there.

The PO murals weren’t make-work so much as advertisements. President Roosevelt wanted to signal to the towns and villages that the federal government would, from now on, have a new relationship with its citizens. Times had changed. The post office had been the only US agency with which most people had any connection. So the new post offices were post offices for the people, for everyone. And the post offices would have stories to tell.

I am eighty years old. I have an electric lift that lifts me up to the top of the scaffolding. It is always warmer up here, right under the ceiling and the sweet odor the plaster puts out as it evaporates seems to drape itself over, like laundry on a line, the fret work of cables and struts, turnbuckles and guy wires that support the paint splattered platform. A real drapery of 6 mil Visqueen shapes the vapors, a thin atmosphere of thinner that has been circulating here for forever. No one below can see how the mural is going. It is in progress, has been in progress since 1934. The only post office mural in the Winesburg PO begun in the Great Depression is the only post office mural that has never been finished. While other murals are restored or are removed or discovered under coats of plaster that are
seared away by means of laser beams, this mural inhabits another state altogether, suspended. Suspended, as I am suspended floating on these persistent clouds of dank water and wet lime here in the lobby near the ceiling of the Winesburg PO.

The mural is a fresco mural so each day I apply a new wash of lime mortar and begin to paint, injecting the pigment in the drying plaster. As the wall sweats and squeezes out its moisture, I can feel the coolness glaze my cheek. I'm an old woman, nearly blind now. I am right on top of the painting even though I have several layers of loupes and lenses and magnifying glasses wired to my head. I lick the point of my brush to shape its point. I taste dirt in all its colors. I taste seaweed and the sea. I taste bones and shells. I taste iodine. I taste lead.

The man in my memory up on the scaffolding painting the wall, that was Bart Harz, the painter originally hired to tell the story of Winesburg in the PO's mural. The artists back then were encouraged to depict an historical moment in the murals, celebrate native crops or manufactured goods, capture a geographical feature, or feature an ethnic or cultural peculiarity. Color the local color.

For years, as we stood in line, waiting to approach the clerk's window for service, we would look up to Bart, sitting on the platform near the ceiling, staring at the big empty wall. Or after mailing a letter, flipping the flap door a time or two to make sure the letter slid down the chute, we would turn and say to Bart, "How's it going, Bart?" Or dialing the combination of the boxes and sorting out the day's mail, we would ponder Bart pondering on his perch. It was hard to leave the lobby after awhile. You wanted to linger just a moment more. And then a moment more. And then another moment to see if, right then Bart would, at that moment, apply the first brush stroke. You didn't want to miss it. Or, at least, see him begin to sketch, trace out a gesture with a piece of charcoal. This went on for years.

There is plenty of paint on the wall in front of me now. There is too much paint. Layers and layers of it. I am constantly revising the faces in the fresco as the faces they are modeled on change and grow older. I must slather on a new skim coat each day. Each day draw the hairlines back a little farther on the men whose hairlines are receding. Or gray the hair on the ones whose hair is graying. Change the color of the hair on those who've changed the color of their hair. Redo the styles as the styles go in
and out of fashion, document this haircut or that, and, every spring, get ready to coif the prom hair-dos for that spring’s junior girls at Durkheim High. And that’s just the hair. There is the clothing to do. The glasses that have moved to bifocals, trifocals. Hats and gloves have mostly disappeared. The dollop of sparkle that represents an engagement ring, wedding ring and then in some cases, painting over the rings. Shades of lipstick. The skin itself reflects the seasons—the summer’s bronze tan, the lake effect’s pale pale. I add the wrinkle here. The age spot there. A scar or two. I work hard to paint a patch of a palsy creeping over a face.

“How’s it going, Constance?” I hear someone shout to me from below. I wave over my shoulder. It goes, I think, it goes.

During lunch, I sit on the platform dangling my feet out over the lobby. I peel back all of my optics, revealing my naked eyes. I watch the citizens of Winesberg below doing their postal business. Jim Hitch is going out of town. Charlie Kimble has a notice that there is something too big to fit in his box. Wanda Weintraub asks for a duck stamp. Omar B Wells (there is no period after the B) has a package to mail to his sister in Peoria. Johnson Jr. is filling out his selective service form. And Sallie Nadir is showing little Josh how to peel a stamp, the Liberty Bell, from the booklet she just bought and apply it to a letter his mother then slides in the slot. Josh looks back up to me looking down at him. He sticks out his tongue. I stick out mine.

Bart never painted a lick of paint. Ever since Mother showed me the picture of the painting of a mother on that stamp, I have wanted to be an artist. When Mother realized that she took me back to the PO and asked Bart to give me lessons in drawing, painting, composition when he took breaks from his not-working work. He needed the money, he said, and he needed the break from the break that, up until he started teaching me, looked pretty much like what he was doing when not on break. I sat on an upended unopened paint can in the middle of the PO’s lobby and sketched Bart as he worked or, more accurately, as he didn’t work. Charcoal and pastels, washes and inks, pencil and pen and brush, watercolors, oils. I even did a pointillistic collage out of pictures I snipped from LIFE magazine, now dead. He’d have me help him rebuild his scaffold. I would re-rig the poles and platforms, the struts and the netting. The airy scrim that hung from the ceiling like a cloud. I would sketch Bart and the scaffold and the PO boxes and the empty wall, the white whiteness of it stretching on and on behind him.
All those studies prepared me to fill in for Bart Harz after he bit the dust after the War. The commission came to me, a codicil to his will. I was bequeathed the rigging and the rigmarole in rigor mortis all those years. The dried up paint, all those shades of blue, the thinners and the pigments, the dry points and the abandoned stencils, the masking tape and the spent snap lines. I was willed the pots and kidney-shaped French palettes with their histories of miscalculated mixing, rainbows of mud and dung derivations, and the wall, I inherited the empty wall and its fifteen years of priming, priming, priming.

That wall is filled with faces now, a portrait of everyone in town, and each of those faces I touch up each day, age them and gray them, add the wide-eyed new arrivals and close the eyes of the citizens who have died as if a camera has caught them blinking in the sun, not sleeping for eternity. It is a field in which the populace of Winesburg is arrayed and the field has depth of field and the folks in the further back ranks shrink in that illusion of distance, dwindle to the distant vanishing point. Some face no bigger than this “o” here and with my skill of chiaroscuro and a triple aught brush I contour even that minute visage with the expressions of joy and wonder.

They are all looking up. They are looking up to Bart on his jury-rigged tower, his back to the PO lobby below. It is all tromp l’oeil, and Bart is bent to his work painting the people of Winesburg spread out before him in attitudes of joy and wonder looking back at the artist who is rendering them so effortlessly and with such detail.

And there, there I am on my paint can stool, an egg, looking over Bart’s soft cotton shoulder. I am in profile, depicted as some antique muse, attempting to sketch the artist’s, Bart’s, own profile I alone can see. It seems I am whispering into his ear, a flash of a pearl pink tongue, a kind of spark between the synapses, rendered between my lips. Still wet, the image glistens. I dismantle all my lenses and glasses and goggles. I lean into this point of paint, the picture closing in on me. And with my own tongue, I tongue the image of my tongue, taste it, that metal taste, that taste of earth, that taste of pink. And with my tongue I draw out the tongue-shaped image of my tongue in the fresco. Shape it. Give it depth and texture. I lap and flick. I am blind to it. It is all by feel. This final touch. This articulation. This accent. This annunciation.

But I myself, I will leave unfinished. A kind of spirit, a ghost. I am an
impression, impasto. A blur really. A bunch of hasty gestures, smudged lines, and smeared paints in unsubtle hues. I float like a cloud, undone, my gossamer gown’s draping all hurried and fudged, naive, here all flat, stiff, matte. My face, except for around the mouth, a blank, traced, an empty outline, still waiting to be finished, sealed, fixed, done after all these years, done. Finally finished after I have completed all of my studies of this little precinct of this unending, this infinite, heaven.

Michael Martone was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, attending the public schools there. Graduating from Butler University in 1977, Martone has butled, in one form or another, his entire career with his domestic service beginning in the employ of the Eli Lilly family as a footman and then commencing to the rank of steward at the governor’s dacha on Geist Reservoir. Martone served as batman for the brevet lieutenant-colonel in command of the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment of Foot (The Black Watch) in the Falkland’s War, and currently is the Majordomo at the Carol Lombard House in Fort Wayne.