

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

Poughkeepsie

There are five murals at the Poughkeepsie post office, painted by three different artists. All three paintings are meant to inform and celebrate the history of Poughkeepsie, but each artist approached this in his own style.

Gerald Foster painted three of the five murals, located upstairs. Foster's style is very traditional, straightforward, and narrative. The colors were subdued (by age perhaps?) and the figures reminded me of the faces on the dollar bill, which is fitting because Foster was the highest paid artist in the public buildings program (34). I didn't particularly like this traditional style, but along with the inscription, they effectively narrated Poughkeepsie's history. I learned about Poughkeepsie's origins prior to becoming a city, the process it went through to become a city, and what it was like when it finally became a city. The paintings are large, grand, and traditional like the post office itself.



Two Wappinger Native Americans from Foster's "Poughkeepsie circa 1692" mural

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09



The critical handshake between George Clinton and Alexander Hamilton in Gerald Foster's "July 26, 1788, New York State Ratifies the United States Constitution in the dutchess County Court House in Poughkeepsie"



Portion of Foster's "Hamlet of Poughkeepsie c. 1750"

The other two murals by Georgina Klitgaard and Charles Rosen were both views of Poughkeepsie from across the Hudson River (Klitgaards from 1839 and Rosen's from 1940's). The murals are on opposite ends of first floor of the building, as if mirroring each other's differences.

The Mural Project

An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley

Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

Their styles were reflective of the time period they represented. Klitgaard worked off a woodcut of the Poughkeepsie waterfront from the 1800's. The forms are solid and precisely rendered. Atmospheric perspective is excluded, giving the picture a sense of extreme clarity, which was a popular style in the 19th century (41). In my research, I learned Roosevelt was dissatisfied with Klitgaard's boats. The President, who was a boat fanatic, called the whaling ship "pretty terrible, and noticed the wind in the painting was coming from four different directions(42). From a nautically naïve eye, I though the two big boats in the river represented the move towards industrialization, and the Hudson River's importance in that move.



The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09



boats from Klitgaard's "View of the City of Poughkeepsie in 1839"

Rosen's painting has modern subject matter and style. Major changes in the 20th century Poughkeepsie waterfront include the Railroad Bridge, Mid Hudson Bridge, and the Post Office itself; all shown in the mural. Smoke stacks could be seen in the background, and there was a significant increase in buildings along the countryside.

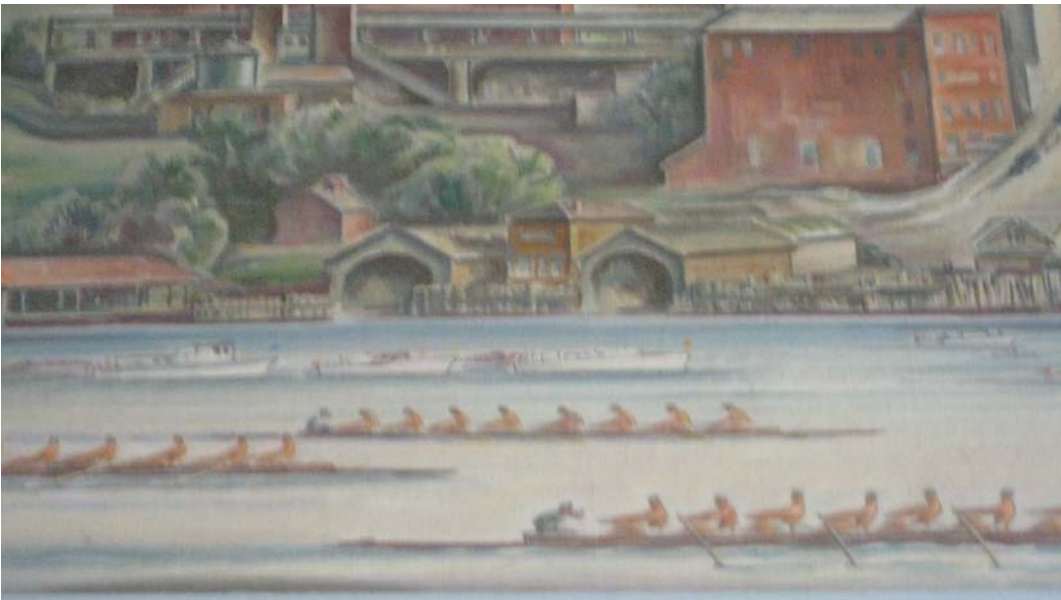
The modern feeling is reflected in the soft brushstrokes that flow across the scene, especially in the river. The oarsmen bend and row enthusiastically across the space, activating the river. The oarsmen were part of the famous Poughkeepsie Regatta, which attracted top oarsmen from large eastern colleges. (42) Along with the ships, the oarsmen show the important role the Hudson River plays.

Rosen's interesting use of perspective also adds to the modern feeling. The bridges extend past the picture plane and into the viewer's space, directly connecting us to the scene.

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09



MidHudson Bridge from Rosen's "View of the City of Poughkeepsie circa 1939"



Oarsmen from Rosen's mural.

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09



Railroad Bridge from Rosen's mural.

Wappinger Falls Murals

The two Wappinger Falls murals are located in the Town Hall, a Dutchess County Historical site, and formerly the town's post office. The paintings by Henry Billings show two views of the town's waterfall at different points in time. The building itself is walking distance from the actual waterfall, which gave me the opportunity to see the view depicted by the artist.

The murals are painted on chestnut panels and fill the triangular space where the ceiling of the building is pitched. The two views, one from 1780 and the other from 1880, face each other from opposite ends of the small building.

The 1780 picture was inspired by the diary of the Marquis de Chastellux, who is shown in conversation with Peter Meseir, whose house the town hall was modeled after. The 1880 scene was taken from an old painting of the falls when Wappinger Falls was a

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

major industrial water source.



Marquis de Chastellux and Peter Meseir chatting by the waterfall in “First Mill on Wappinger Creek”

The 1880 scene shows a more industrialized waterfall. Buildings replace the trees that surrounded the water one hundred years earlier. Despite the industrialization, Billings painted people enjoying the natural beauty of the fall. The people swimming and relaxing remind the viewer that the waterfall serves both as a modern power source, and beautiful landmark. After taking pictures of the actual waterfall in Wappinger, an old man standing nearby told me he used to jump into the creek as a young boy.



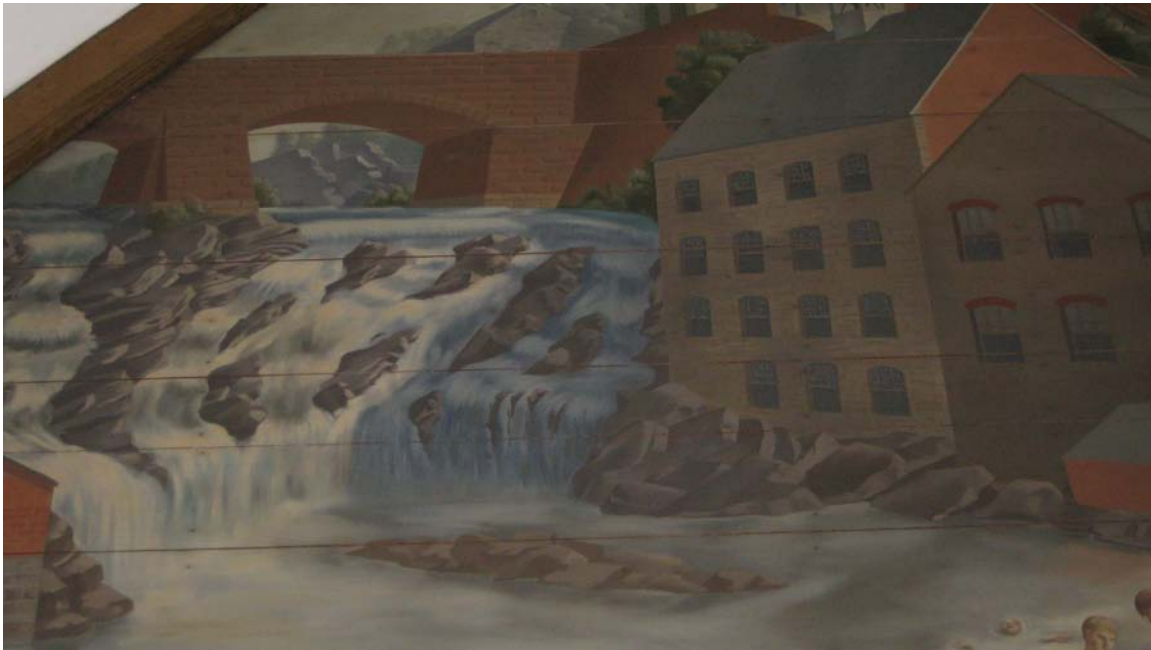
The Mural Project

An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley

Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

Textile Mills in Wappinger Falls circa 1880

The carefully organized composition and natural setting give the paintings an idyllic quality. Only a few people are included, leaving the focus on the waterfall, and hints of industrialization. Both pieces are colorful, but not overly bright, supporting a calm feeling. Stylistically, the paintings are smooth and sculptural, so the public can interpret them with ease.



Close up of the falls in 1880 scene- note the sculptural shading of the building, bridge, and even the rocks.

Rhinebeck and Hyde Park Murals

The Rhinebeck and Hyde Park post offices were small and homey, which was very different than the grand Poughkeepsie office. In Rhinebeck, I talked with Post Master Frank Barton Jr. and got some useful books and information about the murals and architectural history of the post office. Barton provides tours of the historical building and the murals to the public.

Both post offices were painted by Hyde Park native Olin Dows. Dows was a member of the Dutchess County Historical Society, making him the perfect artist for the job. He sent sketches directly to President Roosevelt, who made sure the subject matter was correct. (48) The scenes illustrate specific instances from Hyde Park and Rhinebeck history.

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

Dows did a spectacular job in both post-offices, branding each space with his whimsical, yet concise style. Both murals are continuous friezes that run along the walls like an illustrated border. They depict the history of each town from Henry Hudson's arrival to FDR's revival of bordering towns. He used distinct, linear brushstrokes to shape the figures, and broken outlines that hint at impressionism. Although his style is clear-cut enough to tell a story to the public, it retains a "Fine Art" feeling with the visible brushstrokes, which are also present in Rosen's mural at the Poughkeepsie office. Also like Rosen, Dows outlined his figures, giving them a cartoony feeling that is reminiscent of art from the 30s and 40s.



Panel 1 from the Rhinebeck Mural. Native Americans work in the foreground, while another spots the Half Moon for the first time in the background. In Hyde Park, a close up of the same Native American figure and Half Moon start the cycle of paintings.

Dows has a distinct sense of perspective that pulls the viewer into the scenes; an effective method for capturing people's eye, and pulling them into the space. The perspective varies all over the frieze, showing multiple depths in space and people from very near and very far. I enjoyed how Dows used trees to loosely separate the scenes, which as I mentioned, flow into each other.

The scenes themselves indicate a unity between people and nature. Wildlife can be seen all around the murals coexisting with the settlers and native Americas. Also, man's best friend can be seen running next to their owners all over the murals. Dows painted fellow artist Henry Billings in the Rhinebeck office painting alongside Mrs. Dows' large polka dotted dog (taken from some earlier research). FDR is also depicted with his dog Fala in the Hyde Park mural. The consistent style worked to unify the

The Mural Project

An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley

Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

subjects, people, plant and animal, as well. As I said before, this style is concise but with a definite soul. It indicates underlying structure, but is energized with loose, calm strokes.

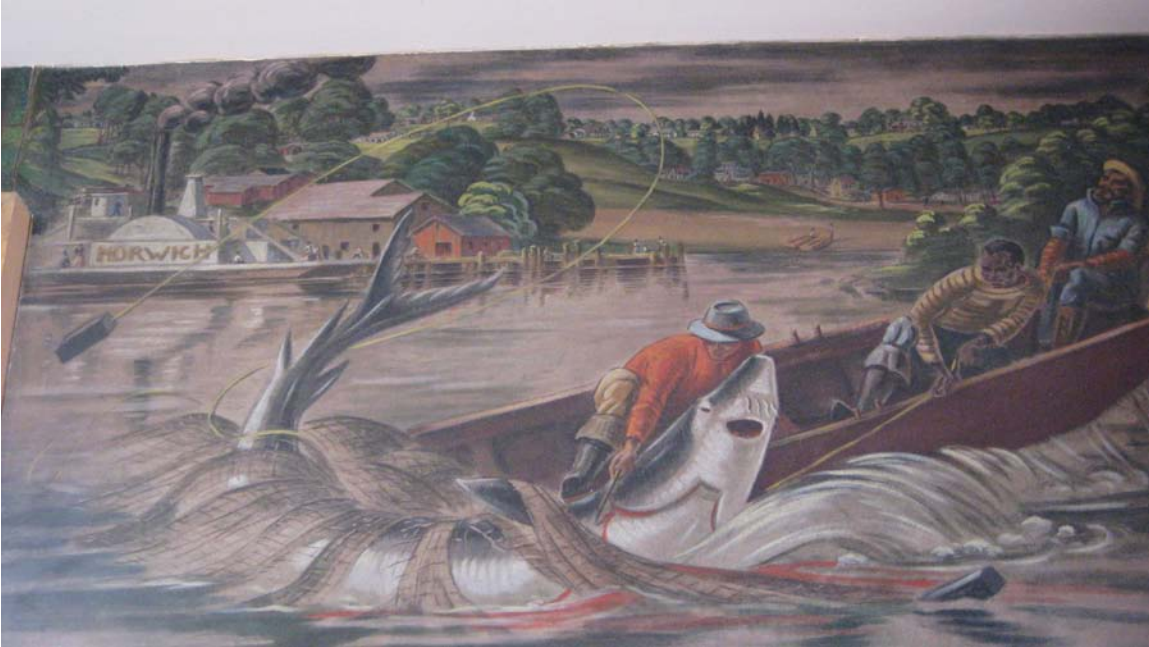


Henry Billings sketching in a panel at the Rhinebeck post office.



Roosevelt and company (including dog Fala) making plans for the Hyde Park WPA post office. Panel from the Hyde Park post office.

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09



William Meier, head of the Hyde Park caviar industry, lands an oversized sturgeon with the assistance of Abe Atkins (51). Scene of the Hyde Park mural.

Life in the murals varies between work, planning, and leisure. Dows made an effort to include every branch of society. The cast of characters are young, old, female, male, dressed up, and even partially nude. Slaves are shown in both towns as fundamental workers, but their leisure time is not touched upon. The artist also included Native American life (especially in Rhinebeck).



Slaves picking fruit in the Hyde Park mural. Notice how Dows painted the tree branches in relation to the figures. Both bend easily and softly, complimenting each other's movement.

The Mural Project

An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley

Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

I really appreciated the cast of characters, especially one in Hyde Park; a large woman selling goods at horserace sits in direct confrontation with the viewer, almost asking us to purchase something.



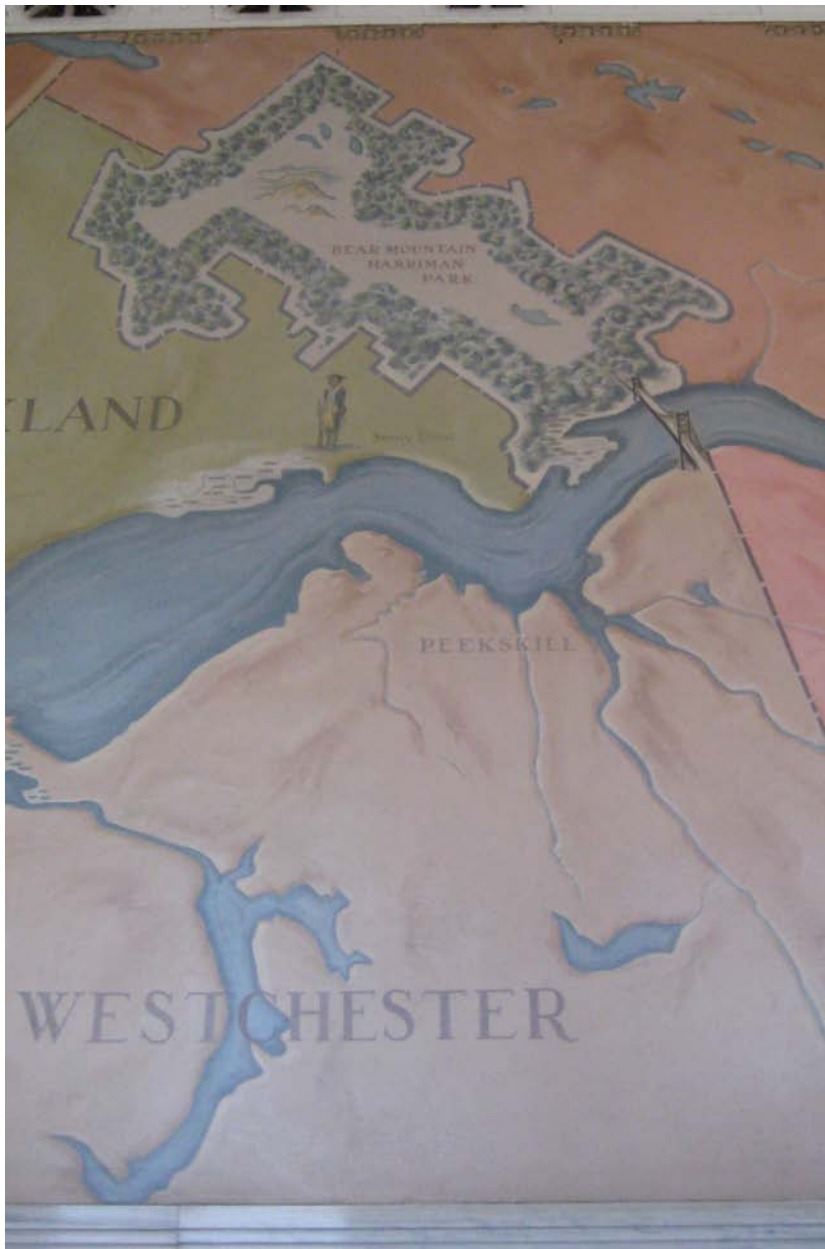
These two murals have a distinct sense of community, and perspective. They draw the viewer in, and show them life in Rhinebeck and Hyde Park from all different views, people, and animals. (left and below) People relaxing in Hyde Park panel.



The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

Beacon Murals

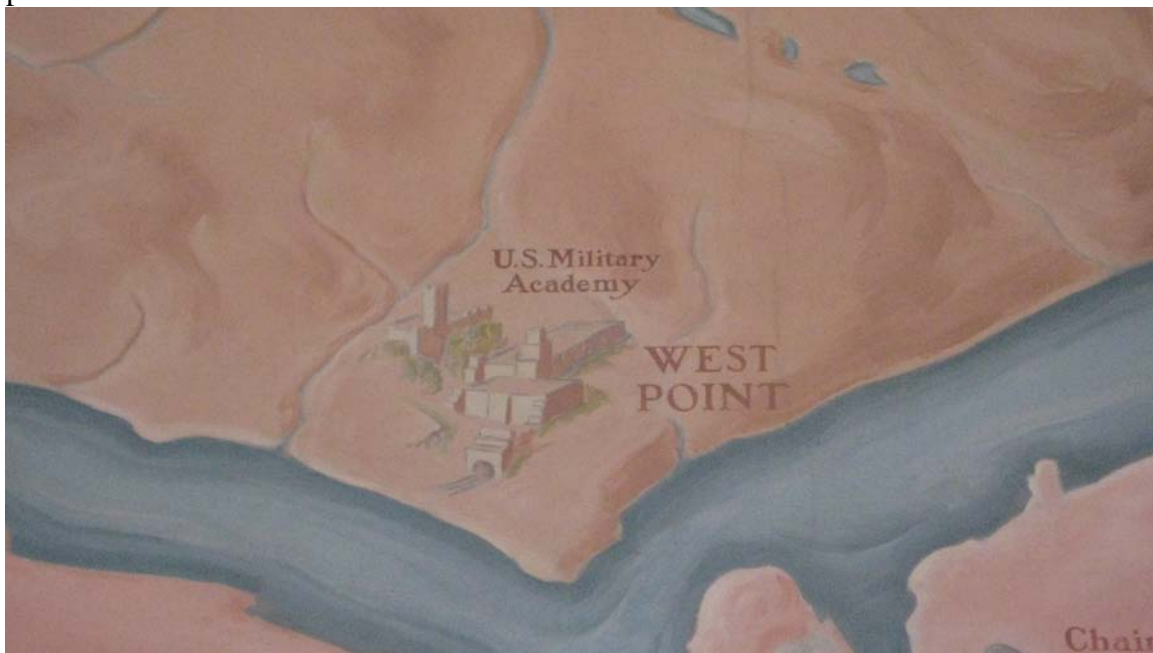
The Beacon Mural, like the Hyde Park and Rhinebeck murals, wraps around the post office in a continuous frieze. The majority of the mural is a map of the entire Hudson River Valley. The major map scene is on the front wall depicts Rockland, Westchester, Orange, Putnam, Dutchess, Ulster, Columbia, and Greene county. The Hudson River flows through each county, taking a central role in the piece. Important places, such as West Point, Bear Mountain, and FDR's home, are depicted with small illustrations and titles within the map.



The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09



Rosen used a similar soft, pastel color scheme as in his Poughkeepsie mural—mostly using a soft peach and dusty blue. Like the majority of the WPA murals, the style is straight forward, but with a distinct cartoony feel. Rosen uses soft outlines a lot like Dows. The style of the painting is smooth with some texture to indicate the landscape. The Hudson River has more active strokes than the rest of the land, indicating the powerful movement of the water.



Water connects the entire mural. On the left wall is a large view of the Hudson dotted with boats in an interesting back perspective. The Hudson flows across the front wall and onto the right side of the building, where the state of NY is shown surrounded by water. The shape of Dutchess County and the Dutchess County seal are also shown in

The Mural Project

An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley

Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

water. The map continues on the back wall, with water running through the middle.



Painted on two overpasses are two views of a waterfall, one titled 1936 and the other 1832. The falls are painting identically, except for the modern buildings shown in the 1936 view. Both falls flow in perfect balance, each breaking the picture plane and cascading onto the wall. Like in Wappinger Fall's, the waterfalls are recognized as an important power source.



On the right wall is the modern city of Beacon. A church is shown against a mountainous backdrop. Distinct shafts of sunlight illuminate the building, giving it a divine quality. Modern life is indicated with a Railroad sign, street lamps and an electrical pole.

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

Ellenville Murals

As is the nature of small towns, the Ellenville mural is largely about characters. The mural, painted by Louis Bouche in 1942, is a five by seven inch panel on the northwest wall. In the center is a log cabin called *the Hartshorne & Rockwell* general store, which eventually became the town's first post office. Before the town was named in 1823, a group of the settlement's men gathered at the general store and agreed to ask the federal government for a post office. The only problem was finding a name for the new town, which they previously referred to as "the City." Charles Hartshorne, owner of the general store and significant figure in the town's history, was sent to ask the women's opinion on the issue. The painting shows the moment when Hartshorne returned to the general store with a name for their town, Ellenville. (71-72)



The painting is set up like stage, with the general store and undeveloped landscape acting as a background for the characters in the foreground. The people capture most of the viewers' attention with their expressive faces and positions. There is a real sense of community, with the three male figures embracing each other as Hartshorne shares the news on the left. Even the dogs on the bottom right stand at attention, looking up excitedly at Hartshorne and company. A cast of supporting characters by the store also look up, although they seem too relaxed to be excited.

The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09



I am unsure of the story behind the four men on the right, but they certainly express emotion. One man hangs his head with a shameful look on his face. His stance seems embarrassed, with one hand bend behind his back like a little boy caught stealing from a candy store. Two men holding weapons and a soldier in uniform look accusingly at the other man. The viewer is left to wonder, what did he do?



The Mural Project
An Investigation of the Six WPA Murals in the Hudson River Valley
Julia D'Angelo, Marist College '09

The paint technique is soft, with natural subdued colors. Painterly details are the most present in the general store, and in the people's clothing. Since the characters do the storytelling, it is obvious that Bouche spent time painting them carefully. The clothing is intricate, especially on Hartshorne's pants, and on the soldier. The faces look worked over, indicating the artist's attention to their expressions. This piece is narrative, and Bouche's characters share Ellenville's story.

Bibliography

Dows, Olin. William Seabrook, Chanler A. Chapman. *Murals in the Rhinebeck Post Office*. Civin Club of Rhinebeck. New York: The Spiral Press, New York. c1940.

Musso, Anthony P. *FDR and the Post Office*. AuthorHouse. Indiana: AuthorHouse Uk Ltd. c2006.

Thomas, Bernice, L. *The Stamp of FDR: New Deal Post Offices in the Mid-Hudson Valley*. Fleischemanns, New York: Purple Mountain Press, Ltd. c2002.