

gallupARTS leads public tour of city's historic depression-era art

Written by By Boderra Joe Sun Correspondent
Friday, 04 May 2018 08:27



Over 90 pieces of art from '30s, '40s in Gallup's collection

Thanks to a generous grant and the work of a local non-profit, Gallup residents got a tour through history at the Gallup McKinley County Courthouse April 30—and the city's historic art will soon be available to everyone in an online exhibition.

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This year, GallupARTS received a \$30,000 Digital Projects for the Public Discovery Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to display a virtual art exhibit showcasing Gallup's New Deal and Works Progress Administration pieces. These pieces were created in 1935 during the Great Depression when President Roosevelt's administration sponsored the work of artists and architects in an expansive jobs program.

The city has more than 90 of these publicly funded artworks, in what the GallupARTS website says is one of the largest collections of federally commissioned artwork from the 1930s and '40s.

Along with the virtual exhibition, GallupARTS, a local non-profit arts council for Gallup and McKinley County, presented a free public tour of Gallup's WPA art and architecture, offering guests the chance to take a closer look at the historic county courthouse, which was built in 1938 under the WPA program.

Carolyn Milligan, the group's tour guide, pointed to the exterior of the old courthouse and noted its Spanish and Native influences, made evident in its pillars, window frames, and doors. Milligan spoke with guests about the inspiration behind the courthouse's architecture.

The courthouse was designed in the Spanish Pueblo Revival style and houses 19 pieces of New Deal artwork, as well as murals and furniture made by New Deal artists and craftspeople, according to the New Mexico Department of Historical Affairs.

The Gallup McKinley County Courthouse is one of two buildings built under the WPA in Gallup. The other is the National Guard Armory, also known as the Larry Brian Mitchell Recreation Center.

A WALK THROUGH HISTORY

Rose Eason, the executive director of GallupARTS, said the purpose of the grant is to showcase

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all of Gallup and McKinley County's WPA art, which includes paintings, woodwork, tinwork, murals, and buildings.

"We want to share our work with the community," Eason said. "I think Gallup's WPA art collection is probably its best-kept secret, so we wanted to raise awareness of this amazing resource that we have."

Eason pointed to the history website, "The Living New Deal" as a good resource for people to learn about the program and New Deal efforts, as are the tours that let the public see the results of the project for themselves. Eason also highlighted the Civilian Conservation Corps, a relief program that provided millions of job opportunities during the Great Depression.

"The (CCC employees) built roads, bridges, manufacturing jobs," Eason said. "All those types of infrastructure work also employ artists."

Among its Depression and New Deal era art, the courthouse holds a 10-foot mural depicting the history of McKinley County, completed by the artist Lloyd Moylan in 1940. Molan, a painter and curator who specialized in Native subjects and the Southwest, Was born in Saint Paul, Minn., and died in Gallup in 1963.

Connecting New Deal history back to Gallup, Eason said there were many different programs that aided artists during the depression, including the Federal Art Project, which Moylan was involved in.

A COMMUNITY AFFAIR

Promoting the work of local artists is a top priority for GallupARTS.

"We create opportunities for local artists and for the community to engage with art," Eason said.

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Eason hopes the virtual website exhibit showcasing WPA art, funded by the Digital Projects for the Public Discovery grant, will encourage children, young adults, and adults alike to learn about history and historical works.

"I think more than anything it's a chance for community building and dialogue," she said.

Betsy Windisch, an art major who attended the University of Missouri, attended the GallupARTS WPA public tour April 30 and said she was particularly struck by what Moylan was able to accomplish, given the time, money, and freedom to create his masterpiece.

The mural that Windisch referred to took about a year to complete, Eason said.

Jean Blackgoat, who also attended the tour, said the experience was "worth it and remarkable" and hoped it would continue on.

Eason wants to use these pieces to expand public understanding of the country's past. Unfortunately, she said, records detailing the length of time these projects took, and how much they cost, have been lost to history.

"Since it's all federally funded you'd think we would have those records," Eason said. "But when World War II started, all the records at the local and state level were destroyed, because the federal government didn't have the capacity to save them and archive them."

Taking into account prominent and less-known artists alike, Eason said today's artists are paid an average of \$1,000 per artwork. Eason said proper compensation for artists' work was the goal of the WPA and other New Deal art programs, which allowed them to make a living and survive the depression.

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For more information, visit: livingnewdeal.org.

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