

Saving the artwork of the people's post office

Below, left: The Berkeley, CA, Main Post Office (photo by Steve Rhodes)
Inset, top: Gray Brechin
Inset, bottom: The Independence, IA, Post Office

The Postal Service is busy shutting down and selling post offices—and with them, part of our nation's public art heritage. Hundreds of unique works of public art from the New Deal era are at risk of falling out of public ownership or even public view. But Gray Brechin, a historical geographer at the University of California at Berkeley, is standing up for the public's right to its art and is documenting it before it disappears.

"This is the greatest art heist in American history," Brechin told *The Postal Record*.

In the 1930s, post offices and other public buildings were decorated with works of art—murals, paintings, reliefs and sculptures—by artists employed through New Deal programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Aimed at putting Americans back to work during the Great Depression, these New Deal programs also beautified the country with thousands of monumental works of art, all owned and enjoyed by the public.

Today, post offices are home to about 1,100 New Deal works of art. Many of the works, in tune with the concerns of the era, depict the dignity and heroism of working men and women, including postal workers.

"These artworks were meant to be available and accessible to the public at any time," Brechin said. But plans to sell or close post offices have put these artworks in limbo.

The Postal Service shouldn't treat public art treasures like surplus property and sell them off with old post office buildings, Brechin said. Removing the art is often impossible because the works are "built-in"—painted directly on walls or crafted in odd

shapes to fit with architectural elements. And the works of art often show subjects or events unique to the culture or history of their geographic locations.

"The artworks were custom-designed for specific places and times," Brechin said. If they are moved, "they lose their meaning."

The historic Berkeley Main Post Office near Brechin's office, for instance, sports a New Deal-era mural—painted on the wall and wrapped around an ornate doorway to the postmaster's office—that shows Berkeley's earliest inhabitants. The USPS plans to sell the 98-year-old building, though Brechin and local residents have protested the plans.





"This art is unique in the world. There's no other country that has art in post offices like ours." But the Postal Service isn't taking its role as steward of this heritage seriously or considering the public's interests or input, he said.

"They're operating like the Kremlin—they just do it."

In fact, in some cases postal managers have tried to stop him from photographing the art in post offices, saying "we own it." Brechin informed them that they were wrong—the public owns the art and can view or take pictures of it.

But what happens when post offices close?

In a few cases, the Postal Service is removing the art. A beloved mural in the Ukiah, CA, post office was taken down and sent for restoration when the building—which was also built by the WPA and was a work of art in its own right—was sold, but the mural's ultimate fate is undecided. A mural by painter Robert Franklin Gates of a local farmer's market was also removed before a historic Bethesda, MD, post office was shuttered.

"I think these post offices are making the country more and more conscious of decorative, artistic values," Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in

her diary after she saw a sketch of Gates' mural.

Local governments might buy some of the buildings or the art and keep them in public hands. Some works of art, though, have already ended up under private control when the buildings were sold. The Windward Circle postal facility in Venice, CA, was sold to movie producer Joel Silver, who is converting it into his headquarters. Silver is restoring the building and its beloved "Story of Venice" mural by modernist artist Edward Biberman, but the mural will only be open to viewers six days a year or by appointment, Brechin said. As additional historic postal buildings go on the auction block, the public could lose access to more art.

Brechin is writing and speaking on behalf of postal art, and he's working on a possible legal challenge. To document the progeny of the artists commissioned through the WPA and other agencies, he created the Living New Deal project. The project includes an archive and interactive map at livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu. If your post office has art from the New Deal era that isn't on the website, you can submit photos and information by clicking on "Get Involved." **PR**



Top: The Lakeview Post Office in Chicago
(photo by Thee Erin)

Middle: The Venice, CA, Post Office (photo by Cathy Cole)

Bottom: The Bethesda, MD, Post Office (photo by Jimmy Wayne)