

Selling America's Art Collection

Audit Comments by Gray Brechin to the US Postal Service Office of the Inspector General

The USPS is, effectively, selling the public's art collection along with the historic buildings for which it should be a responsible steward. Although these works of art that were commissioned by the U.S. Treasury and paid for by American taxpayers – including architecture – are theoretically protected by preservation covenants held by third parties, in many instances such as Venice, CA, Birmingham, MI, and Palm Beach, FL, they are no longer freely accessible to the public and have thus become the de facto possessions of those who have bought the buildings containing them.

“Works of art paid for by American taxpayers are no longer freely accessible to the public.”

Moreover, virtually no consideration has been given to the fact that these unique works of art were commissioned for specific places and spaces. Thus, to radically change the function of the building for which they were intended — to convert a public postal lobby into an office building, for example — diminishes their worth. This is especially the case if, as so many murals and sculptures do, the art commemorates the history of the postal service and the often heroic work of its employees.

“Many murals and sculptures commemorate the history of the postal service and the often heroic work of its employees.”



Berkeley, California

“The art works were not designed to be portable.” Moving them diminishes their value and meaning.



Princeton, New Jersey

The art works were also not designed to be portable, so moving them to other locations — as in Ukiah, CA and Bethesda, MD — also diminishes their value, especially if they were designed to have a sequential narrative that may be scrambled once removed from the space for which they were intended. In a case such as “America Under the Palms” in the Princeton, NJ post office, the artist designed the mural to accommodate architectural features such as a postmaster’s door and/or a vaulted ceiling that will ill suit any other location to which the art might be moved.

Furthermore, although I believe that Dallon Wordekemper has been conscientious in his attempts to restore art works and locate those that have been lost, the parameters of his employment as both Real Estate Specialist and Federal Preservation Officer pose a conflict of interest in which the demands of the former may override those of the latter, especially when his superiors in the USPS are monetizing the public's assets in order to sell them. As Jill Korte has remarked (08/02/2013): "The Federal Preservation Officer (FPO) appears to have sole discretion in deciding whether New Deal artwork in U.S. Post Offices may be removed, sold, lent, or otherwise disposed of. There is a total lack of transparency. USPS staff and the general public cannot possibly determine from [USPS] Handbook RE-1 the basis upon which the USPS FPO decides it is proper to remove, sell, loan, or otherwise dispose of post office New Deal artwork." As with so much else in the current management of the USPS, these decisions that seriously affect the public's interest and property are made in total opacity with no chance of appeal.

The Federal Preservation Officer is also a Real Estate Specialist resulting in a "conflict of interest."

Finally, it has long been my worry that the USPS would – using the excuse of the fiscal exigencies imposed upon it by Congress – sell those artworks since its management claims to own them. The public must have access to the appraised value of the artworks apparently compiled by the USPS.

USPS management lays claim to art works that belong to the public. Will it use "fiscal exigencies" as an excuse to sell them?

As to the question "Considering its financial constraints, what should the Postal Service's role be in maintaining historic assets?" it should engage in long-term leases rather than sales of surplus space to insure a continual revenue stream while maintaining essential retail services in the buildings for which those services were intended. It should also offer more services – such as postal banking – rather than less and poorer in demeaning spaces. The current contraction of services under PMG Donohoe is nothing less than an engineered death spiral that will result in the liquidation of the USPS, including the historic assets that it should hold in trust for those who paid for them.

USPS "should offer more services – such as postal banking – rather than less and poorer in demeaning spaces."

Sincerely,

Gray Brechin, Ph.D

Gray Brechin is an historical geographer and author. Dr. Brechin is the founder and project director of California's Living New Deal Project.



Citizens to Save the Berkeley Post Office

email us at savetheberkeleypostoffice@gmail.com
follow us at <https://www.facebook.com/savetheberkeleypostoffice>
learn more at www.savethebpo.com or www.savethepostoffice.com
contribute at www.nationalpostofficecollaborate.com

Labor donated