

**LLOYD NEY'S *NEW LONDON FACETS*: ABSTRACTION AND REBELLION IN THE
SECTION OF FINE ARTS**

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS

by
Louise Howard Feder
May 2013

Thesis Approvals:

Dr. Gerald Silk, Thesis Advisor, Department of Art History
Dr. Susanna Gold, Department of Art History

ABSTRACT

Lloyd Raymond “Bill” Ney’s mural *New London Facets* was commissioned for the New London, Ohio post office through the Treasury Department-run New Deal program, the Section of Fine Arts (the Section), and is the only mural that program officials considered abstract. An examination of the mural today reveals that the label of “abstract” may be a bit extreme; objects in the piece have been abstracted but the mural as a whole is not at all strictly non-representational. This discrepancy and the ensuing controversy over Ney’s mural reveal much about the sensitivity of Section officials to abstraction and to subjects outside genre or allegorical scenes typical of Section commissions. Correspondence between Ney and Section officials indicate a fear in the Section that the public would reject and fail to understand or relate to anything outside of the representational norm, a belief against which Ney adamantly and successfully argued. As a result, the Section made its lone exception in the case of Ney and *New London Facets*.

While Ney did not achieve national renown as an artist within his lifetime, his work is still exhibited and auctioned relatively regularly in his hometown of New Hope, Pennsylvania. With the exception of Karal Ann Marling’s description of the *New London Facets* incident in her book Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression, there is nothing significant published on Ney or his mural. With this thesis I hope to raise awareness of Ney as an artist, provide readers with a complete understanding of the *New London Facets* commission and approval, and explore the relationship between abstraction and the New Deal art programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people have been kind enough to help me with my Master's Thesis. First and foremost I want to thank my advisor Dr. Gerald Silk who has been unendingly patient and understanding in the face of a multitude of delays and persistent computer troubles. He was also incredibly helpful to me as I edited this thesis and I could not have completed it without his guidance. My second reader, Dr. Susanna Gold, has overseen my research since I became interested in Lloyd Ney in her course *The Modern American Experience*. Her encouragement and insights throughout this process have been exceedingly helpful. I owe them both my warmest thanks.

I would also like to thank Lloyd Ney's grandchildren, Odile and Michel Laugier for welcoming me into their homes, their insights about their grandfather's work, and unprecedented access to their family archive and art collection. Birgitta Bond and Pam Sergey at the James A. Michener Art Museum were also indispensable in tracking down a plethora of archival sources. Without all of their help I could not have explored Ney's career to the extent I did for this thesis.

Finally thank you to my family and friends who have supported me through every part of this process. From Philadelphia to Doylestown to New Hope to Coaldale they have helped me keep my head clear and spirits high. Thank you all very much.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|--|------|
| ABSTRACT..... | i |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | ii |
| LIST OF IMAGES..... | iv |
| CHAPTER | |
| 1. ABSTRACTION WITHIN THE SECTION OF FINE ARTS AND AMERICA AT LARGE | 1 |
| 2. LLOYD RAYMOND "BILL NEY AND HIS CAREER PRIOR TO THE <i>NEW LONDON FACETS</i> COMMISSION | 18 |
| 3. NEY, <i>NEW LONDON FACETS</i> , AND FRICTION WITH THE SECTION..... | 43 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 67 |

LIST OF IMAGES

| Image | Page |
|---|------|
| 1. Lloyd Ney, <i>New London Facets</i> , New London, Ohio post office, 1941. Oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Michel Laugier..... | 1 |
| 2. Kindred McLeary, <i>Modern Justice</i> , Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, 1937. Oil on canvas..... | 4 |
| 3. Howard Cook, <i>Steel Industry</i> , Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, 1936. Oil on canvas..... | 4 |
| 4. Stuyvesant Van Veen, <i>Pittsburgh Panorama</i> , Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, 1937. Oil on canvas..... | 4 |
| 5. Alexander Calder, <i>Mobile</i> , circa 1935. Metal and steel..... | 7 |
| 6. Alexander Calder, <i>Form Against Yellow</i> , 1936. Painted metal and wood..... | 7 |
| 7. Mark Rothko, <i>Untitled</i> , 1940. Oil on canvas..... | 8 |
| 8. Frank Mechau, <i>Dangers of the Mail</i> , Post Office Departmental Building, Washington, D.C., 1937. Oil on canvas..... | 10 |
| 9. Victor Arnautoff, <i>City Life</i> , Coit Tower, San Francisco, California, 1934. Fresco... | 11 |
| 10. Arshile Gorky, <i>Mechanics of Flying from Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations</i> , 1936-1937. Oil on canvas..... | 12 |
| 11. Minetta Good, <i>Retrospection</i> , United States Post Office, Dresden, Tennessee, 1938. Oil on canvas..... | 15 |
| 12. Lloyd R. "Bill" Ney. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235]..... | 18 |
| 13. Lloyd Ney, <i>The Drinkers</i> , 1924-25. Oil on canvas..... | 22 |
| 14. The Mechanic Street Bridge Towpath House. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].... | 24 |
| 15. Lloyd Raymond Ney, <i>Mechanics Street, New Hope</i> , 1934. Oil on canvas. Gift of Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest, James A. Michener Art Museum..... | 24 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 16. Lloyd R. "Bill" and Jean Ney. The Lloyd Ney Papers, The James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA..... | 25 |
| 17. Lloyd Ney, <i>The Canal</i> , 1935. Oil on canvas. Photo Courtesy of Michel Laugier..... | 26 |
| 18. William Langston Lathrop, <i>Chilmark Moor</i> , 1930. Oil on canvas. Gift of Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest, James A. Michener Art Museum..... | 26 |
| 19. Joseph Pickett, <i>Coryell's Ferry, 1776</i> , 1914-1918. Oil on canvas. Whitney Museum of American Art..... | 29 |
| 20. Lloyd Ney, <i>Construction</i> , 1958. Wood, iron, steel on wood..... | 30 |
| 21. Lloyd R. "Bill" Ney. Joe Masick and Bill Dwyer for the Delaware Valley Scrapbook, 1946. The Lloyd Ney Papers, The James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA..... | 31 |
| 22. Lloyd Ney, <i>Untitled</i> , circa 1930s. Oil on canvas..... | 36 |
| 23. Lloyd Ney, <i>Abstract</i> , 1939. Oil on canvas. Private collection..... | 37 |
| 24. Lloyd R. Ney, Sketch for the St. Louis, Missouri competition, Record Group 121-MS, National Archives, College Park, MD..... | 39 |
| 25. Lloyd R. Ney, Sketch for the St. Louis, Missouri competition, Record Group 121-MS, National Archives, College Park, MD..... | 40 |
| 26. Trew Hocker, <i>The Louisiana Purchase Exposition</i> , Saint Louis, Missouri Post Office, 1940. Fresco..... | 41 |
| 27. <i>New London Facets</i> in Lloyd Ney's studio in New Hope, PA with studio visitor. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235]..... | 43 |
| 28. Howard Cook, <i>Steel Industry</i> , Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. 1936. National Archives..... | 44 |
| 29. William Gropper, <i>Construction of a Dam</i> , 1939. Oil on canvas..... | 45 |
| 30. Ward Lockwood, <i>Consolidation of the West</i> , 1937. Oil on canvas..... | 46 |
| 31. Early plan for <i>New London Facets</i> . The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235]..... | 49 |

32. Early plan for *New London Facets*. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].....50
33. Early plan for *New London Facets*. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].....50
34. Lloyd R. Ney, Simplified visualization of outstanding subject matter. Record Group 121-GA, National Archives, College Park, MD.....52
35. Lloyd R. Ney, Color study for the New London, Ohio post office. Record Group 121-GA, National Archives, College Park, MD.....52
36. Lloyd Ney, *Key West #1 C*, 1939. Watercolor. Private Collection.....55
37. Lloyd Ney, *Key West #3 C*, 1939. Watercolor. Private Collection.....55
38. Lloyd Ney, *Study for New London Facets*, 1940, charcoal, graphite, and tempera on wood panel. James A. Michener Art Museum.....58
39. Lloyd Ney, *New London Facets*, 1941, Oil on Canvas. New London, Ohio post office. Photo courtesy of Michel Laugier.....59
40. Lloyd Ney, *Red Center*, 1941. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.....61
41. Lloyd Ney, *Untitled*, circa 1940s. Oil on canvas.....61
42. Lloyd Ney, *Untitled*, 1941. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.....61
43. Lloyd Ney, *Composition No. 9*, 1950. Watercolor on paper. Photo courtesy of Michel Laugier.....62
44. Lloyd R. "Bill" Ney, watercolor of planned Ney Museum. Watercolor and charcoal on canvas. Private Collection. Photo by Edwin Hild.....64
45. Lloyd Ney, untitled and undated sculpture. Painted metal. Collection of Michel Laugier.....65
46. Lloyd Ney, *Self-Portrait*, 1962. Watercolor on Paper.....65
47. Lloyd Ney, *Untitled*, 1963. Oil on Canvas. Private Collection.....65
48. Lloyd Ney, *Apple Orchard*, 1950s. India ink on arch paper. Collection of Steven Hochberg. Photo courtesy of the James A. Michener Art Museum archive.....66

CHAPTER 1

ABSTRACTION WITHIN THE SECTION OF FINE ARTS AND AMERICA AT LARGE

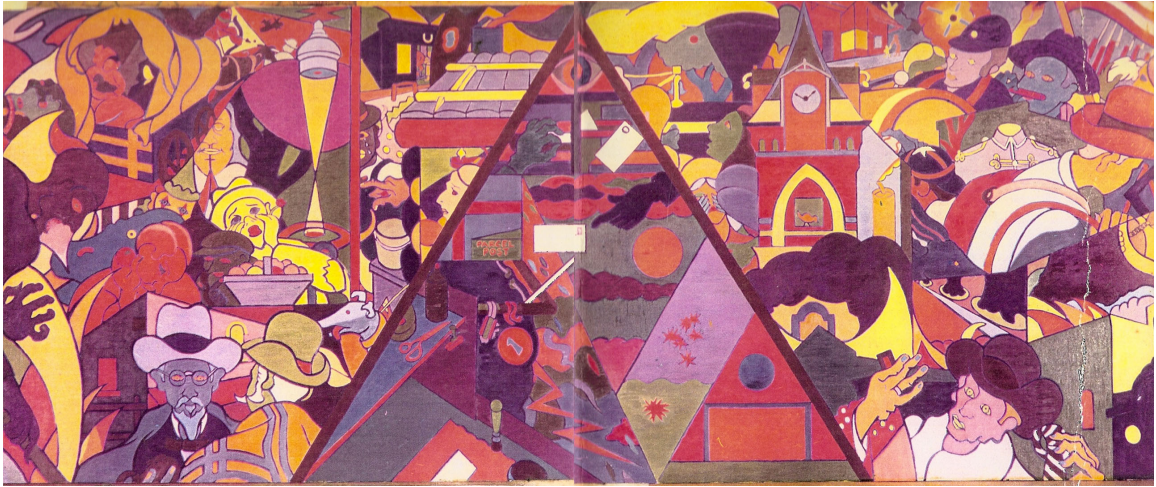


Figure 1: Lloyd Ney, *New London Facets*, New London, Ohio post office, 1941. Oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Michel Laugier.

Lloyd Ney's mural, *New London Facets* (figure 1), has long been described both in New Deal and art historical literature as the only abstract mural created through the Treasury Department-run Section of Fine Arts.¹ Though Ney's work is certainly abstracted in form, unusual in subject matter, and unnatural in color, christening the mural with such an exclusive title is misleading. Observation of the work reveals that Ney's style, however unconventional for murals commissioned through the New Deal program, remains rooted in representational treatments of figures, objects, and parts of the surrounding environment. In addition to being disingenuous, the label has also limited research on Ney and *New London Facets* to issues of abstraction within the Section of Fine Arts leading to scholarly neglect of

¹ Karal Ann Marling, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 293-5. Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 21. Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 54.

much of the rest of the artist's career. Over the course of this thesis I hope to remedy this omission and examine issues of abstraction within the Section of Fine Arts as found in *New London Facets* within the larger context of Ney's career. A detailed probe of Ney's oeuvre will provide a broader and deeper understanding of the controversy surrounding his New Deal mural and shed vital light on the conscious choices of style and subject matter that the artist made for the sake of his composition's audience. However, before delving into the affect of Ney's rich and varied career's affect on *New London Facets*, it is important to first investigate the New Deal's Section of Fine Arts' thorny relationship with abstraction.

The New Deal spawned a great many new federal art programs, so many that participants sometimes did not know who was actually in charge of their position, commission, or work.² This may have been due to the fact that many of the art programs were designed as temporary, experimental projects while other programs lasted for years in order to create as many jobs as possible, and still more programs were solely concerned with creating art as opposed to jobs. Confusing the matter further for artists, nearly all of the New Deal programs were charged with representing the "American scene" in art for American citizens in the midst of the

² Lloyd Ney, the artist discussed in this thesis, often wrote that the WPA employed and commissioned him to paint a mural in the New London, Ohio post office. In fact, Ney was never approached by the WPA and only spoke with Section officials. Ney's confusion has led to numerous mistakes in the literature about his time working on his New London, Ohio commission. The most noticeably incorrect example of this was the label formerly accompanying the cartoon for Ney's final mural, *New London Facets*, located in the James A. Michener Art Museum, which named both the WPA and PWAP as the institutions in charge of the commission. It has since been corrected with the assistance of this author.

Great Depression.³ These already similar programs also had seemingly interchangeable acronyms and, in this confounding sea of bureaucratic abbreviations, many artists simply began to refer to all New Deal art programs as the WPA.⁴

One of these programs was the Section of Painting and Sculpture, later the Section of Fine Arts, and always called simply, “the Section.” The Section lasted the longest of the New Deal art organizations, running from October of 1934 through 1943. Different perhaps from the more widely known need-based Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Art Project’s (FAP) and the Public Works of Art Program’s (PWAP), both of which gave thousands of unemployed artists work, the primary mission of the Section was to provide artists unable to obtain large commissions on their own with jobs that would jump-start their careers while simultaneously decorating federal buildings.⁵

³ Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*, 139-142.

⁴ This practice was not only made archival work on New Deal artists and their commissions understandably confusing, but the label was also actually incorrect. The WPA was an umbrella organization responsible for organizations such as the Federal Arts Project (FAP) that employed needy artists.

⁵ While Section commissions were not awarded based on financial need, many artists who participated in Section projects did qualify for and often took part in need-based programs like the FAP and PWAP. However, in spite of the presence of financially troubled artists, the Section was conceived as a means for artists of any background to compete for large, public, paid commissions.

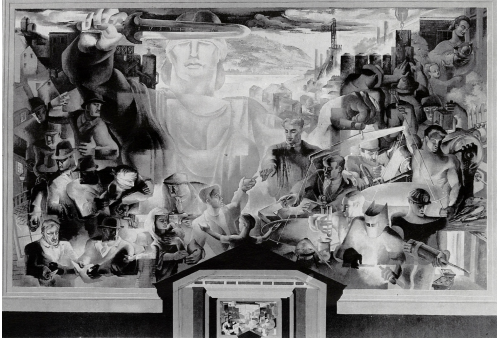


Figure 2: Kindred McLeary, *Modern Justice*, Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, 1937. Oil on canvas.



Figure 3: Howard Cook, *Steel Industry*, Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, 1936. Oil on canvas.

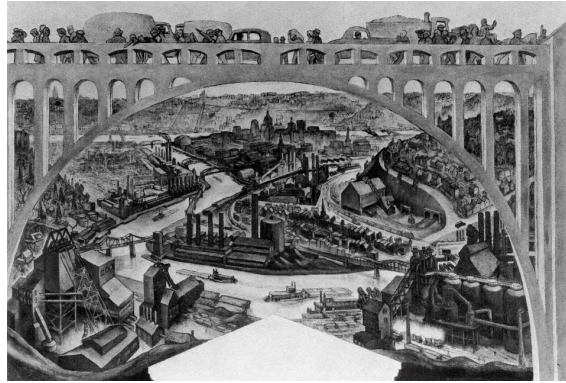


Figure 4: Stuyvesant Van Veen, *Pittsburgh Panorama*, Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, 1937. Oil on canvas.

The most frequently commissioned motifs in Section murals include imagery of farms, family scenes, episodes from local history, or allegories that allude to topical concepts such as “freedom,” “American progress” or “work.” For example, the Section awarded three mural commissions in the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse to artists Kindred McLeary, Howard Cook, and Stuyvesant Van Veen who won with submitted sketches that depicted Justice, the local steel industry, and a panoramic view of the city (figures 2-4) respectively, all of which were subjects

suggested by Section officials in the commission competition's initial announcement.⁶

Terms such as avant-garde, modern, and abstract would be appropriate for a far fewer number of such murals. Indeed, a general accounting of New Deal murals located across the United States in post offices, hospitals, schools, and other very public buildings may tempt a viewer into assuming that art in America during the 1930s was solely concerned with depicting the American landscape in a pseudo-Regionalist style.⁷ Of course, should one leave the post office and seek out non-New Deal commissioned examples of American painting and sculpture from the 1930s and 1940s, as much of the subject matter would seem almost intentionally at odds with contemporary New Deal works.

Simultaneously with the Section's commissions, artists like Alexander Calder were creating abstract works recognizable by flat, colorful shapes and imbued with movement. Calder's *Mobile* (figure 5), for example, from 1935 consists entirely of hanging geometric shapes. Completely abstract, the kinetic sculpture cannot be associated with any recognizable objects outside of pure geometrical forms and is entirely concerned with shape, line, and motion. Calder's fascination with pure abstraction can also be seen in 1936, the same year Cook completed his previously mentioned Section commissioned mural for the Pittsburgh post office and courthouse, in *Form Against Yellow* (figure 6). Though no longer literally in motion,

⁶ Section announcement for the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse Contest, 1935. Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, Textual Records Division, National Archives.

⁷ Marling, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 68-69.

the work's energetic lines and three-dimensional forms imply movement in a lively manner. With *Form Against Yellow*, Calder also plays with the viewer's ideas of traditional artistic categories with the work's liminal placement between painting and sculpture. Though Calder was simultaneously working in a style still concerned with the figural and representational during the same years he produced *Mobile* and *Form Against Yellow*, the pure abstraction present in these two works is far removed from the type of painting being commissioned by the Section in the 1930s.⁸

Outside of sculpture, artists like Mark Rothko strived towards pure abstraction in painting during the 1930s and 1940s, where forms existed solely as forms as opposed to abstracted versions of recognizable objects.⁹ In Rothko's *Untitled* (figure 6) from 1940 for instance, the artist has painted an ambiguous, orange shape in front of a red, black, yellow, and beige background. The orange shape, though perhaps familiar in its organic form, cannot be readily identified as an abstracted version of a specific object. This type of non-objective abstraction, which, as we will see, was of much of interest to Ney, was completely out of bounds for Section officials.¹⁰ While many American artists seemed far more interested in

⁸ Representational and figural works created during the 1930s by Calder include *Cirque Calder* and associated circus wire sculptures and drawings, among others.

⁹ During this period Mark Rothko was also painting urban themes including paintings of street scenes, buildings, and portraits.

¹⁰ It is important to note that Rothko viewed himself as equal parts Surrealist and abstract painter during the early 1940s. As Jacob Baal-Teshuva points out on page 37 of his book, *Mark Rothko 1903-1970: Pictures as Drama*, "The war had caused a number of European Surrealists to emigrate to New York...The great pioneer of abstract art, Piet Mondrian, had moved to New York back in 1940. The critical discussion of his works and the arrival of the Surrealists were decisive steps in the rise of Abstract Expressionism. Rothko and Gottlieb saw themselves as the new, independent successors to the European avantgarde. They sought to unite Surrealism and abstract painting."

incorporating these modern styles and techniques into their work, the head of the Section dismissed the trend as, “that Abstract art stuff.”¹¹

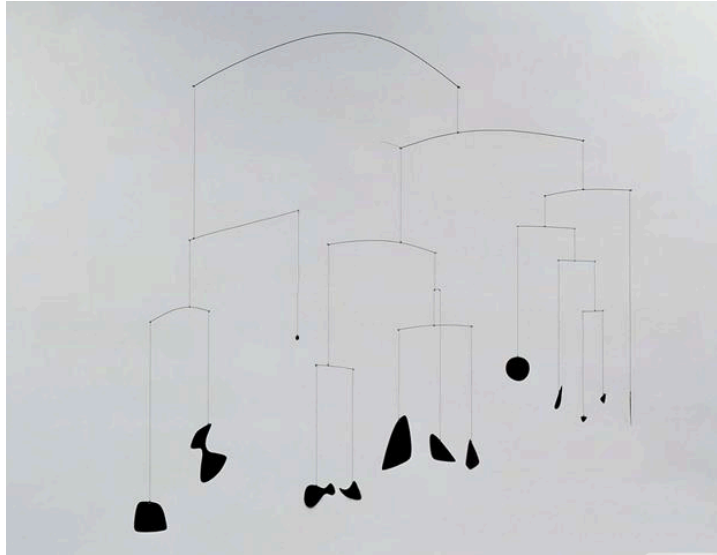


Figure 5: Alexander Calder, *Mobile*, circa 1935. Metal and steel.

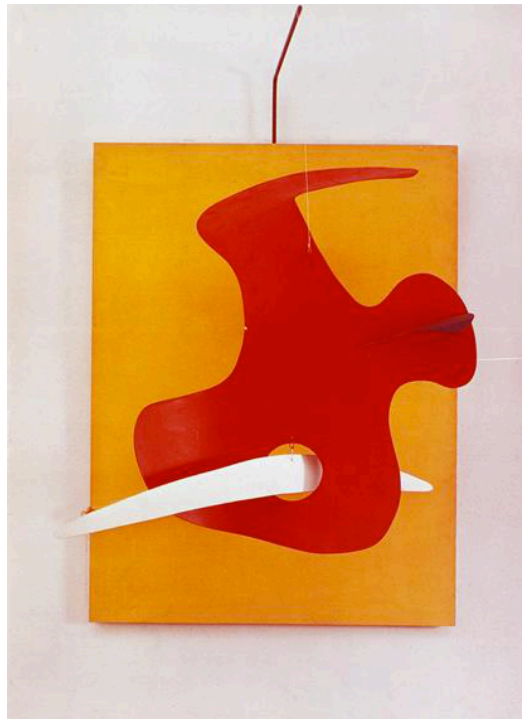


Figure 6: Alexander Calder, *Form Against Yellow*, 1936. Painted metal and wood.

¹¹ Marling, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 25, 293-5.



Figure 7: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1940. Oil on canvas.

This interest became so significant that in 1937 a small, select group of artists committed to abstraction organized and formed a group called the American Abstract Artists (AAA). Members of the AAA met regularly and struggled to find nomenclature that would suit the varied approaches and styles of all involved. Given their differing uses of abstraction, the group struggled to cohesively define “abstract art” as a term.¹² Eventually the AAA members gave up on this precise definition and decided instead to embrace a liberal interpretation of the word *abstract*. The term was used generally for abstracted works and purely non-objective works alike, which proved useful in creating an environment where artists, critics, and, later, government officials, felt comfortable using the term often, and for very different

¹² Elaine D. Gustafson and Susan E. Strickler, *The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s, Selections from the Penny and Elton Yasuna Collection* (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1991), 8-9.

works of art.¹³ Unfortunately, as the practice of using *abstract* as a broad term spread outside of the artistic community, it began to be applied to works and situations that were not abstract at all, even in the AAA's general sense.

For instance, in defending Frank Mechau's 1937 mural, *Dangers of the Mail* (figure 8), officials in the Section program repeatedly called the several nude women in the piece "impersonal" and "almost abstract" in an attempt to pacify the public's concern about the presence of nudity. The Section officials' logic appears to have been that if a recognizably nude figure could be thought of in any way as abstract, then it surely cannot exist in reality and can therefore be acceptable on a post office wall. It is also possible that the Section officials hoped that having a discussion about the nudes would keep the public from fretting about Mechau's otherwise extremely violent painted central scene in *Dangers of the Mail*. Unfortunately for the Section, their "abstract vocabulary" strategy backfired; the publicity surrounding the "scandalous" D.C. murals fused a link between federally funded, accepted, and defended "almost abstract" art and nudity, immorality, and modernism.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 24-25.



Figure 8: Frank Mechau, *Dangers of the Mail*, Post Office Departmental Building, Washington, D.C., 1937. Oil on canvas.

This new correlation among styles and subjects in the wake of *Dangers of the Mail* caused subsequent Section commissions that contained hints of nudity to be labeled “modern art,” which made Section officials nervous about further controversy. It is important to note that the Section was commissioning art in a country that had already witnessed and condemned the creation of “modern,” so-called “Red” art under the auspices of the WPA’s FAP and PWAP.¹⁵ The most infamous episode was that of the Coit Tower murals painted under the Public Works of Art Program (PWAP) by artists Victor Arnautoff, Bernard Zakheim and Clifford Wight in 1934 (figure 9).

¹⁵ Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 24.



Figure 9: Victor Arnautoff, *City Life*, Coit Tower, San Francisco, California, 1934. Fresco.

These murals included subtle references to the Communist beliefs of these artists, such as a painted magazine stand holding copies of the *Daily Worker*. When asked to explain these references, Zakheim famously stated that Communism was simply an alternative to the “American scene” requested in the PWAP commission.¹⁶ The public was outraged and became mistrustful of artists employed in PWAP. Then, adding to the flames of public resentment towards abstract art, controversy erupted three years later over Arshile Gorky’s murals painted for the WPA.

Gorky was commissioned to paint ten large murals between 1936 and 1937 for the Newark Airport Administration Building in New Jersey. His assigned subject

¹⁶ Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 46.

was “aviation,” a topic WPA officials deemed appropriate and non-controversial for an airport setting. However, upon its completion Newark locals were overwhelmingly negative about the newly installed murals. Though Gorky had created a series of murals based on aviation as instructed, his forms were severely abstracted. His work referenced photographs taken by Gorky’s friend Wyatt Davis throughout the airport. At times objects in the source photos were used in their entirety and for other parts of the murals the original photos were combined into a photo-collage that in turn was represented in the murals.



Figure 10: Arshile Gorky, *Mechanics of Flying* from *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations*, 1936-1937. Oil on canvas.

The resulting mural series, *Aviation: Evolution of Forms under Aerodynamic Limitations* (figure 10), is an amalgamation of forms, colors, and lines that reference parts of planes and airports without representing objects directly. As Kim S. Theriault writes in *Rethinking Arshile Gorky*, “The composition bridges time and space to form an idea of flight and quotes fragments of modern life. Just as one can

fly from one place to another, thereby compressing time and shifting easily from space to space and culture to culture, Gorky's abstraction dislocates and reattributes elements from one composition or location to another."¹⁷

This effect created by the disorienting abstracted forms was lost on the murals' audience and local papers were quick to make fun of Gorky's style. Ultimately, public disapproval became so strong that a group of area citizens attempted, unsuccessfully, to remove the murals from the airport in the middle of the night.¹⁸ Though Gorky had followed the WPA's directive regarding a subject, his inclusion of abstracted objects, however recognizable they were in parts, and use of compressed space proved too modern for citizens in Newark. This episode when combined with the Coit Tower incident led officials, concerned about funding and public reception, to become exceedingly careful about artists' "modern" styles in later commissions.¹⁹

As Karal Ann Marling points out in her seminal book, *Wall to Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, the more the terms "abstract," "modern art," and "the contemporary manner" were used in popular reports on murals that communities found displeasing, the more the terms became catchalls for art that failed to please or was deemed in bad taste.²⁰ Since the Section was intended to eventually evolve into a Federal Department for the Arts, officials in

¹⁷ Kim S. Theriault, *Rethinking Arshile Gorky* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2009), 94-95.

¹⁸ Theriault, *Rethinking Arshile Gorky*, 96.

¹⁹ Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 48.

²⁰ Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 24.

charge of commissions such as Edward Bruce and Edward Rowan wanted to avoid serious controversy in order to guarantee the organization's permanence. This meant that even if Section judges and officials personally took no issue with abstraction, Cubism, non-objectivity, Surrealism or any other Modern art style, technique or movement, it did not make sense in the long run to antagonize the public with modern styles or unconventional subjects.²¹

And yet Bruce, Rowan and their compatriots desperately did not want to become stuck too deeply in the past. Rowan in particular was known for immediately dismissing submissions that were too academic or derivative of "old masters" works.²² The Section hoped to decorate post offices with American subjects painted in a style not overly dependent on European academicism. This did not, of course, keep the Section from commissioning a number of murals that contained unexplained angels, as in Karl Free's *Columbia Under the Palm*, or gestures that relied heavily on or copied directly from Renaissance or classical sculpture and painting, as in Edmond Archer's *Captain Eppes Making Friends with the Appomattox Indians*.²³

With officials wary of modernistic submissions and frustrated with academic imitations, the Section was often left with art commissioned and painted in a strange middling style. The majority of the works were not quite Regionalist in nature, but

²¹ Ibid, 25.

²² Ibid, 312-3.

²³ Ibid, 307-309. Marling further remarks that, "According to the minutes kept by Bruce's private secretary, the Section was struck collectively dumb by *Captain Eppes Making Friends with the Appomattox Indians*. Small wonder! The most stunning feature of the work was Archer's implicit contention that Bernini was alive and well and working in Virginia. And Tiepolo lived in the neighborhood too." 309.

many did depict scenes from American life. There were no history paintings in the 19th century sense of the word, but there certainly were a large number of murals depicting staged historical events. Minetta Good's 1938 mural *Retrospection* (figure 11) is one example of this awkward in-between categorization. Good has painted scenes from the town of Dresden, Tennessee's local history; on the left pioneers settle the land, on the right stagecoaches arrive bringing the mail, and in the middle of the composition there is a representation of the town during its prosperous antebellum period. Though she is careful in representing Dresden accurately in terms of historical events, she does not frame the place as an alternative to urban, modern living as would a Regionalist painter nor does she attempt to endow Dresden with a sense of greatness or gravity as one would in a 19th century history painting.



Figure 11: Minetta Good, *Retrospection*, United States Post Office, Dresden, Tennessee, 1938. Oil on canvas.

This safe middling style in submissions ultimately produced a collection of murals that do not accurately represent current artistic trends in painting and sculpture in America. This is not to say that the Section failed to produce interesting

or successful murals; on the contrary a great number of Section murals, like Ney's *New London Facets*, are fascinating in terms of subject matter, composition, and style. We simply must acknowledge that an artist with a distinctive or progressive style hoping to obtain a Section commission had to fight for the commission, persuade Section officials to leave the comfortably safe and established aesthetic style behind, and to take a significant risk in terms of public opinion and federal support.

However, in spite of these restrictions, Section officials successfully awarded 1400 contracts to artists from all over the country during the institution's tenure from October of 1934 through 1943.²⁴ The Section became a means through which artists across the country could obtain large-scale commissions. It especially favored artists who were either just starting their careers or were not well known, and emerging artists became ideal candidates for the Section's commissions. If a Section commission could launch an artist's career, and if the public liked his or her art, then that was the ultimate success both for the artist and for the Section as an institution.

That said, Section officials were entirely unprepared for a public that might favor public, abstract art, as in the case of the New London, Ohio commission. In a series of events that baffled officials, Ney, whose proposed mural for New London's post office was initially rejected by the Section, rallied the people of New London to his side. Ney presented himself to the public as an artist attempting to paint America in his own individual style, not as someone intentionally engaged in an elitist,

²⁴ Dows, "The New Deal's Treasury Art Program: A Memoir," 20. The Section faded out because of budget constraints necessitated by the advent of World War II beginning in 1941 and then finally ending the program altogether in 1943.

incomprehensible, foreign style of painting. Ney's passion for abstract art and his struggle with the Section was then viewed by New London's citizens as an example of an American standing up for his rights in the face of the government, and they excitedly defended his art to the Section.

The details of Ney's life prior to his New London appointment are outlined in detail in Chapter Two. There, I will discuss how Ney's philosophies about painting and abstraction changed over the course of his career, leading to his passionate defense of his New London mural. Then, in Chapter Three, I explore Ney's interactions with the Section officials and how his relationships with them affected both Ney's career and the Section's attitude towards abstract art. As the Section named Ney's mural as the only abstract mural they ever commissioned, the incident provides a case study in the Section's attitude towards abstraction. An analysis of Ney's art, career, and relationship with Section officials throughout the incident offers important insights into how the Section felt about commissioning art outside of its regularly accepted style.

CHAPTER 2

LLOYD RAYMOND “BILL NEY AND HIS CAREER PRIOR TO THE *NEW LONDON FACETS* COMMISSION

Figure 12: Lloyd R. “Bill” Ney. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].

Before examining the controversial circumstances surrounding the *New London Facets* commission, I shall discuss the artist, Lloyd Ney, and his body of work prior to beginning work on the mural. Past accounts of Ney’s important clash with Section officials, such as those by Karal Ann Marling in *Wall to Wall America* and Richard D. McKinzie in *A New Deal for Artists*, focus on Ney’s notorious mural and information about his relationship with the Section. As important as these accounts are in regard to this episode within the Section’s broad and at times confusing

history, they ignore the valuable context that Ney's larger career provides. Thus, my research will expand upon prior accounts to consider why the mural was so important to Ney and why he was adamant that the final mural not be changed from his original conception for the work.

Lloyd Raymond "Bill" Ney was born to Sadie Maidenford and William W. Ney in 1893 in Friendsburg, Pennsylvania. The family had virtually no connection to the arts, although Lloyd claimed that he was related to Marshall Ney, a general under Napoleon, and Elisabet Ney, "a courtesan to Kings," both of whom he considered creative.²⁵ Despite his lack of exposure to the arts, Ney became interested in art at a young age and painted often without the aid of classes or a teacher. Recognizing their only child's passion for the arts, Ney's parents allowed him to leave high school in 1913 to study in Philadelphia at the Industrial School of Art, now the University of the Arts, where he specialized in cast drawing.²⁶ Ney flourished in his classes and transferred to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia (PAFA) in 1914 where he studied under Henri McCarter until he

²⁵ Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd. *Ney* (New York: Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd., undated), 1. Ney's relationship to Marshall and Elisabet Ney is mentioned in a biographical essay accompanying his solo exhibition at the Avant-Garde Gallery in New York City. The author's name is not included in the catalog, but we can assume that Ney aided the author in writing the essay as it contains several anecdotes repeated by Ney in unpublished essays and in his personal papers, now located in the Archives of American Art.

²⁶ Lloyd R. Ney, "Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!" (book manuscript, James A. Michener Art Museum, undated), 1a. Ney's daughter, Gretchen Ney Laugier, wrote on March 26, 2003 in a letter to the James A. Michener Art Museum that she thought her father finished the manuscript, "around November 27, 1949." Unfortunately, the manuscript itself is not dated, so we cannot know for sure that it was completed in 1949. We may however, assume that Ney wrote it around that time as the only date referenced in the manuscript older than the date provided by Gretchen Ney Laugier is 1950.

graduated in 1918.²⁷ Though Ney became more technically precise in his painting, he found his experience in school lacking in creative inspiration. He later wrote disparagingly about his time at PAFA:

My creative and inventive spirit continued to lie dormant. The process of making me an imitative painter was stepped up in tempo – full length casts, nude and draped with many folds, hair and beards full of large and small curls, each curl having its light, half tone and dark to challenge accuracy.²⁸

In spite of Ney's reservations about his academic training, the staff and faculty had such faith in his work that he was awarded the prestigious Cresson Travelling Scholarship in 1920, which he used following a brief tour in Europe at the end of World War I. Ney utilized the scholarship to travel throughout Europe where he was exposed to and quickly admired the work of Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, and William Blake. While living in the Hotel de Versailles in Montparnasse, Ney made the acquaintances of painters such as Jules Pascin, Moïse Kisling, Léonard Fujita, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Frederick Frieseke, all of whom helped Ney to think about painting in ways markedly different from his training at the Industrial School of Art and PAFA.²⁹ His four-year trip in Europe proved so instrumental to his style and career that the majority of articles and biographic

²⁷ Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd. *Ney*, 1-2.

²⁸ Ney, "Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!" 1a-2b.

²⁹ Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd. *Ney*, 2. The essay also mentions that, while in Montparnasse, Ney also, "helped 'Shorty' Lazar form a basketball team, played chess with Walter Pach and Roger Fry in St. Tropez."

essays in exhibition catalogs discuss it in detail.³⁰ Ney himself later wrote about the trip as a type of cure for his academic training:

I had to learn the hard way by trial and error; experimentation, travel in Europe, seeing the masterpieces of the world. I lived in Paris...surrounded by abstract painting, sympathetic but not knowing how to understand it always searching for an approach to painting that suited by particular temperament. I read Clive Bell and Roger Fry thereby gaining my first real understanding and was tremendously stimulated, gradually forming a philosophy about fine art in painting.

About the year 1924-25 I started painting a good sized canvas...My theme was two men sitting at a marble top table in one of the small bistro eating places in a working man's section of Paris (figure 13). Every part of the painting was completed but the marble top of the table. I had great difficulty, and spent in time at least four months trying to paint the top of that table. Somehow I couldn't get it right. Out of desperation one day I mixed together cobalt blue, white and a little black with a palette knife and furiously brushed that muted color tone over the tabletop surface and in five or ten minutes my canvas was completed! A perfect relationship. That was the beginning of my becoming conscious of painting relationships instead of painting things. That was the kind of intuitive feeling I had the day before entering art school. That kind of understanding at its highest is a referential approach which offers some creative and inventive liberties. So if I am embittered with organized art schools and the standards they impose bear with me...³¹

³⁰ Charles Shaw, "Bill Ney lives! Retrospective show of New Hope artist reveals his artistry and prolificness," *New Hope Gazette* (New Hope, PA), October 12, 1978, 3, 10. Shaw's article is perhaps most notable among the articles and essays as it accompanied Ney's first major retrospective exhibition. Shaw attempted to document the artist's evolution, highlighting the most important events, one of which was Ney's time in Paris.

³¹ Ney, "Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!" 2b-4d.



Figure 13: Lloyd Ney, *The Drinkers*, 1924-25. Oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Odile Laugier.

Ney's daughter remembered after his death that her father never promoted art school or painting as a sole career. She wrote that Ney "would say stand guard in a museum, dig a ditch, drive a taxi for money, but paint for love."³² It is by no means an understatement to say that Ney left the United States a traditional, academically trained painter, but returned committed to a new, more abstracted style of painting.³³

Ney left Paris and settled in New Hope, Pennsylvania in 1925 where he lived next door to close friend Harry Rosin, a sculptor whom he had met in Paris. The town of New Hope, considered a center of the Pennsylvanian Impressionist movement, was also an artist's colony populated by a new wave of Modernists

³² Gretchen Ney Laugier, "Stream of consciousness, thoughts and facts about Lloyd R. Ney, my father, March 26, 2003," Lloyd R. Ney Files, James A. Michener Museum, Doylestown, PA.

³³ Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd. *Ney*, 2-5.

interested in moving beyond Impressionism during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s.³⁴ Ney became a fixture within this new group of artists and was friends with painters such as Charles Frederic Ramsey, Charles Evans, and Louis Stone. Together they formed a group appropriately called “The New Group,” later known as “The Independents,” and strove to create art in response to what they considered the dull, staid work of the Pennsylvania Impressionist school, still very active in the late 1920s.³⁵ Ney bought a home now known as the Towpath House, located on Mechanic Street, which grew into a thriving artist’s community dubbed the “Latin Quarter” populated by this new wave of New Hope Modernist painters (figures 14 and 15).³⁶

³⁴ Roy Pedersen, “The New Hope Modernists,” in *New Hope Modernists, 1917-1950*, ed. Roy Pedersen and Barbara A. Wolanin (New Hope, PA: The New Hope Modernist Project, Inc., 1991), 8.

³⁵ Sarah Langham, *A Modernist Experiment: Visual Jazz, The Cooperative Painting Project and Modernist Works* (New York: Langham Leff Gallery), 3.

³⁶ Shaw, “Bill Ney lives! Retrospective show of New Hope artist reveals his artistry and prolificness,” 10.

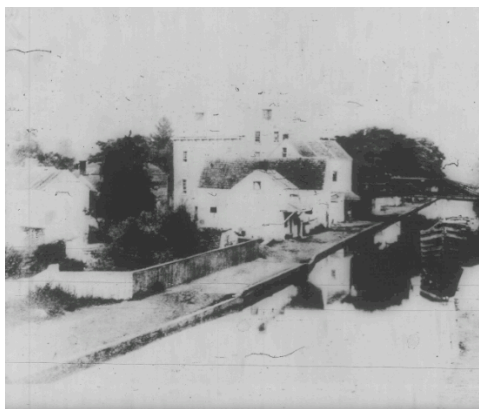


Figure 14: The Mechanic Street Bridge Towpath House. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235]



Figure 15: Lloyd Raymond Ney, *Mechanics Street, New Hope*, 1934. Oil on canvas. Gift of Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest, James A. Michener Art Museum.

Ney painted with his New Group peers in relative quiet over the course of the following five years, leaving intermittently to take teaching positions in institutions such as Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, Ogontz Junior College in Abington, Pennsylvania, a government teaching project located in Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands, and the Kansas City Art Institute where he served as head of the painting school.³⁷

In 1930 a number of things changed for Ney. First, he left his position at the Kansas City Art Institute to return home to New Hope where he continued painting with the New Group circle. Then, on July 12 of the same year, he married his fiancée Jean (figure 16). Finally, later that year, Ney was dramatically turned down from the annual Phillips' Mill exhibition held in New Hope.

³⁷ Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd. *Ney*, 2-5.



Figure 16: Lloyd R. “Bill” and Jean Ney. The Lloyd Ney Papers, The James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA. The Phillips’ Mill exhibition was first held in the summer of 1929, where one hundred twenty five works were displayed and judged by famous area Pennsylvanian Impressionists such as John Folinsbee, Daniel Garber, and Rae Sloan Bredin.³⁸ When Ney submitted his painting of a bridge over the Delaware Canal in New Hope the exhibition was only in its second year, was still a young “tradition” in the community, and the jurors had not yet encountered anything remotely Modern until Ney’s piece. The jury concluded that the painting of the New Hope canal did not fit with their vision for the exhibition; Pennsylvanian Impressionist and tonalist William Lathrop told Ney that, specifically, his use of red on a bridge was too garish and disturbing for the exhibition.³⁹

³⁸ Pedersen, “The New Hope Modernists,” 9.

Phillips’ Mill Community Association, “Art Exhibition: History of the Phillips’ Mill Art Exhibition,” <http://www.phillipsmill.org/art-exhibition/>.

³⁹ Unfortunately, the name of the actual work submitted to the Phillips’ Mill exhibition has been lost along with any image of the work. Ney painted so many canvases during his career, and so many of them abstract, that it has been all too easy for names of paintings and reproductions to become lost. However, based on



Figure 17: Lloyd Ney, *The Canal*, 1935. Oil on canvas. Photo Courtesy of Michel Laugier.



Figure 18: William Langston Lathrop, *Chilmark Moor*, 1930. Oil on canvas. Gift of Marguerite and Gerry Lenfest, James A. Michener Art Museum.

Given Lathrop's own style, this rejection should not have been a complete surprise for Ney and the New Group. Lathrop's work featured portraits, still lifes,

the described subject matter, we may assume that the painting submitted to the Phillips' Mill Competition was similar to *The Canal* in figure 17.

and landscapes, such as *Chilmark Moor* (figure 18), rendered in the muted color palette and hazy brushstrokes typical of Pennsylvania Impressionist painters. The style was still rampantly popular in 1929, but, with an influx of modernist painters in New Hope, formerly home to impressionist painters only, Lathrop and the other Phillips' Mill judges were probably feeling a bit threatened. It is also likely that the members of the judging committee, working in the traditional academic style championed by PAFA, disapproved of Ney and the New Group's decidedly anti-academic feelings. Looking outside of New Hope, the judges may have also recognized hints of European modernists such as Henri Matisse and Paul Gauguin in Ney's submitted work with its expressive use of color, thick black lines, and flattened perspective. This influence would not have been welcomed and may account, in part, for Ney's immediate rejection from the exhibition.

Frustrated, Ney and his New Group peers, in the spirit of the history of alternative exhibitions in modernism, quickly put together a display of Modern paintings to rival the selection of traditional, safe, Impressionist paintings at the Phillips' Mill. Their exhibition was held in a local abandoned prison and opened the day before Phillips' Mill, thereby stealing most of the initial press attention and publicity.⁴⁰

The rival exhibition significantly raised the New Hope Modernists' profile within the art world as a whole, but perhaps even more so for Ney individually. His work began to be noticed and reviewed by critics, publications, and galleries outside of the New Hope area. He started exhibiting almost annually in major group

⁴⁰ Pedersen, "The New Hope Modernists," 9.

exhibitions, first in the College Art Association International Exhibition in 1932, then the “Little International Show” in the Mellon Galleries in Philadelphia, and again in the Pickett Galleries locally in New Hope in 1934.⁴¹

The Pickett Galleries is especially significant for Ney’s career. It was Ney who opened and ran the gallery space, demonstrating his dedication to establishing new homes for Modern art within New Hope. Ney also named the gallery after Joseph Pickett, an artist whose work he discovered while living on Mechanic Street; Ney viewed Pickett as an important influence on his own work. Ney never stated explicitly what he found so inspiring in Pickett’s art except that his style was, “primitive.” Extant examples of his work are extremely rare, but in *Coryell’s Ferry, 1776* (figure 19) we may see why Pickett’s painting so attracted Ney. Pickett’s painting style is flat with little attention to actual perspective, scale, or shading, similar to Ney’s work in *Canal*. Though *Coryell’s Ferry, 1776* depicts a real place within New Hope in a real year, the scene relates very little to actual events or to a realistic depiction of the area. In Pickett’s simplified style, Ney may have found a local inspiration for his modern way of painting. Though Ney had already learned about modern artists finding inspiration in non-Western “primitive” objects while studying in Europe, discovering a local, untrained, American painter from which he could draw further inspiration must have been exhilarating.

⁴¹ The James A. Michener Art Museum Bucks Country Artists Database, “Lloyd (Bill) Ney: Career,” <http://www.michenermuseum.org/bucksartists/artist.php?artist=164&page=664>.



Figure 19: Joseph Pickett, *Coryell's Ferry, 1776, 1914-1918*. Oil on canvas. Whitney Museum of American Art.

Additionally, one may also surmise that Pickett's reported technique of introducing textured materials into his paintings like sand and shells was exciting to Ney, who also incorporated nontraditional materials into some of his later works like *Construction* (figure 20). Additionally, his assertion that Pickett's work was "primitive" reinforced Ney's disdain for the academic world; in seeking out the pure, untouched, and primitive he followed in the footsteps of modern artists such as Gauguin, Picasso, and Modigliani, to mention but a few, who were fascinated with "primitive" art. When his interest in Pickett first arose, Ney reportedly bought two Pickett paintings for \$15 and later sold them to Moore Price, a local collector.⁴² The

⁴² *New Hope Gazette* (New Hope, PA), April 2, 1953.

episode so captivated area newspapers that Ney was later the subject of an editorial cartoon (figure 21).

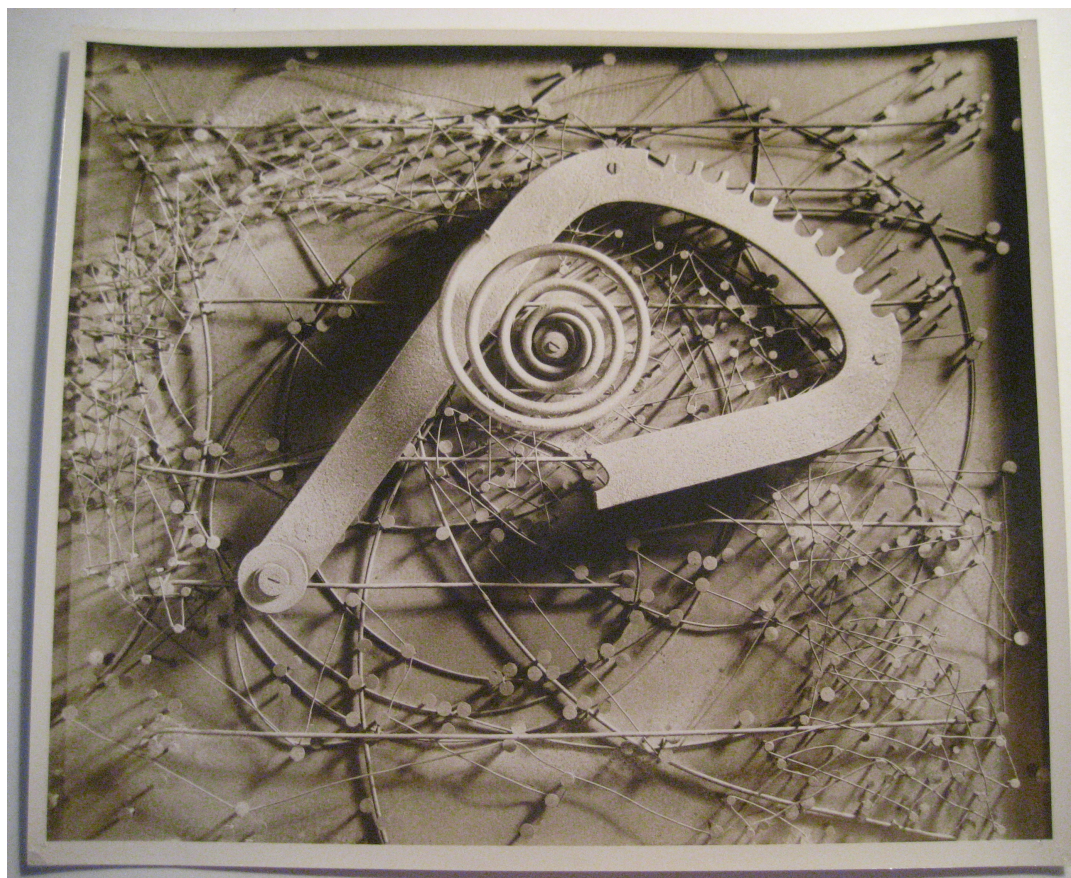


Figure 20: Lloyd Ney, *Construction*, 1958. Wood, iron, steel on wood.



Figure 21: Lloyd R. "Bill" Ney. Joe Masick and Bill Dwyer for the Delaware Valley Scrapbook, 1946. The Lloyd Ney Papers, The James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA.

His interest and investment in Pickett also indicates that Ney was deeply attentive to matters of art history and artistic relevance. In establishing a space to display Pickett's work as well as his own, Ney was carefully building a reputation for both artists that would hopefully result in critical attention, fiscal reward, and the legitimatization of style. Ney also vigilantly documented his opinions on connections between art, education, and the public throughout his career and came closest to

collecting them all in an unpublished manuscript entitled, “Art Appreciation for the People! How to Look at Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!”⁴³ In the manuscript Ney drew upon different episodes throughout his career in order to instruct the reader in how to appreciate works of art within their own historical context and how to distinguish between commercial art and great and true masterpieces.

Ney’s writing is at times difficult to follow and perhaps not fully developed. It is possible that Ney was waiting to edit the manuscript carefully only after he obtained a publisher, which ultimately never happened. In spite of its lack of flow and cohesion, “Art Appreciation for the People! How to Look at Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!” laid out what Ney thought differentiated abstraction from his eventual proclaimed personal style of the Nonobjective. According to Ney, all art can be placed into one of three groups: Imitative, Abstract, or Nonobjective.

The Imitative refers to any art that relies upon artistic convention in portraying the real; as Ney writes, “Imitative painting is the usual readable surface aspect of perfection.”⁴⁴ This broad definition means that everything from academic painting to history painting to photography falls within this category and is ultimately problematic as realism is not every viewer’s idea of perfection. Ney went on to write that the difficulty with Imitative painting is that in imitating the masters

⁴³ A copy of this unpublished manuscript is located in the James A. Michener Art Museum’s archives in Doylestown, Pennsylvania as well as in the personal collections of Michel and Odile Laugier.

⁴⁴ Ney, “Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!” 21.

every imitation gets a bit worse, as if every artist within this group is only producing a poor copy of what someone had completed before them.

Abstract painting is defined in the manuscript as, “a natural sequence from referential painting,” which took place when Picasso began painting in the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁵ In his chapter on the Abstract, Ney emphasizes that the style is a drastic improvement over the sameness present in the Imitative, but that Abstract painters still work within the same framework as their predecessors. Nevertheless, Ney reminds his reader that even though Abstract artists work within the same tradition as the Imitative the end result is so different that viewers must interact with Abstract works in an entirely different way, thereby making the Abstract vastly superior for contemporary viewers.

Finally, Ney writes about the Nonobjective, which is described, as one might expect of a self-proclaimed practitioner, to be the superior style. Kandinsky is credited with starting the style in 1911, painting, “for the first time in the history of painting where the usual life and nature forms aren’t used as a theme.”⁴⁶ In writing his own treatise on art, Ney likely had read and drew heavily on Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Kandinsky’s comparison of humanity to a pyramid with the artist leading viewers up to its peak is reminiscent of Ney’s three progressive stages. Further aligned with Kandinsky’s writings, Ney goes on to explain how the Nonobjective is the one style that will finally allow art to move forward, past subject and theme and illusionistic space and into explorations of

⁴⁵ Ney, “Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!” 26.

⁴⁶ Ney, “Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!” 36.

relationships involving a spiritual, fourth dimension of inner reality. This “inner reality” bears a striking relationship to the spiritual in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, conscious homage to Kandinsky as the painter that Ney believed most committed to this approach.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most telling aspect of Ney’s passionate belief in the superiority of the Nonobjective is his description of it as, “the beginning of a new wave length, [standing] alone as a beacon for all time.”⁴⁸ Ney’s written philosophy of artistic styles as laid out in “Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!” – along with his teaching history – informs his passionate defense of *New London Facets*, which I will explore in more detail in Chapter Three. For Ney, the New London commission was not just a simple post office mural; it was a means through which he could communicate a sample of his aesthetic beliefs with the public.

In 1936, Ney had his first major solo show in New York City at a gallery on 57th Street.⁴⁹ Though the exhibition was small, the noted critic Lewis Mumford in

⁴⁷ Among Ney’s papers in Odile Laugier’s family archives were second edition copies of Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* and *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Both were inscribed to Ney as a gift from the Baroness Hilla von Rebay, a staunch advocate of Non-Objectivism, who wrote the introduction in each volume and was involved with planning the new Guggenheim Museum, originally called the Museum of Non-Objective Painting when it opened in 1939. While it is tempting to assume Ney only read Kandinsky’s work through this gift, he and Rebay did not know each other until the early 1940s. As Ney’s “Art Appreciation For The People! How To Look At Paintings! What Constitutes a Work of Art!” is so closely related to Kandinsky’s written work, it is much more likely that Ney had already read both volumes and simply kept those given to him by Rebay because they were beautifully bound volumes from a friend.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, though the artist’s papers mention that Ney had a show in a gallery on 57th Street in New York City in 1936, the name is not given. Reviews of the show

The New Yorker enthusiastically described Ney as an artist capable of depicting America within a new imaginative style:

Ney's imagination, while intoxicated with this world of color, has nevertheless been nibbling at the daily incidents of commonplace life in a Pennsylvania village – New Hope, to be exact...Ney's paintings are as much paintings of the American scene as the more stridently native kind. Ney's pictures have even got into circulation in his own community: he has three murals in the village newsstand, and he has decorated the entrance to one of the garages. That seems to me a healthy sign. Americana should show us fireworks on a clear Fourth of July night as well as exploded paper and charred Roman candles and empty bottles of soda pop lying on the grass in the dull drizzle of the next morning.⁵⁰

Though Mumford does not directly reference Ney's use of abstraction, Mumford was most likely reviewing a selection of abstracted canvases like that of *Untitled* (figure 22) and *Abstract* (figure 23). In *Untitled*, Ney produced a fantastical landscape, complete with mountains rising from a blue field or body of water, a multicolored foreground, two possible figures, one seated and the other peeking in at the lower right corner with a partially covered face, and a bunch of bright red flowers, possibly poppies, in the lower left corner. Just as Mumford stated in his review, Ney has become by the mid 1930s completely intoxicated with color. In *Abstract*, it becomes more difficult to discern specific forms. Aside from some potential flowers in the lower left corner, the entire composition is an assortment of shapes, some geometric and others more organic. Clearly Ney had begun to think about the direction his painting will go in during the 1930s, with a slow progression towards

do not mention the gallery name either as it is included among many in a few reviews of "group shows."

⁵⁰ Lewis Mumford, "Group Shows and Solos," in *Mumford on Modern Art in the 1930s*, ed. Robert Wojtowicz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 186.

pure abstraction. Ney still has not completely become a Nonobjective painter as he would following *New London Facets*, but paintings like those Mumford reviewed show a progression away from the strict academic representation Ney called Imitative and towards the imaginative Abstract.



Figure 22: Lloyd Ney, *Untitled*, circa 1930s. Oil on canvas.



Figure 23: Lloyd Ney, *Abstract*, 1939. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Such a positive review by a prominent critic like Mumford seems to have given Ney the confidence to pursue his “charred Roman candle” of a style and he began to apply for a number of large, public commissions. Mumford’s mention of “the American scene” may have also struck a chord with Ney and prompted him to create and submit a design for the Section’s St. Louis post office competition. As mentioned earlier, PWAP called for artists who would explore aspects of “the American scene,” a recommendation that permeated all subsequent New Deal art programs, including the Section, and would have been a familiar phrase for Ney.⁵¹ Mumford’s review echoed everything Ney’s written beliefs about art and encouraged him even further; Ney has been charged with bringing his new, colorful,

⁵¹ Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 43-5.

imaginative work to regular American citizens outside of the gallery-going crowd in New York. If Mumford applauded Ney's casual work on the garages of New Hope, a post office wall would serve equally well if not better as a podium from which Ney should spread his own, new style.

Before receiving the New London, Ohio commission (to be discussed in chapter three), Ney submitted a proposal for a Section mural in 1939 for Saint Louis, Missouri. The Saint Louis commission called for ten panels: nine long and rectangular and one large and square to be mounted above the others.⁵² Ney's square panel is a striking painting of a man whose head pensively leans against his propped arm and hand, looking, presumably at post office patrons below the mounted canvas (figure 24). Behind the figure is a collection of ambiguous geometric shapes that suggest a corner of a picture frame and part of a chair, though one cannot distinguish what they are with certainty.

The lower nine panels depict various modes of transportation, presumably in the act of delivering mail (figure 25). Space in each of the panels has been compressed in the same manner as the square top panel. In such a shallow plane, objects are stacked on top of each other and activity appears chaotic as people, animals, plants, and vehicles co-exist in severely altered space. This is seen best in the lower right panel that depicts barges carrying livestock on a canal much like the one behind Ney's house in New Hope and depicted in *The Canal*. With a large barge

⁵² Lloyd R. Ney, Sketch for the St. Louis, Missouri competition, Record Group 121-MS, National Archives, College Park, MD. Unfortunately, the only surviving images of Ney's submission for the Saint Louis competition are in black and white; therefore I cannot discuss his use of specific colors, only tones. This is a terrible loss since an understanding of Ney's expressive use of color is integral to a complete discussion of his work.

located in the middle of the panel's foreground, poles, shores, and figures have been cast far out to the side or above the boat in order to fit all activity into the panel. Additionally, Ney has included a crowded, abstracted skyline of a town in the background, similar to the ambiguous shapes present in the top square panel. While the town's skyline has a somewhat recognizable silhouette in the background's center, it becomes less delineated closer to the panel's corners until it fades into amorphous shades of gray.

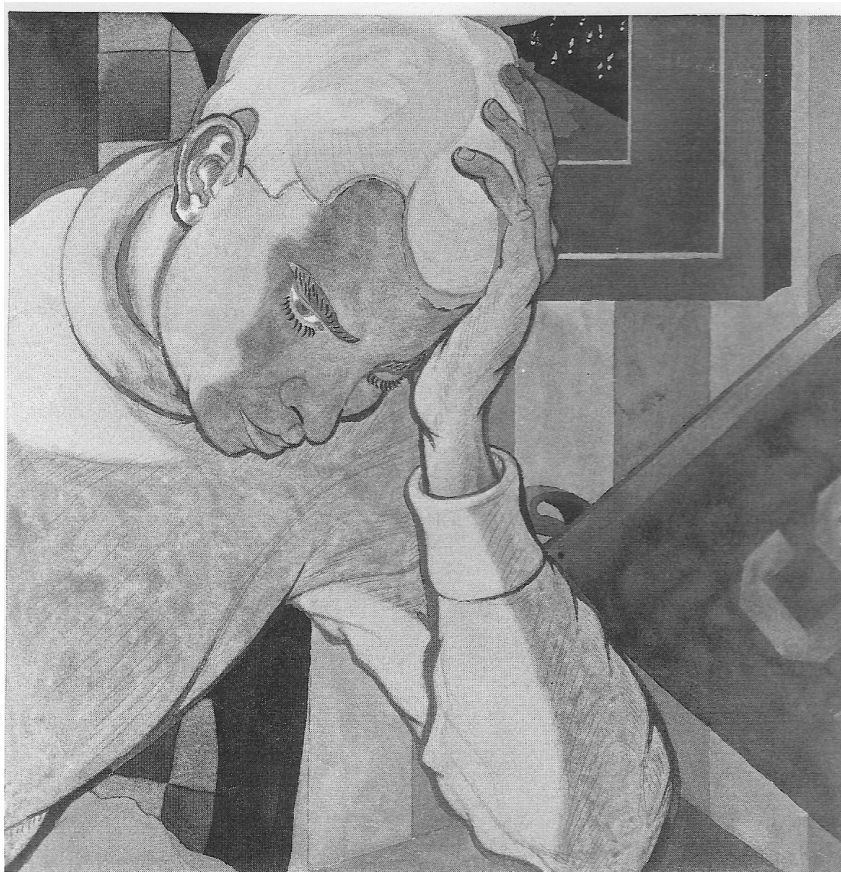


Figure 24: Lloyd R. Ney, Sketch for the St. Louis, Missouri competition, Record Group 121-MS, National Archives, College Park, MD.

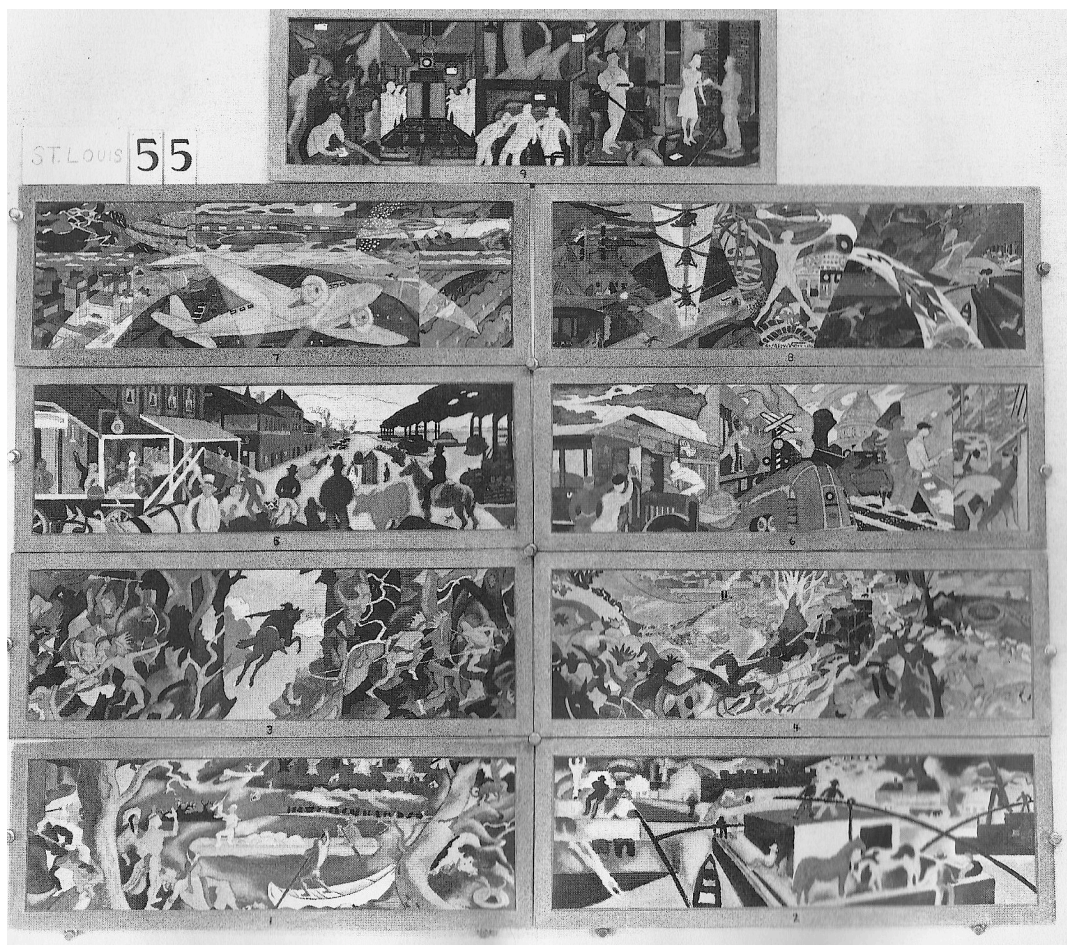


Figure 25: Lloyd R. Ney, Sketch for the St. Louis, Missouri competition, Record Group 121-MS, National Archives, College Park, MD.

Ney's panels are characteristic of his work during the 1930s; while certain elements are abstracted his subjects are mostly recognizable and essentially representational. Similar to *The Canal*, in which Ney painted just what the title suggests with various abstracted elements and expressive colors, the panels depict recognizable sites, objects, and activities, but with dynamic, angular lines and, presumably, similarly energized colors. As it is more conservative than works Ney would have classified as Abstract like *Untitled*, it appears that Ney was conscious of his audience. While Ney was ready to bring his style to the public, he seems aware that both the Section and his work's eventual audience would receive abstract

works skeptically. Clearly Ney wanted to win the commission and yet still stay true to his style, and so adjusted his composition accordingly.

Though the Saint Louis commission jury was intrigued by Ney's submission and style, the mural contract was awarded to Trew Hocker's *The Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (figure 26). With such a large commission the Section only seemed prepared to select a safe composition painted in the type of nondescript style described in chapter one and seen in Good's *Retrospection*. Even though it is toned down, Ney's work most likely was too progressive in style for the Section and would have been a risky choice for a highly publicized commission in an urban center, especially when compared to Hocker's nostalgic depiction of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition.



Figure 26: Trew Hocker, *The Louisiana Purchase Exposition*, Saint Louis, Missouri Post Office, 1940. Fresco.

Following the Section's selection of *The Louisiana Purchase Exposition* in April of 1939 the St. Louis jury decided that Ney should be allowed to create a design for another location as a sort of runner-up prize. The available mural site was

the newly constructed post-office in the small town of New London, Ohio. Not as glamorous or high profile as Saint Louis, a commission in New London was far less risky in stirring up serious national controversy and yet would still provide Ney with a venue to introduce the public to his style.

It is relatively unclear whether jury members and artists Howard Cook, Ward Lockwood, and William Gropper described Ney's style to upper-level Section officials when they made this decision. Regardless of what they disclosed, Ney received a letter from the Section in September of 1939 informing him of the New London commission paying \$800.⁵³ Ney's acceptance, relationship with the Saint Louis jury as he worked on *New London Facets*, and his ensuing battle with the Section, permanently changed the artist's later career as well as the Section's attitude towards abstraction. This will be the subject of chapter three.

⁵³ Rowan to Ney Sep. 26, 1939

CHAPTER THREE

NEY, *NEW LONDON FACETS*, AND FRICTION WITH THE SECTION



Figure 27: *New London Facets* in Lloyd Ney's studio in New Hope, PA with studio visitor. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].

Ney was understandably thrilled to receive the New London, Ohio commission from the Saint Louis, Missouri jury, but it appears that the jury members were equally as excited about Ney's style. The mere fact that Howard Cook, Ward Lockwood, and William Gropper took the initiative to award Ney a surprise commission speaks to their faith in his work, but the jury members' careers and relationship with the Section must have also contributed to their decision.

At that time Howard Cook was already a Section veteran, having completed murals for the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse as well as the post office in San Antonio, Texas. While his style was far more representational than Ney's, Cook

habitually compressed space and action in a manner similar to Ney's submitted sketch, as seen in his Pittsburgh mural, *Steel Industry* (figure 28). Cook was also intensely interested in Mexican mural painting, which he saw as pushing the boundaries of what murals could be. It is possible that in Ney's sketch he recognized a kindred spirit who would also be able to compress a meaningful narrative within a mural.⁵⁴



Figure 28: Howard Cook, *Steel Industry*, Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse, Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. 1936. National Archives.

William Gropper was a well-known cartoonist in the 1930s but he was also a book illustrator and painter. Famous for documenting and depicting social upheaval through his drawings and prints, at the time of the Saint Louis jury, he had recently completed a mural for the Interior Department through the Section titled *Construction of a Dam* (figure 29). Though his style in the Interior Department mural is much more polished than Ney's, Gropper may have recognized and appreciated

⁵⁴ Robert L. Gambone, "Howard Cook: From Drawings to Frescoes, January 28 – March 19," *Georgia Museum of Art Bulletin* 14 no. 3 (1989): 4.

how Ney's sketch diverged from conventional Section-approved styles and subjects. As Gropper later wrote, "The beauty of all this art that we have is; it's challenging and you cannot disprove it. All of these are little worlds and it is a part of our world."⁵⁵



Figure 29: William Gropper, *Construction of a Dam*, 1939. Oil on canvas.

The third jury member, Ward Lockwood, had already completed Section murals in the Lexington, Kentucky post office and two for the new Post Office Department Building in Washington, D.C. (figure 30). Lockwood's themes in his Washington D.C. murals also dealt with travel through the post, similar in subject matter to Ney's scenes in his nine smaller panels submitted for the Saint Louis commission. Lockwood, who lived in Taos, New Mexico along with Howard Cook, may have shared Cook's interest in Ney's innovative use of space. In any event, Lockwood, whose work in the Section had been praised time and again for its dramatic historical scenes and use of allegory, also gave his approval for Ney's commission in the New London, Ohio post office.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ William Gropper, "William Gropper: His Statements," in *William Gropper: Retrospective*, ed. August L. Freundlich (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1968), 28.

⁵⁶ Charles C. Eldridge, *Ward Lockwood: 1894-1963* (Kansas City: Kansas Museum of Art, 1974), 74.



Figure 30: Ward Lockwood, *Consolidation of the West*, 1937. Oil on canvas.

Ney was thrilled with the jury members' interest in his work and to have been awarded this "runner-up" commission.⁵⁷ While he had hoped to receive the much larger Saint Louis competition as it provided the winner with more money, he still saw this new opportunity in the small community of New London as a chance to explore and experiment more fully with abstraction in a public venue. He said, "In my competitive sketches for the St. Louis job I consciously compromised with my approach, but since the definite New London assignment was on hand I wanted to have as much freedom as possible to express myself."⁵⁸ Ney viewed his newly obtained commission as a sure thing and did not assume that his sketches might be judged harshly before final approval.⁵⁹

Ney immediately set to work on a fresh sketch for his new site. Unprompted by the Section, he drove to New London to learn as much as he could about the

⁵⁷ Rowan to Ney Sep. 26, 1939.

⁵⁸ Lloyd R. Ney with Frederick Walker, "My Fight With Officialdom" (book manuscript, James A. Michener Art Museum, undated), 5.

⁵⁹ Ney with Walker, "My Fight With Officialdom," 1-3.

community, its people, history, and landmarks. It seems that Ney immersed himself effectively in the town life; in later correspondence with Section officials, Ney mentioned the specific opinions and comments of individual townspeople. Among his many encounters, Ney allied himself with the town's "oldest resident," William B. Thom who provided the artist with a detailed summary of New London's history.⁶⁰

According to Thom, New London was established as part of the "fire land" grants during the revolutionary war. When New London, Connecticut was burned to the ground, land in Ohio was set-aside for those who had lost everything in the fires, which led to the founding of New London, Ohio. The town was also deeply proud of the C.E. Ward factory that made mail-order uniforms and that it was the site of the first hippopotamus ever shown in the United States. Ney was inundated with stories about eccentric townspeople such as doctors who wore shawls instead of white coats and a man who drove by New London the same time every month shouting, "How far to Belle Fontaine?" as some type of joke.⁶¹

Ney was deeply affected and inspired by the town and people of New London, Ohio as a whole and decided that he could not dismiss the local flavor completely in favor of a Nonobjective design. At the same time, Ney was unwilling to forsake his abstract style in favor of a simple, representational scene, typical of other Section commissions. As a result, Ney presented a plan to town members, "of doing a composite painting depicting many ideas or scenes in one setting similar to the photo montages shown in every moving picture house at the beginning of a

⁶⁰ Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*, 300-321.

⁶¹ Ney, "My Fight with Officialdom," 3.

newsreel.”⁶² While the plan called for a composition that was certainly much more narrative than his other works, Ney was excited to work within an abstracted style while producing something the people of New London could understand and appreciate. Ney noted that when he explained his style and plan to the citizens, “Everyone there at that time was pleased in the first place because I had come to them with my ideas. They said go ahead as it sounded alright [sic] to them. It was a happy experience.”⁶³

The people of New London were not only excited about Ney’s openness and the opportunity for their input, but also must have quickly realized that Ney’s design was unique and distinct from most Section commissions. According to their local newspaper, citizens were proud that, much like the first unveiling of a hippopotamus, New London would be home to the “first abstract mural” in the United States.⁶⁴ Rather than feeling alienated, as Bruce had always feared small communities would be by abstract art, New London was, as a whole, thrilled to receive something new, unique, and modern.

Ney’s early sketches show how he planned the mural around three essential geometric shapes: a square, triangle, and circle. Ney wrote that the shapes would provide a divided grouping of New London’s past and present, both of which were connected formally to a triangle that represented the “pioneer spirit” (figure 31).⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The New London Record, “\$1,000.00 Mural is Placed in the Postoffice Lobby,” December 2, 1940.

John L. O’Hara to Rowan, December 2, 1940.

⁶⁵ It is also possible that the triangle was another allusion to Kandinsky’s described pyramid in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

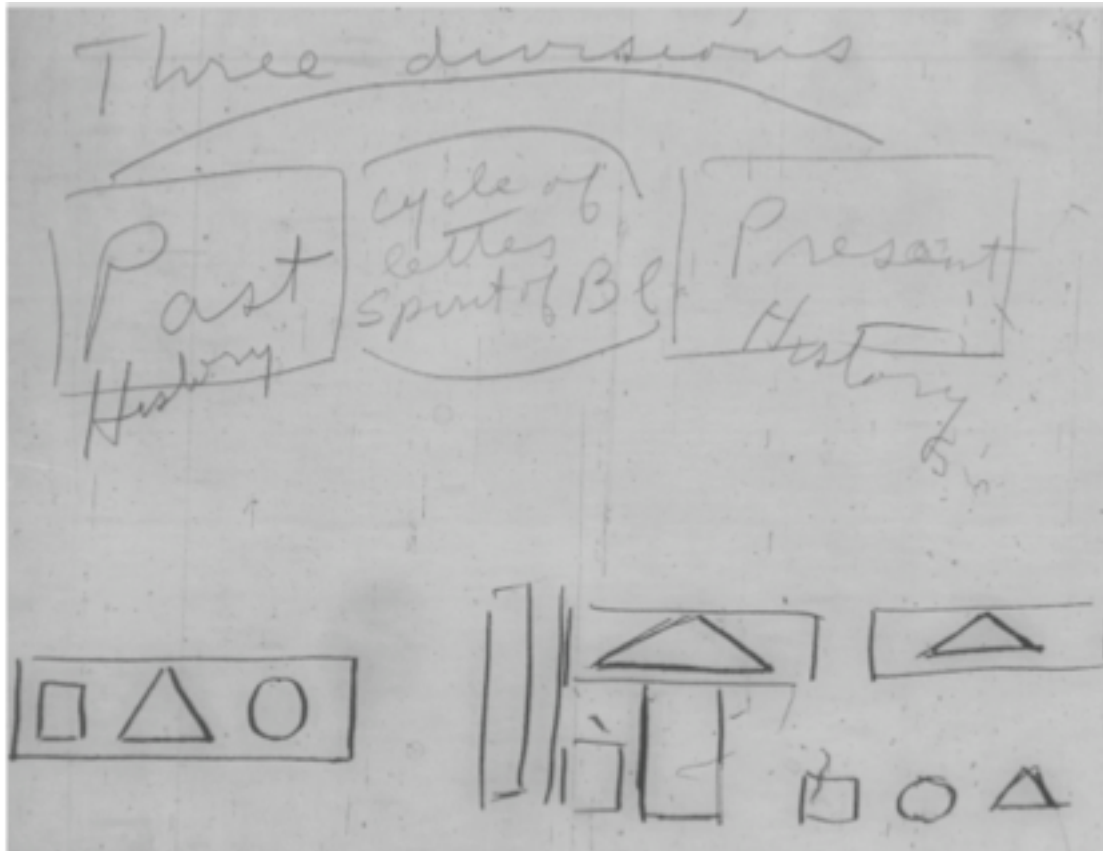


Figure 31: Early plan for *New London Facets*. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].

Ney then adjusted his plan to incorporate recognizable aspects of New London, all seen from the town's Main Street. He began loosely, working from his original three shapes to break up the picture plane. By this stage in the planning process, however, the circle and square gradually disappeared as the central triangle became more prominent and the spirit of the pioneers was relegated to one side of the composition (figures 32 and 33).

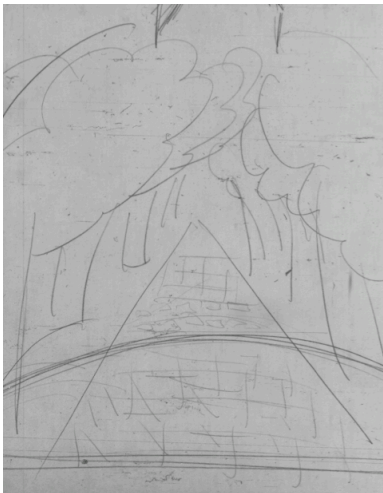


Figure 32: Early plan for *New London Facets*. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].

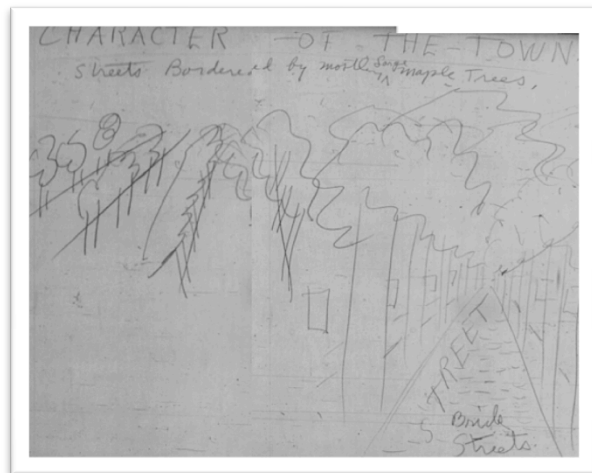


Figure 33: Early plan for *New London Facets*. The Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers, 1902-1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. [4234-4235].

While Ney's interactions with the citizens of New London went smoothly, his later correspondence with the Section proved more difficult. Following completion of his initial watercolor plan for the mural, Ney sent the work along with a "simplified visualization of outstanding subject matter" (figure 34) to Bruce and Ed Rowan, another Section official who handled the bulk of the Section's correspondence with artists. The difference between Ney's simplified visualization and his color plan (figure 34) for the post office mural is extreme; had the two sketches not arrived in the mail together it is entirely possible that Rowan and Bruce could have assumed they were intended for two different sites.

A close examination of Ney's color study for New London, Ohio reveals few similarities with his submitted panels for the Saint Louis commission. Both plans utilize compressed space for the sake of the painted subject matter and narrative. Whereas the action in Ney's submission for Saint Louis was spread across nine panels, each of which had its own unified subject matter, the New London color

study has just as much activity on one. A pioneer's covered wagon appears in the upper left corner on top of an ambiguous mass of figures. The central triangle remains from Ney's earlier sketches, but it is full of strange geometric shapes, what appears to be an eye, and an envelope. Off to the right, Ney's color study becomes even more difficult to decipher, with a clock tower as the only recognizable object in the midst of a jumble of abstracted forms and shapes. Ney's plan for New London was visually more unruly than his original regimented sketches for Saint Louis, but also was a much better representation of Ney's personal painting style.

Following his submission of the color study and then watercolor plans for New London's post office, Ney suddenly left New Hope to winter in Key West with his wife and four-year-old daughter, Gretchen.⁶⁶ Ney remembered that, "Back in my subconscious mind I knew Bruce spent some time every winter in Key West," which prompts one to wonder whether Bruce and Ney's wintering simultaneously in Key West was pure coincidence. Or did it result from Ney's worries that the Section would take issue with his design and that he might need to plead his case to Bruce personally and directly?⁶⁷ Surely even Ney, who believed that the citizens of New London would welcome his final design submitted to the Section, realized how unconventional his sketch was for the Section and how little it looked like his simplified plan.

⁶⁶ Unfortunately the original watercolors have been lost, but we can assume that they are similar to Ney's color study, which is included here as figure 29.

⁶⁷ Ney, "My Fight with Officialdom," 5-6.

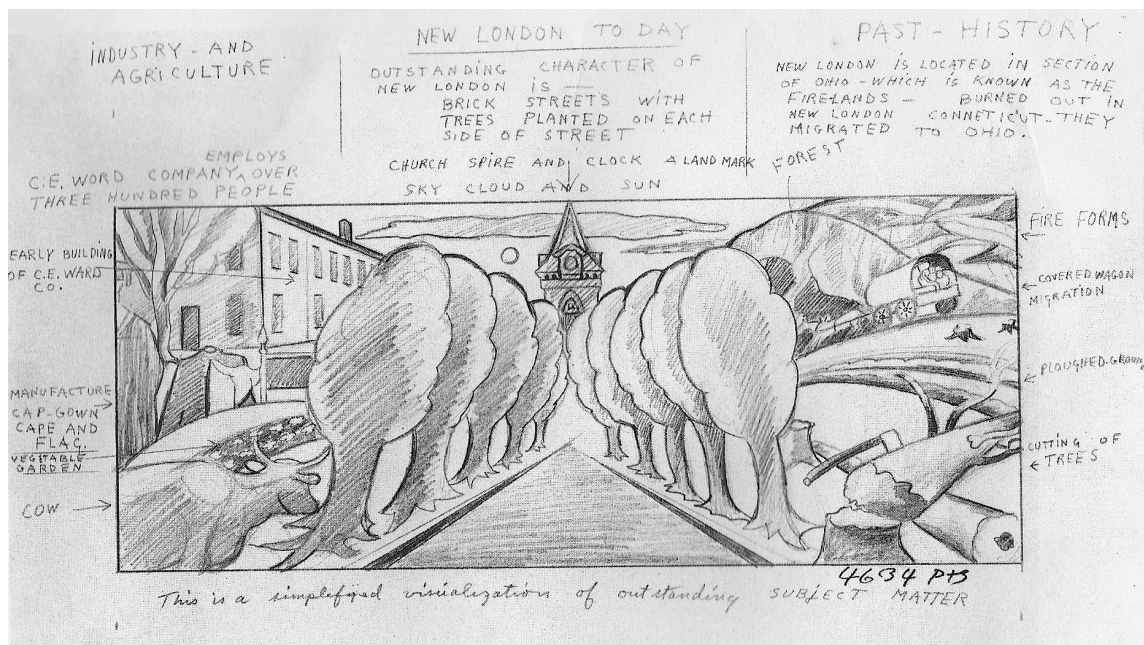


Figure 34: Lloyd R. Ney, Simplified visualization of outstanding subject matter. Record Group 121-GA, National Archives, College Park, MD.

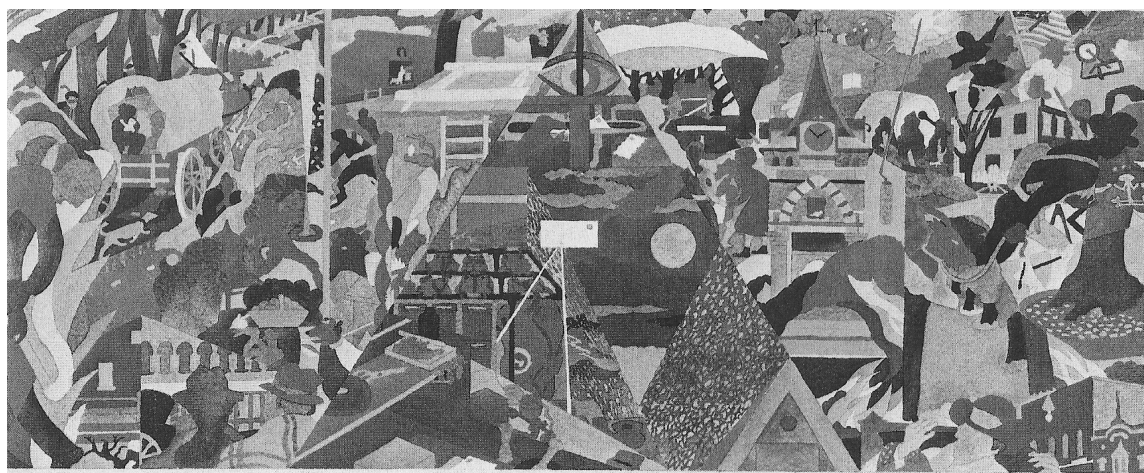


Figure 35: Lloyd R. Ney, Color study for the New London, Ohio post office. Record Group 121-GA, National Archives, College Park, MD.

As it turned out, whether subconscious or planned, Ney needed to be in Key West to plead his case with Bruce. By December 27, 1939, less than three months after Ney was selected for the commission, Rowan returned Ney's watercolor and rejected the design. He stated that:

It is our feeling that you have not presented the material in a way that will be acceptable to the general public. First of all, the palette is so extremely vivid that it is our feeling the mural would not harmonize with the architecture, and secondly that the combination of the objective and the abstract would find very few supporters in the town...Your design seemed more fitting as a theatrical back drop than as a single mural decoration in a Federal building. It is our feeling that it would have absolutely no meaning for the people.⁶⁸

Typically, when Rowan or another Section official rejected a design, the commissioned artist would comply with the critique and adjust his or her design until it was approved. In some cases this could take a great deal of time; in one extreme case artist Stuyvesant Van Veen was forced to alter his submitted design over the course of a full year.⁶⁹ Therefore, when Ney refused to change his design, Rowan was surprised and at a complete loss as to what he should do.

Unbeknownst to Ney, Bruce had been largely ignorant of the whole affair, up until that January. Rowan, most likely nervous about Ney's appointment by the St. Louis judges and Ney's previous work, had hoped that Ney would produce something "appropriate" for New London and, barring complications, would not need to worry Bruce. However, after seeing Ney's watercolor, Rowan decided it was time to inform Bruce of their troublesome artist, writing, "When you are in Key West you will no doubt be bombarded by one Lloyd R. Ney of 515 Fleming Street, Key West. For your information in order to help you be prepared, I attach photographs of the work which he submitted for the decoration of the New London, Ohio, Post Office and which the Section was unable to accept."⁷⁰ Rowan also mentioned that he

⁶⁸ Rowan to Ney, December 27, 1939.

⁶⁹ Louise Feder, "New Deal Murals in the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse" (Honors thesis, Dickinson College, 2010), 51.

⁷⁰ Rowan to Bruce, Jan 26, 1940.

had sent the same photographs to the St. Louis jury members to get their comments on Ney's recent work.

Bruce needed Rowan's warning; aided by staff at the Key West post office, a furious Ney discovered Bruce's address and went to plead his case at Bruce's home in Key West twice that January. Ney later described his visits as arguments between "an English limey [Bruce] and a Pennsylvania Dutchman [Ney]...stalled and very angry with each other...I was the little man against officialdom but my strength was backed by the people of New London, Ohio."⁷¹ According to Ney, his disagreement with Bruce always came back to the abstract portions of the mural and its not being "academic" enough, even though Ney retained figures in his composition.⁷²

Apparently, in the heat of one of their aesthetic debates, Bruce exclaimed to Ney, "[I] wouldn't allow a Picasso in any one of [my] post offices," and, when Ney reminded him that the people of New London wanted his design, Bruce supposedly replied, "to hell with the people of New London, Ohio!"⁷³

While his discussions with Bruce insured attention from the Section, Ney was not any closer to getting his design approved. Looking for help, Ney turned to his acquaintances in New London, who started a petition through the local Rotary Club

⁷¹ Ney, "My Fight with Officialdom," 9.

⁷² The use of the word "academic" is certainly surprising given Bruce's proclaimed disinterest in true academic painting as he thought it another kind of extreme not appropriate in American post office. As discussed in chapter one, Bruce was as opposed to academic painting as he was to abstract works. It is possible that Ney remembers the particular word incorrectly and he is not always a reliable source, which is evident in a number of contradictions in his papers both in the Archives of American Art and the archives at the James A. Michener Art Museum. The most likely truth is that either Bruce or Ney used "academic" here as a synonym for "representational" or "realistic."

⁷³ Ney, "My Fight with Officialdom," 9-10.

to bring Ney's mural to their town, which they sent to the Rowan at the Section.⁷⁴ Most likely with New London on his mind, Ney took to painting Key West in the same abstracted style that he had planned for his Section mural during this period (figures 36 and 37). Whether he depicted Key West in this style simply to calm his nerves or to serve as visual evidence for his meetings with Bruce is unclear, but the similarity in terms of color and line to the New London mural and Ney's Key West work is striking.



Figure 36: Lloyd Ney, *Key West #1 C*, 1939. Watercolor. Private Collection.



Figure 37: Lloyd Ney, *Key West #3 C*, 1939. Watercolor. Private Collection.

⁷⁴ Rotary Club to Rowan, 1940.

Ney also wrote Rowan and Bruce numerous times throughout that January and February, continuously stating that the community of New London needed and wanted his mural as did the nation, emphatically ending nearly every sentence with an exclamation point. Ney summarized his argument in a letter to Bruce on February 12, 1940:

I enjoyed the Privilege of meeting you, and talking with you; however I feel that you are turning down my Work, Presented to You and wanted by the People of Ohio because it is an abstract approach to Painting, my St. Louis sketches were abstract approaches to Painting! The St. Louis jury designated my being a capable artist, when they gave me the right, to Paint the mural For New London. When the People of New London request you to allow me to continue developing that Particular mural, the other half of the Idea will be accomplished! I am capable! And the People want it! Mr. Bruce You represent, a medium! Of serving the People. Mr. Bruce there are two schools of thought concerning Painting – You are using only one of the schools of thought! You are only using half of an idea! in what you are presenting to the People. Mr. Bruce You tell me...that you will have to stick to your ideas! ...Mr. Bruce if your visualization of your Section of Fine Arts, serving the People as a whole – would combine all the creative Forces in this country, combine Modern Art and Conservative Art, you would combine a full force, You would combine a Whole idea, not half an idea – to give to the People. Mr. Bruce it isn't Fair to Mr. Roosevelt! It isn't Fair to the artists! It isn't Fair to your self! And it isn't Fair to the People! Why don't you show good sportsmanship! My last pull – is to that inner man in all mankind!⁷⁵

Luckily for Ney, his emotional letter was delivered to the Section close to the same time that the institution received letters of support for Ney from the St. Louis jury members, which proved to be exceptional timing.⁷⁶ Adding to Ney's campaign on behalf of the mural all three jurors stood by their initial decision to award Ney the

⁷⁵ Ney to Bruce, February 12, 1940.

⁷⁶ In Ney to Rowan, April 1, 1940, he mentions that he enjoyed the letters forwarded by the Section written by Cook, Lockwood, and Gropper at an earlier date.

New London commission.⁷⁷ By this point the whole affair had, in Bruce's opinion, involved too many people and taken up too much of the Section's time away from its other commissions. Therefore, on February 22, 1940 Bruce gave Ney his approval and informed the artist that he would convince the rest of the Section officials to accept the design.

Ney was overcome and told Bruce that he wanted, "to state with tears in my eyes to you, you will never regret giving me this opportunity."⁷⁸ Indeed, Bruce may have been correct when he wrote to Forbes Watson, art critic and Section official, that he feared Ney might have "cracked up" if his design had been finally turned down. Bruce ended his letter to Watson describing his final decision casually, exclaiming, "what the hell!"⁷⁹ The statement, while certainly offhand, may have indicated a shift in the Section's attitude toward abstraction. It is possible that by February of 1940, following his extended correspondence with Ney, Bruce was able to relax his stylistic standards for the Section. Perhaps, after witnessing the community support of Ney's design, Bruce recognized that abstract art was not a passing trend.

After all, Ney's submission for the New London post office was not pure abstraction; it was not part of Ney's own Nonobjective category of painting. The charcoal study that Bruce approved (figure 38) was abstracted, but in the midst of Ney's chaotic composition, a viewer could still identify features of New London's

⁷⁷ Bruce informed Ney by letter on February 22, 1940 that all three jurors continued to support his appointment and, in varying degrees, Ney's plan for the New London post office. Bruce also mentions that Ney has a "very loyal rooter" in Ward Lockwood and that Ney was "not lacking in enthusiastic friends."

⁷⁸ Ney to Bruce, Feb 23, 1940

⁷⁹ Bruce to Watson, February 24, 1940.

landscape and history, even if they were strangely composed and, in the final mural, vibrantly colored. The shawl wearing doctors, famous within New London, were clearly depicted on the left of the central stabilizing triangle, the town's clock tower was to the triangle's right, and in the midst of the jumble of geometric shapes inside the triangle are two envelopes. Ney had created and Bruce had approved a sort of middle-ground abstraction, one that incorporated purely abstract shapes and colors alongside images from the "American scene" that the Section and all New Deal programs looked for in their commissions.

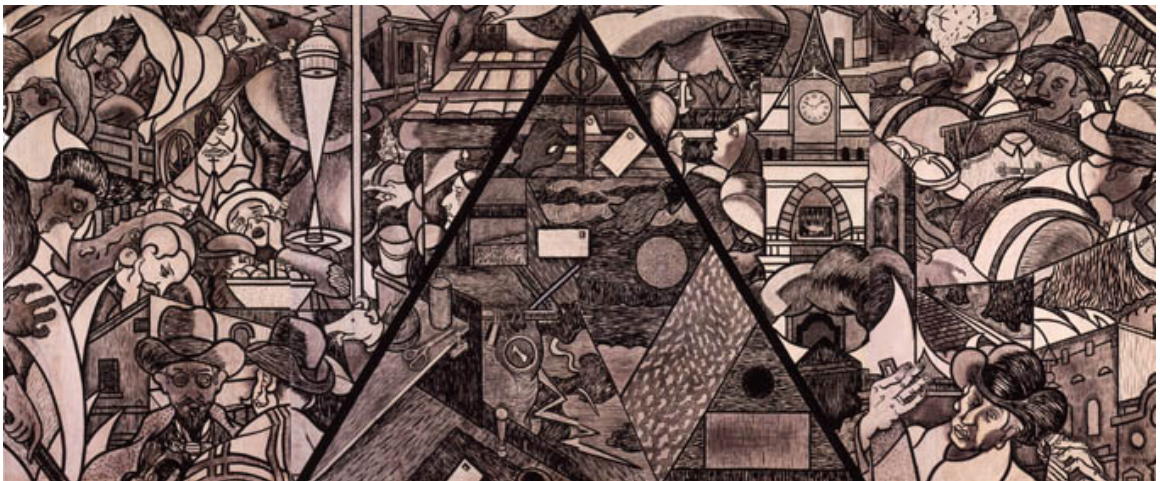


Figure 38: Lloyd Ney, *Study for New London Facets*, 1940, charcoal, graphite, and tempera on wood panel. James A. Michener Art Museum.

Further, in giving Ney his commission Bruce demonstrated to the artistic community and the country as a whole, that the federal government, through the Treasury-funded Section, had begun to think about public art and abstraction in a new way. After years of relatively safe subjects commissioned through New Deal art programs, Bruce and the Section started to bend and allow submissions with new, Modern styles: "why not, what the hell!"

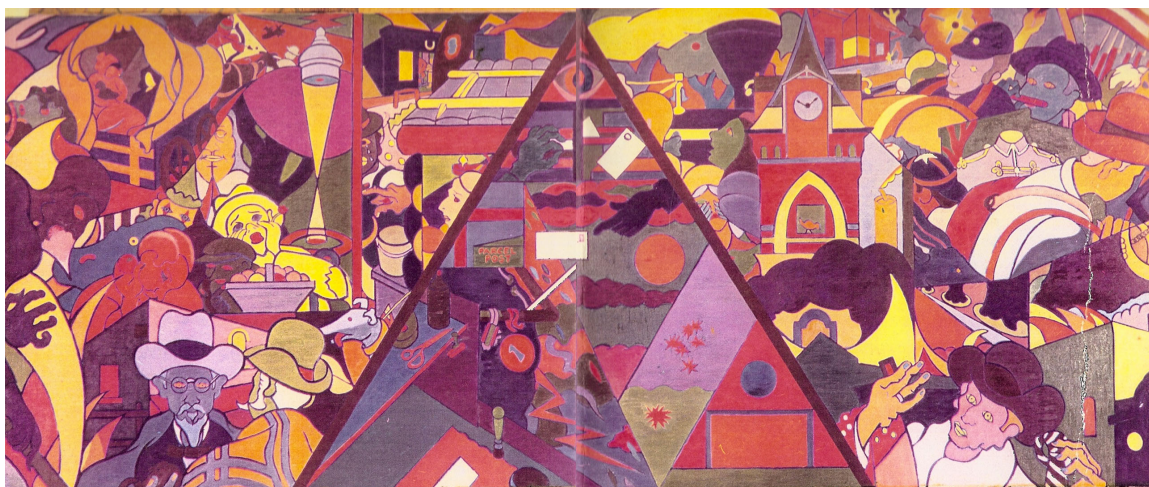


Figure 39: Lloyd Ney, *New London Facets*, 1941, Oil on Canvas. New London, Ohio post office. Photo courtesy of Michel Laugier.

Following the installation in 1941 of Ney's mural, eventually titled *New London Facets* (figure 39), the Section only ran for two more years, during which it was not able to award many commissions. With the United States' involvement in World War II fast approaching, Ney's mural in Ohio and the Section's attitude towards abstraction were simply not newsworthy at the national level. Ney's hopes that *New London Facets* would ignite a new movement in art, as well as Bruce's initial fears that public abstract murals would shock American citizens, were never realized. What was controversial for the Section, its artists, and communities surrounding commission sites in 1940 was a non-event nationally by the time of the mural's completion and installation in 1941.

New London Facets still hangs in the New London, Ohio post office, while many other Section murals were destroyed or misplaced following the disbanding of the Section in 1943. While Ney's abstracted vision of New London may have not received much national publicity, the local community was delighted that they

owned the first and only so-called abstract Section mural.⁸⁰ When presented with abstraction, the small town of New London surprised the government with its acceptance of what must have been a new style of painting for this community, choosing not to reject what they did not immediately understand. This reaction to Ney's work was a revelation for a government institution previously fixated on the traditional and representational. One wonders if, following the success of *New London Facets*, the Section would have accepted more abstract murals had the Section been reinstated following World War II.

In what may have been surprising for Ney, Rowan took a genuine interest in the artist following the New London commission. Rather than attempt to forget the troublesome and opinionated Ney, Rowan, at the artist's request, went out to New Hope in August of 1940 to visit Ney and view some of his more abstract and nonobjective paintings most likely similar to *Red Center*, *Untitled*, and *Untitled* (figures 40-42). Rowan was apparently so impressed by what he saw that he wrote to Alfred Barr, Director of the Museum of Modern Art, and to Baroness Hilla von Rebay, art buyer and member of the board of directors at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.⁸¹ Rowan's introduction led to a close working relationship between Ney and Rebay.

⁸⁰ "\$1,000.00 Mural is Placed in the Postoffice Lobby," *New London Record*, November 28, 1940, 1.

⁸¹ Rowan to Barr and Rebay, August 6, 1940.

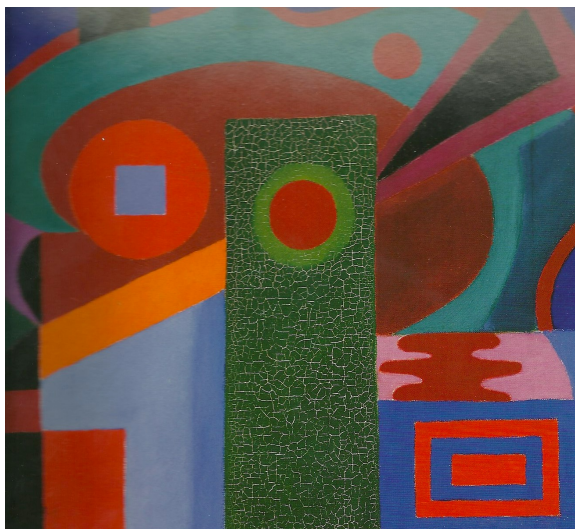


Figure 40: Lloyd Ney, *Red Center*, 1941. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.



Figure 41: Lloyd Ney, *Untitled*, circa 1940s. Oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Michel Laugier.

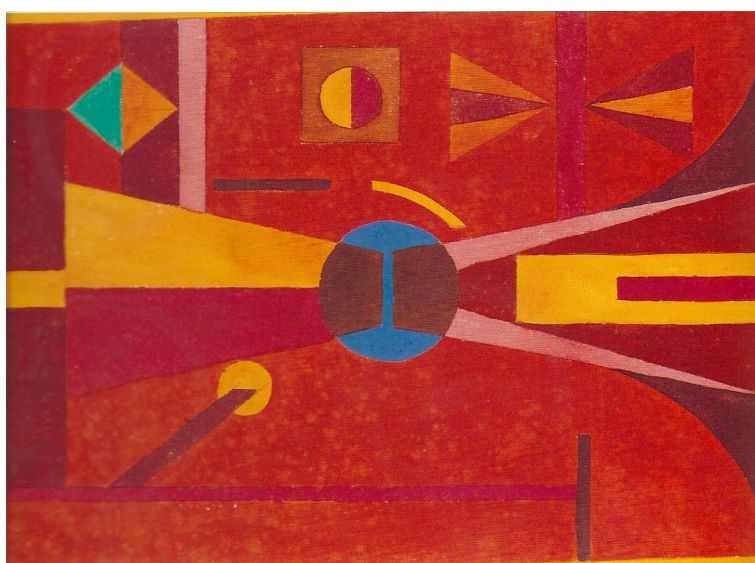


Figure 42: Lloyd Ney, *Untitled*, 1941. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

It remains unclear whether Ney realized that the reason Rebay first wanted to preview, exhibit, and, ultimately, buy his work for the Guggenheim's permanent collection, was all thanks to Rowan's influential letter. In Ney's unpublished manuscript, "My Fight With Officialdom," the introduction to Rebay and the Guggenheim is not mentioned even in passing in an otherwise detailed account of his relationship with the Section. Ultimately, though Ney resented the Section's initial reluctance to let him paint what he wanted in Ohio, it was only thanks to Section officials that his career genuinely took off both nationally and internationally. Rowan's introduction enabled Ney to show his work in group exhibitions at the Guggenheim's Museum of Non-objective Art in 1941, 1942, and 1956 where Ney's *Composition No. 9* (figure 43) was selected by Rebay for the cover of the catalog.⁸² The introduction also led to Ney's induction into the museum's permanent collection in 1946.

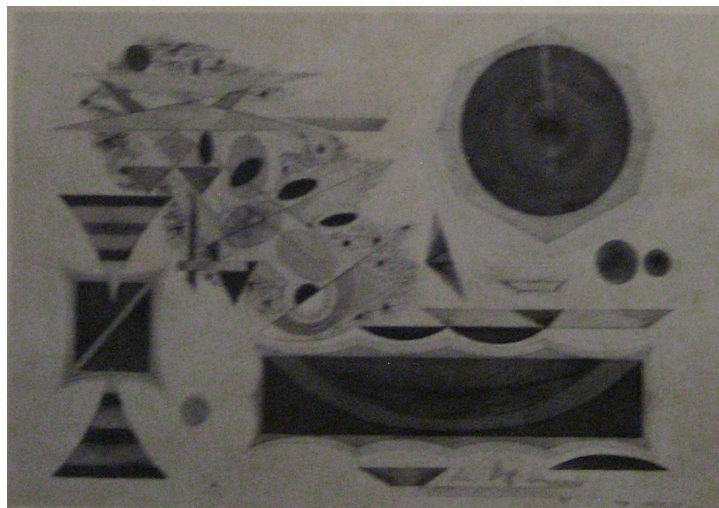


Figure 43: Lloyd Ney, *Composition No. 9*, 1950. Watercolor on paper. Photo courtesy of Michel Laugier.

⁸² Museum of Non-objective Painting, *Museum of Non-objective Painting Exhibition Catalog*, 1956, 1.

Ney also had a solo exhibition at the Delgado Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1948 and the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in Paris in 1947, as well as a number of group exhibitions in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy in the years from 1947-1955.⁸³ Surely, Ney's work would not have been exhibited as readily, let alone at locations as experimental as the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, had he not shown at the Guggenheim previously. Even as his career expanded and Ney's art grew more nonobjective, he still considered *New London Facets* to be one of his greatest works. When Ney began to conceive of and organize a self-run Ney Museum in New Hope in the years before his death in 1965 he painted a watercolor of what he wanted to include in the first exhibition (figure 44). Featured prominently in the very middle of the largest wall and above all other paintings, Ney reproduced his cartoon for *New London Facets*, which he had carefully preserved in his home in New Hope. Even if Ney did not realize how much the New London commission had helped him both in reputation and professional connections, he did recognize its importance within his oeuvre.

⁸³ Again, unfortunately, the names and locations of many of these exhibitions are not listed in Ney's papers held by his grandchildren, Odile and Michel Laugier. Only the countries and years have survived.



Figure 44: Lloyd R. “Bill” Ney, watercolor of planned Ney Museum. Watercolor and charcoal on canvas. Private Collection. Photo by Edwin Hild.

In the decades following *New London Facets* Ney continued to paint and occasionally sculpt (figure 45) in his home and studio in New Hope, Pennsylvania.⁸⁴ As his health deteriorated Ney began to produce work rapidly in the hopes that his wife and daughter would have enough work to fill his planned museum. Ney’s work in the 1950s ranged greatly in terms of style and subject; he produced a vast number colorful of self-portraits (figure 46) and portraits of friends, many geometrically based and linear Nonobjective paintings (figure 47), and a multitude

⁸⁴ Little is known about Ney’s sculptures. Michel Laugier, the artist’s grandson, owns the undated and untitled metal sculpture seen in figure 35 but knows nothing about its conception or Ney’s process. However, the work is included in Ney’s drawings for the Ney Museum, so we may assume that Ney considered it one of his important works, worthy of exhibition alongside a slew of his better-known nonobjective paintings.

of watercolors that illustrated his planned museum. Ney's work never attempted to replicate or reference the New London mural; instead he produced hundred of purely abstract paintings, at times incorporating material other than paint, such as sand or working on textured surfaces to physically enliven the picture plane (figure 48).



Figure 45: Lloyd Ney, untitled and undated sculpture. Painted metal. Collection of Michel Laugier.



Figure 46: Lloyd Ney, *Self-Portrait*, 1962. Watercolor on Paper. Collection of Odile Laugier.

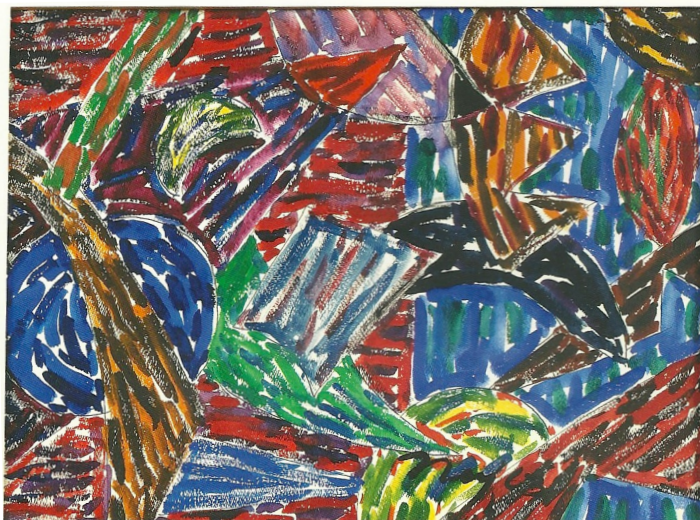


Figure 47: Lloyd Ney, *Untitled*, 1963. Oil on Canvas. Private Collection.



Figure 48: Lloyd Ney, *Apple Orchard*, 1950s. India ink on arch paper. Collection of Steven Hochberg. Photo courtesy of the James A. Michener Art Museum archives.

Though the Ney Museum was never realized in his lifetime, it did open briefly for a few years in the later 1960s, and was run by his widow Jean and daughter Gretchen before closing and being converted into apartments. A number of his works are part of the permanent collection at the James A. Michener Art Museum, a museum in Bucks County that specializes in art by the Pennsylvania Impressionists and New Hope Modernists. The cartoon for *New London Facets* is displayed prominently in the museum's lobby, acknowledging the commission's importance in the life of one of Bucks County's greatest Modernists, Lloyd Ney. It also echoes the actual mural's presence in New London, Ohio, still on the post office wall, a permanent reminder of the community's surprising passion for abstraction within the Section.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alterman, Jim M. *New Hope for American Art: A Comprehensive Showing of Important 20th Century Painting from and Surrounding the New Hope Art Colony*. Lambertville: Jim's of Lambertville, 2005.
- Archives of American Art. *Lloyd Raymond Ney Papers*. 1989, Reels 4234-4235.
- Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd. *Ney*. New York: Avant-Garde Gallery, Ltd., undated.
- Baal-Teschuva, Jacob. *Mark Rothko 1903-1970: Pictures as Drama*. Cologne: Taschen, 2003.
- Bowman, Ruth. *Murals Without Walls: Arshile Gorky's Aviation Murals Rediscovered*. Newark: Newark Museum, 1978.
- Coaldale, PA. Michel Laugier family archives, Lloyd Ney files.
- Doylestown, PA. James A. Michener Art Museum Archives, Lloyd Ney Files.
- Eldridge, Charles C. *Ward Lockwood: 1894-1963*. Kansas City: Kansas Museum of Art, 1974.
- Feder, Louise. "New Deal Murals in the Pittsburgh Post Office and Courthouse." B.A. honors thesis, Dickinson College, 2010.
- Fold, Thomas C. *The Pennsylvania Impressionists*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1997.
- Gambone, Robert L. "Howard Cook: From Drawings to Frescoes, January 28 – March 19." *Georgia Museum of Art Bulletin* 14 (1989): 1-28.
- Gropper, William. "William Gropper: His Statements." In *William Gropper: Retrospective*, edited by August L. Freundlich. Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1968.
- Gustafson, Elaine D. and Susan E. Strickler. *The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s, Selections from the Penny and Elton Yasuna Collection*. Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1991.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Translated by M.T.H. Sadler. Toronto: Dover, 1977.
- Knott, Robert, ed. *American Abstract Art of the 1930s and 1940s: The Donald Nichols Collection*. Winston-Salem: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998.

- Langham, Sarah. *A Modernist Experiment: Visual Jazz, The Cooperative Painting Project and Modernist Works*. New York: Langham Leff Gallery.
- Marling, Karal Ann. *Wall to Wall America: Post Office Murals in the Great Depression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- McKinzie, Richard D. *The New Deal for Artists*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Mumford, Lewis. "Group Shows and Solos." In *Mumford on Modern Art in the 1930s*, edited by Robert Wojtowicz. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.
- O'Connor, Francis V., ed. *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*. Greenwich: The New York Graphic Society, 1973.
- . *Federal Support for the Visual Arts: The New Deal and Now*. Greenwich: The New York Graphic Society, 1969.
- . *The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972.
- Park, Marlene and Gerald E. Markowitz. *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984.
- Pedersen, Roy. "The New Hope Modernists." In *New Hope Modernists, 1917-1950*, edited by Roy Pedersen and Barbara A. Wolanin. New Hope, PA: The New Hope Modernist Project, Inc., 1991.
- Phagan, Patricia E. For the People: American Mural Drawings of the 1930s and 1940s. *Resource Library* May 2008.
- Rand, Harry. *Arshile Gorky: The Implication of Symbols*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Records of the Public Buildings Service*. RG 121, Records Concerning Federal Art Activities, Textual Records of the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration, and Its Predecessors, Biographical Data File Concerning Artists, 1940, Box No. 1, Entry 136.
- . RG 121, Records Concerning Federal Art Activities, Textual Records of the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration, and Its Predecessors, Correspondence of Edward Bruce 1934-43, Box No. 8.

- . RG 121, Records Concerning Federal Art Activities, Textual Records of the Section of Fine Arts, Public Buildings Administration, and Its Predecessors, Case Files Concerning Embellishments of Federal Buildings, 1934-43, OH, Newcomerstown - Portsmouth, Box No. 84, Entry 133.
- . RG 121-CMS, Prints: Completed Murals and Sculptures, Painting: New York to Pennsylvania, Box 4 of 8.
- . RG 121-GA, Prints: Photographs of Paintings and Sculptures Commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts, 1934-1943. Newell, J.M. – Nyquist, Carl, Box 40.
- Saab, A. Joan. *For the Millions: American Art and Culture between the Wars*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Stahl, Joan. "American Abstract Artists Tackle the Big Question." *American Art* 12 (1998): 89-91.
- Sydney, Patricia Tanis. "The Visual Artists." In *The Genius Belt: The Story of the Arts in Bucks County, Pennsylvania*, edited by George S. Bush, 129-133. Doylestown: James A. Michener Art Museum, 1996.
- Taylor, Michael T., ed. *Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Theriault, Kim S. *Rethinking Arshile Gorky*. University Park: Penn State Press, 2009.
- Wycombe, PA. Odile Laugier family archives, Lloyd Ney files.