

Oklahoma's Indigenous Muralists During the New Deal Era



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Cover artwork:

Fancy Dancer by Stephen Mopope, *Fancy Dancer* by Woody Wilson Crumbo, and
Untitled by Fred Beaver

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OKLAHOMA'S INDIGENOUS MURALISTS DURING THE NEW DEAL ERA

by Kristi Kohl

In the years following the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted The New Deal, a series of relief programs, public work projects, and financial reforms. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) (1935-1943) (renamed Work Projects Administration in 1939) created work for unskilled men who built schools, hospitals, bridges and roads. In addition to its building and infrastructure projects, the WPA oversaw programs that subsidized artists, musicians, painters, and writers under the Federal Art Project (1935-1943).

Three additional programs administered by the U.S. Treasury hired commercial artists to add murals and sculptures to federal buildings. The Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) (1933-1934) appropriated public funds for the production of over 15,000 works of art by nearly 4000 artists in public buildings, 700 of which were murals. With the ending of PWAP in 1934, the Section of Painting and Sculpture (1934-1943) (later renamed the Section of Fine Arts in 1938) commissioned 1400 murals in newly constructed federal buildings across the country most of which were post offices. The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) (1935-1938) provided artistic adornment to existing federal buildings.

The programs' commissioned artists were encouraged to paint images related to local history, industry, or culture. It was hoped that the artwork and murals depicting American scenes in public buildings would offer the larger population a more hopeful view of life amidst financial turmoil. It was also during the early twentieth century that Native American artists were beginning to be more recognized for their art, selling works to patrons and exhibiting in museums. The convergence of all these factors helped shift the perspective regarding Indigenous art from "an ethnographic lens toward an appreciation of Indigenous-made objects as works of art" (Neil-Binion, 41). Native American art was now being viewed as fine art.

The reclassification of Native American art from cultural material to fine art was most evident in the State of Oklahoma. In the late 1920s,

University of Oklahoma art professor Oscar Brousse Jacobson had already been providing studio space, art materials, and guidance to a group of Native American artists, including a group who were originally known as the Kiowa Five and later the Kiowa Six. The youngest and only female member of the group was not initially counted as part of the group. In recent decades her place among the Kiowa six has been restored, thanks to the scholarship of Dr. Mary Jo Watson. Smokey cut her painting career short and returned home where she married and devoted the rest of her life to her husband and children. Ironically, because her works are the rarest they are the most collectible. The other members of the Kiowas Six included James Auchiah, Spencer Asah, Jack Hoeah, Stephen Mopope, and Monroe Tsatoke. Jacobson began organizing local and national art exhibitions for these young Native American artists. He and 31 of his students attracted international attention at an exhibition in Prague, Czech Republic in 1928. This event significantly widened the art market for Indigenous painting both in the United States and abroad. Additionally, Jacobson's role as head of PWAP operations in Oklahoma, and his continued influence on the Section thereafter, factored in the commissioning of Indigenous artists in the State.

These same artists and other Oklahoma Native American painters who were producing small, privately commissioned works on paper were contracted to produce large-scale murals in federal buildings for public viewing during the New Deal Era. In fact, Denise Neil-Binion (2017) notes, "Aside from the Oglala Lakota artist Andrew *Standing Soldier's* murals in Blackfoot, Idaho, and the works painted by Native artists for the newly constructed Department of Interior Building in Washington, D.C., Oklahoma represents the only other location where murals were painted by Indigenous artists" (p. 30).

The Max Chambers Library Archives & Special Collections holds works of art completed by some of the muralists, both Native American and non-Native American artists. Showcased in the current exhibit, however, are works by five Oklahoma Native American artists from the Melton Art Reference Library (MARL) Collection, four of whom were commissioned to paint murals between 1937 and 1943 for New Deal projects sponsored by the Section and its precursor the PWAP. They

include Stephen Mopope (Kiowa), Monroe TsaToke (Kiowa), Acee Blue Eagle (Creek-Pawnee), and Woody Wilson Crumbo (Pottawatomie). The fifth Native American artist on display, Fred Beaver, restored one of the murals to its original glory in 1965. In addition to the Native American muralists, a drawing by Oscar Brousse Jacobson is included, who championed Oklahoma's Native American Artists launching them to star status. He also had the honor of restoring Monroe TsaToke's murals in 1953.

The MARL Collection also includes works by Nan Sheets who served as the co-Director of the Works Progress Administration's Art Program in Oklahoma and who commissioned some of the Indigenous artists featured. After WWII when federal funding for the arts ceased, Sheets was instrumental in establishing the Oklahoma Art Center an outgrowth of the WPA Experimental Gallery. Other non-Native artists represented in the MARL Collection who participated in New Deal projects in Oklahoma include Kenneth Miller Adams, Ruth Monro Augur, Grace Hamilton, Alexander Hogue, Derald Swineford, Arthur Lee Van Arsdale, and Milford James Zornes. In total, forty artists were commissioned in Oklahoma, and many of their works can still be found at various locations around the State. While some of the New Deal Era muralists are now obscure, some went on to become well-known artists in Oklahoma, and around the country and world.

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ARTISTS & ARTWORKS

Stephen Mopope (Kiowa, 1898-1974) was born and raised on the Kiowa Reservation, Indian Territory, which later became Oklahoma. Recognizing Mopope's artistic talent at a young age, his grandmother taught him how to paint on tanned skins in the old Kiowa tradition. Mopope was one of a group of Native American artists, the Kiowa Six, who was provided studio space, art materials, and guidance at the University of Oklahoma by Oscar Jacobson in the late 1920s.



Fancy Dancer

Mopope and two other Kiowa Six artists, James Auchiah and Spenser Asah, were commissioned to complete a series of 16 panels representing Kiowa culture in the Anadarko Post Office. Sadly, Mopope died before the mural's completion in 1937. Given that these were the first Indigenous murals completed for the Section of Painting and Sculpture, the murals received national attention and were described as being the most important works of art in the State of Oklahoma by their mentor Jacobson.



Kiowa Moving Camp (1937) Anadarko Post Office



Brave

Monroe TsaToke (Kiowa, 1904-1937) was born in Saddle Mountain, Oklahoma in 1904. Along with several other Native American children, TsaToke took art lessons from Susie Peters, an employee of the Indian Agency in Anadarko. Peters eventually circulated the children's artwork to interested parties, including Oscar Brousse Jacobson, the Head of the Art Department at the University of Oklahoma. It was under Jacobson's guidance that TsaToke and five other Native American artists became known as the Kiowa Six.

TsaToke was commissioned to paint a series of ten murals in 1934 with the assistance of two other Kiowa Six artists, Spenser Asah and James Auchiah, for the Oklahoma Historical Society Building (now the Oklahoma Judicial Center) in Oklahoma City. Each of the paintings represents an important date significant to Native American history. TsaToke was able to complete eight paintings in the series before he died of tuberculosis 1937. Oscar Brousse Jacobson restored TsaToke's murals in 1953.



Indian Figure (1937), Judicial Center

Acee Blue Eagle

(Pawnee-Muscogee, 1909-1959) was an artist and teacher born near Anadarko in 1909. Blue Eagle attended Haskell Indian Industrial Training Institute in Lawrence, Kansas and the Chilocco boarding school before studying art



Fawn

at Bacone Indian College and the University of Oklahoma. Like Mopope and TsaToke, Blue Eagle was mentored by Oscar Jacobson.

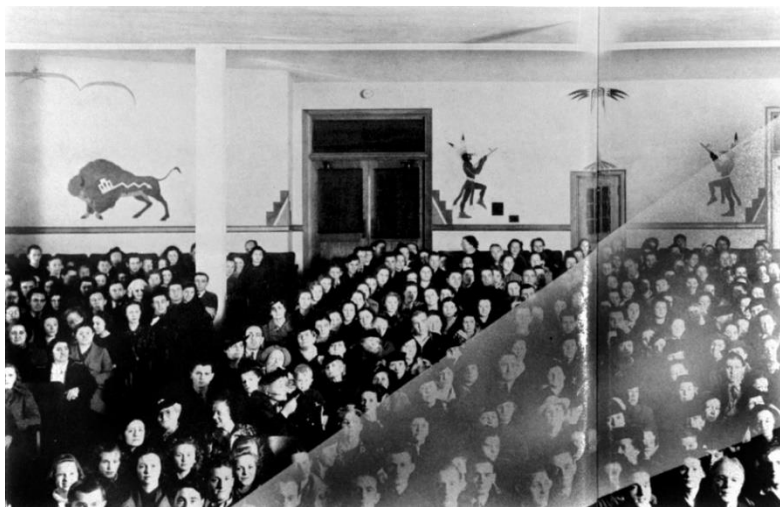
After earning his fine arts degree in 1932, Blue Eagle was invited to lecture on Native American art at Oxford University. When he returned home, he accepted a teaching position at Bacone College where he established the art department and served as its first head through 1938. After serving in WWII, Blue Eagle taught art at Oklahoma State University Technical School in Okmulgee until his death in 1959.

Blue Eagle was commissioned to paint murals in the Coalgate and Seminole Post Offices under the Section as well as other murals under the Public Works of Art Project. Both post office works were well received by the community for their authentic depictions of Choctaw and Seminole daily life.



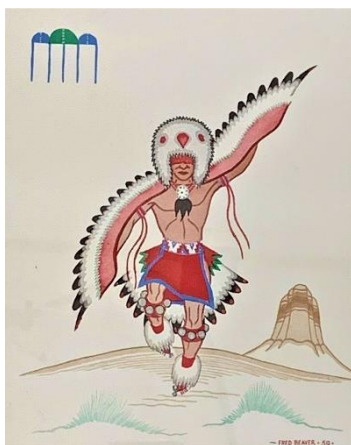
Seminole Indian Village Scene, 1939, Seminole Post Office

In 1943, Blue Eagle also painted a mural in Mitchell Hall on the campus of the University of Central Oklahoma; unfortunately, the mural has since been painted over.



Ace Blue Eagle Murals, Mitchell Hall, 1938

Fred Beaver (Creek, 1911-1980) was born in Eufaula, Oklahoma in 1911. Beaver graduated from Eufaula High School in 1931 and attended Bacone College for a short period before deciding to pursue a degree from Haskell Business College. He worked as an interpreter under the Five Civilized Tribes Agency for the Bureau of Indian Affairs until 1942. He then served three years in Europe in the U.S. Air Corps followed by a 15-year career in the Corps. After retiring in 1960, Beaver devoted the rest of his life to art and music.



Untitled

In 1965, Beaver was contracted to restore Acee Blue Eagle's mural in Coalgate, Oklahoma with funding from the Women's Clubs in Coalgate and Government Services Administration. Beaver is considered a master of the traditional, flat style popularized at Bacone College and is most well-known for his authentic representations of Seminole and Creek culture.



Fancy Dancer

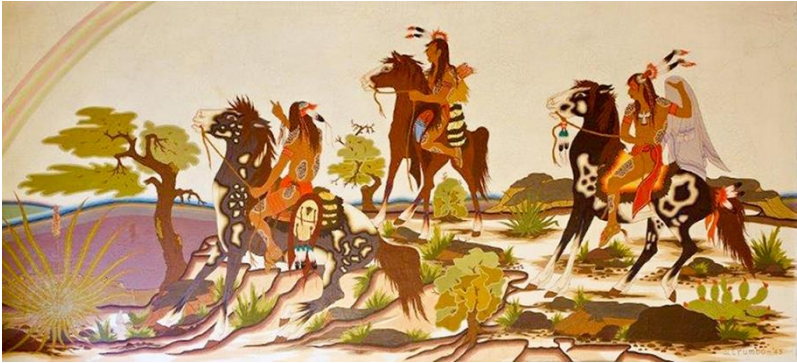
Woodrow Wilson “Woody”

Crumbo

(Pottawatomi, 1912-1989) was born in Lexington, Oklahoma of Pottawatomi and French lineage. Orphaned at a young age, Crumbo was raised by multiple Native American families near Sand Springs, Oklahoma. Like TsaToke and Mopope, Crumbo's artistic abilities were recognized by Susie Peters who went on to sell 22 of his works to the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1932. Crumbo went to college and graduated from Wichita American Indian Institute at the top of his class. He continued his art

training for several years including studying painting and drawing with Oscar Brousse Jacobson. By the age of twenty-one, Crumbo was appointed as Director of Indian Art at Bacone College in Muskogee.

Crumbo was commissioned by the Section of Painting and Sculpture to complete a mural in the Nowata Post Office in 1943. Unlike some other Native American artists' murals, Crumbo's image is more representative of Plains Indians than his own Pottawatomi heritage. Crumbo was also one of six Native American artists selected to paint murals for the newly constructed Department of Interior building in Washington, D.C. in 1939.



Rainbow Trail, Nowata Post Office (1943)

Oscar Brousse Jacobson

(Swedish, 1882-1966) emigrated with his family to the United States from Sweden in 1890. In 1908, he graduated from Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas and earned his Master's degree Fine Arts from Yale University. From 1915 until 1945 Jacobson taught at the University of Oklahoma, was Director of the School of Art, and served as the director of the university's museum of art. During his tenure, Jacobson sponsored and mentored dozens of Native American artists and brought international attention to their work.



River Seine, Notre Dame

The U.S. Department of the Interior awarded him a citation for his outstanding services in the preservation, encouragement, and development of Native American art. Even after his death in 1966, Jacobson's legacy of championing Native American art continues through the Jacobson Foundation, a non-profit educational organization created in 1987.



Kiowa 6 and Oscar Jacobson, ca. 1928

L-R Monroe Tsatoke; Jack Hokeah; Stephen Mopope; Oscar Jacobson; Spencer Asah & James Auchiah; [not pictured: Lois Smokey]

*Image from Arthur & Shifra Silberman Native American Art Collection
National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum*

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