

Exploration of the Artwork in Milne 200

A Contextual Study of the Murals of David Cunningham
Lithgow and the Friezes after Bertel Thorvaldsen



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Land Acknowledgment	2
Descriptions of Panels and Friezes.....	3
Thematic Essays.....	24
• “Historic Background on Artist that Situates His Life and Work”	24
• Lithgow’s Portrayal of the Mahican People	27
• “Treatment of Women and Gender in Lithgow’s Paintings”	34
• “African American Representation in Lithgow’s Paintings”	42
• “Themes of Technology in Lithgow’s Milne Murals”	45
• “The Friezes after Bertel Thorvaldsen”	51
General Bibliography.....	58

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking, and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Muhheaconneok or Mahican people, who are the Indigenous peoples of this land. Despite tremendous hardship and displacement, their community today resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

DESCRIPTIONS OF PANELS AND FRIEZES

“The Mahikan Indian People”

The Indigenous group that Lithgow calls “the Mahikan Indian People” lived along the Hudson River long before the arrival of European explorers and settlers. They called themselves Muh-he-conneok, meaning the People of the Waters That are Never Still. When the Dutch set up trading posts in the area, they found this name hard to pronounce and renamed the tribe “Manhigan” which was the Mahican word for one of their most important clans, the Wolf. Eventually, the English tweaked the name further to Mahican or Mohican; the latter became most popular after James Fenimore Cooper published his famous novel *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1826. These English names tend to be used interchangeably today, although here the name Mahican is used throughout.

The Mahicans relied on agriculture, mainly corn, for food and supplemented their diet by hunting and fishing. After Henry Hudson sailed upriver to Albany under a Dutch flag in 1609, the Dutch set up trading posts in the area. They were more concerned with profit than settlement and quickly established a mutually beneficial relationship with the Mahicans. The Mahicans traded beaver pelts for guns and useful tools and enjoyed an influential relationship with the Dutch. However, this relationship increased tensions with the Mohawk as the two tribes competed for dwindling beaver stock and top placement in the eyes of the Dutch traders. The Mahicans had the upper hand initially, but over the years were overtaken in trading opportunities by the Mohawk and turned to land sales as an alternative. When the Dutch were replaced by the English in 1664, the remaining Mahicans were unable to secure the same influential relationship with the new settlers.

The main inaccuracy in Lithgow's representation is that this idyllic scene ignores the complexities of Mahican history in the region, most notably the Mahicans' ongoing conflicts with other tribes, primarily the Iroquois. Even before the arrival of the settlers, Mahicans placed their focus on protection and maintaining their place in the local hierarchy. The only potential sign of the Mahicans' warrior culture is the inclusion of arrowheads along the scene's border. However, given Lithgow's preference for picturesque generalization over human conflict, these are likely intended as references to hunting, not war. The remainder of the iconography in this panel – the pottery and needlework within the scene as well as the corn and wampum in the border – heighten the effect of a peaceful tableau. This painting immediately sets the stage for Lithgow's other depictions of Indigenous people according to simple, "noble savage" stereotypes.

- Heather Christensen

"In the Year 1609 Henry Hudson Sailed His Vessel"

In this panel, Lithgow depicts his version of Henry Hudson sailing into Albany on September 19 (not the 18th as it says in the title), 1609. Hudson was English but sailed on behalf of the Dutch. He was looking for the Northwest Passage, which was a legendary shortcut to Asia. He was supposed to be looking for the Passage farther north, but winds, storms, and a near mutiny had forced him to abandon that path. Instead, he came up the river that was later named for him and ended in the region that would become known as Albany. After his stop in Albany, Hudson turned around and abandoned his search. He realized the river was too shallow and would not lead to Asia.

The primary record we have of this voyage is the journal kept by mate Robert Juet. In his

writings, he recounts numerous fights with tribes along the coast, drunkenness, killing, and a kidnapping. The crew of the Half Moon had negative attitudes regarding Indigenous people. Most tribes along the coast had witnessed their members being seized as slaves by the Europeans, so they were naturally wary and hostile towards Hudson and his crew. However, the Mahicans lived farther inland and were not yet used to European aggression. They were friendly with Hudson, and Juet reported a peaceful trading interaction with the Mahicans: “The people of the Countrie came flocking aboard [sic], and brought us Grapes, and Pompions, which wee bought for trifles. And many brought us Bevers skinnes, and Otters skinnes, which wee bought for Beades, Knives, and Hatchets. So we rode there all night.”¹

Lithgow’s painting highlights the Dutch connection to Hudson and the Mahicans. The Dutch flag is presented on the border along with several red lions, which were depicted on the royal coat of arms of the House of Nassau. As mentioned in the previous panel description, the Mahicans had a complicated history with the Dutch. However, here that relationship is shown in a positive, non-threatening light. The Mahicans did enjoy influence with the Dutch, but it was a calculated, profit-driven relationship. Ultimately there was significant conflict with other tribes and settlers because of the Dutch drive for profit.

Additionally, Lithgow’s decision to focus on Hudson’s “discovery” of the Hudson River is part of a problematic trend to erase hundreds of years of Indigenous history that predates European exploration. The Mahicans had been living on the river long before Henry Hudson “discovered” it by accident. They had named the river Mahicannituck, which means “the river

¹ Robert Juet, *Juet’s Journal of Hudson’s 1609 Voyage* (New Netherland Museum, 2006), 593
<http://halfmoon.mus.ny.us/Juets-journal.pdf>

that flows two ways.” Hudson wasn’t even the first European explorer to sail on the river.

Before him came the Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazzano, in 1524. However, Dutch dominance was paramount, and the river is still known as the Hudson.

- Heather Christensen

“Heyward and His Female Companions”

In Chapter 6 of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, the character Heyward and two women companions, Alice and Cora, are being shown a cave hideout by their “Mohican” friends. All three of them are impressed by what they see, and they express their admiration to their Mohican guides. At the end of the scene, the women sleep peacefully while Heyward and Hawkeye (a Mohican) keep watch and talk long into the night.

In Lithgow’s painting, we see Heyward at right in a defensive position, seemingly protecting Alice and Cora from a Mohican figure who is gesturing at them. However, in the novel it is clear that Heyward and the women already know these Mohicans – why are they depicted in defensive positions if they are among friends? Indigenous people have been treated as threats or as unintelligent savages throughout America’s history, but the attitude of the 1930s may shine more light on Lithgow’s views specifically. During this decade, Hollywood was churning out its first Westerns (culminating in 1939’s hit movie, *Stagecoach*, which launched John Wayne into superstardom as a tough, manly, Indian-killer). In these films, Native Americans were the “bad guys,” and they were always put in their place by the most all-American figure possible: the Cowboy.

On a different end of the spectrum, the photographs of Edward S. Curtis, which had been published in the 1920’s, served to depict Native Americans as a pure, primitive people

whose culture should be preserved. While Curtis intended to show his subjects in a positive light, his interpretation veered dangerously close to that of the stereotypical “noble savage.”

Curtis not only omitted any context relating to the centuries of oppression endured by Native Americans, but believed his project was necessary to save what was left of their culture – placing himself in the role of a savior.

These conflicting images of Native Americans as threats to be erased or as “noble savages” no doubt affected the way Lithgow viewed the Indigenous communities of New York. It is also worth mentioning that, in Chapter 6 of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cora is especially impressed by the Mohicans’ defenses in the cave. She asks aloud if skin color even matters at all – to which Heyward and Alice are silent. So, apparently, is Lithgow.

- Heather Christensen

“Albany as a Trading Post About 1685”

The trading post depicted in this panel is most likely Fort Frederick, which was built by the English to replace the Dutch Fort Orange in 1676. It was located at the top of State Street Hill and was originally a wooden stockade. One of its main purposes was as fortification against hostile Indigenous tribes, especially the Mohawk.

The Mahicans traded with the English and did their best to maintain a friendly relationship with them; however, they did not enjoy the same influence they had experienced with the Dutch. By 1685, Mahicans had been forced to sell or abandon most of their lands along the Hudson, had been badly defeated by the Mohawks, and their population had fallen drastically. In addition, the fur they had traded with was now in alarmingly short supply.

In this painting, Lithgow focuses on a pleasant trade for “trinkets.” This plays into the old narrative of Indigenous people as naïve and easily tricked, giving up valuable items for cheap baubles. It’s also inaccurate. The Mahicans needed guns and useful items like metalwares and currency. The focus on trinkets could be Lithgow’s way of referencing the Mahican’s fall from influence, but it’s doubtful given his conflict-free lens and the peaceful demeanor of the figures in the painting. Regardless, the Mahicans are shown in an idyllic and simplistic light despite the hardships they had encountered by this time. Apart from one Mahican leaning casually on his gun, there is once again no reference to the ways in which the Mahicans had been negatively affected by settlers, trade, and war.

The attitudes of Lithgow’s own time clearly influenced his view of Indigenous people and culture. But he also ignored positive changes in social consciousness. After the displacement, forced relocations, and nineteenth-century boarding schools established to scrub native culture out of Indigenous children, positive changes in treatment began taking place. In 1924, the Indian Citizenship Act passed, granting citizenship to all American Indians. In 1928, a document titled “The Problem of Indian Administration” was published and acted as a blueprint for reform of government policies. And in 1933, just before Lithgow began these panels, John Collier was named Commissioner of Indian affairs. He advocated for Indigenous people to be able to learn and practice their culture and was responsible for the Indian New Deal, which was meant to slow assimilation, improve social services, and support a multicultural nation.

In the 1920’s and 30’s, there was a general push to backtrack on the discriminatory policies of the past and save native culture. While largely positive in intent, the impact of this change often manifested as a “white savior complex” with people like the photographer Curtis

believing that Indigenous people were simple beings in need of saving. All of this historical nuance was ignored by Lithgow. He went the Curtis route of romantic idealism and let none but the photogenic moments into his work.

- Heather Christensen

“An Incident of Anti-Rentism”

The mural *An Incident of Anti-Rentism, 1838* was completed in November 1935.² The subject of the painting appears to be an anti-rent protest, a movement that had been slowly building from as early as the period after the American Revolution. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before owner-operated farms, the tenant system upheld that tenant families would pay annual rent on long-term leased estates. The distribution of these estates increased starting in the 1730s. By the 1810s there were about two million acres of leasehold estates spread across sixteen counties, and by the 1840s leasehold tenants made up approximately one-tenth of New York’s population. The relationship between landlords and estate farmers was complex. Tenants were free to leave at any time, but they were restricted on their use of the land, as landlords typically reserved all mineral and manufacturing rights as well as part of the sale price when a farm was sold. Tenants were unhappy with this system, but landlords bought tenant loyalty by being lenient on rent payments, assisting poor tenants, and contributing to community institutions. In return, tenants surrendered to their superiors by publicly proclaiming their loyalty and voting as they were directed. This strange entanglement survived the anti-landlord rebellions of the 1750s, 1760s, 1790s, and 1810s but broke down

² Arthur Thompson and John Winne, editors, “New Library Mural Painted by Artist David Lithgow; Milne Art on Exhibition.” *Crimson and White: Senior News*, 8 Nov. 1935, p. 1.

between 1819 and 1840. Landlords began splitting their assets between multiple heirs and were no longer marrying to merge family fortunes. This resulted in a loss of income, which made proprietors stricter about regulations. They stopped tolerating standing-timber theft and often sued for late rent payments. Some counties replaced long-term leases with limited contracts of between one and five years, cutting off tenants' economic security. Tenants responded with boycotts, challenging landlords' titles to their estates, and dragging out court proceedings.

Although this mural is set in 1838, a well-organized movement only emerged around 1839. The Van Rensselaer estate, as seen in the mural, holds particular significance to the movement, as Stephan Van Rensselaer III instructed that his executors pay his \$400,000 debt by collecting owed rent from tenants. If his executors failed, Van Rensselaer's heirs would inherit the debt. Stephan Van Rensselaer IV began persecuting tenants in an effort to collect the money.³ When negotiation failed, the anti-rent movement turned violent. The gathering as seen in Lithgow's mural does not appear to be overtly violent, though it is curiously described as violent in a published commentary on Lithgow's murals when they were installed.⁴

-Charlotte Ashley

"Governor Thomas Dongan"

Thomas Dongan was born in Ireland in 1634 and became the first Royal Governor of New York. Although he spent little, if any, time in Albany itself, in 1686 he established Albany as

³ Huston, Reeve. "Antirent Movement." *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, Edited by Peter Eisenstadt and Laura-Eve Moss, 1st ed., Syracuse University Press, 2005, pp. 90–92.

⁴Thompson and Winn, "New Library Mural," 1.

a city and granted its City Charter. In this painting, we see him signing the Charter. He is probably surrounded by his advisors, who included Robert Livingston and Pieter Schuyler (the first mayor of Albany and the great-uncle of Philip Schuyler, who became the father-in-law of Alexander Hamilton). The charter incorporated the City of Albany, gave fur traders many rights, set city boundaries, established municipal government, and gave the city corporation special privileges. These included: the right to trade and negotiate with local tribes, which was still an important part of the economy, and a requirement to buy land at Schaghticoke and Ticonderoga.

Schaghticoke was both the name of the Schaghticoke tribe and the place where they lived. The land was a refuge for Indigenous people fleeing colonists and the second Pequot War. Under the terms of the charter, the Schaghticoke land would be “acquired” from the Schaghticoke tribe. However, there were complications with the purchase and decades of raids as a result. The Schaghticoke tribe, like other tribes, endured a long history of broken treaties and relocation.

- Heather Christensen

“The Courtship of Alexander Hamilton and Elizabeth Schuyler”

This painting depicts one of Albany’s most famous figures, Alexander Hamilton, wooing his future wife at one of Albany’s most famous landmarks, the Schuyler Mansion. Elizabeth Schuyler came from a wealthy, influential Albany family, and this panel highlights the beauty and luxury of privileged colonial life. The Schuyler Mansion is large and well-kept, the gardens are lush and flowering, and the people are well-dressed and bear pleasant expressions – including a man in the midground to the left of Hamilton, an apparent slave and the only Black

man in the painting.

Not only is this figure the only Black man in this panel, he is the only Black person depicted in any of Lithgow's Milne paintings. And he is serving white people as an enslaved man. The Schuyler family were the third largest slaveholders in Albany (the second largest were Elizabeth's brother-in-law's family, the Rensselaers).

As for Alexander Hamilton, his role as a slaveholder is often glossed over, but he was certainly complicit. Six months after marrying Elizabeth, Hamilton purchased an enslaved woman to help his wife establish her household. He also assisted other members of the Schuyler family in buying their slaves and handled the legal paperwork for these transactions. The elegant livery Lithgow gives the man in this painting is perhaps meant to suggest that the Schuylers were kind to their slaves – but was that actually the case? While there isn't much concrete information, we do know that Philip Schuyler opposed manumission (the legal release of slaves before slavery was outlawed), and even Hamilton went back and forth on the issue depending on political strategy. In addition, several enslaved people attempted to escape Schuyler land over the years. We don't know why, but we can be certain that life as a slave to the Schuyler family was not always as pleasant as this panel suggests.

Lithgow's painting is a romantic view first and foremost. It is focused on the love between these two beautiful people who would put Albany on the map. In this vision, the slave is well dressed, perhaps happy, loyal, and compatible with his surroundings. Lithgow is not including him to direct our focus to the oppressive side of history. The painting is lovely to look at, but it presents a frustratingly simple view of wealthy colonial life. In this panel, Lithgow relegates Black history in Albany to one depiction of an enslaved man who serves the principals.

Slavery ended long before Lithgow painted this scene in 1939 – why did he emphasize the “happy, loyal slave” role here? What does that say about Lithgow’s beliefs and priorities and, more broadly, those of his contemporaries, especially his patrons and viewers?

- Heather Christensen

“The Anti-Ratification Riot in Albany, 1788”

Debates took place across the country in the years leading up to the ratification of the Constitution. Federalists and Antifederalists held meetings and marches to earn support. In 1788, Federalists were a minority in New York, though they did have popular support in most cities. Albany was the only American city that did not support the Constitution. The primary concern of the Antifederalists was the need for amendments, particularly a bill of rights. The eighty-five essays we now know as The Federalist Papers were addressed to the “Considerate Citizens of the State of New York” in hopes of convincing New Yorkers to support the federal Constitution. A ratification convention met at Poughkeepsie in June. New York’s Federalist leaders proposed a formula for ratifying the Constitution “in full confidence” and stated that amendments would be made later. A split developed among the Antifederalists in New York when New Hampshire ratified the Constitution against all expectations. Concern grew as citizens wondered whether New York would participate in the new federal union. Some delegates, including all delegates from Albany, were absolutists, but others were willing to accept the compromise.⁵

⁵ Edward Countryman, “United States Constitution Ratification,” *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, edited by Peter Eisenstadt and Laura-Eve Moss, 1st ed., (Syracuse University Press, 2005), pp. 1608–1609.

The riot pictured here is a riot that took place in Albany on July 4th, 1788. When Federalists in New York received the news that Virginia had ratified the Constitution, they proposed to hold a procession through the streets in celebration. They gave up on the idea upon remonstrance from Antifederalists. The next day a group of about fifty Antifederalists marched through the streets of Albany to a vacant lot and proceeded to fire thirteen guns and burn a copy of the Constitution. Appalled, Federalists assembled a procession and marched through the streets of Albany until they were stopped by a large group, presumably of Antifederalists. The large group demanded the Federalists turn around. They refused and battled each other with whatever weapons they had – bayonets, clubs, swords, and even stones, which, as shown in the mural, they launched toward each other. Eventually, the Federalists, because of their greater numbers, overpowered the Antifederalists and they were forced to retreat. Many of the Antifederalists fled to a nearby house where they attempted to make a second stand, but the Federalists attacked the house and many members on both sides were severely wounded. On July 26th, the final vote took place, 30 for ratification and 27 against. New York State became the eleventh and last state to ratify the Constitution before it took effect, with North Carolina and Rhode Island not accepting until after the new government took office.⁶

- Charlotte Ashley

“Robert Fulton’s Clermont Arrived in Albany, Sept. 5th, 1807”

⁶ Report of a fight in Albany between Federalists and Antifederalists, *Freeman’s Journal*, July 16, 1788 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00259.01, p1) as cited in “A Spotlight on a Primary Source by the Freeman’s Journal: A Brawl between Federalists and Anti-Federalists, 1788.” *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History* <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/brawl-between-federalists-and-anti-federalists-1788>.

“Robert Fulton’s Clermont Arrived in Albany, Sept. 5th, 1807” by David Cunningham

Lithgow depicts the steamboat’s trip up the Hudson river, an event that marked the first successful use of steam propulsion for commercial travel. The boat was not called the Clermont in 1807 but was instead referred to as the North River Steamboat. After the first trip up the Hudson the steamboat routinely traveled up and down the river, offering transport to the public for a fare. In the initial trips there were very few passengers on the Clermont due to the public’s apprehensions regarding the safety of steam propulsion and the possibility of boiler explosions. At the time there were many explosions as a result of the limited knowledge of the specific methods of working steam-propelled vessels. In the mural, Lithgow captures the reaction of the spectators onshore: they are excited and shocked at the sight of the steamboat passing by and its ability to travel upstream and against the wind. Mathematicians and scientists at the time did not believe Fulton’s attempts at implementing steam propulsion would be successful so there was a significant reaction from onlookers, as can be seen in the foreground on the left side of the painting. The depiction of the boat shows that the sails are not in use and therefore the vessel is not getting any advantage from the wind, but rather its speed was achieved solely through the use of the steam engine.

- Chrissy Focken

“The Erie Canal’s First Boat Seneca Chief Arrived at Albany, Nov. 2nd, 1825”

The Erie Canal was completed in 1825 and connected the Great Lakes to Manhattan. At the time, it was the longest artificial waterway and the most important public works project in the United States. It not only opened access to the West, but it secured New York City’s place as an important, wealthy, commercial city. Governor Dewitt Clinton led the Grand Opening and

rode on the first voyage from Buffalo to Manhattan. This maiden voyage was cause for much celebration. Crowds of enthusiastic New Yorkers waved the governor on at each stop along the way in what was seen as a victory for Manifest Destiny.

The boat used for the opening voyage was called the Seneca Chief. The Seneca are an Indigenous tribe originally from the Great Lakes area south of Lake Ontario. They were also the largest of the six tribes that made up the Iroquois Confederacy (or Six Nations). They have a rich history and culture that they are trying to preserve despite their displacement at the hands of the US government. The Seneca were known for being fierce and skilled at warfare, but also for their oratory and diplomacy skills. Today, their language is considered “at risk,” and tribal elders are fighting to ensure it doesn’t disappear altogether.

Using the Seneca as the name for a ship that would become a symbol of Manifest Destiny is ironic at best, implicitly violent at worst. Manifest Destiny was an idea that became popular in the 19th century. It held that the expansion of the United States throughout the continent of North America was justifiable, not unlike the belief in the divine right of kings in Europe. It was also seen as inevitable. The problem of pre-existing Indigenous nations was a pesky one, but easily solved by displacement and broken treaties. Today, we see Manifest Destiny as a problematic concept because it relied on a racist belief in white superiority to flourish. However, in the 19th century when the Erie Canal was completed, it was a thriving ideal.

In Lithgow’s painting, we see the Seneca Chief arriving in Albany on its way from Buffalo to Manhattan. Men and women are dressed in their finest for this special event and there is an

air of celebration to the scene. The irony of naming a vessel after a tribe who were displaced by white settler advancement is unacknowledged.

- Heather Christensen

“The Locomotive DeWitt Clinton First Trip Albany to Schenectady, Sept. 24th, 1831”

Lithgow’s mural depicts the historic event of the locomotive DeWitt Clinton’s first trip from Albany to Schenectady on September 24th, 1831. A notable technological achievement, the locomotive was one of the first steam powered passenger trains in the United States. The *Genesee Farmer* published an article the week after the event on October 1st, 1831 describing the trip and stating that there were a total of ten cars, three of them attached to the locomotive and seven drawn by horse. The mural depicts the three cars attached to the train and depicts the horse drawn carriages on the right side of the painting. The article also describes the people present in the scene, including the governor, members of the Senate, the judges of district courts and the state Supreme Court, as well as citizens of New York City, Albany, and Schenectady. The focus of the painting is as much the lively depiction of the crowd of people as it is the depiction of the train. This event demonstrated the potential for steam travel in the Albany region to the people in attendance. It is likely that the basis of Lithgow’s decision to include a depiction of this event was that the development of steam travel in Albany marked the city as modern and a place of significance. Steam locomotives allowed for efficient travel and transport of goods, but they were very destructive to the environment. They contributed to pollution and required forests to be cut down to make room for the rails. The success of the use of the DeWitt Clinton showed people the possibility for fast efficient travel

across the land and the ways that technology could be used to overcome nature, prompting a change in attitudes towards the land.

- Chrissy Focken

“Normal School Building Corner of Lodge and Howard Sts. Albany N.Y. Erected 1849”

In the 19th century, public schools were still relatively new in the United States. As they became more popular, special schools called Normal Schools were established to train new teachers. The Albany Normal School was especially successful and drew a large number of students from all over rural New York. Soon, the school boasted 250 students, more than all three of the Normal Schools in Massachusetts combined. Both men and women were accepted (although they had separate entrances to the building), but in the early days most of the students were men. That changed with the onset of the Civil War. As men left to fight, women continued their training at the Normal School. By the time the war was over, women teachers were preferred and were considered “calmer, more patient, and better equipped to instill the values necessary for a successful republic into their students.”⁷

The belief that women are naturally more nurturing than men is not a new one. For centuries, it has been used to keep women in the home working exclusively as caretakers for their children. It is also what makes the jobs of teacher, nurse, or nanny considered by many to be “women’s work.” The role of teacher was certainly one of the only respectable jobs available to a woman in the 19th century. Even in the 1930s, when women were working a much wider variety of jobs, old beliefs about what was “women’s work” vs. “men’s work” died hard.

⁷ Allen Ballard, ed., “The Albany Normal School,” University at Albany, Department of History
<https://www.albany.edu/faculty/aballard/civilwar/normalschool.htm>

In Lithgow's painting of the Albany Normal School, the school building dominates the scene. There are some Albany citizens in the foreground, and the women are all depicted in traditional female roles: arm in arm with men or looking after children. If you look carefully, you can see that there are mostly women at the entrance to the school. While there is nothing wrong with women wanting to be teachers, this is the only scene Lithgow painted that depicts any kind of working women. Even in the 19th century, women worked in factories and as activists. By the time Lithgow painted these panels, women had already flooded the workforce during World War I, been appointed to government positions by President Roosevelt, and had been accounted for in the New Deal. It is also telling that in his only painting of women workers, the women teachers themselves are depicted at such a small scale – almost unnoticeable. Instead, it is the building where they worked that takes center stage.

- Heather Christensen

"In the Year 1910, June 30th, Glenn Curtiss Flew From Van Rensselaer Island, Albany, N.Y. To Governor's Island, New York"

Perhaps the most unusual element of this mural comes not from the painted scene but from the painting's inscription. Lithgow's inscription lists Glenn H. Curtiss' flight as taking place on June 30th, when it actually took place a month earlier, on May 29th, with the news report coming out the next day. The *New York Times* of May 30th, 1910 records Curtiss' historic flight in fervent detail over six pages.⁸ It is particularly interesting that Lithgow erred in specifying the date because he took pride in doing most of his own research to ensure that historical subjects in his paintings were portrayed accurately.⁹ The misidentification of this fairly rudimentary fact

⁸ "Curtiss Flies, Albany to New York, At the Speed of 54 Miles an Hour," *The New York Times*, 30 May 1910, pp. 1–6.

⁹ Betty Barden, ed. "Lithgow Explains Murals in Interview," *Crimson and White: Senior News*, 3 Mar. 1939, p. 2.

speaks to the inaccuracy of Lithgow's artwork. While it is true that technology has come a long way in providing easy access to historical records, it is still somewhat surprising that this mistake was made considering the subject was a relatively recent event that took place in Albany and an event that Lithgow himself lived through.

In 1910, *The New York World* offered \$10,000 to any pilot who could complete a 152-mile journey before October 10th, 1910. The rules permitted two stops in either direction. Many famous names were shooting for the prize. Among them was aviator Glenn H. Curtiss, known for piloting the first publicly witnessed air flight in 1908 and winning a \$5000 prize at an air meet in France in 1909. Curtiss built the airplane himself. It had a single propeller operating 350 pounds of driving power through air resistance. The 50-horsepower engine was the most powerful one he had built to date and marked his departure from air-cooled to water-cooled systems. Still, the added weight prompted him to add two sealed metal drums covered in rubberized silk beneath each wing and cork-filled bags to the fuselage to keep the aircraft afloat if it fell into the river. With this unique adaptation, Curtiss essentially constructed the world's first seaplane.¹⁰ The biplane measured only thirty feet wide and thirty feet and one inch from extreme front to extreme rear, weighing a mere 1,004 pounds. On May 29th, Curtiss took off from Van Rensselaer Island with a letter from Albany mayor James B. McEwan addressed to New York City mayor William J. Gaynor. This letter became America's first airmail. Despite a couple of unexpected hiccups – including relying on nearby motorists to refuel his plane when the intended supplier didn't show up, and almost being ejected from the plane during intense

¹⁰ Reed Sparling, "From Albany to NYC, Bravely Flying the Country's First Airmail," *Scenic Hudson*, 9 Sept. 2021 <https://www.scenichudson.org/viewfinder/from-albany-to-nyc-bravely-flying-the-countrys-first-airmail/>.

winds at the Hudson Highlands – Curtiss landed safely on Governor’s Island. His two-hour-and-fifty-one-minute flight marked the first flight between two major American cities.

- Charlotte Ashley

“Capitol Hill Modern Albany 1943 Three Forms of Architecture”

“Capitol Hill Modern Albany 1943 Three Forms of Architecture” depicts a view of three buildings in downtown Albany, including the New York State Department of Education Building on the right, the Alfred E. Smith Office building in the center, and the New York State Capitol Building on the left. The viewpoint is from the corner of Hawk Street and Washington Avenue looking west. Also depicted is West Capitol Park and the crowded sidewalks of people and the cars and buses passing by on Washington Avenue. The mural focuses on representing the forms of architecture of these buildings and architectural achievements in Albany. The construction of the New York State Capitol Building was finished in 1899. It was built in the Romanesque style by architects Thomas Fuller, Leopold Eidlitz, and Isaac Perry. The Alfred E. Smith building is an Art Deco skyscraper that was finished in 1930. The building was mostly built by the state architect Sullivan W. Jones and was completed by William Haugeard. Sullivan W. Jones also worked on the State Education Building and West Capitol Park, both featured in the mural. The Department of Education Building was finished in 1912. It was designed by Henry Hornbostel in the Beaux-Arts architecture style which included a resurgence in the popularity of the classical style in combination with Renaissance ideas. There is a sense of perspective created in the painting through the use of the orthogonal lines formed by Washington Avenue which recede back to a vanishing point. This instills in the viewer a sense of the vastness of Albany. The detail of the tree line along the West Capitol Park emphasizes these orthogonal lines and also

communicates the modernity of Albany through the depiction of the repeated verticals of the meticulously planned out placement of the trees. The light around the top of the Alfred E. Smith building emphasizes its impressive height and the status that the building had upon its completion as the tallest building in between Buffalo and New York City.

- Chrissy Focken

Sculptural Friezes: Section One

Frieze 1 represents people engaging in different activities along the banks of the Tigris River, personified by the God of the Tigris at the right edge. He is depicted as a bearded, nude man leaning on an urn with water flowing from it into the river, and he holds a rudder and wheat stalk. Next to him a group of men on a boat flee Alexander's invading army.

Frieze Two

Frieze 2 displays a shepherd herding a group of sheep against the walls of Babylon. In the background, there is a view of the hanging gardens and a group of figures interacting.

Friezes 3-4

Frieze 3 also represents sheep herding. A long, rectangular element separates the herders from the Babylonian procession, where figures bring a variety of goods as a tribute to Alexander. Animals, such as horses, lions, and tigers, are marched forward in a parade. This procession continues in Frieze 4, where a group of dynamic figures is trying to control the horses as they walk.

Friezes 5A-5C

Friezes 5A-5C illustrate the rest of the procession that leads directly to Alexander and his army. On Frieze 5A, there is a depiction of trumpeters with a band of figures

preparing an altar and scattering flower petals on the right side. Frieze 5B displays, at left, three Babylonians soldiers and, in the center, Mazaeus, the governor of Babylon, with his children, all with hands outstretched as they beg for mercy from Alexander. Frieze 5C depicts Alexander's arrival in the center of the composition with the Goddess of Peace standing before his chariot, holding a cornucopia and olive branch. Alexander dominates the scene as he rushes into Babylon with his flowing drapery and army following behind him.

Friezes 6-9

Friezes 6-9 portray Alexander's cavalry and foot soldiers following Alexander's entry into the city. Significantly, Frieze 9 displays Greek soldiers guiding an elephant that has an abundance of loot on its back. A Persian prisoner of war, his head bowed in a submissive manner, accompanies them.

- Amanda Pagan

Thematic Essays

Historical Background on Artist that Situates His Life and Work

By Charlotte Ashley

David Cunningham Lithgow (1868–1958), the painter who created the murals in this room, was one of the most prominent Albany artists active in the first half of the twentieth century. He received his primary education at the Halden Academy in Scotland¹¹ and then spent a year in London. He worked in Glasgow to build his reputation before coming to New York City in 1888 to expand his art career. Lithgow started out as a draftsman for Gilbert Car Works,¹² and his first assignment was to draw plans for a \$100,000 private railroad car for President Don Pedro of Brazil.¹³ His first private commission in the United States was a portrait of the actress Lillie Langtry, also known as “The Jersey Lily.” Lithgow also painted portraits commissioned by notable community members. He was a believer in spreading out one’s interests and attention over multiple areas, so as to never get tired of one thing.¹⁴

Although he was best known for his multi-scene murals, of which he produced many for banks and other public institutions in the Albany area, Lithgow also engaged with the arts of etching, sculpture, stained glass, writing, music, and carpet design. Lithgow sculpted the statue of St. Andrew in Albany Rural Cemetery. He was well-respected by his fellow artists for his “sound technique, deep scholarship, and expert draftsmanship.”¹⁵ According to *The Times*

¹¹ Katherine A. Van Epps, “Scant Ceremony and Plans for Future Mark David Lithgow's 80th Birthday,” *The Knickerbocker News*, 12 Nov. 1948.

¹² Marie Stanley, “Area Resident Leaves His Mark,” *The Times Record*, 14 Aug. 1976.

¹³ Albany Institute of History and Art— David C. Lithgow Papers, Box 1, newspaper clipping, 27 May, 1958.

¹⁴ C.R. Roseberry, “Artist, Kristen and Hearty at 85, Works Every Day; Best Known for His Murals” *The Times Union*, 10 Jan. 1954.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Union he worked at his easel in a vest and rolled-up shirtsleeves, never wearing a smock. “I have always felt that clean work calls for a clean suit and clean hands,” he said. When he was out and about, he was easily recognizable by his pince-nez glasses and signature derby hat, the latter of which, he said, he wore “for spite, because they tease me about it.” At the age of 85, he still followed his routine of working at his studio on 91 State Street every weekday from 10 am to 5 pm. He was short in stature and never quite lost his highland Scottish accent, even after 65 years in America.¹⁶

The series of fourteen murals Lithgow painted for the Milne School library—the original function of the large room now known as Milne 200--was one of the most important commissions of his career. The idea for the commission was proposed to Milne students by principal Dr. John M. Sayles. The original idea was for Lithgow to base the murals upon James Fenimore Cooper’s popular novel series *The Leatherstocking Tales*. However, this plan changed over time, its focus shifting to Albany history and the history of the Milne School.¹⁷ Dr. Sayles suggested this commission to students because he wanted to encourage them to start a project that would have enduring value and a legacy. Lithgow agreed, and each year Milne students raised funds to pay for the murals by selling school merchandise and holding card parties.¹⁸ The murals were completed between 1933 and 1944. Aesthetically, they form a visual and material counterpoint to the plaster reliefs cast after Berthold Thorvaldsen’s originals of “Alexander the Great’s Triumphal Entry into Babylon” that had been installed in the room in

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fred Regan and Florence Herber, editors, “Lithgow Says...” *Crimson and White: Senior News*, 1 Mar. 1940, p. 3.

¹⁸ Robert S. Kohn, ed., “Hoopes '42, Announces Heads of Committees for Library Mural Drive,” *Crimson and White: Senior News*, 27 Feb. 1942, p. 1.

1929. Thematically, the two series unite to promote a biased theme of white male progress and superiority, as the following essays will explain.

Lithgow's Portrayal of the Mahican People

By Sarah R. Cohen

John Cunningham Lithgow's four murals featuring the Mahican people who inhabited the upper Hudson River combine stereotype, romanticism, artistic convention, and what Lithgow believed to be ethnographic research. Like most of his white contemporaries, Lithgow generalized his portrayal of "Indians" as a universal type whose history was subject to settler interpretations and fictions. One of his panels was in fact drawn from James Fenimore Cooper's classic novel *Last of the Mohicans*, and thus cannot be considered historical at all. Given Lithgow's overall focus upon the technological and civic progress of Albany's white male population, it is not surprising to find that Indigenous people drop out of the series entirely after the first four panels. What Lithgow failed to acknowledge was the living history of the Mahican people and how they, themselves, might have experienced it. For although the Mahicans moved about and assumed other names during their 250 years of absence from Lithgow's visual narrative, just when the artist was finishing his paintings, in 1938, their descendants (now called the Stockbridge-Munsee Tribe) finally achieved self-governance and a permanent home in 16,000 acres of rural Wisconsin.¹⁹

Especially in the first two scenes of the series, Lithgow adopted the role of an interested, even sympathetic observer of "Indians" through his carefully constructed imagery and compositions, which were informed partly by his artistic training and values and partly by

¹⁹ See especially William A. Starna, *From Homeland to New Land: A History of the Mahican Indians, 1600-1830* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013). Recent revisionist histories of Indigenous peoples in North America include Pekka Hämäläinen, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2022); and Ned Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America: Native Peoples and the Unmaking of U.S. History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023).

personal investigations he was pursuing in the 1930s. In preparation for his work on the “Indian” tableaux for the New York State Education Building, which the artist was developing simultaneously with designing and executing the paintings for the Milne School, Lithgow travelled to the Onondaga Reservation in central New York, where he observed and drew Iroquois artifacts that he would incorporate into his iconography at both sites.²⁰ This one-size-fits-all approach to Indigenous representation inevitably led to errors and also to cultural homogenization and oversight: whereas the New York State Museum’s “Indian Hall” was devoted to presenting the Iroquois,²¹ the Milne murals focus upon the Mahicans, a people not only distinct from the Iroquois, but also their foes during the first half of the 1600s. Certain images that Cunningham presents in his paintings, particularly in the carefully designed borders of the first and fourth scenes --corn, squash, intricately strung wampum belts—were indeed fundamental to both the Mahicans’ and the Iroquois’ agricultural, artisanal, and ritualistic practices.²² All Indigenous peoples of the northern waterways moreover fished and hunted beaver and deer, as Lithgow duly referenced in the first mural of the series. But the longhouses that appear on the left side of this scene were built and inhabited by Iroquois, not Mahicans,

²⁰ John Cunningham Lithgow, “History of the Indian Groups with a Description of the Technic,” *New York State Museum Bulletin* (Feb. 1937): 83-100. Although Lithgow’s primary assignment at the New York State Museum (now the State Education Building in Albany) was to paint the backgrounds of the tableaux, he also seems to have served as a general scenographer of the groups and contributing designer of Iroquois emblems painted in the hall. Lithgow created numerous other depictions of Indigenous people, perhaps inspired by his travels through Onondaga territory; see, for example, his highly romanticized etchings of native American male warriors in the collection of the Albany Institute of History and Art. Many thanks to the AIHA Curator Diane Shewchuk for helping us to research the institution’s extensive Lithgow holdings.

²¹ Lithgow, “History of the Indian Groups,” 99-100.

²² Starna, *From Homeland to New Land*, 71, 81, 107, 150, 236.

who as a more mobile people generally relied upon smaller, centrally oriented structures such as the wigwam.²³

Lithgow's generalized approach to portraying Mahican life emerges most obviously in the second mural, which depicts the crucial point just before contact between the Indigenous inhabitants of the upriver valley and the European sailors. While a small, precise depiction of the Halve Maen shimmers in the distance, in the foreground we see a group of Mahican men gesturing, hoisting weaponry, and preparing canoes to meet the strange ship on the water. Their muscular grace derives largely from pictorial traditions of idealized physical form that the artist would have absorbed in his European artistic training. The variety of poses, angles of view, and states of dress and undress directly recall classic Academic drawing practices from a live model. But demonstrating his artistic prowess does not appear to have been Lithgow's primary aim: rather, he uses idealized nudity to romanticize the pre-contact Indigenous men as "noble savages." Notable in this respect is the relative lack of such nudity in the fourth mural, which is set toward the end of the seventeenth century, after the Dutch had departed and the English had replaced them as traders and incipient colonialists: now apparently familiar with European ways, the Mahicans are seen to have likewise adopted their sartorial codes of civility.

This story of encounter Lithgow portrays runs counter to seventeenth-century Dutch accounts: the Mahicans, it was reported, brought to their very first meeting with the Dutch mariners valuable offerings including food and furs—suggesting that they were already aware of

²³ See, e.g., *Ibid.*, 40, 191. On the wigwam, an ovoid domestic structure of widespread use in the northeast and beyond, see William C. Sturtevant, "Two 1761 Wigwams at Niantic Connecticut," *American Antiquity* 40 (1975): 437–44.

European interest in fur as a principal item of trade.²⁴ Robert Juet, probably the Halve Maen's navigator, recounted that an "old Savage, a Governour of the Countrey . . . carried him [Hudson] to his house, and made him good cheere."²⁵ Henry Hudson himself praised the hospitality shown to him by this Mahican headman, and further observed, "the natives are a very good people, for when they saw that I would not remain, they supposed that I was afraid of their bows, and taking the arrows, they broke them in pieces, and threw them into the fire . . ." ²⁶

Hudson's diary, which exists in fragments, was translated into English and published by the New York Historical Society in 1841, so it would have been a readily available source should Lithgow had chosen to portray what was known of the actual interaction between the Mahicans and the first of the Dutch to arrive.²⁷ Mutual interest in trade and coexistence indeed seems to have prevailed in the relations between the Dutch and the Mahicans throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, leaving open many such opportunities for visualizing cultural encounters.

A more fraught sequence of events to which Lithgow could have turned in historicizing his portrayal of the Indigenous inhabitants of the upper Hudson was the Mahican-Mohawk war of the mid-1620s, a culmination of the mutual animosity between the Mahicans and the Iroquois and a crisis point in the early history of the Dutch settlers themselves. Concerned to protect the smooth trade in furs, the Dutch sought from the start to play the role of mediators, although they inevitably became caught up in the deeply-rooted conflict.²⁸ Lithgow's distanced, picturesque view of native life likely prevented him from attending to such social and political

²⁴ Ibid., 19, 20-21, 94.

²⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

²⁶ Ibid., 23.

²⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸ See Starna, *From Homeland to New Land*, 79-96; Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America*, 85-86.

complexities of Mahican history, in contrast to his forthright portrayal of tension and even violence in the colonial murals, notably the “Anti-Ratification Riot of 1788.”

Lithgow’s tendency to give his Indigenous actors one-dimensional roles becomes seriously misleading in the fourth mural, “Albany as a Trading Post About 1695,” which represents his one attempt to depict direct engagement between the Mahicans and the European settlers. “Silver ornaments, trinkets, and cloth,” stated in the caption and highlighted by Lithgow both in the composition of the trade scene itself and around the decorative borders, were never the primary interest of the Mahicans, as the settlers well knew: even Henry Hudson, in 1609, had brought with him hatchets and knives in addition to glass beads and red coats, while subsequent trade with the Mahicans entailed various kinds of useful metal wares, food and drink, and wampum, which in addition to its sacred properties also served as a valuable type of currency among native groups.²⁹ In Lithgow’s painting we see Mahican men coming laden with beaver skins—skins that are also depicted emblematically in the decorative border of the scene—but in fact, by the end of the seventeenth century this once flourishing animal had been hunted almost to extinction, as the Indigenous people strove to meet European demands for more and more fur. Now it was land that the Mahicans were selling strategically, first to the Dutch, beginning as early as 1630, and then to the English when they took over the colonial enterprise in 1664. Far from unknowing of settlers’ ways, the Mahicans appear to have quickly caught on to European notions of personal, rather than communal, land ownership, and they sought to manipulate their sales so as to continue trade advantageous to

²⁹ Starna, *From Homeland to New Land*, 21, 134; Blackhawk, *Rediscovery of America*, 85; Hämmäläinen, *Indigenous Continent*, 75.

themselves. Certain Mahican individuals stand out in the land selling enterprise: one Skiwias, known to the Dutch as Aepjen, had the trust of both sides and skillfully negotiated deals, acting as a kind of land broker.³⁰

Inevitably, however, their multiplying land sales greatly reduced the Mahicans' ability to farm and flourish by subsistence, while settler induced poverty and alcoholism reduced their viable numbers and spurred much of the remaining upper Hudson Mahican population to migrate east to Stockbridge in Western Massachusetts. Their disappearance from Lithgow's Albany series by the early eighteenth century is thus not entirely inaccurate, although key historical events would continue to bring the Mahicans back to their original lands. In 1775, for example, Stockbridge Mahicans travelled to Albany to pledge their loyalty and service to the colonists in the brewing Revolution against England, the Mahicans' former ally. As recorded in a source published in Albany in the late nineteenth century, the headman of the Stockbridge Mahicans, known by the name of Solomon, declared to the Indian commissioners, "Wherever you go, we will be by your sides. Our bones shall lie with yours. We are determined never to be at peace with the red coats, while they are at variance with you."³¹ Such a scene, exhibiting at once Indigenous "nobility" and a stirring moment of solidarity in the colonial history of Albany, would have provided Lithgow with just the kind of pictorial drama he characteristically sought, as well as an opportunity to acknowledge the ongoing history of the Mahican as a people.

The transformations in American society brought about by the New Deal reforms of the 1930s proved to be consequential both for the Milne School and for descendants of the

³⁰ Starna, *From Homeland to New Land*, 113-33.

³¹ Starna, *From Homeland to New Land*, quoting from E.B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of New York; Procured in Holland, England, and France by John R. Brodhead* (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1853-1887), 197.

Mahicans. For although Lithgow's commission to paint his series for the school came from the institution itself, public murals, especially those depicting regional history and industry, were a staple of the Works Progress Administration and may well have inspired the Milne commission. Indeed, while Lithgow was painting the later scenes in his series, the WPA sponsored the New York artist William Brantley Van Ingen to design a series of large canvases, also portraying Albany history, for the New York State Teacher's College; these works, dating from 1937-38, still cover the walls of the Dewey Graduate Library and would undoubtedly have been known to Lithgow.³² More momentous was the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which the historian Ned Blackhawk has characterized as "a sea change in federal Indian policy," allowing as it did for autonomous self-governance and reversing many of the prior legal disparities Indigenous peoples had endured for centuries.³³ The Stockbridge-Munsee Tribe, which united several Indigenous groups including descendants of the Mahicans, achieved their own such federal recognition in 1938 and established themselves permanently in Shawano County, Wisconsin.³⁴ Although far from the river where they first met Henry Hudson with offers of friendship and goods for trade, the Mahicans did not disappear but continue to live as citizens of the United States, alongside all the descendants of immigrants to this land.

³² See Kristen Thornton-De Stafeno, *The Murals of the Dewey Graduate Library* (Albany, NY: University Libraries, University at Albany, 2017):

<https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=dewey>

We are grateful to Tyler Norton of the University Libraries for helping us research this installation.

³³ Blackhawk, *The Rediscovery of America*, 401-7; quotation from p. 402.

³⁴ Starna, *From Homeland to New Land*, 221.

Treatment of Women and Gender in Lithgow's Paintings

By Heather Christensen

Historically in the West, whether in art or the public record, men have most often told women's stories. Although women have been pointing out the unfairness and absurdity of this for decades, the trend remains largely intact. Women's roles have changed drastically over the years and most of the changes have brought new rights and freedoms. Even so, David Cunningham Lithgow joins the ranks of men who have ignored women's contributions to their communities, national policies, and the world at large. His paintings in Milne Hall at the University of Albany, mainly completed in the mid- to late 1930s, relegate women to traditional gender roles and silence their voices. Most of his paintings depict events from the colonial era through the nineteenth century; we must look at the history of women's roles in those historical years, but most importantly during the 1930's, to gain insight into why Lithgow painted women this way, and to see what he left out.

During America's colonial years, a woman's place was in the home. After the first colonies were established, women were needed to help with the farming because the survival of the community depended on everyone doing their part. However, domestic roles were the ideal, and, once the colonies were secure enough to run without women's agricultural labor, the women went back to their homes. Religion played a big role in setting this submissive female ideal. The Puritans were known for their strict adherence to literal interpretations of the Bible, and in the 18th century, charismatic preachers like Jonathan Edwards continued to stress traditional gender roles. Because of the patriarchal structure of colonial society, precious few

women's voices have made it into the public record to give us insight into how they felt about their lot in life.

One of the exceptions is Esther Edwards Burr. Burr is mainly known for being related to two famous men: the fire-and-brimstone preacher Jonathan Edwards was her father and she became the mother of Aaron Burr, future vice president and killer of Alexander Hamilton. Esther Edwards Burr was known for being very smart and witty. She also left behind journals and letters to her dear friend, Sarah Prince, that allow us to see what life was like for an intelligent woman trapped in a domestic role. Burr had been educated, but only up to a point. Her father believed educating women was necessary only so they could read and understand the Bible in order to avoid Hell. Too much education, he believed, would strip a woman of her femininity. In her writing, Burr often expressed her frustration at being tied to her home – especially once she became a mother. After giving birth to her second child, she wrote, “When I had but one Child my hands were tied, but now I am tied hand and foot. (How I shall get along when I have got ½ dzn. or 10 Children I can’t devise.)”³⁵ In her journals and letters, Burr was able to question the patriarchy, lament her confinement to her home, and exhibit her intelligence. In a letter to Sarah, she recounted an argument with a man who foolishly said that real friendship was something only men could achieve: “I retorted several severe things upon him before he had time to speak again. He Blushed and seemed confused...[and] I talked him quite silent.”³⁶ However, despite the freedom her writing afforded her, Burr still expressed guilt over the intensity of her emotions. Her father's influence was

³⁵ Cornelia Powers, “Women in Colonial America Were More Powerful Than We Give Them Credit For,” *Time Magazine*, March 16, 2022 <https://time.com/6157132/colonial-women-history-esther-aaron-burr/>

³⁶ Ibid.

powerful and convinced her that her intelligence was worldly and might have kept her separated from God.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, women's roles began to change. Factories created jobs and welcomed women to the workforce. Some unmarried women saw work as a source of freedom or a way to help their families. They weren't the only ones to see work for women as a step forward. Alexander Hamilton believed that women's work would be an especially positive thing for farmers by providing them "a new source of profit and support from the increased industry of his wife and daughters."³⁷ For middle class women, the ability to work meant that for the first time marriage became about companionship rather than necessity. However, this took longer to change for poorer, working-class women. For them, working was a necessity and marriage helped ensure their survival. Societal changes and shifts in thinking took longer to trickle down to the lower classes. For these women, working was not a source of freedom, but another link in their chains.

Despite the measure of freedom they offered, factories had their own problems. Women were finally out of the house, but factory owners became their new father figures. They often required women to live in factory boardinghouses, which allowed them to keep tabs on their workers and enforce "morality" outside of work. Women were required to observe the Sabbath, keep curfew, and abstain from smoking and other improper activities. If they broke any of these rules, they could be fired. Married women didn't need to live in the boardinghouses, but they could have their wages seized by their husbands. And worst of all,

³⁷Catherine Clinton and Christine Lunardini, "American Women in the Nineteenth Century," *The Columbia Guide to American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2000), pg. 31.

long hours and unsafe working conditions pushed women to their breaking points. In Lowell, Massachusetts, factory women published their own paper, titled *The Lowell Offering*. In it, they featured creative writing, poetry, and political opinions. In 1845, they formed The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. One activist said, “As our fathers resisted unto blood the lordly avarice of the British ministry, so we, their daughters, never will wear the yoke which has been prepared for us.”³⁸ Women in factories around the country followed suit and soon the oppressive nature of the factory owners and the reality of the horrible working conditions became widespread knowledge.

As women became more engaged in politics thanks to their work in labor unions, they began to turn their attention to women’s suffrage. In July of 1848, an important meeting was held at the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. It was organized by two rising women activists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. They advertised the meeting in the *Seneca County Courier* and encouraged any interested women to join them in discussing the role of women in society. In the end, 300 people, including 40 men, attended. Over the course of two days, they argued over the proposed Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. This document was to be modeled after the Declaration of Independence, even beginning with the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal.”³⁹ Stanton and Mott’s Declaration included the following demands: equal education, equality in marriage, equal access to work, the right to own property, make contracts, testify in court, sue (and be sued), speak in public, retain custody of children, and vote. The right to vote

³⁸ Clinton and Lunardini, “American Women of the Nineteenth Century, pg. 33.

³⁹ Ibid., pg. 114

was nearly left out of the document altogether. It was very controversial at the time, and many people feared it would prevent their other demands from being taken seriously. However, Stanton was an eloquent, passionate speaker and she had an important ally on her side: Frederick Douglass. He was at the meeting and spoke in favor of the vote, saying, “All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman, and if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying women the exercise of the elective franchise.”⁴⁰ In the end, the vote made it into the Declaration, which was signed by 68 women and 32 men. However, the document was met with severe (and predictable) criticism by both politicians and religious figures.

They argued so vehemently against it that many who had signed the Declaration withdrew their support. But the ideas had stuck, and many more women’s conventions were planned and executed in the coming years.

Over the next 30 years, women continued to engage in politics. After World War I, even more women began working outside the home. The vote had finally been secured in 1920, and women had gotten used to working men’s jobs during the war. Once the war was over, their options expanded from domestic, farm, teaching, and factory work to include office jobs and careers previously reserved for men. Women were now stenographers, typists, journalists – even dentists and architects. With more options available to them and a major political battle won, things were looking up.

In the 1930’s the Great Depression made the shift to social feminism important. The

⁴⁰ Ibid., pg. 115.

League of Women Voters advocated for both the 1936 Social Security Act and the 1937 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. They did so with the intent of distancing themselves from a feminist label and asking to be treated as equal citizens. As one leader said, “We of the League are very much for the rights of women, but...we are not feminists primarily; we are citizens.”⁴¹ During this period, Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as a vocal advocate for women’s rights (she also avoided the label of feminist). Her influence was such that she both molded and reflected public opinion. Thanks to her, Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed several women to public office (e.g., Frances Perkins, the first woman cabinet secretary, and also ministers to foreign countries as well as the first woman judge on the Circuit Court of Appeals). In addition, women from the Women’s Trade Union League and the Consumers’ League worked in every New Deal agency. Many New Deal programs benefitted women, but one of the most important was the National Industry Recovery Act of 1933. This set the maximum and minimum wage standards for men *and* women workers. Although it was eventually found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, the same principles were applied when Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938.

Despite the Roosevelts’ influence and the relief offered by the New Deal, the Depression also dealt a blow to the advancement of women’s rights. Many women were forced to find work as their husbands lost their jobs. Unlike the aftermath of the war, this influx of women into the workforce was due to necessity, not feminism. Men resented the fact that their wives were now acting as the providers. Some even claimed that women *caused* the Depression by

⁴¹ Lois W. Banner, *Women in Modern America: A Brief History* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Second Edition, 1984), pg. 183.

taking jobs away from men. As a result, domestic violence increased. In addition, many companies found loopholes in New Deal programs that allowed them to exclude women. For example, the Works Projects Administration barred women from working construction jobs – the major form of employment they offered.⁴² This tension fueled critics of feminist efforts and laid the groundwork for a return to domestic roles in the 1950's.

David Cunningham Lithgow's 1935 paintings ignore this progressive history. His scenes cover up women's struggles with idealized depictions of conventional gender roles; his women are arm candy, wives and mothers, even damsels in distress. Lithgow refused to acknowledge women's roles in Albany's history and all the gains they had made to be seen as equal workers and partners. His paintings seem to suggest that history has been advanced exclusively by white men. Given the fact that women were no longer restricted to domestic roles in the 1930's and given the fact that art is meant to probe into current ways of thinking, feeling, and imagining, it is surprising that Lithgow silenced the women in his paintings. However, given that Lithgow was a man working in a profession where men had typically told (or not told) women's stories, it isn't so surprising after all.

In contrast to what Lithgow suggests, many women have contributed in key ways to Albany's history. Perhaps the most famous example is Elizabeth Schuyler. She has historically been known merely as the wife of Alexander Hamilton. Lithgow does include her in his work, but this is how he portrays her: on the arm of her more famous husband. In reality, she continued to raise their children, at least one of whom had special needs, for many years after

⁴² Notably, however, numerous women artists found employment within the auspices of the WPA especially in the field of printmaking. See Dulce Román, "Spotlight on Women Artists of the WPA," Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, 2023 [<https://harn.ufl.edu/resources/spotlight-on-women-artists-of-the-wpa/>]

Hamilton's death. When her own children were grown, she established New York City's first private orphanage and acted as caretaker for the many children who called it home. Another important figure was Ann Lee, the spiritual leader of the Shakers. The Shakers were one of the most influential early-American religious communities, and Lee led them during a time when few women were allowed to teach or lead religious services. Eleanor Roosevelt can also be counted in Albany's history thanks to the years she worked in Albany during her husband's two terms as Governor of New York. Harriet Myers is another name that isn't heard enough. She and her husband worked as activists on the Underground Railroad, but most of the effort was made by Harriet while her husband was at work. She not only helped former enslaved people to freedom but also raised money for them and advocated for all women's rights. Finally, there is C. Mary Williams. Williams was a Black woman who was chosen to be Vice President for the 11th Ward (Arbor Hill) of the Albany Woman's Suffrage Society. As far as we know, she was the only Black woman leader of a Suffrage Society, and she was very good at her job. She mobilized both white and Black women to demand the vote and even led a group of women to have their names enrolled for voter registration during the election of 1880 – 40 years before the vote was nationally secured for women.

To our 21st-century eyes, the exclusion of women playing important roles in Lithgow's paintings is jarring. The 1930's were a different time and much progress has been made since then, but there is still no reason for Lithgow to have made this error. The history of women's advancement was already significant by the 1930's. The stories were there, their contributions were already obvious. As we discuss and absorb these paintings today, we must keep this history in mind and fill in the gaps that Lithgow left.

African American Representation in Lithgow's Paintings

By Heather Christensen

There is only one panel in Lithgow's series on the history of Albany that depicts a Black figure. This figure is a man in the background of "The Courtship of Alexander Hamilton and Elizabeth Schuyler." He is a secondary character at best and is performing in service to the prominent white couple. He is dressed as an elegant, well-off servant, but in reality he would have been a slave on the Schuyler property during the time this painting takes place. Lithgow therefore boils down the significant contributions of Black people in Albany to this: their role as property.

Slavery certainly is an ugly stain on Albany's history, just as it is for the U.S. as a whole. The Schuyler family and the Rensselaer family, two of the most prominent and wealthy families in Albany, were also the two largest slaveholders in the region. They opposed manumission and often enlisted Alexander Hamilton (who is commonly depicted as being opposed to slavery) to handle the legalities of the purchase of their slaves. On Schuyler property, where Lithgow's Black figure resides, white tenant farmers worked the land, so enslaved men performed other duties. These included operating the mills, working with animals, and moving materials between Schuyler's properties. Enslaved women did domestic chores and children were wait staff. So, not only does Lithgow include a Black man in the role of slave, but his painting is an inaccurate depiction of the role a male slave would have performed on Schuyler's property. The well-dressed male butler or waiter of Lithgow's imagination did not exist in Schuyler's home.

If Lithgow had wanted to, he could have included several real, influential Black figures in this mural series. Two of the most well-known Black people in Albany's history are Stephen and

Harriet Myers. They were a free Black couple who were active in the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad in the 1840's, 50's, and during the Civil War. Harriet Tubman came through their house, and Stephen Myers spoke at events with Frederick Douglass and edited abolitionist newspapers. Today their residence in Arbor Hill is a historic site and a stop on the Underground Railroad Freedom Trail.

Another important man is Sergeant Henry Johnson, a World War I hero from a regiment nicknamed "Hellfighters from Harlem." Johnson was largely responsible for stopping a German advance in a battle during which he sustained 21 wounds but continued to fight. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by Barack Obama for his bravery, and Teddy Roosevelt named him "one of the five bravest Americans to serve in World War I."⁴³ Then there is Roseanna Vosburgh. Born a slave, she was free by age 20 and became a paid house manager at the Ten Broeck Mansion. She was also a proud abolitionist and set up a trust using her own money for African American women of Albany (likely widows).

These are just a few of the many Black men and women who have left their mark on Albany's history. Today, historical sites and prominent Albany homes including the Schuyler Mansion, Cherry Hill (home of the Rensselaer's), and the Ten Broeck Mansion are grappling with their slaveholder past and devoting time and money to researching the lives of Black people who lived and worked on these sites. However, it is still an uphill battle. The funding is often not there and, as in the past, research on Black lives is often not deemed a priority. Lithgow's paintings are a perfect visual aid for this lack of interest and care. He leaves

⁴³ Army Colonel Richard Goldenberg, *Medal of Honor Monday: Army Sgt. Henry Johnson*, U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Feature-Stories/story/Article/2201270/medal-of-honor-monday-army-sgt-henry-johnson/>

an entire population out of his representation of contributors to Albany's history and chooses to diminish their stories to this solitary depiction of a loyal slave to a wealthy colonial family.

We can do better. To learn more about African Americans' contributions to Albany's history and culture, including information on contemporary artists and educational events, visit www.albany.org/things-to-do/tours-and-itineraries/black-history-and-culture/.

Themes of Technology in Lithgow's Milne Murals

By Chrissy Focken

Within the series of David Cunningham Lithgow's murals, there are five that highlight technological advancements, including those which depict the arrival of Seneca Chief at the Erie Canal, Robert Fulton's Clermont steamboat, the DeWitt Clinton Locomotive, the Glenn Curtiss flight in the Hudson Flyer, and the view of Capitol Hill and the three forms of architecture. The murals show technological advancements that developed as part of the industrialization in America that occurred throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These murals specifically depict major milestones of the advancement of transportation in the Albany area. The steam engine was a crucial part of industrialization as the United States moved away from an agrarian lifestyle and began to rely on new technologies to transport goods and supplies. The development of steamboats, steam locomotives, canals, planes, and cars led to the spread of goods and people across the country and the growth of cities.

Chronologically, the first of these advancements as depicted by Lithgow through local events is the arrival of Robert Fulton's Clermont in Albany. The steamboat was not known as the Clermont in its own time but was instead referred to as the North River Steamboat. The importance of the Clermont was that it was the first steamboat to successfully use steam propulsion for commercial travel. In a letter Fulton wrote to Joel Barlow which was published in the *Albany Register* on September 11, 1807, Fulton recounts that the trip consisted of a thirty-two-hour trip from New York City to Albany and a thirty-hour trip back to the city.⁴⁴ In the letter Fulton also makes note that the wind was against them on the whole trip in order to provide

⁴⁴ Robert Fulton to Joel Barlow, Philadelphia; New York, 22 August 1807; *Albany Register*, September 11, 1807.

confirmation that the propulsion of the ship was achieved entirely through the steam engine. In 1807, as the boat made its trip, many people were afraid of it, and it was often described as monstrous and was compared to a dragon because of the way it breathed fire.⁴⁵ Explosions of steam engines were common because of the limited knowledge in how to operate them. People were, as a result, apprehensive to travel on steamboats. The stories of exploding steam engines caused fear amongst the public that it could happen to them. In the first of Fulton's steamboat trips there were very few passengers because of this.

Steamboats were not only destructive in terms of being a hazard to human life, but they also had detrimental effects on the environment. Trees had to be cut down in massive amounts to use for fuel. Often it was the trees surrounding the rivers that would be used because the proximity allowed for easier transport of the wood. Rivers that had major steamboat routes were altered by humans to make it easier for the steamboats to pass, and, as a result, those natural rivers started to become like man made canals at the expense of the environment and wildlife. As described in "A Legacy of Absence: Wood Removal in US Rivers" by Ellen Wohl, some of the ways that the rivers were altered included, "snagging, dredging, and blasting of rock and sediment obstructions within the channel"; this led to the removal of instream wood which would negatively impact the natural habitat of the wildlife living in the river.⁴⁶ The increase in the accessibility of steamboats for transportation led people to begin to settle in areas that had not been settled before due to difficulties in receiving supplies and goods.

⁴⁵Alice Crary Sutcliffe, *Robert Fulton and the "Clermont"; the Authoritative Story of Robert Fulton's Early Experiments, Persistent Efforts, and Historic Achievements. Containing Many of Fulton's Hitherto Unpublished Letters, Drawings, and Pictures* (The Century Co., 1909), 208.

⁴⁶ Ellen Wohl, "A Legacy in Absence: Wood Removal in U.S. Rivers," *Progress in physical geography* 38, no. 5 (2014): 646.

Steamboats now enabled people to move into such regions because of the faster spreading of goods allowed by the steamboat. The settlement of these people in previously forested areas is intertwined with the American and colonial desire to conquer what had been considered wild. As people settled those new lands, they further contributed to deforestation in their participation in the task of cutting the trees down in the vicinity to be used for their homes or to sell for money.

The next mural that focuses on technological advancement is the mural depicting the arrival of the Seneca Chief at Albany after leaving from Buffalo several days before and traveling through the Erie Canal and stopping at several towns along the way. The Seneca Chief was the first boat to pass through the canal, and its arrival celebrated the canal's opening. The Erie Canal was largely the project of the governor at the time, DeWitt Clinton. The mural depicts the Seneca Chief passing from the Canal to the Albany Basin. In the mural there is a large group of people there for a celebration of the arrival of this boat. The Erie Canal connected the Hudson River with the Great Lakes to make it easier to move goods inland and to the rest of New York State. The Erie Canal is an example of the ways people used technology to overcome nature's challenges: with the canal they restructured the waterways to suit their own needs for transportation.

The next technological achievement depicted in the murals is the Locomotive DeWitt Clinton's trip from Albany to Schenectady on September 24, 1831. The DeWitt Clinton was one of the first steam-powered passenger trains in the United States. This event demonstrated to the people in attendance the potential for steam travel in the Albany region. The DeWitt Clinton locomotive is an example of how the development of steam travel in Albany marked the

city as modern and a place of significance. Steam locomotives allowed for efficient travel and transport of goods, but they were very destructive to the environment. They contributed to pollution and required forests to be cut down to make room for the rails. Steam locomotives also required enormous amounts of wood to be used as fuel, contributing to deforestation. The success of the use of the DeWitt Clinton showed people the possibility for fast efficient travel across the land and the ways that technology could be used to overcome nature, prompting a change in attitudes towards the land. The painting titled *The First Railroad Train on the Mohawk and Hudson Road*, created by Edward Lamson Henry and currently in the Albany Institute of History and Art, depicts the same subject as Lithgow's mural of the DeWitt Clinton locomotive. Lithgow's mural was created in 1943 while Henry's was created around 1892-3. This is of interest because Lithgow may have used Henry's painting as reference for the iconography of the event along with first person accounts and descriptions like the one in *The Genesee Farmer* article published on October 1st, 1831.

The mural depicting Glenn Curtiss' flight from Van Rensselaer Island to Governors Island shows the advancement of long-distance flight. Glenn Curtiss flew from Albany to New York City to win a prize of ten-thousand dollars that would be awarded to the first person to make the trip in an airplane in under 24 hours with only two stops in between. The trip was timed and watched by a train following him to make certain he remained in the air the whole time. Curtiss made the trip in two-and-a-half hours, which was faster than any train had made the trip before. All along Curtiss' route people gathered in the areas he flew over to catch a glimpse of the plane, eagerly watching for the success of the flight and anticipating that they would no longer have to be dependent on the land for supplies because of this new technology. The land

is not as detailed as the plane in this mural, alluding to the fact that nature is going to be less important than the technology for human survival.

The mural depicting Capitol Hill and the three forms of architecture shows a view of three buildings in downtown Albany, including the New York State Department of Education Building, the Alfred E. Smith Office building, and the New York State Capitol Building. Also depicted is the West Capitol Park and the crowded sidewalks of people and the cars and buses passing by on Washington Avenue. The mural focuses on representing the forms of architecture of these buildings and the architectural achievements in Albany. The New York State Capitol Building was completed in 1899 and was built in the Romanesque style by architects Thomas Fuller, Leopold Eidlitz, and Isaac Perry. The Alfred E. Smith building is an Art Deco skyscraper that was started in 1926 and finished in 1930 was built by the state architect Sullivan W. Jones and by William Hugaard. Sullivan W. Jones also worked on the State Education Building and the West Capitol Park, which are also shown in the mural. The building of the Department of Education Building was finished in 1912. It was designed by Henry Hornbostel in the Beaux-Arts architecture style, which included a resurgence in the popularity of the classical style in combination with Renaissance ideas. The buildings depicted in the mural are considered to have contributed to the transformation of Albany into a modern city. There is a sense of perspective created in the painting through the use of the orthogonal lines formed by Washington Avenue, which recede back to a vanishing point. This instills on the viewer a sense of the vastness of Albany. The detail of the tree line formed along the West Capitol Park emphasizes these orthogonal lines and communicates the modernity of Albany through the depiction of the repeated verticals of the meticulously planned-out rows of trees. The light

around the top of the Alfred E. Smith building emphasizes its impressive height and the status that the building had upon its completion as the tallest building between Buffalo and New York City. The mural includes cars and buses as the most advanced type of transportation. Cars allowed people to move around more freely and independently. People could live farther away from where they worked and conveniently drive anywhere necessary. Cars gave people autonomy and independence and allowed for people to no longer have to wait for a bus or a train to travel. Cars also ultimately contribute to pollution and carbon emissions. Overall, this scene shows the way that humans have completely taken over the natural landscape. The only trace of nature is present in the park which has been designed with cut grass and planned out trees to suit the needs of the location.

Throughout the murals Lithgow depicts the landscape being completely taken over and modernized. Lithgow chose to depict these events as markers for the various technological advancements that occurred through industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The murals show the prioritization of human productivity above all else and the potential of technology to enhance productivity. Throughout the paintings that depict the theme of technology the achievements highlighted by Lithgow for celebration in the history of Albany, moreover, include only those of white men. These five of Lithgow's murals provide a highly selective timeline of major achievements through the advancement of transportation and technology in Albany.

The Friezes Cast after Bertel Thorvaldsen's Originals

By Amanda Pagan

Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844) sculpted the relief *Alexander's Triumphal Entry into Babylon* in 1811-1812 for Napoleon's residence at Rome, the Quirinal Palace. Thorvaldsen was a notable Danish sculptor who typically produced Neoclassical works based on Greek mythology.⁴⁷ He had been interested in the arts since his youth and had the opportunity to attend the Royal Danish Academy of the Fine Arts.⁴⁸ In 1793, Thorvaldsen entered an art competition the Academy hosted and won first place with his sculpture of *Saint Peter Healing the Paralytic*. The prize was a pension that allowed the winner to travel for three years. However, Thorvaldsen did not have the chance to depart until three years later. On May 20, 1796, he embarked on his journey to Rome and did not arrive until over a year later. Thorvaldsen's visit to Rome left an everlasting impact on him and resulted in his decision to stay permanently. Eugène Plon's *Thorvaldsen: His Life and Works* describes this event, "A devoted student, then a youth careless and dreamy, such had been Thorvaldsen until the moment of his arrival in Rome... 'I was born on the 8th of March, 1797,' he used to say: 'before then I did not exist.'"⁴⁹ This statement demonstrates that his time in Rome shaped him tremendously as a person.

Furthermore, in 1811, Napoleon's visit to the Quirinal Palace resulted in the demand for artwork to adorn the building. Plon describes this event: "the French Academy in Rome has just received an order to ornament with great magnificence the Quirinal Palace...The architect

⁴⁷ Eugène Plon, *Thorvaldsen: His Life and Works* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874), Pg.3.

⁴⁸ Plon, *Thorvaldsen*, 6.

⁴⁹ Plon, *Thorvaldsen*, 23.

Raffaele Stern, who directed them, proposed to Thorvaldsen that he should compose the bas-reliefs that were to form a marble frieze for one of the most spacious halls, and left to him the choice of subjects. The sculptor decided to represent the 'Entry of Alexander the Great into Babylon.'" ⁵⁰ The reliefs depict Alexander arriving at Babylon, the territory he captured from the Persian King Darius. They were time-consuming to complete because of Thorvaldsen's frequent bouts of sickness, yet he finished them in June 1812.

The subject matter of the Alexander reliefs originated from the ancient Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus' *History of Alexander*, which discusses Alexander the Great's life and conquests. On December 23, 1813, Thorvaldsen wrote a letter to Stern telling him he based the relief's narrative from "Book Five" of Rufus' work. ⁵¹ The descriptions of Alexander's arrival in Babylon in Book Five is similar to what is represented in the reliefs. For instance, Rufus states, "Moving on to Babylon Alexander was met by Mazaeus, who had taken refuge in the city after the battle. He came as a suppliant with his grown children to surrender himself and the city." ⁵² This scene is illustrated on Frieze 5B where Mazaeus, the governor of Babylon, and his five children have their arms outstretched towards Alexander as they beg for mercy. Additionally, Rufus' description of the Babylonian procession to meet Alexander matches Thorvaldsen's work in Friezes 3 through 5A. Rufus states:

"A large number of the Babylonians had taken up a position on the walls, eager to have a view of their new king, but most went out to meet him, including the man in charge of

⁵⁰ Plon, *Thorvaldsen*, 49.

⁵¹ Bertel Thorvaldsen to Raffaele Stern, December 22, 1813, in The Thorvaldsen's Museum Archives <https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/documents/m28AI,nr.37?highlight=Quintus+Curtius+Rufus>

⁵² Rufus Quintus Curtius, John Yardley, and Waldemar Heckel. *The History of Alexander*. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics ; New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1984), Pg.93.

the citadel and royal treasury, Bagophanes. Not to be outdone by Mazaeus in paying his respects to Alexander, Bagophanes had carpeted the whole road with flowers and garlands and set up at intervals on both sides silver altars . . . Following him were his gifts--herds of cattle and horses, and lions too, and, and leopards, carried along in cages.”⁵³

In Friezes 3 and 4, the Babylonians bring a procession of animals, such as lions and horses to give as tribute to Alexander. In the center of Frieze 5A, Bagophanes, the man whose hand is in a pointing gesture, instructs the band of figures beside him to arrange an altar for Alexander. Also, in the far right of Frieze 5A, a group of three women are scattering flower petals across the ground. The narratives presented in Rufus’ book and *Alexander’s Triumphal Entry into Babylon* are similar to each other, thus demonstrating that Thorvaldsen based the work’s theme on Rufus’ *History of Alexander*.

After the relief’s completion in June 1812 for the Quirinal Palace, it proved to be a popular work among the public. Thorvaldsen made multiple plaster and marble copies for patrons. Making casts of marble reliefs and sculptures was a common technique utilized by nineteenth-century European artists to replicate classical sculptures. Plaster was applied to an artwork to create a cast, or mold. Next, the mold was removed and was filled with plaster powder mixed with water. Once the plaster inside the mold hardened, it created a replica of the original work.⁵⁴ Multiple patrons asked Thorvaldsen for a plaster copy of the Alexander

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Cornell University Library Digital Scholarship and Preservation Services. “Cornell Collections of Antiquities.” A Short History of Plaster Casts | Cornell Collections of Antiquities. Accessed December 6, 2022. <https://antiquities.library.cornell.edu/casts/a-short-history>.

reliefs. For instance, on January 3, 1819, Eugène de Beauharnais, a French nobleman, commissioned Thorvaldsen to create a plaster cast of the relief. Additionally, in 1822, Leo von Klenze, a German architect, asked for a copy as well.⁵⁵ Moreover, patrons commissioned marble copies of the reliefs. For example, Giovanni Battista Sommariva, an Italian politician, in 1818 commissioned Thorvaldsen to create a marble copy of the Alexander relief, so he could place it in his residence, the Villa Carlotta. Sommariva paid over fourteen-thousand scudi in installments for the frieze and did not receive it until 1825.⁵⁶ Lastly, Frederick VI, the King of Denmark, commissioned a marble copy of *Alexander's Triumphal Entry into Babylon* in 1818, this too for his home, the Christiansborg Palace.⁵⁷ The fact that Thorvaldsen received multiple orders from individuals from a wide range of social classes illustrates his prominent status as a sculptor and the public's admiration for his work.

Plaster copies of Thorvaldsen's *Alexander's Triumphal Entry into Babylon* continued to be made throughout the next century. In 1929, a plaster cast of the Alexander relief was installed in the Milne School in Albany, around the upper walls of the room now known as Milne 200. According to the Milne School yearbook, *The Crimson and White*, from June 1926, the relief was a school gift funded by the students.⁵⁸ The yearbook does not mention where the students obtained the plaster copy, but there is a theory that the students ordered it from a catalog. Geoff Williams, a former University at Albany archivist, writes that:

⁵⁵ "The Thorvaldsens Museum Archives": Thorvaldsen Year by Year - A503

<https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/chronology/search?q=A503> (Accessed December 6, 2022)

⁵⁶ Giovanni Battista Sommariva to Giovanni Raimondo Torlonia, December 31, 1817, in "The Thorvaldsens Museum Archives"

<https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/documents/ea8144?highlight=Giovanni+Battista+Sommariva>

⁵⁷ "The Thorvaldsens Museum Archives": Thorvaldsen Year by Year - A503

<https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/chronology/search?q=A503> (Accessed December 6, 2022)

⁵⁸ *The Crimson and White*, June 1926, Pg.9.

“It appears that the plaster copies of the friezes were probably available in a school or art supply catalogs [sic] . . . In 1926, at the same time as the Milne school was installing its copies of the *Alexander the Great’s Triumphal Entry into Babylon*, Emory University was also installing a set of the friezes in their library over the reference desk. Our copy of the friezes has fared quite a bit better than the Emory’s as the ones at Emory were, at some point, either plastered over or destroyed during renovations.”⁵⁹

Williams’ statement demonstrates the possibility that the Milne students received the Alexander relief from an art supply catalog accessible to both schools. It is perhaps a coincidence that the Milne School and Emory University installed plaster copies with the same subject matter during the same time, especially since Emory University is located in Atlanta, Georgia.⁶⁰

A few years after the plaster reliefs were installed in Milne 200, in the 1930s, the painter David Cunningham Lithgow was commissioned to paint a series of panels depicting the history of Albany in the same room beneath the reliefs. The Lithgow murals and Alexander reliefs in Milne 200 together illustrate the domination of one race or ethnic group over another. Lithgow’s murals depict a variety of scenes that are supposed to represent Albany’s history. Yet, the murals that illustrate the contact between the Native Americans and European settlers foreshadow colonization. For instance, the mural *In the Year 1609 Henry Hudson Sailed His Vessel* pictures the Dutch ship Halve Maen arriving on what would later be called the Hudson

⁵⁹ “Milne Alumni Newsletter,” June 15, 2011
<https://www.albany.edu/~milne/06-15-2011.html> (Accessed December 7, 2022)

⁶⁰ “Emory University Candler Library Renovation: History”
<http://college.emory.edu/program/candler/history/index.html> (Accessed December 7, 2022)

River while Mahican men watch in the foreground.⁶¹ Not only the central scene but also the mural's border foreshadow European colonization in upstate New York, as Dutch flags appear in the sides of the frame. The Alexander reliefs likewise demonstrate the theme of one people dominating another because they represent Alexander the Great's superiority as he arrives in the territory he has just conquered and seized from the Persian King Darius.

European rulers frequently had artists represent the story of Alexander's conquest over Babylon to highlight their alleged preeminence, especially in regard to non-Europeans. For instance, in 1529, William IV, the Duke of Bavaria, commissioned a painting, *The Battle of Alexander at Issus*, from Albrecht Altdorfer. The Battle of Issus was a significant battle between Alexander and the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire, led by Darius III. Alexander won the battle and gained control of southern Asia Minor. In 1529, William IV was himself about to lead a siege against the Ottoman Turks. By commissioning the painting, he was trying to associate himself with Alexander's victorious outcome in the Battle of Issus and to suggest that, in this future attack on the Turks, the Bavarians would emerge as the winners.⁶² The mural, "In the Year 1609 Henry Hudson Sailed His Vessel" and the frieze "Alexander the Great's Triumphal Entry into Babylon" are vastly different works but fundamentally present the same theme.

Triumph of the strong over the weak, or more specifically, the dominance of the West over nations and peoples Westerners see as inferior, is unfortunately a common theme running throughout the history of art. To see reliefs and paintings glorifying this idea in a university

⁶¹ "The Ages of Exploration" <https://exploration.marinersmuseum.org/subject/henry-hudson/> (Accessed December 6, 2022)

⁶² Dr. Steven Zucker and Dr. Beth Harris, "Albrecht Altdorfer, the Battle of Issus," *Smarthistory* <https://smarthistory.org/albrecht-alt-dorfer-the-battle-of-issus/> (Accessed December 8, 2022)

meeting hall, while not unusual, may be jarring and upsetting to today's more progressive, 21st-century student. However, universities are exactly where we should be having discussions about unlearning the problematic lessons of the past. To see these artworks as a product of their time and discuss them as such, while also reframing the narrative for the future is the goal of this project and of the study of Art History as a whole.

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