

SOUTH HALL
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THE SOUTH HALL MURAL

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The subject matter for a mural painting cannot be undertaken lightly when it is to occupy a prominent place in a university. The thought expressed must be above the fads and fancies of a decade and have a basis of permanence and timelessness as have the eternal verities themselves.

Had we to dispose of a series of spaces not too monumental in location it would be possible, even desirable, to go lightly contemporary, morbid and iconoclastic, or gay, and ride hard the hobbies and the fancies. The space in question, however, located in the beautiful new library, South Hall, on the main axis at Columbia University, would admit of none of these. The building is a library and I would have welcomed the opportunity to paint in praise of books, the most boundless and vital expression of human experience and hope. To detract from books and scholarship is casuistry and sophistication at its worst, a sulking underestimation of the fullness of life itself and of the possibilities of excellence in all things. But the importance of the space went beyond reference solely to the library, it must necessarily represent the University rather than an integral part. It must necessarily stress its function, giving due emphasis to the particular character for which Columbia University is well known.

Important elements in that function would be to inform, to impart traditions of thought and prepare youth for independent thinking and thus coördinate the past and present with the future. The guiding spirits of Columbia have outstandingly pointed the way in the important fields of human endeavor, inspired higher standards and identified evil with its source and courageously resisted that evil. She has well earned and followed her motto, *In Lumine Tuo Videbimus Lumen*.

No subject matter could deal with more vital things nor is drama absent in what goes forward.

A beam of light separates obscurity from evident and tangible things, be the source of that light what you will, it separates ignorance from enlightenment. It points out the

way "to those who sacrifice and stumble and aspire" to gain the heights.

The group of figures in the lower left of the painting are struggling upward from thorny and difficult paths, confused in direction and circumstance as to how they shall apply hand and brain and escape the chaos and suffering that could engulf them. Agricultural and industrial labor dominate the group which is led upward by three figures in the upper left section bearing symbols of the four major phases of human effort, Law, Religion, Art and Science, historically the guiding spirits of progress. These two groups proceed under the protecting hand of Columbia, represented by her prototype, Athena, who directs their steps as she stands in the center of the composition holding high her shield in opposition to the spirits of malignant ignorance and greed, who rise from the black on the right and direct at her head their shafts and fire in an effort to overwhelm the scene. That the issue between these opposing forces rests in the balance in the mural painting may in time be viewed, as of our own time, a true contemporary point of view of the chances for Peace, for there it stands today.

Well used peace is the underlying premise of all progress and well being, it overhangs everything in the mural painting with the motive of the olive tree, back of the portal, sacred to Athena and our symbol of Peace. It seems to be the recent almost universal lapse from peace and its resultant ideological and economic demoralization that is now successfully challenging all previously well-ordered thinking and traditional philosophical conclusions. Such is the thought of the subject matter.

Plastically the painting was intended by the architect to dominate the entrance hall, and so it does. Besides its axial location, the scale, color and pattern are managed to insure dominance, aided in this instance by gold leaf enrichment in relief. Scale is little understood by many, perhaps because there are no rules to apply. I once heard Mr. Kenyon Cox try for a rule when he said "figures should never appear to be over life size." The statement cannot stand when examined in the light of Egyptian, Asiatic or Byzantine experience, but only from the standpoint of the period in which Mr.

Cox worked and spoke so ably, the late Renaissance, is there truth in what he said.

Figures or objects painted on a wall or in a picture thereon measure a wall and decide its size and the size of the interior. It is a flexible measure; large walls can lose their size, small interiors can become relatively larger by the management of that measure, therefore we have scale and it is a fundamentally important consideration. It is interesting to note here that in Byzantine and early Asiatic or Egyptian work, two scales of figures are frequently used on the same wall, forty-foot figures taking the dominance while five- or six-foot scale the wall, the contrast yielding pattern and leverage not otherwise to be had. It seemed best in the South Hall mural painting to have the figures of life size, the Athena figure slightly larger, with a distant view of Manhattan in small pattern to give the rest of the composition more comparative scale.

The longest line in the composition is the beam of light which is balanced by the lines of the hovering figures in the upper left, and the line of evil spirits continued athwart the beam of light. The opposition of these two lines forms an adequate counterpoint to the semicircular top to the composition. The line made by the hovering figures and that of the evil spirits required opposition in the lower left and this is supplied by the figure of labor, with the hammer, who leans forward in sympathy and interest for the climbing figures in his group.

The form description and relief given the figures and other elements, is simple and rounded, usually with one transition from light to dark, in harmony with the rounded forms and degree of relief of the classical Renaissance style of the building. The space was not the occasion to follow that section of critical persuasion that calls for subversive subject matter done with modernistic experiments in the manner of the prevailing fad of the month; it would desecrate the premises.

Columbia has reason to rejoice that the architect, Mr. James Gamble Rogers, had the taste and vision to conform to the campus and build beautifully and harmoniously with the University as far as it has been developed.