

## Boris Deutsch's WPA Mural in Truth or Consequences' Post Office

by Charles Bennett

The Truth or Consequences post office building at 300 Main Street, constructed 1939-1940, is known both as a good example of an unaltered small town single-purpose post office and for its historic association with the federal government's New Deal public arts programs. The mural in the lobby of the Classical Revival building was painted by an acclaimed artist and is a nationally recognized work of art.

"The Indian Bear Dance," was painted by professional artist Boris Deutsch (1895-1978) and installed in June 1940 under one of the federal arts programs created to employ artists during the Great Depression (1929-1943). Over time art produced under these programs has come to be known as "WPA Art," an acronym for one of the New Deal programs, the Works Progress Administration.

Congress approved funding in 1935 for the WPA, a centerpiece in President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal solution to the Great Depression. In its 8 year run, the WPA hired more than 8.5 million unemployed people to do publicly useful work, from bridge and road construction to concert performances, painting and writing. Management controversies and high employment rates during WW II brought the WPA to an end in 1943.

Boris Deutsch's mural, measuring 5'x12' and executed in oil on canvas, depicts a group of Native Americans of no specific tribe, some masked and costumed, observing a "Bear Dance." Installed several months after the new



post office building in Hot Springs, NM (Truth or Consequences) was completed, the mural design was a prize winner in a 48 state competition. The winning designs, to be placed in one post office in each of the then 48 states, were selected from 1,475 anonymously submitted sketches. The competition was the largest ever held in the country, and made a distinct contribution to American mural art.

Deutsch's mural was featured along with the other winning entries in the December 4, 1939 issue of LIFE Magazine. The color studies of Deutsch's mural are in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution. They reveal that originally the mural depicted a Native American chief dancing out of the path of an oncoming Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway Super Chief locomotive. For some unknown reason Deutsch redesigned the mural to show a mountain instead of a locomotive. Another change was, a man riding a horse became a masked dancer. The balance of the final work is essentially the same as the studies.

The mural is very expressive and stylized; the figures have a peculiar moody, surrealistic appearance, with large and small figures interspersed without regard to spacial positions. The mural was evidently created by Deutsch not so much as an authentic documentation of any specific Native American dance or ceremony, rather as a representation of the color, spirit and drama of Southwestern Native

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American rituals in general. It's obvious that Deutsch respected Native American cultures: his mural in T or C can be viewed as a precedent for a larger mural he painted several years later for the interior lobby of the Los Angeles Terminal Annex Post Office, with the theme of recognizing cultural contributions of indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Deutsch was born in Lithuania, then a part of Russia. After being conscripted into the Russian army he deserted and fled the country. He studied art briefly in Latvia and in various Berlin academies before immigrating to Seattle in 1916 and becoming a United States citizen. Three years later he moved to Los Angeles where he became a successful commercial artist and worked for Paramount Pictures in the special effects department. He also taught advanced painting. In the early years of the Depression he worked for the Federal Resettlement Project, traveling to several states to visually document workers being resettled on farms. He painted two other WPA post office murals: "Grape Pickers" in Reedley, California, in 1941, and the mural for the Los Angeles Terminal Annex Post Office.

Deutsch painted his self-portrait into this latter mural in a number of places.

Deutsch was well-known in California and was exhibited and collected widely there: a number of prestigious museums have works by Deutsch in their permanent collections. Other murals he painted are in the Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, the San Diego Fine Arts Museum, Mills College (California), the Portland Museum of Art (Oregon), the Denver Art Museum and the Carnegie Institute (Pennsylvania).

Deutsch also made a low-budget fifteen-minute personal art film in Los Angeles: *Lullaby* (1929). Deutsch used moody expressionistic visuals and symbolic touches in the art film to convey the heroine's psychological state. He used his own special-effects photography and other cinematic techniques for a dramatic plot recognized as a precursor to the "psychodramas" of California experimental film of the 1940's. Unfortunately, the only known print of the film is in poor condition and it is not clear that the print is complete.

The building occupied by the Truth or Consequences downtown post office was accepted to the National Register of Historic Places in 1989, partly due to Deutsch's mural and its association with the federal government's New Deal arts program.



Photo by Charles Bennett