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Book Review: The Texas Post Office Murals: Art for the People

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Stodgy university presses, in these hard economic times, have begun to produce books that have a broad appeal to scholars and casual readers alike, and The Texas Post Office Murals is a splendid example of the genre. Beautifully designed and printed, mostly in vivid color, Parisi’s book becomes both a superb tourist’s guide to 1930s art in Texas and a primary research document for students of American art and culture. Given the size of the state of Texas, he has also performed a valuable service by saving all of us a lot of dusty mileage along blue highways.

Wisely, the author has limited his history of how the federal government came to send mural painters into the boondocks in the depths of the Great Depression to a few pithy pages. The literature on the field is already extensive, especially in the areas of aesthetics and the bureaucratic structure of the Treasury Department agency charged with the post office and courthouse mural program. Instead,
Parisi gets right down to grassroots business: where are such murals to be found in Texas? Who painted them? What has happened to the pictures over the years since? Did local people like them? Do they like 'em still today? And, most important perhaps, what are the stories being told, the symbols on display, the issues important to dwellers on the Texas Plains during hard times? This is grassroots history with its boots on—local, fine-grained, and endlessly fascinating.

Take, for example, Parisi's deconstruction of the surreal, almost savage *Stampede* mural of 1940 by noted Western artist Tom Lea in the Odessa Post Office. Lea, he tells us, took the scene of maddened longhorns poised against a blackened sky from the traditional cowboy ballad "Little Joe the Wrangler." The ranch hand pitching to his death in the foreground comes from the song, as do the awful red eyes of the steers, the flashes of lightning, and the cruel horns of the cattle. It was rare for federal murals to express strong emotion, let alone outright terror, but we learn that Lea's work is still highly regarded in Odessa today, where it has been protected and restored in a new postal facility.

Even the most peaceful scene—the town-scape in the Ranger, Texas, Post Office, from 1939—has a story to tell. The artist found Ranger a virtual ghost town but gave hope to the former boomtown with a picture of the clean, prosperous place it could once again become. Hope on the wall, for a mere $880 (the artist's unprincely fee)! Delight for the reader, for only $50!

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