

Leslie Stinger and Bobbie Ferguson

Portraits of Reclamation

A portrait allows some portion of the sitter's personality to be revealed. In the moment that an individual views a portrait, some fact, a mood, or some quirk about the person in the portrait becomes apparent. Even if the person remains inscrutable, the observer will learn something about the time in which the work was painted or the feelings of the artist. Through the work of art, the silent subject has the power to communicate.

In 1969, the Bureau of Reclamation sponsored an art program to portray the results of Reclamation's efforts to "reclaim the arid West" through the construction and management of large water projects. The Bureau of Reclamation became the sitter, painted by 40 artists, giving the public numerous interpretations of the organization. As each artist sees the world differently, the paintings provide a multitude of messages and endless possibilities for communication.

Among those commissioned to paint their impression of Reclamation projects were such well-known artists as Norman Rockwell and Richard Diebenkorn. Each artist was given an all-expense paid tour of the project site, including if the artist wished, a helicopter tour of the surrounding area. Much latitude was given to the

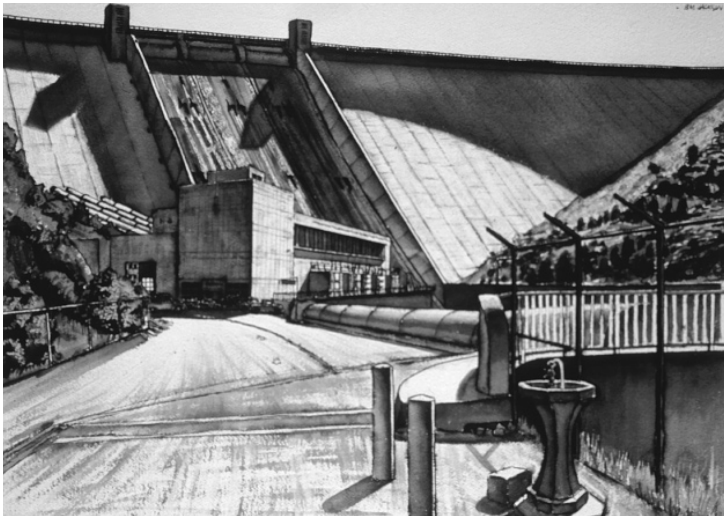
artists in their choice of what to paint; the only requirement was that the finished piece relate in some way to the mission of the agency and the results of its projects. Reclamation had the opportunity to select one or more pieces of the artist's work for its collection; in some cases no work was selected. Two hundred ten pieces created under the program became Reclamation's art collection.¹ Some 70 pieces were displayed in a 1972 National Gallery exhibit, *The American Artist and Water Reclamation*. Following the exhibit, selected pieces were shown around the country by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibitions Service.

Why did a federal agency recognized for its engineering capabilities and accomplishments commission art? In the late 1960s the environmental movement was gaining momentum, and members were quite vocal in protesting Reclamation projects that they viewed as detrimental to the natural environment. As the funding for these projects came from Congress, the Bureau was susceptible to the whims of the congressmen and by extension, their constituents. Surely one of Reclamation's motives for hiring artists was to improve its image beyond its traditional clients, the irrigators. The question remains, however, why art instead of, say, community service and educational programs? Although the thoughts behind the decision are unknown today, there are possible answers. These include the permanence of art—a work of art continues to communicate long after both the artist and the patron, in this case Reclamation, are gone. There is also the multiplicity of readings inherent in a work of art. Although one message may dominate, there are many other ways to

interpret and understand a painting, which allows dialog to occur. The program organizers may have been aware of the tradition of western landscape painting; commissions such as these would have added another chapter in a recognizable school of painting, adding all sorts of secondary meanings and messages to the artwork. Perhaps the most compelling reason was that government-sponsored art programs seemed to be *en vogue* at the time. One was that of the

Campsite at Dawn, Dean Fausett.





Shasta Dam,
B.M. Jackson.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration which began its Artist Cooperation Program in 1963.

Having decided on an art program, goals were defined. The primary goal, according to John DeWitt, Reclamation's program director, was to employ "the assistance of established creative artists to convey the meaning of its programs to the general public" (1973).² How does the collection of paintings represent the Bureau? At least one critic, Allegra Berrian, was positive about the government sponsorship of artists, but she wrote of the art itself, "Excepting the recognizable quality of the heavies in the show, there's little real visual or mental excitement in the work."³

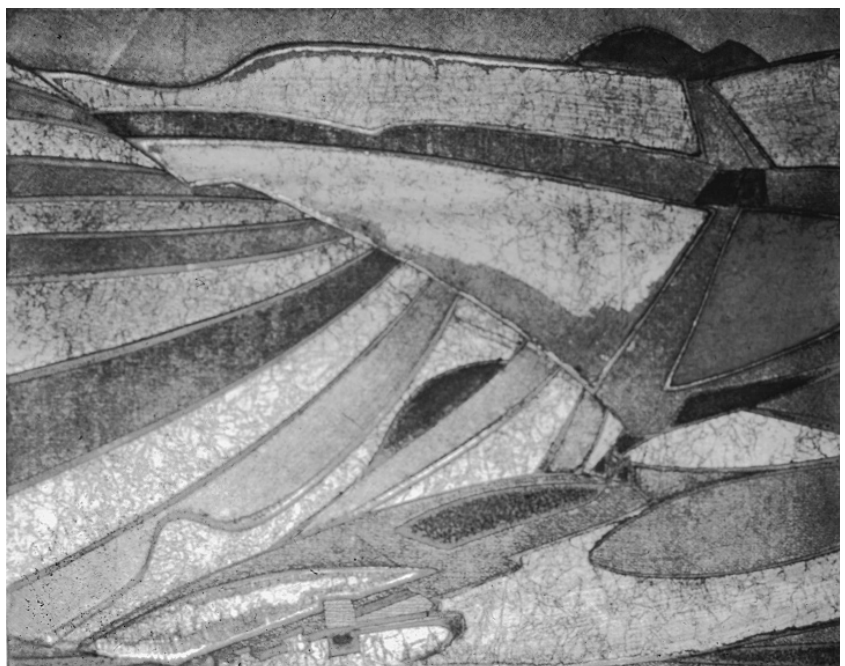
Regardless of the critical reaction, the artwork carried messages to the public at large. The messages can be placed in four broad categories, each of which contains many artistic styles. The first category is representational pieces of the projects themselves; the second, landscapes and natural abstractions; the third, paintings that show the benefits of the project, and the last, construction. Each of these four categories shows a different aspect of the Bureau of Reclamation.

The representational pieces, such as

Billy Morrow Jackson's painting of Shasta Dam, (left) focus on physical aspects of the projects. These paintings usually depict a dam or other project feature as their main subject. Jackson's depiction of Shasta Dam is pictorially accurate, showing the dam from the vantage point of a spectator approaching the power plant at the base of the dam. In fact, this painting is practically an architectural rendering in its precision. This is the type of art that one would expect to see from an engineering organization. Its main purpose is to describe the physical qualities of the dam, as if the viewer of the painting were actually there, viewing the dam. To an educated eye, this painting may convey a great deal of information about the workings of the project, but to the lay public, it appears as a snapshot rendered in watercolors.

A subtle message is advanced through the landscape paintings. These landscapes, painted in a wide variety of styles, generally portray some natural feature that has been created as a result of a Reclamation project. Alternatively, the painting shows the project in the surrounding landscape. Often the structure is not present in the painting, or if it is, it is rendered inconsequential by its size, treatment and placement in the painting. An example of a landscape painting that does not include the structure is Dean Fausett's painting *Campsite at Dawn* (p. 48). Here, a craggy landform rises majestically from a serene body of water. The clouds are suitably stormy to provide the dramatic background, and the lighting is relatively harsh, creating sharp shadows on the cliff-

Whiskeytown
Patterns,
Roland
Petersen.



Builder at Grand Coulee, No. 9, Anton Refregier.



face. The tradition of landscape painting in the West began with explorers from the East Coast. The works created by the artists who came with them were of grand, dramatic images of sublime, untouched nature at its finest. Fausett's grand landscape recalls the first western landscape paintings, and the landscape does not look any different. It is as if the artist is claiming that despite the large interventions of the Reclamation, the spirit of the West remains unchanged.

The third category could possibly be considered a subset of landscape painting, but the message is slightly different. Whereas in the landscape paintings it would be easy to ignore or forget Reclamation's role entirely, here, either by title or by the subject matter of the painting, the benefits of the Bureau's projects are explicitly shown. Roland Petersen's intaglio print, *Whiskeytown Patterns* (page 49), shows the patterns that form a landscape of irrigated fields. Irrigation is clearly the main benefit of Reclamation's activities. Once again, there is no evidence of the project itself, only the positive results.

The last category, construction paintings, often glorify the immense effort it took to construct a project, similar to the paintings of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Some pieces focused on the human effort, such as

Anton Refregier's pastel drawing, *Builders at Grand Coulee, No. 9* (above). This drawing shows two workers setting rebar in place in preparation for the placing of concrete. A man in a welder's mask holds a flaming torch, while another in a hard hat and overalls, holds the rebar in place. A sense of dynamism is imparted to the piece by the artist's use of stylized swirls and quick strokes. Other artists looked at the machinery and parts that built the projects. These artists who focused on the human and construction aspect of the projects reflect the Social Realist movement, glorifying the mechanical and human feats that went into Reclamation projects.

While Reclamation relinquished direct control over how the artists represented the projects, it carefully selected the artists who participated, thereby influencing the final portrayal of the Bureau. Aside from a few famous names, many of the artists selected had worked previously with the government. Some artists, such as Billy Morrow Jackson and Mitchell Jamieson, had participated in the NASA art program. The majority of the artists had worked with the WPA or had taken commissions to paint Post Office murals; a few were artist correspondents during World War II. Thus, most of the artists that participated in Reclamation's art program were tried and tested. More important is that the art was created and that these paintings present a multitude of views of Reclamation's projects. To fulfill the original goal of the program to convey the meaning of Reclamation's program of water resource development to the general public, every opportunity should be taken to make the art available to the public now and in the future.

Notes

- ¹ For a list of the artists who participated in this program, their biographies, and their art work, visit the Bureau of Reclamation web site and look under fine arts programs: <www.usbr.gov/art>.
- ² John DeWitt, "Reclamation and the Creative Artist," *Reclamation Era*, 59:2 (1974): 16.
- ³ Allegra Berrian, "U.S. Show at 2 Colleges," *The Spokesman Review*, September 15, 1974, 12-15.

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