

# U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## MAIN INTERIOR BUILDING

### SELF GUIDED TOUR OF PUBLIC AREAS



#### The Main Interior Building

FDR and Interior Secretary Harold Ickes had envisioned the design and construction of a headquarters for the Department as a symbol of their plans for the Nation. At the Dedication ceremony held on April 16, 1936, President Roosevelt referred to the building as “symbolical of the Nation’s vast resources” and the “cornerstone of a conservation policy that will guarantee the richness of their heritage.” This building was the first government building to be designed and constructed as part of the New Deal.

Ickes worked with local architect Waddy Wood to design and construct the building. Ickes ensured that symbolism is the overarching theme of the building beginning with its exterior. While the building gives a nod to the classical tradition of architecture, its style is an updated version that ties it to the modern world. Its size is monumental, and though it was constructed in only 18 months, inconceivable today, it occupies two whole city blocks. Its colossal pilasters and pillars emphasize monumental scale rather than relate the size of the building to the individual. It was meant to emphasize a new “heroic age of government,” and every aspect of the building tells this story.

The building provided the best working environment for its inhabitants. It was one of the first Federal buildings to be designed with central air conditioning and escalators. It also contained amenities that were designed to make the work environment a nurturing place for employees:

gymnasium, art gallery, and even an employee soda shop in the penthouse. The 2,200 offices were designed to provide space, light, comfort, and utility.

The art in the building was considered integral to its design. Fabulous floor to ceiling murals were commissioned for each floor of the building and main gathering areas to give the employees a sense of the value of their work and to exhibit the activities of each bureau for all to see. Many of these works can be seen today by the public without prior arrangements.

### Museum

Ickes required that a museum be integral to the building, providing a venue to show the public the work of the Department of the Interior and for the employees to see the work of other bureaus. The goal of the Interior Museum remains to interpret the mission and work of the Department of the Interior. While the museum now has temporary changing exhibitions, some of the original exhibits of the museum remain, including the ever popular dioramas. The designers of the dioramas, staff of the National Park Service, did everything in their power to assure the accuracy of the depictions of the diorama. In one diorama which depicts the Hoover dam, they went so far as dispatch a staff member to sketch the dam to determine the shadow cast by the dam during the day. Everything in this museum was designed to show museum exhibitions as a science and an art. Today, the Museum maintains a mixture of its original 1930s exhibitions with updated exhibitions as well.

### Indian Craft Shop

Ickes wanted to encourage the ongoing creation of indigenous art. To that end, he included a shop in the building where arts and crafts from living Indian artists would be sold. The Indian Craft Shop on the first floor provides employees and visitors with a venue to see high quality work by some of the best Indian artists, while offering an opportunity to view three stellar murals by two of the most well known Indian artists: Alan Houser and Gerald Nailor. Houser's *Breaking Camp at Wartime* and *Buffalo Hunt* show his great style in depicting scenes from the life of the Apache people. *Deer Stalking* by Nailor shows his taste for integrating traditional Navajo sand painting techniques into his intimate scenes of the Navajo world.

### Cafeteria and Courtyard

A visit to the Cafeteria in the basement of the building gives visitors an opportunity to view the murals and display cases surrounding the Central Grand Staircase on the First Floor and Basement levels. On the First Floor are the four murals by Millard Sheets *The Negro's Contribution in the Social and Cultural Development of America: The Arts, Education, Religion and Science*. These works display the Interior Department's role in affirming civil rights and present the efforts of Ickes to advance the lives of African Americans. On the Basement level to the right of the entry door to the Cafeteria is the famous mural by Mitchell Jamieson *An Incident in Contemporary American Life* depicting Marian Anderson's concert at the Lincoln Memorial. Anderson's concert was organized by Ickes and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt after Anderson was denied permission to sing at DAR Constitution Hall for being African American. Inside the Cafeteria visitors can enjoy a meal while viewing the monumental murals *The Harvest Dance* by James Auchiah and *The Ceremonial Dance* by Steven Mopope. Both artists are Kiowa Indians from Oklahoma and their work exhibits the stylization and pattern common to murals created by Indian artists in the 1930's. The Cafeteria also provides visitors with an opportunity to visit the courtyard to see the two bronze sculptures. *Negro Mother and Child* by Maurice Glickman and *Abe Lincoln* by Louis Slobodkin, both completed in 1940.



Mitchell Jamieson: *An Incident in Contemporary American Life*, 1939

### [Library](#)

The Department of the Interior Library opened on April 28, 1937 as a combined library for all the bureaus within the department. The Interior Library currently has a collection of over one million publications including all federal documents relating to the department and a rare book collection of nineteenth century monographs. The library offers educational and training programs as well as online access to many federal and private research sites. The Main Reading Room with clerestory windows, balconies and original cork floors remains a hidden gem and great resource for scholars of American history and land use.

### [Additional Information](#)

The public is invited to visit the Interior Museum, the Indian Craft Shop and the Interior Cafeteria Monday through Friday 8:30 to 4:30 (The Cafeteria closes at 3:00 pm daily). The Interior Library is open Monday through Friday from 7:45 to 5:00. The Shop and Museum are also both open on the third Saturday of each month from 1:00 to 4:00 pm. Admission is always free, however, each adult must have photo identification. Photography is not permitted in the building without prior approval. For a complete tour of the building, the murals, paintings and sculptures (including works by Alan Houser Gerald Nailor, Maynard Dixon, Gifford Beal, William Gropper, and others) please make an appointment with the staff at least a week before your visit to ensure that there will be a guide available. Contact 202-208-4743.