

# *Antelope: A New Deal Mural*

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As the Great Depression ravaged the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt attempted to breathe life back into the country's lungs by creating various "New Deal" programs. These programs covered a plethora of needs throughout the country and, most importantly, put citizens back to work. Among these programs was the Treasury Section of Fine Arts (TSFA) (The Section), which aimed to provide unemployed artists' work and spruce up pre-existing buildings across the country. Among the projects completed under the TSFA was the vivid wall mural *Antelope* painted for the Florence, Colorado, post office by renowned artist Olive Rush. To better understand the mural that has graced the interior of this post office for eighty-four years, the life of Rush, the functions and goals of the TSFA, and Colorado's experiences with the Great Depression must be understood to contextualize this work.

Olive Rush was born in 1873 to Quaker parents in Indiana; from childhood, she enjoyed drawing<sup>1</sup> and set her sights on pursuing an art career. In her late teen years, with the support of her parents, she began studying art professionally at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, where she was first introduced to landscape painting and, more importantly, the use of oil paints, a medium

she would continue to be drawn to throughout her career. Following Earlham, Rush spent time in Washington D.C., New York, Delaware, and Philadelphia throughout the early

1900s, illustrating for various periodicals and studying under other artists. Following a trip to England and France in 1910, Rush accompanied her father, a lifelong admirer of the American Southwest landscape and Native Americans, on a generous trip to Arizona and New Mexico.

This trip would profoundly impact the rest of Rush's life and artistic career.<sup>2</sup> The holiday notability impressed Rush more than her recent travels abroad, and she became determined to live and work in Santa Fe, New Mexico, one day. She was particularly drawn to the Southwest's expansive landscapes and interactions with local Native American tribes. After several years of saving, Rush achieved her dream in 1920, quickly acclimating to Santa Fe and becoming a part of its budding art community, showcasing art and expanding her techniques, such as teaching herself to create frescos.<sup>3</sup> Rush spent the 1920s splitting her time between Santa Fe, traveling for various commissions, and occasionally taking teaching positions at universities.

By the end of the 1920s, Rush had garnered acclaim in Santa Fe and throughout the country

1 Phil Kavinick and Marian Yoshiki-Kovinick, *An Encyclopedia of Women Artists of the American West*, ed. William H. Goetzmann (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 264.

2 Jann Haynes Gilmore, *Olive Rush: Finding Her Place in the Santa Fe Art Colony* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2016), 46-47.

3 Peggy Seigel, "Olive Rush's Long Love Affair with Art," *Indiana Magazine of History* 110, no. 3 (September): 222, <https://research.ebsco.com/c/3czfwv/viewer/pdf/3raougcngf?auth-callid=f51f84ce-220d-908f-9513-7a2dafbef51d>.

by demonstrating talent by embracing newfangled modernist aesthetics on canvas and through her delicate depictions of animals, especially deer.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, as the Great Depression descended on the U.S., Rush struggled to find commissions and sell work, as many artists did. However, an opportunity in the mid-1930's provided Rush a springboard that would ultimately see her work under several art-centric New Deal programs. The New Deal entered Rush's career first through the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in January 1934, "...[S]he received a letter from Jesse Nusbaum, director of Region 13 of the PWAP ...inviting her to serve on his artist selection committee."<sup>4</sup> Following her time on the committee, she began receiving commissions under the PWAP for various fresco murals around New Mexico, which occupied much of her time for the next few years.<sup>5</sup> In 1938, Rush entered and won a competition hosted by the TSFA to paint a mural in the newly completed post office of Florence, Colorado.

The competition Rush entered was unique within the art-centric New Deal agencies. The TSFA, initially the Section of Painting and Sculpture till 1939, had two main objectives. The first was to provide relief to artists through the form of artistic commissions, and the second was to bring art to the American public in accessible pre-existing spaces, especially those visited frequently, like post offices. The Section's ideals of "democratizing" art emphasized the idea that art could enhance the broader American public, perhaps not educate them in art, but give them a sense of pride and inspiration when they saw The Sections work in public. Furthermore, within these notions of "democratizing" the TSFA desired to cultivate

a common "American" culture through art that celebrated identities and histories with an overall "American" spirit.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Federal Arts Project, another agency focused on art, which often assigned work to artists and placed them in groups to complete a preconceived commission, The Section, as long as commissions fit their overarching ideals, gave artists free rein, asking them to conceive how pre-existing spaces could be enhanced.<sup>7</sup> This freedom allowed The Section's guiding principles of creating an "American" culture to be interrupted in various ways, leading to a plethora of diverse works being created. However, The Section still had standards to uphold; if they were to create art for the public, it should fit the public's tastes. The Section often preferred artists like Rush, who had established, versatile, and accomplished careers and proficiency in various mediums and artistic styles. Artists like these had substantial talent and the ability to fit The Section's standards of creating works that were modern but traditional enough not to alienate the public. After all, the artwork created needed to have the power to connect with everyday Americans, not just highbrow critiques.<sup>8</sup> For example, The Section valued Realism, a style seen most 'favorably' by the general public at the time. 1930s Realism often emphasized earthy tones and technical simplicity. *Antelope* beautifully displays Rush's adherence to The Section's preferences, using soft natural tones throughout the work and complimenting them with watercolor-esque brush strokes, likely pulling from watercolor deer and landscape scenes from her early career.<sup>9</sup>

In order for The Section to help as many artists as possible and limit artist and gender biases, competitions were often held to select

4 Haynes Gilmore, *Olive Rush*, 145.

5 Seigel, "Olive Rush's Long Love Affair with Art," 228.

6 Marlene Park and Gerald E. Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 5.

7 Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 8.

8 Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 138-139.

9 Patricia Janis Broder, *The American West: The Modern Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), 230.

artists anonymously. A typical competition had artists come up with about four ideas and create preliminary sketches in both black and white and color for each. If an artist won a competition, they usually signed a contract based on which idea The Section liked the most.<sup>10</sup> Looking towards Rush's 1938 competition win, her decision to pursue a mural of antelopes for Florence likely comes from the suggestion of Edward B. Rowan,

The Section assistant director, who wrote to her that year, urging her to enter the competition "May I suggest the theme for this work that you resubmit your distinguished panel of the prong-horned antelopes and ducks in a pool."<sup>11</sup> Rush heeded his advice, as she had an approved contract for an antelope mural by April 1939 and set off for Florence sometime thereafter to begin work through the early part of the summer.

As Rush entered Colorado, she likely felt the strains of the Depression on the state. Colorado's experience with the Great Depression had not immediately begun with the 1929 stock market crash. For a time, Colorado seemed to escape many of the hardships the rest of the country had to grapple with as tourists still flocked into the Rocky Mountains soaking in picturesque views and enjoying cooler temperatures. There were only a few warning signs of the trouble to come, such as farmers dealing with some rising prices, but compared to the droughts that plagued much of the Midwest, Colorado's setbacks were minuscule.<sup>12</sup> However, this good fortune would not last long; by 1932, Colorado was experiencing the Depression just the same as the rest of the country, with sky-high prices and stark unemployment.

By the time Rush arrived in Florence in May 1939, Colorado was in the midst of its second financial crisis of the decade. Under these dire circumstances, Governor Ralph L. Carr made the difficult decision to severely undercut funds for public education and welfare, to better balance the state budget. While these measures ultimately saved the state from bankruptcy it severely strained two vital services many Coloradans depended on.<sup>13</sup> These larger state decisions would have impacted the residents of Florence, on top of other pressures the Depression had brought them.

Nevertheless, Rush's arrival in the small industrial town that primarily produced coal and oil may have seemed worlds away from the state's crisis as Rush's arrival piqued interest in the community; for Florence, it had only been three years since the Treasury Department even built their post office. Therefore, the addition of a large mural likely stirred excitement. Rush was interviewed for at least one local paper, where she stated an interest in meeting other "art lovers" of the town, more than happy to discuss her upcoming work with anyone who wished to know more about it.<sup>14</sup> As Rush nestled into the Florence Hotel to begin her stay, she made the final decisions for her upcoming mural; the first was to work with oil paint, as the space for the mural, directly above the postmaster's door, was inside. When completing previous murals, Rush had worked with a variety of mediums, including fresco, tempera, and oil.<sup>15</sup> As the mural was to be set to cover a 15 x 15 space, Rush believed the properties of oil paint would create a more vibrant pigment than other mediums, which would only help to compliment the ample workspace, noting in her

<sup>10</sup> Park and Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas*, 120-121.

<sup>11</sup> Haynes Gilmore, *Olive Rush*, 163.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen J Leonard, *Trials and Triumphs: A Colorado Portrait of the Great Depression, with FSA Photographs* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1993), 20.

<sup>13</sup> James F Wickens, "Tightening the Colorado Purse Strings," *Colorado Magazine* 46, no. 4 (1969): 283, [https://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2018/ColoradoMagazine\\_v46n4\\_Fall1969.pdf](https://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2018/ColoradoMagazine_v46n4_Fall1969.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Haynes Gilmore, *Olive Rush*, 165.

<sup>15</sup> Kovinick and Yoshiki-Kovinick, *Encyclopedia of Women Artists*, ed. William H. Goetzmann, 264.

newspaper interview, “[oil paint gives] a brighter and deeper tone [that] is more pleasing to the eye.”<sup>16</sup> Following her arrival, Rush began her mural. Despite occupying a large space, Rush’s finished work is hardly imposing, neither in its vibrant hues or subject matter. *Antelope* bleeds together the ideals of The Section, with hints of Realist muted tones and inspiration from Rush’s long career, such as the mural’s notable fluid tranquility, seen in her use of clouds that seemingly blend together, likely inspired by her previous Santa Fe landscape pieces, which were often created from memory, giving them a dreamlike quality<sup>17</sup>. The impressive mural shows a dreamy landscape, focusing on a grassy hill with a line of seven antelope coming down its side.<sup>18</sup> In an almost single-file line fashion, the antelope line up to drink from a vibrant blue pond, which has two Mallard ducks, a native species to Florence, swimming in it.<sup>20</sup> Already at the pond is an antelope that laps up water, creating small blue ripples that bleed together in a gradient stretching from white to a dark Caribbean blue. The mural incorporates soft lines and brushes of purple, giving it an ethereal quality. The antelope are realistic to an extent, but Rush’s soft features on the animals show a more delicate and placid side of nature.

Similarly, the two Mallards swimming in the small pool are unbothered by the herd; the only indication of a disturbance or perhaps slight annoyance is seen in their swimming away. By July of 1939, Rush had completed *Antelope* and was paid \$660 for its completion; Rowan wrote to Rush acknowledging that while he had not seen *Antelope* in person, “...photographs indicate the charm of this decoration and I sincerely congratulate you on your achievement.” Rowan finished his letter, noting

he hoped to see the mural in person.<sup>19</sup> *Antelope* was Rush’s final commission under The Section, and for that matter, under the New Deal. Rush’s career did not slow down; nevertheless, she continued to create art till her death in 1966.<sup>20</sup> The Section lasted into the Second World War but ceased operations in 1943.

Today, *Antelope* still holds its soft power over the postmaster’s door in Florence, Colorado. It is a testament to the legacy of its pioneering creator, Olive Rush, the wider New Deal and the Section. In order to understand this vibrant mural, it must be understood within the context of Rush’s life, the functions and goals of the TSFA, and Colorado’s experiences with the Depression. For Rush, this commission, and several others she did for various New Deal agencies, helped her financially stay afloat during the Depression while allowing her to demonstrate her finest skills in mural work and animal scenes. *Antelope* was created under The Section, which aimed to spruce up pre-existing buildings citizens visited daily with art that could reach the masses and tell a story. *Antelope* presents an ideal image of nature, antelope waiting for a turn to drink from a crisp blue pond. The soft lines define the antelopes as placid creatures, while the Mallard ducks that swim within the pond hark back to Florence’s native wildlife. With a soft blue sky overhead and ripples of purple accentuating various features, Rush’s work is a product not only of the Depression era but also of the uniqueness of Florence. Still visible in its bright composure today, it stands as a testament not only to Rush’s artistic abilities but also to the success of The Section, bringing art to people in everyday spaces, accentuating the beauty of Colorado, and, to a

16 Haynes Gilmore, *Olive Rush*, 163-166.

17 Broder, *The American West*, 230.

18 Mary Motian-Meadows, “Western Visions: Colorado’s New Deal Post Office Murals,” *Colorado Heritage* Autumn (1991): 32, <https://colorado-illiad-oclc-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/illiad/COD/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=1171249>.

19 Haynes Gilmore, *Olive Rush*, 166.

20 Seigel, “Olive Rush’s Long Love Affair with Art,” 244.

certain extent, the success of the New Deal agencies, which gave work and optimism. Amid Colorado's own Depression story, marred by many of the same ills that plagued the rest of the country and state government politics that often led to complex financial decisions, the work of New Deal artists like Rush provided a glimmer of hope, still visible today.

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