

BRONX GENERAL POST OFFICE LOBBY, FIRST FLOOR INTERIOR, consisting of the lobby and the fixtures and components of this space, including but not limited to, the wall surfaces, murals, wainscoting, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, columns, plaque, metal gate and globe lighting fixtures, 560 Grand Concourse (aka 554-582 Grand Concourse), Bronx.

Built: 1935-37; Architect: Thomas Harlan Ellett; Murals: 1938-39, Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson.

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx, Tax Map Block 2443, Lot 400.

On October 29, 2013, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Bronx General Post Office Lobby, First Floor Interior and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Public Hearing Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Four people spoke in support of designation, including representatives of Congressman José E. Serrano and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr., as well as representatives of the Historic Districts Council and the New York Landmarks Conservancy. There were no speakers in opposition to the designation. The Commission also received thirteen letters and emails in support of designation.

Summary

The Bronx General Post Office Building and its notable interior lobby were planned and constructed between 1934-37. The architectural design was executed by Thomas Harlan Ellett. The space contains a series of 13 mural panels created by noted artists Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson.

In the early 20th century—as the Bronx was becoming one of the fastest-growing urban areas in the country—it became apparent that the borough needed improved postal facilities. Efforts to secure a proper headquarters began as early as 1902, but it was only during the depths of the Great Depression and the advent of New Deal public works programs that the Bronx General Post Office was finally completed. Funding came from the Public Works Administration and the architectural design was overseen by the Federal government’s Office of the Supervising Architect, of which Ellett was a temporary employee.

The Bronx General Post Office and its lobby were designed in the Modern Classical style of architecture preferred by the New Deal-era public works programs. Ellett’s design combines modified classical ornament with a tendency to abstraction and simplification of these motifs. The double-height space features floor-to-ceiling Ionic columns, a striped marble and terrazzo floor, and a coffered ceiling with simplified rosette ornamentation. Materials include gray Missouri marble and white Tennessee marble, as well as complimentary terrazzo.

Integral to the design of the Bronx General Post Office Lobby was a series of murals, titled “Resources of America,” conceived by Shahn and completed with Bryson’s assistance. The artists won the commission through an open competition sponsored by the Section of Painting and Sculpture, a Federal agency closely aligned with the Office of the Supervising Architect. Per the requirements of the competition, Shahn’s designs comprise a unified decorative scheme that integrates with the architectural setting of the lobby. All of the panels relate to the general theme of Labor and depict dynamic, even heroic, views of the American worker. An acclaimed photographer as well as painter and graphic artist, Shahn often used photographs as the basis for his paintings. Several of the panels in the Bronx Post Office were clearly inspired by his photography trips to the American heartland during the 1930s, while others were derived from his extensive collection of newspaper clippings.



Draft versions of the murals were installed in the post office in December 1938 for public inspection and final approval. One of the panels, which included a portrait and quotation of Walt Whitman, drew intense criticism for the perception that the poet questioned the place of religion in modern society. Seeking to avoid controversy, Shahn modified the text with a different quotation. Installation of the murals occurred early the following year and all 13 panels were completed by August 1939. Reception of the murals was almost universally favorable; contemporary accounts praised them for their “real social significance as well as being beautiful compositions,” the artist’s obituary cited the Bronx works as major mural commissions, and many recent art history texts mention the paintings as amongst the best examples from his most productive period.

The Bronx General Post Office has continued to serve its original purpose since it opened in 1937. The murals have been restored on at least two occasions and the lobby underwent extensive renovations, all of which occurred in the 1970s. In spite of alterations that have occurred to the interior space, the Bronx General Post Office Lobby retains much of its original fabric and Modern Classical architectural design. The notable series of murals executed by Shahn and Bryson are intact and are still situated in their original context. The structure—whose design incorporates a significant synthesis of architecture, sculpture, and painting—remains a monument to the ideals of the New Deal-era public works programs.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Bronx General Post Office¹

At the turn of the 20th century the Bronx was experiencing a residential boom as thousands of second-generation New Yorkers moved from the crowded tenements districts of East Harlem and Lower East Side in Manhattan. Service on the Third Avenue Elevated line was greatly expanded and improved between 1887 and 1902, and in 1904 the first subway connecting the Bronx to Manhattan opened. During this period the Bronx was one of the fastest growing urban areas in the country, with the population reaching well over one million by 1930. The rapidly increasing population of the Bronx quickly strained the existing postal facilities in the borough. Between 1907 and 1915 the volume of mail nearly doubled, as did the number of postal employees.² Despite this growth, the borough lacked a true postal headquarters and mail destined for the Bronx continued to be sent to Manhattan for processing before being transported north to its final destination.

As early as 1902, local representatives were pushing the Federal government for improved postal facilities for the Bronx.³ Progress, however, proved to be interminably slow. In 1910 the Federal government acquired a portion of the block bounded by East 149th and East 150th Street between Mott Avenue (later renamed the Grand Concourse) and Spencer Place (renamed A. J. Griffin Place), and purchased the remainder of the block in 1913.⁴ During the following two decades numerous bills were introduced and appropriations requested for the Bronx post office, but nothing materialized. It was only during the depths of the Great Depression, and the advent of New Deal public works programs, that the Bronx General Post Office was finally completed. Funds for the building, totaling approximately \$1.5 million, came from the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (widely known as—and later officially renamed—the Public Works Administration, or PWA). The Bronx post office was part of a major PWA campaign that saw the construction of 29 such buildings in New York City, 136 in New York State, and thousands throughout the country.⁵

Architectural design work for Federally-owned PWA projects was overseen by the Office of the Supervising Architect, headed by Louis A. Simon and located within the Public Buildings Branch of the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department.⁶ Most of commissions were executed directly by Simon himself or by his permanent staff. By mid 1934, however, a new round of allocations for public works had been approved by Congress and Simon’s office came under mounting pressure to complete designs as soon as possible in order to provide employment relief in the form of construction jobs. In order to fulfill this mandate—which called for 321 buildings in four months—the Office of the Supervising Architect hired a group of 21 private architects and 300 draftsmen so serve as temporary, salaried employees.⁷ The work was generally divided so that the permanent staff was responsible for the smaller projects, typically costing less than \$60,000, while the temporary staff took on the larger, more prominent assignments—circumstances that earned the temporary architects the sobriquet “prima donnas.” The Bronx General Post Office, the largest New

Deal-era post office to be completed in New York City, was assigned to Thomas Harlan Ellett of the temporary staff.⁸

Many of the PWA-funded, Federally-owned building projects designed by the Office of the Supervising Architect benefited from another New Deal-era program, the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture ("the Section").⁹ This organization was founded to "secure suitable art of the best quality available for the embellishment of public buildings." Over the course of its existence, from 1934-43, it produced works for civic structures across the country including more than 1,100 post offices. Under the general policy of the Treasury Department, a small portion of constructions costs—typically around one percent—were allocated for artistic decoration on eligible buildings projects. The Section was closely allied with the Office of the Supervising Architect, both being located within the Procurement Division, and the two groups developed a close working relationship that resulted in synthesis of art and architecture. As Edward Bruce, director of the Section, noted, "the present program is the first one completely organized to combine painting and sculpture with architecture in a coherent production unit. This cooperation between the three great arts is what gives this program its essential character or permanence and its social and educational force."¹⁰ The Bronx General Post Office is exemplary of this integration of architecture, sculpture, and painting. On the exterior of the building, Ellett's striking design is embellished with a pair of limestone panels, *The Letter* by Henry Kreis and *Noah* by Charles Rudy, while the interior the lobby contains a significant series of murals by Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson—all commissioned by the Section.

Final appropriations for the Bronx General Post Office were approved in June 1934 and by December of that year Ellett had completed the architectural designs.¹¹ Plans for the new structure were filed with the Department of Buildings in early 1935 (NB 374-1935). The construction contract was awarded to the Cauldwell-Wingate Company in September 1935 and preliminary work began shortly afterwards. On June 13, 1936 a ceremony commemorating the laying of the cornerstone was held with Postmaster General James A. Farley and New York City Postmaster Albert Goldman officiating.¹² The same officials were present at the opening of the new building on May 15, 1937 when it was announced that the building would serve as the Bronx headquarters of the New York Post Office.¹³

Thomas Harlan Ellett and the Design of the Bronx General Post Office Lobby¹⁴

PWA buildings produced by the Office of the Supervising Architect generally employed one of two architectural modes. Many of the projects, particularly the smaller ones designed by Simon's permanent staff, were designed in what has been termed the "architectural traditions" approach—frequently an academic Colonial Revival style but sometimes more region-specific such as Spanish Revival.¹⁵ The other mode used on the larger buildings, particularly those in major urban centers, was the so-called "monumental" approach that entailed the use of the Modern Classical architectural style.¹⁶ Architects working in this idiom sought to create a modern interpretation of classical architecture drawing on "the alphabet of forms that the world has known and loved for hundreds of years" while meeting modern needs and using modern technology.¹⁷ In contrast to the earlier phase of the Classical Revival, which emphasized careful copying of historic sources, Modern Classicism took a much freer approach to historic models, abstracting and simplifying classical motifs and using them with great restraint. The style also placed great emphasis on abstract design, massing, and the arrangement of shapes and forms. Modern Classicism has become so identified with the public works programs of the New Deal era that it is sometimes referred to as PWA Moderne.

Ellett's Modern Classical design for the Bronx General Post Office, which combined modified classical ornament with the elegant simplicity of modern architecture, received critical praise. A description in *Architectural Forum* for June 1938 stated, "A distinct modern influence and the continuing tradition of 'government classic' are the two conflicting tendencies which have resulted in the first signs of vitality in American post office design, and the new Bronx Post Office is an excellent example of the best recent work...the building subtly suggests a Georgian precedent without the use of traditional detail."¹⁸ Ellett in fact had a distinguished pedigree in Modern Classicism. He had studied under Paul Phillipe Cret—who is widely credited with developing and popularizing the style—at the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1900s.¹⁹ The two apparently remained close throughout their careers and in the mid 1920s, Cret helped Ellett secure an important job from the American Battle Monuments Commission for the design of the Saint Mihiel American Cemetery & Memorial in Thiaucourt, France. This was part of a series of foreign monuments commemorating United State's involvement in World War I, each designed by a noted architect such as Cret, Arthur Loomis

Harmon, and John Russell Pope.²⁰ These works were among the earliest buildings designed in the Modern Classical style by American architects and were perhaps the first commissioned directly by the Federal government, playing an important role in popularizing the style for the New Deal-era public works programs.²¹

The lobby of the Bronx General Post Office is also notable for its use of the Modern Classical architectural style. *Architectural Forum* article called the interior “somewhat more conventional in treatment than the exterior” but also claimed that, “here too, however, the same trend toward greater simplicity is noticeable.”²² The double-height space features floor-to-ceiling Ionic columns, a striped marble and terrazzo floor, and a coffered ceiling with simplified rosette ornamentation—a motif also seen on the exterior cornice. Materials include gray Missouri marble and white Tennessee marble, as well as terrazzo made with chips of the same gray marble. Polished brass was used extensively for the entrance vestibules, customer service window screens, heating grilles, and as trim on furniture and bulletin board frames. Painted metal screens formed the upper walls between the lobby and the working spaces behind. Furniture, which has since been removed, included four writing desks affixed to floor in the center of the flanking bays, as well as permanently-attached telephone shelves and movable telephone booths located in the outside two bays of the west wall. Lighting was provided by five large pendant globe fixtures and a series of recessed fixtures located in the coffers of the ceiling.

Ellet was born in Red Oak, Iowa on September 2, 1880. He began his architectural training at the Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago, from which he received a certificate in 1903. He continued his education at the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Architecture. There he studied under Cret and George Walter Dawson, receiving the gold medal in the Arthur Spayd Brooke Memorial Prize for distinguished work in architectural design and graduating first in his class in 1906. The following year he won the Cresson Traveling Scholarship from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and spent time in Paris and at the American Academy in Rome from 1908-09. Upon returning to the United States he worked the firm of McKim, Mead and White for four years, from 1909-13, before establishing his own practice in 1915.

Ellett developed a reputation in the 1910s and 20s as a skilled architect of large country estates designed in a range of Academic Eclectic styles.²³ In the mid 1930s, while working as a temporary employee with the Office of the Supervising Architect, he produced a number of buildings for the United States government; in addition to the Bronx General Post Office, he was responsible for the Modern Classical Huntington Post Office on Long Island (c. 1935) and the Vidalia Post Office in Georgia (1935), as well as the Colonial Revival Federal Building and United States Courthouse Building in Anderson, South Carolina (1937-38). He also won an open competition—a rarity for Federal commissions during the 1930s—for the striking Modern Classical Covington Post Office and Courthouse (1938-41) in Kentucky.²⁴ Ellet received a number of professional honors throughout his lifetime. In 1922 he earned an honorable mention in the prestigious competition for the Chicago Tribune Tower. The Architectural League of New York awarded him a silver medal in 1928 for his work on the J. Seward Johnson House (1924-26) in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and a gold medal in 1933 for the Cosmopolitan Club (1931-32) at 122 East 66th Street in Manhattan (within the Upper East Side Historic District). He died November 24, 1951 in Garrison, New York.²⁵

The Murals by Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson²⁶

Integral to the design of the Bronx General Post Office Lobby was a series of murals completed in 1938-39 by the noted American artists Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson (later Bernarda Bryson Shahn). This work was commissioned by the Section, which, unlike other New Deal arts programs, awarded its contracts based not on economic need but through juried competitions.²⁷ The competition for the Bronx murals was announced in January 1938. The selection committee was chaired by Henry Varnum Poor, an established local mural painter, and also included the building’s architect Ellett and George Harding, a mural painter from Philadelphia. The official leaflet publicizing the competition emphasized the Section’s desire that the murals harmonize with Ellet’s architectural design, stating that, “the artist should constantly keep in mind the relation between his design and the architecture of the building in composition, color, scale and subject matter.” Additionally, the announcement claimed that, “the preference of the architect is for a grisaille or monochromatic treatment of the series of murals” and that, “if incidental color is introduced it must be sparingly used so as to emphasize rather than detract from the effect of the chosen monochromatic palette, which should harmonize with the grey and white color treatment of the lobby.” The announcement also directed that, “the objective of the artist should be the creation of a harmonized decoration of all the wall

spaces in the lobby rather than the separate treatment of each mural panel,” and that “a satisfactory scheme of treatment of the lobby as a unit be achieved.”²⁸

There were 198 entries in the Bronx mural contest. Shahn and Bryson actually submitted separate proposals but were awarded the commission jointly in May 1938.²⁹ Bryson ultimately deferred to Shahn’s design, perhaps because Shahn already had experience working with large-scale mural projects.³⁰ Shahn in fact first experimented with the art form around 1931 when he produced a small-scale study and a full-sized detail for a mural exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. His real training came in 1933 when he apprenticed with one of the acknowledged masters of the medium, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, on the influential—if ill-fated—frescos for the lobby of the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center.³¹ Shahn won his first mural commissions in the mid 1930s from the New York City Public Works of Art Project for paintings in the Central Park Casino and at the prison on Rikers Island, but the designs for both were ultimately rejected by the Municipal Art Commission and never executed.³² In 1938, even as he was competing for the Bronx project, he finally completed his first successful project, a series of three panels for the community center in Jersey Homesteads, New Jersey.³³

Per the requirements of the Bronx mural competition, Shahn’s designs comprise a unified decorative scheme, both compositionally and thematically. Compositionally, the Bronx murals are relatively simple, with most panels depicting a single figure placed in front of a schematic background.³⁴ The larger panels on the west wall are composite images with several complimentary scenes overlaid on each other, although they also feature a single figure dominating the scene. The color scheme, while not exactly the monochromatic range that Ellett had desired, are nonetheless muted and consistent, unifying the panels with each other and with the architectural setting of the lobby. Thematically all of the panels relate to the general theme of Labor. Titled “Resources of America,” the paintings incorporate larger-than-life-size images of Americans at work. The mural programs of the New Deal, and especially the Section, encouraged artists to depict the so-called “American Scene”—celebratory images of everyday Americans represented in a realistic manner. Shahn’s paintings clearly fulfill this mandate, projecting a dynamic, even heroic view of the American worker. His figures represent the strength of these laborers quite literally by exaggerating the size of their forearms and hands.³⁵ The central panel on the north wall depicting poet Walt Whitman, discussing the topic of Democracy with a group of laborers, introduces the sequence of 13 murals. The remainder of the paintings are arranged in thematic pairs facing each other across the long axis of the lobby. The north wall features the portrait of Whitman flanked by a pair of murals depicting miners. Progressing south, subsequent pairs portray steelworkers, hydroelectrical engineers, wheat harvesters, textile manufacturers, and on the south wall, workers associated with the cotton trade. The figures represent a notably diverse range of American labor. Shahn himself commented, “my idea was to show the people of the Bronx something about America outside New York,” and the murals present subjects both rural and urban, from southern plantations to northern factories and Midwestern farms.³⁶ Several of the figures are African American and two are female.

The subject matter of the Bronx murals was closely informed by Shahn’s experience working for a pair of New Deal programs, the Resettlement Administration (RA), and its successor, the Farm Security Administration (FSA). In 1935 he was asked to join the RA as an artist in the Special Skills Division producing posters and promotional materials. As part of his assignment he was sent on a tour of the American South to see the effects of the Depression firsthand. As Shahn later noted, prior to this trip he had not visited much of the country and, “my knowledge of the United States...came via New York and mostly through Union Square.”³⁷ In 1937 Shahn returned to the South to photograph the positive effects of New Deal relief efforts for the RA as part of Special Skills Division, and in 1938—as he was developing the Bronx mural designs—he was sent to Ohio as part of the FSA’s Historical Section to document the wheat harvest and steel factories.

On each of these trips Shahn used a camera to record what he encountered.³⁸ Many of these images served as inspiration for his paintings; sometimes he would take figures or even entire scenes directly from his photographs and use them in his artwork. Shahn was especially interested in the level of detail the camera was able to capture. He later noted, “I became interested in photography when I found my own sketching was inadequate. I was at the time very interested in anything that had details...[I’d] take my camera along, as I felt there wouldn’t be enough time to draw the things I wanted to.”³⁹ While Shahn used photography primarily in a documentary capacity, many of the images he captured during the 1930s received widespread praise as fine art in their own right.⁴⁰

Shahn clearly used photographs as the basis for many of his murals for the Bronx General Post Office. The scenes depicted in the panels on the south wall, for example, were both taken directly from images he captured in October 1935 during his trip to the South; the cotton picker comes from his documentation of the Alexander Plantation in Pulaski County, Arkansas, while the people loading cotton bales is based on photographs he took in Natchez, Mississippi (see illustrations on page 20). The pair of paintings depicting wheat farmers, located towards the middle of the lobby, was likely inspired by his 1938 trip to Ohio.⁴¹ Shahn also drew inspiration from other photographers and artists. The larger, more intricate murals on the west wall in particular contain elements that are unmistakably based on images Shahn had collected from newspapers and magazines.⁴² The figure of the steel worker located towards the north end of the lobby is an exact mirror image of a Philip Gendreau photograph taken in the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation's South Chicago factory, right down to the "18" stenciled on the crucible above the laborer.⁴³ The geometric field of spools behind the textile worker in the southern panel comes from a *New York Times Magazine* article titled "American Industry: A Many-Headed Giant" published in March 1938, while the hydroelectric dam in one of the middle panels may have been modeled after a photograph of the Wilson Dam in Alabama produced by the Acme Roto Service that Shahn had in his collection of newspaper clippings and images.⁴⁴

Benjamin Zwi Shahn came from an immigrant, Orthodox Jewish family. He was born in the city of Kovno—which at that time was located in what was then part of the Russian-occupied Pale of Settlement and is now part of Lithuania—on September 12, 1898.⁴⁵ Shahn, with the rest of his family, followed his father to the United States in 1906 in order to escape political and religious oppression.⁴⁶ When he was fourteen he was apprenticed to his uncle's lithography shop, where he first began the professional study of the graphic arts. He later attended the Educational Alliance and the Art Students League. After finishing his apprenticeship at age seventeen he studied at New York University, the City College of New York, and finally at the National Academy of Design. He traveled extensively in Europe during the 1920s, but when he began his own successful art career in the early 1930s he rejected European Modernism and its tendency towards abstraction in favor of what he called "social communication"—realistic figural representation, often with political or social overtones.⁴⁷ Bernarda Bryson was born on March 7, 1903 in Athens, Ohio to a Christian family. She studied at Ohio University, where she majored in philosophy, and later attended the Cleveland Art School for printmaking. In 1933, while visiting New York City to write a news article on Diego Rivera, she met Ben Shahn and the two began a life-long relationship, both romantically and professionally.⁴⁸ Bryson traveled with Shahn during his cross-country trips for the RA/FSA during the 1930s and assisted on several of his mural commission from that period, including both the Bronx murals and the panels in the Jersey Homesteads community center. She later gained recognition for her own artwork, particularly for her illustrations during the 1950s and 60s and afterwards for her paintings. Ben Shahn died in 1969 and Bernard Bryson Shahn in 2004.

In December 1938, Shahn and Bryson installed full-sized draft cartoons of the murals in Bronx General Post Office lobby for public inspection and for final approval from the Section. The Whitman portrait, which included a quotation from the poet's "Thou Mother with thy Equal Brood," drew intense criticism from father Ignatius W. Cox, a priest from Fordham University, and other members of the Catholic Church.⁴⁹ Cox particularly objected to the suggestion that churches should be "recast, may-be discard them, end them—maybe their work is done, who knows?"⁵⁰ Having experienced first-hand the destruction of Rivera's Rockefeller Center murals, and having had several of his own designs rejected by the Municipal Art Commission, Shahn was anxious to avoid any controversy that would prevent the installation of the Bronx murals.⁵¹ He soon wrote his supervisors at the Section suggesting four alternative Whitman quotations, of which he signaled his preference for lines from "As I Walk these Broad, Majestic Days." These lines, which were ultimately approved by the Section and included in the final, installed murals, read, "For we support all, fuse all/After the rest is done and gone, we remain/There is no final reliance but upon us/Democracy rests finally upon us, (I, my brethren, begin it)/And our visions sweep through eternity."⁵²

By early 1939 Shahn received approval from the Section for the substitute Whitman quotation and he and Bryson began work on the final paintings. The murals were executed in egg tempera on dry plaster, rather than the fresco technique Shahn had learned with Rivera at Rockefeller Center and had employed at Jersey Homesteads.⁵³ During the project, Bryson apparently served as an assistant to Shahn, painting small details and performing such task as grinding pigments. Work continued into the summer and was finally completed in

August 1939. For their work, Shahn and Bryson received \$7,000 covering both their labor and the cost of the materials they used.

Aside from the controversy surrounding the Whitman quotation, Shahn's design for the Bronx murals was well received. Edward B. Rowan, superintendent of the Section, claimed the paintings "have real social significance as well as being beautiful in composition and color."⁵⁴ Forbes Watson, also of the Section, noted, "these decorations are easily among our best and some day—when the public wakes up—will be a point of pilgrimage."⁵⁵ Later critics echoed these praises; James Thrall Soby claimed the artists "succeeded in their exalted aim" and that "the Bronx murals as a whole abound in...subtle shifts of technique and mood, yet they arrive at a cohesive monumentality."⁵⁶ The artist's obituary cited the Bronx works as "major murals," while many recent art history texts call out the works as amongst the best examples from his most productive period.⁵⁷

Subsequent History

The Bronx General Post Office has continued to serve its original purpose since it opened in 1937. The murals have been restored on at least two occasions and the lobby underwent extensive renovations, all of which occurred in the 1970s.⁵⁸ The first mural restoration project was undertaken around 1970 by Hiram H. Hoelzer for the General Services Administration, the Federal agency that at that time has responsibility for post offices.⁵⁹ The murals underwent a second round of restoration in the late 1970s as part of a larger renovation of the entire lobby. Plans for the project were approved in 1975 and work continued through at least 1977. During this work, the east wall of the lobby was substantially reconfigured with the removal of three sections of customer service window and the installation of post office box nooks. The bronze grilles were removed from the remaining customer service windows, wood wainscoting was installed below the windows, and the metal screen between the lobby and the work space either replaced or covered over. Many of historic fixtures were also removed or replaced, such as the four free-standing writing desks and the telephone shelves and booths, while the bronze entrance vestibules were replaced with revolving doors. The *New York Times* lauded the project, particularly the restoration work performed on the murals, as "a major act of artistic preservation."⁶⁰ Other critics questioned the restoration methods used on the murals and complained that some of the new fixtures obscured portions of Shahn's panels.⁶¹ In subsequent years, additional furniture has been added to the lobby and some of the 1970s-era doors and customer service windows have been replaced.

In spite of these alterations, the Bronx General Post Office Lobby retains much of its original fabric and Modern Classical architectural design. The notable series of murals executed by Shahn and Bryson are intact and are still situated in their original context. The structure—whose design incorporates a significant synthesis of architecture, sculpture, and painting—remains a monument to the ideals of the New Deal-era public works programs.⁶²

Description

The Bronx General Post Office Lobby is divided into five bays corresponding to the three central entrance openings and the flanking two window openings in the building's primary (west) facade; floor-to-ceiling marble Ionic columns support a plastered fascia; patterned floor consists of light-gray marble and dark-gray terrazzo; marble wainscot; plastered coffered ceiling with simplified ornamental rosettes; historic pendant globe light fixtures decorated with eagle figures centered above each bay. West wall: center three bays contain entrance openings; flanking bays contain recessed window openings, fitted with marble-and-bronze radiator covers; murals installed on walls between bays, above marble wainscoting punctured with bronze radiator grilles. East wall: each of the five bays divided into three sections by engaged columns; murals installed on walls between bays above marble wainscoting; left two bays contain service counters with non-historic security windows set above historic marble wainscot; center and right two bays contain recessed post office box nooks flanked by doorways. South wall divided into sections by marble pilasters; central section features a central doorway with a historic bronze gate set below a marble plaque memorializing the erection of the building; murals installed in flanking sections above marble wainscoting. North wall divided into three sections by marble pilasters; left section contains doorway with non-historic door and frame; middle and right section contain service counters with non-historic security windows set above historic marble wainscot; murals installed in upper portion of each section above door and customer service windows.

Alterations: Entrance vestibules removed and replaced with exterior door infill; east wall partially reconfigured with three recessed nooks; metal grille between lobby and work spaces, forming upper section of east wall, replaced or covered over; interior doors and customer service windows replaced; metal ductwork installed in front of fascia on west wall; historic square recessed light fixtures replaced with can light fixtures with exposed conduit; historic furniture—including writing desks centered in four flanking bays—removed and non-historic furniture installed, including post office box kiosk, self-service kiosk, information kiosks, and writing desks.

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NOTES

¹ Portions of this section were adapted from: Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Bronx Post Office Designation Report* (LP-0837) (New York: City of New York, 1976); LPC, *Grand Concourse Historic District Designation Report* (LP-2403) (New York: City of New York, 2011), prepared by Jennifer L. Most. Information in this section is based on the following sources: Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson, *Art in Federal Buildings: An Illustrated Records of the Treasury Department's New Program in Painting and Sculpture* (Washington D.C.: Art in Federal Buildings Incorporated, 1936); C. W. Short and R. Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the Assistance of the Public Works Administration* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939); "Washington Concentration Camp," *Architectural Forum* 62, February 1935, 148-55.

² "Bronx Post Office," *New York Times*, July 23, 1916, XX8.

³ "Post Office for the Bronx," *New York Times*, February 21, 1902, 3.

⁴ "Bronx Post Office Site," *New York Times*, January 21, 1910, 8; "Latest Dealings in the Realty Field," *New York Times*, November 2, 1913, XX2.

⁵ The incredible number and range of buildings produced by the PWA is documented in Short and Stanley-Brown.

⁶ The Procurement Division was created, and the Office of the Supervising Architect was reorganized, pursuant to Executive Order 6166.

⁷ "Washington Concentration Camp."

⁸ Assignments were typically divided "primarily upon familiarity with the general local conditions. The three or four men from New York, for instance, have split up the post offices in the Middle Atlantic States...Occasionally, however, one of them might find a job dumped on his desk for some town 1,500 miles away from his home town, as Thomas H. Ellett from New York did when he was given the Post Office in Vidalia, Georgia." "Washington Concentration Camp."

⁹ The Section of Painting and Sculpture was later renamed the Section of Fine Arts.

¹⁰ Bruce and Watson, 284.

¹¹ "Bronx Postoffice: Trade Board Notified that Plans Are Being Prepared," *New York Times*, August 26, 1934;

"Bronx Postoffice Bids to Be Sought Soon; Plans Completed for Concourse Building," *New York Times*, December 23, 1934.

¹² Farley used the occasion to assail the critics of the New Deal. "Critics' 'Bugaboo' Derided by Farley," *New York Times*, June 14, 1936, 33.

¹³ "New Postoffice in Bronx Opened," *New York Times*, May 16, 1937, 37.

¹⁴ Portions of this section were adapted from: LPC, *Queens General Court House Designation Report* (LP-2404) (New York: City of New York, 2010), prepared by Gale Harris. Information in this section is based on the following sources: Lois A. Craig, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Building* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978); Elizabeth G. Grossman, "Architecture for a Public Client: The Monuments and Chapels of the American Battle Monuments Commission," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42 (May 1984), 119-143; Grossman, *The Civic Architecture of Paul Cret* (New York: Cambridge Univ.

Press, 1996), 82-90, 140-154; Grossman, "Paul Cret and the Federal Reserve Board Building, *Revue Francaise d'etudes Américaines* 102 (Dec. 2004), 6-19; Antoinette J. Lee, *Architects to the Nation: The Rise and Decline of the Supervising Architect's Office* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Leland M. Roth, *American Architecture: A History* (Boulder, CO: Icon Editions/Westview Press, 2001); Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930* (New York: Rizzolli, 1987), 20-27; Richard Guy Wilson, "Modern Classicism and Washington, D.C." in Craig Zabel and Susan Scott Munshower, eds. *American Public Architecture: European Roots and Native Expressions* (University Park, PA: Papers in Art History from Pennsylvania State University, 1989); Wilson, Introduction to the Da Capo Edition, C.W. Short and Stanley Brown, *Public Buildings: Architecture Under the Public Works Administration, 1933-39* (1939: rpt. New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), i-x.

¹⁵ Lee, 263.

¹⁶ Modern Classicism is has also been referred to as Classical Moderne, Starved Classicism, or Stripped Classicism.

¹⁷ Talbot Hamlin, quoted in Stern et al, 23.

¹⁸ "U.S. Post Office, Bronx, New York," *Architectural Forum* 68 (June 1938), 479-483. Ellett himself called his building "contemporary Georgian" in style; *Architect and Building News*, June 32, 1939.

¹⁹ Wilson cites Cret's Folger Shakespeare Library (1928-32) as one of two buildings that helped popularize Modern Classicism, along with Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue's National Research Council Building (1919-24). Wilson, "Modern Classicism." See also Roth, 368-70.

²⁰ For a description of the architectural program for the American Battle Monuments Commission, see Grossman, "Architecture for a Public Client."

²¹ As one architectural historian noted, "the adoption of starved classicism as an official style coincided with the creation of...cemeteries on foreign soil." Craig, 286.

²² "U.S. Post Office, Bronx, New York," *Architectural Forum*.

²³ Ellett's residential work included the French-inspired E. Mortimer Barnes Residence ("Manana"), in Glen Head, Long Island (c. 1915); the medieval-inflected J. Seward Johnson Estate ("Merriewold"), New Brunswick, New Jersey (1924-26); the Colonial Revival Caroll B. Alker Residence ("Ca Va") in Locust Valley, New York (c. 1924); and the Donald H. Cowl Residence in Port Washington, New York (c. 1924).

²⁴ The competition was announced in May 1938 and was envisioned as a model for future collaboration between the Office of the Supervising Architect and private architecture firms. 650 architects submitted proposals for the competition. Lee, 270; Rita Walsh, "Covington Downtown Commercial Historic District (District Expansion) National Register of Historic Places Registration Nomination Form" (June 1995).

²⁵ Ellett's papers are located at the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

²⁶ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Carl R. Baldwin, "Shahn's Bronx P.O. Murals: The Perils of Public Art," *Art in America* 15 (May/June 1977), 15-19; Susan Chevlowe, *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Painting of Ben Shahn* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1998); Richard K. Doud, Oral history interview with Ben Shahn, 1964 Apr. 14, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Howard Greenfield, *Ben Shahn: An Artist's Life* (New York: Random House, 1998); Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn* (San Francisco: Pomegranate ArtBooks, 1993); Patricia Raynor, "Off the Wall" New Deal Post Office Murals," *EnRoute* 6 (October-December 1997); "Ben Shahn papers, 1879-1990, bulk 1933-1970," Smithsonian Archives of American Art (available online: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/ben-shahn-papers-6935>); "Bernarda Bryson Shahn papers, 1972-2004, bulk 1904-2005," Smithsonian Archives of American Art (collection summary available online: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/bernarda-bryson-shahn-papers-5712>); James Thrall Soby, *Ben Shahn* (West Drayton, England: Penguin Books, 1947).

²⁷ Raynor.

²⁸ Shahn papers, Series 3: Project Files, Bronx Central Annex Post Office Mural, NY, 1938.

²⁹ Shahn and Bryson may have benefitted from their relationship with Poor, who was a close friend and later a colleague at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

³⁰ Bryson's preliminary proposal for the Bronx murals—depicting President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivering a radio address, similar in composition to the Whitman panel actually installed—is reproduced in Susan Noyes Platt, *Art and Politics in the 1930s: Modernism, Marxism, Americanism* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1999).

³¹ Rivera is widely considered one of “los tres grandes” (“Big Three” or “Three Great Ones”)—along with José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros—who helped popularize politically-charged murals as an art form in post-revolution Mexico, and who had a significant influence on mural painting in America.

³² Pohl, 15.

³³ Jersey Homesteads was a planned community established by the Resettlement Administration during the New Deal era. Shahn and Bryson moved there in 1939 and lived there throughout their lives. The town was later renamed Roosevelt, New Jersey following the death of President Roosevelt in 1945.

³⁴ Pohl notes, “In the Bronx Post Office murals Shahn and Bryson Shahn tried to simplify the individual panels, including only one enlarged figure in most and reducing the background detail.” This contrasts with the Jersey Homestead work, which “was crowded with figures and buildings and other objects rendered in great detail.” Pohl, 19.

³⁵ At least one critic complained that Whitman’s hands were excessively exaggerated for a poet. Kenneth M. Price, *To Walt Whitman, America* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 77.

³⁶ Quoted in Greenfield, 161.

³⁷ Doud.

³⁸ Shahn was given a small Leica camera by his brother. He received pointers on its use from noted photographer Walker Evans, with whom Shahn shared a studio for a time in the early 1930s and who was also employed by the RA/FSA.

³⁹ Doud.

⁴⁰ By the early 1940s Shahn had largely abandoned photography in order to concentrate on his painting. Several books have focused on Shahn’s photography as fine art, including

Susan H. Edwards, *Ben Shahn and the Task of Photography in Thirties America* (New York: Hunter College of the City of New York, 1995); Timothy Egan, *The Photographs of Ben Shan* (Washington D.C.: The Library of Congress, 2008); Deborah Marin Kao, Laura Katzman, and Jenna Webster, *Ben Shahn’s New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000); and John Raeburn, *Ben Shahn’s American Scene: Photographs, 1938* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁴¹ In the mural of the harvester on the west wall, the draft cartoons show the machine lettered with the brand “DEERING,” as seen in one of Shahn’s FSA photographs. In the final, installed version of the mural this was changed to “LEARNER,” apparently at the request of the Section.

⁴² Shahn’s papers include an extensive collection of newspaper clippings and other source files. Shahn papers, Series 7: Source Files.

⁴³ *Ibid*, “Workers.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, “Dams” and “Workers.”

⁴⁵ The Pale of Settlement was the restricted area of the Russian Empire in which Jewish residents were permitted to live and work under strict regulations. Transliterated from Yiddish, the name of Hurwit’s birth city was often spelled Kovne or Kovna. It is now Kaunas, Lithuania. See Dov Levin, “Kaunas,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.

⁴⁶ Shahn’s father was active in Socialist politics and was arrested for distributing revolutionary pamphlets.

⁴⁷ Shahn’s obituary claimed, “The style he developed was basically realist...but it was a realism transmuted by poetry, magic, and mystery.” “Ben Shahn, Artist, is Dead Here at 70,” *New York Times*, March 15, 1969, 1.

⁴⁸ According to Bryson’s obituary, they married shortly before Shahn’s death in 1969. “Bernarda Bryson Shahn, Painter, Dies at 101,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2006.

⁴⁹ “Bronx Postoffice Mural Assailed by Father Cox as Insult to Religion,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1938, 3.

⁵⁰ The full quote read, “Brain of the New World, what a task is thine/To formulate the Modern—out of the peerless grandeur of the modern/Out of thyself, comprising science, to recast poems, churches, art/(Recast, may-be discard them, end them—may-be their work is done, who knows?)/By vision, hand, conception, on the background of the mighty past, the dead /To limn with absolute faith the mighty living present.” Incidentally, neither Whitman nor Shahn seemed to object to the implication that their vocations, poetry and art, may be recast or even ended along with the churches.

⁵¹ While he was outwardly willing to change the quotation, Shahn had personal reservations, writing in a draft letter to the Section that, “one must protest that Whitman is one our most loved and honored Americans poets...I question whether it is the right thing for a limited group of people to try to impose their particular Index on the general public.” Shahn papers, Series 3: Project Files. Shahn later satirized Cox and the controversy in his easel painting *Myself Among the Churchgoers* (1939).

⁵² Versions of these lines appeared in a number of Whitman poems, including “Chants American and Native American” from the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “As I Walk Solitary, Unattended” from the 1867 edition, and in “As I Walk these Broad, Majestic Days” from the 1872 edition. He also used the lines in an 1872 commencement poem for Dartmouth College titled “As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free.”

⁵³ The plaster walls were previously covered with canvas, which left an uneven, mildewed surface that had to be cleaned and smoothed out before the tempera paint was applied. Baldwin, 15.

⁵⁴ Shahn papers, Series 3: Project Files.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Greenfield, 160.

⁵⁷ Shahn obituary. A small selection of general surveys of American art history that discuss the Bronx murals include Christos M. Joachamides and Norman Rosenthal, eds, *American Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1913-1993* (Munich: Prestel, 1993), 67; *Coming Home: American Paintings 1930-1950* (Athen, GA: Georgia Museum of Art and Mobile, AL: Mobile Museum of Art, 2003), 293.

⁵⁸ This work happened to coincide with the most intense period of disinvestment in the South Bronx.

⁵⁹ Baldwin, 15-16.

⁶⁰ “Post Office Restoring Shahn Murals in Bronx,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1977, 27.

⁶¹ Baldwin 16-17. The new telephone booths, which intruded the most onto the murals, were soon removed in favor of something less objectionable.

⁶² As of the date of designation, there have been reports that the Bronx Post Office could be closed and the building sold. Under Post Office regulations, the United States Postal Service (USPS) cannot sell artwork. Thus, in the event that the building is sold, the murals would continue to be owned by the USPS and could remain in the building pursuant to a loan agreement with the new, and subsequent, owner(s). Telephone Conversation with Sharon Freeman, USPS.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

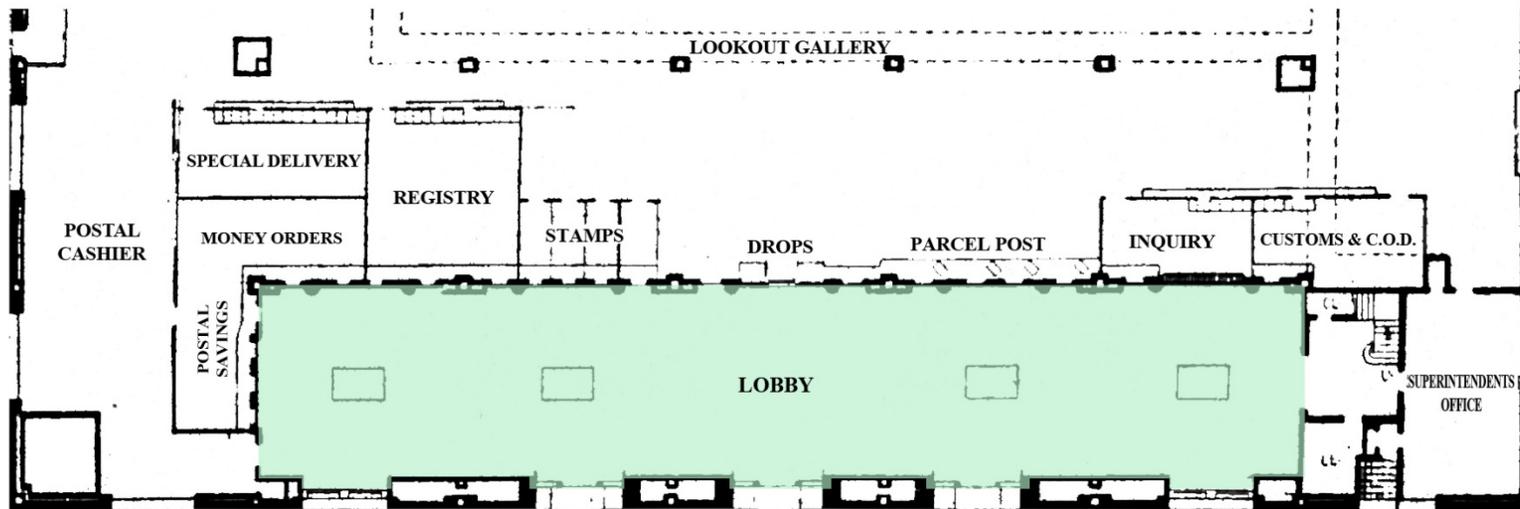
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the buildings and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Bronx General Post Office Lobby, First Floor Interior has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest, and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Bronx General Post Office Lobby, First Floor Lobby—planned and constructed between 1934-37 and designed by Thomas Harlan Ellett—contains a series of 13 significant New Deal-era murals created by noted artists Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson; that the construction of the Bronx General Post Office responded to growing need for improved postal facilities in the borough as the Bronx was becoming one of the fastest-growing urban areas in the country during the early 20th century; that the Bronx General Post Office and its interior lobby are significant as examples of New Deal-era public works programs in New York City, with funding for the building coming from the Public Works Administration and architectural design being overseen by the Federal government's Office of the Supervising Architect, of which Ellett was a temporary employee; that the post office and its lobby are notable for their Modern Classical architectural design, a style preferred by New Deal-era public works programs, and that Ellett's design combines modified classical ornament with a tendency to abstraction and simplification of these motifs, with the space featuring architectural elements such as floor-to-ceiling Ionic columns, a striped marble and terrazzo floor, and a coffered ceiling with simplified rosette ornamentation, and materials including gray Missouri marble, white Tennessee marble, and complimentary terrazzo; that the murals, titled "Resources of America," are integral to the design of the Bronx General Post Office Lobby, and that the artists won the commission through an open competition sponsored by the Section of Painting and Sculpture, a Federal agency closely aligned with the Office of the Supervising Architect; that, as per the requirements of the competition, Shahn's designs comprise a unified decorative scheme that integrates with the architectural setting of the lobby, with all of the panels relating to the general theme of Labor and depicting dynamic, even heroic, views of the American worker; that the murals depict a notably diverse range of American labor, the scenes oftentimes being inspired by the artist's trips to the American heartland during the 1930s; that draft versions of the murals were installed in the post office in December 1938 for public inspection and final approval, and that installation of the murals occurred early the following year, with all 13 panels being completed by August 1939; that the Bronx General Post Office has continued to serve its original purpose since it opened in 1937, and that in spite of alterations that occurred in the 1970s—including the restoration of the murals and extensive renovations of the lobby—the building and its lobby retains much of its original fabric and Modern Classical architectural design; that the notable series of murals executed by Shahn and Bryson are intact and are still situated in their original context, and that the structure—whose design incorporates a significant synthesis of architecture, sculpture, and painting—remains a monument to the ideals of the New Deal-era public works programs.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Bronx General Post Office Lobby, First Floor Interior, consisting of the lobby and the fixtures and components of this space, including but not limited to, the wall surfaces, murals, wainscoting, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, columns, plaque, metal gate and globe lighting fixtures, and designates Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2443, Lot 400 as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Frederick Bland, Diana Chapin, Michael Devonshire, Joan Gerner, Michael Goldblum, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington, Commissioners



Bronx General Post Office Lobby
 * Based on Lobby Plan Bronx Post Office, *Architectural Forum*, June 1938, Pg. 12

BRONX GENERAL POST OFFICE LOBBY, FIRST FLOOR INTERIOR, consisting of the lobby and the fixtures and components of this space, including but not limited to, the wall surfaces, murals, wainscoting, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, columns, plaque, metal gate and globe lighting fixtures, 560 Grand Concourse (aka 554-582 Grand Concourse), Bronx.



Bronx General Post Office Lobby, First Floor Interior

Draft mural cartoons installed for public inspection

Photo: Gottscho-Schleisner, Inc. (December 5, 1938)

Courtesy Museum of the City of New York



View looking southeast

Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (December 12, 2013)

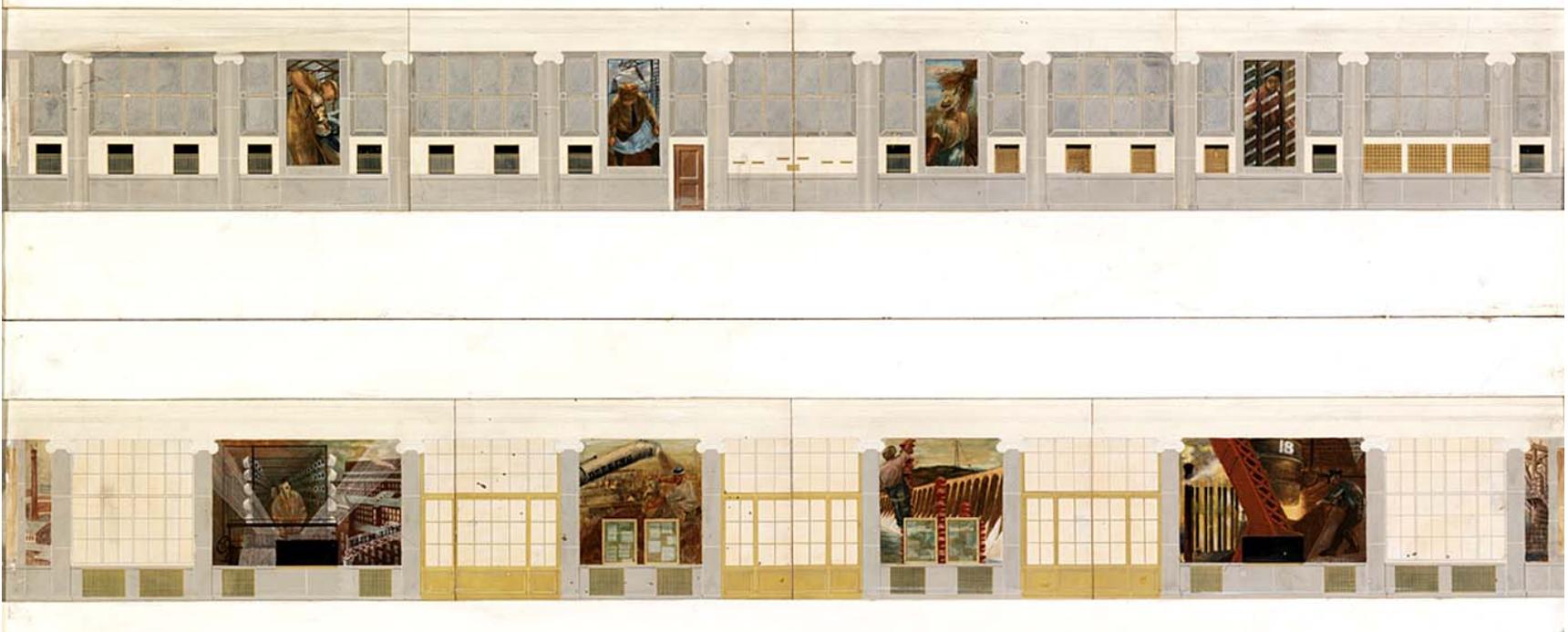
Photo taken with permission of the United States Postal Service



Shortly after 1970s alterations
Photo: Stephen L. Senigo (September 1979)



View looking northeast
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (December 12, 2013)
Photo taken with permission of the United States Postal Service



Resources of America (two panels, mural study, Bronx, New York Central Post Office)
Painting: Ben Shahn (1939-43)
Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum



Murals, north wall

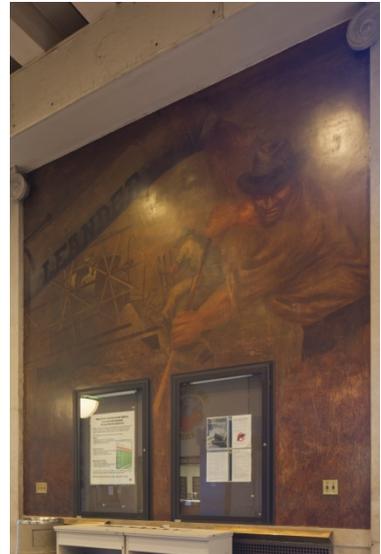
Photos: Christopher D. Brazee (December 12, 2013)

Photos taken with permission of the United States Postal Service



Murals, east wall

Photos: Christopher D. Brazee (December 12, 2013)
Photos taken with permission of the United States Postal Service



Murals, west wall

Photos: Christopher D. Brazeo (December 12, 2013)

Photos taken with permission of the United States Postal Service



Top: Picking cotton on Alexander plantation, Pulaski County, Arkansas
 Bottom: [Untitled photo, possibly related to Loading cotton in Natchez, Mississippi]

Photos: Ben Shahn (October 1935)

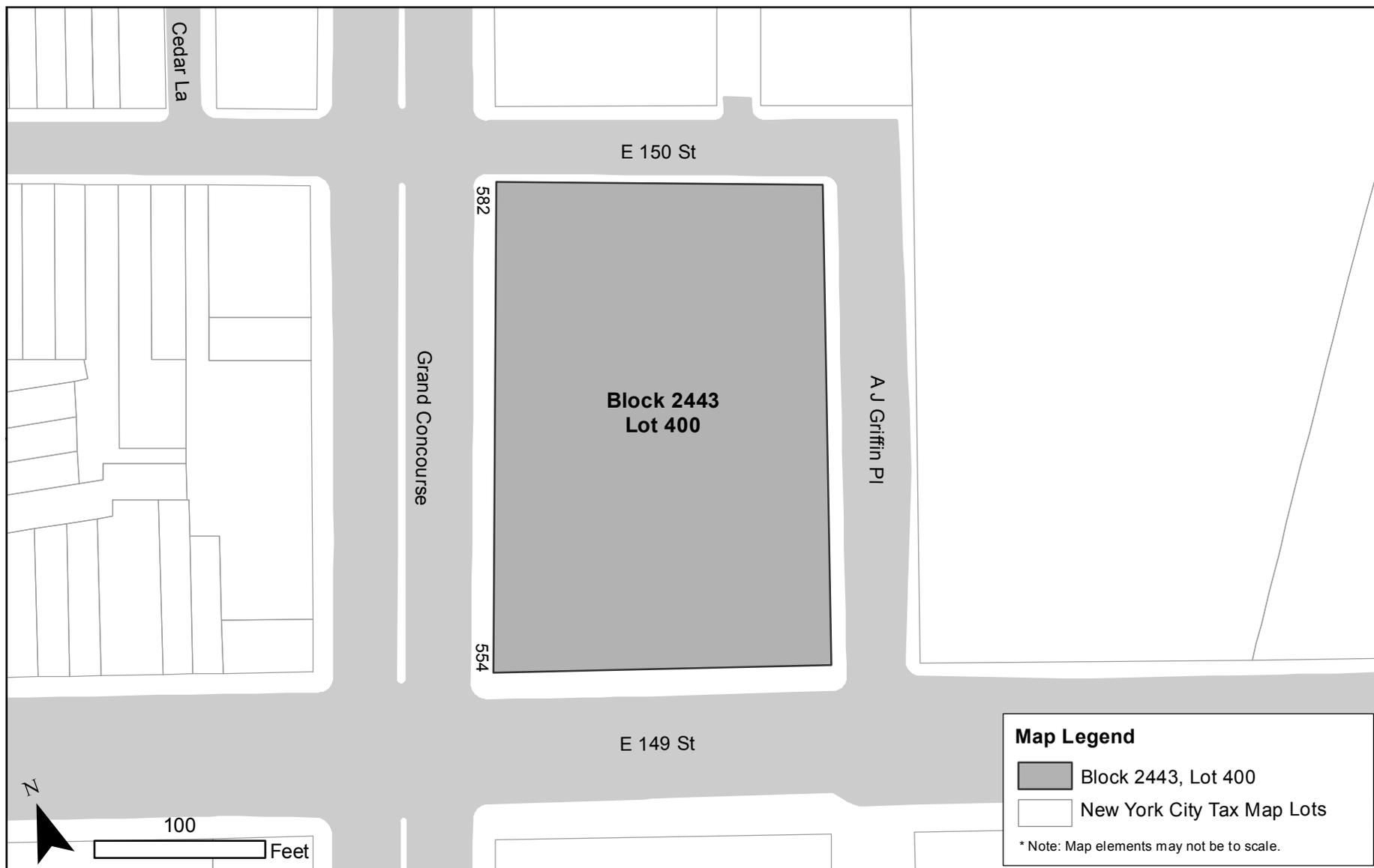
Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographics Division

Murals, south wall

Photos:

*Christopher D. Brazee
 (December 12, 2013)*

Photos taken with permission of the United States Postal Service



BRONX GENERAL POST OFFICE LOBBY, FIRST FLOOR INTERIOR (LP-2552), 560 Grand Concourse (aka 554-582 Grand Concourse). Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx, Tax Map Block 2443, Lot 400, consisting of the lobby and the fixtures and components of this space, including but not limited to, the wall surfaces, murals, wainscoting, ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, columns, plaque, metal gate and globe lighting fixtures

Designated: December 17, 2013