A Vision of Cincinnati: The Worker Murals of Winold Reiss

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In July 1972, the Southern Railroad announced its intention to purchase the all-but-unused Union Terminal Concourse, tear it down, and redevelop the land as part of a modern piggy-back freight operation. The plan seemed to spell disaster for the fourteen murals dedicated to Cincinnati’s workers which had lined the concourse for forty years. Ironically, this crisis ended not in the destruction of the murals, but in their elevation to a new level of influence on community consciousness.

At their new home, the Greater Cincinnati International Airport, this group of fourteen murals wove themselves into the everyday experience of millions of Cincinnatians and out-of-town travelers. If the Concourse had remained standing, they would have remained locked away from public view for fifteen long years. But the enduring popularity of this artistic endeavor was grounded in more than accessibility. Their power and durability rests on original vision of their creator.

Originally the worker murals were a distinct part of the larger effort by the Terminal architects, Fellheimer and Wagner, and its interior decorator, Paul Cret, to enliven the interior. In the Concourse, they proposed a series of murals on the wall spaces above and between the gates honoring the industrial workers of Cincinnati. The architects asked two foreign born artists, Pierre Bourdelle from France and Winold Reiss from Germany, to submit proposals for the concourse mural project.

Bourdelle submitted sketches rooted in his imagination of how workers ought to look. He projected these figures against a thin screen of information about the important industries of Cincinnati. The result was a series of sketches of young, muscular males working in settings that vaguely suggested soap making and machine tool manufacture. The effect was a glorification of idealized workers.

Winold Reiss began from a radically different point of departure. He personally visited at least seventeen Cincinnati factories to photograph real workers performing actual tasks. A few were young and muscular, but the majority reflected the great cross section of society. Some were middle aged, some were old. Some were skinny, some were overweight. All were quite ordinary. The result was a grittier, more realistic, and ultimately more engaging view of the people who built Cincinnati.

This is not to say that Winold Reiss, the artist, did not carefully craft the scenes he photographed. Emil Weston was one of the four workers pictured in the American Rolling Mill (Armco) mural. In 1988, almost sixty years after the base photograph was shot, Weston still recalled with awe Reiss’s methodical approach the day he visited Armco. First, the artist surveyed the various industrial processes of the plant and decided to focus his study on the dramatic process of pouring molten iron into a mold. At that moment the workers were active and the process created a shower of sparks.

In addition, Reiss carefully selected four workers from the pool of men who worked in that area of the plant. Reiss determined, according to Weston, that “a tall, muscular man” by the name of Swope would be the central figure. Weston, who was taking the temperature of the molten iron, and a Mr. Rendering who is shown working the wheel on the bucket, were physically much smaller, and meant to stand in artistic contrast with Swope. Although Reiss worked to stage this scene dramatically, he worked with real people and recorded them going about the tasks that they performed every day.

The reality Reiss perceived and recorded with his camera on the factory floor was the truth he worked to depict in the completed mural. Most of the murals are based on a single photographic image, although several combine elements from two or even three photographs.

But even at the level of detail, the continuity between original image and completed mural is often startling. For example, the Andrews Rolling Mill photo reveals a small triangular shadow cast on the factory floor by a hot piece of metal being dragged by two workers. Even that shadow survives as a triangle of violet colored tiles in the finished mural.

The development process from original base
of two artistic techniques. The human images are rendered in tile, while the background areas are treated as large masses of frescoed concrete — concrete that has the color added while it is still wet. Background shapes such as shadows, are outlined, or silhouetted, in tile.

Craftsmen at the Ravenna Tile Company headquartered in New York implemented Reiss's plans. Photographs of the oil painting were enlarged to full size (20 feet by 20 feet) and then cut into two foot squares and distributed to individual craftsmen. Under the direction of Reiss and company owner, Paul Heudeck, the Ravenna workers could choose from over 8,000 shades of tile, to implement the vision.

These two foot square sections were pasted face down on heavy brown paper, organized, and shipped to Cincinnati. Heudeck and Reiss came to Cincinnati to supervise their installation on the walls of the Concourse personally.

Many commentators refer to the murals that once graced the Union Terminal Concourse as the “Industrial Murals.” It is more helpful to think of them as the “Worker Murals.” Whether taken individually, or as a total body of work, Reiss’s thematic interest is clear — portraying the factory workers of Cincinnati with dignity and respect.

In the worker murals, machinery and technology are secondary, providing the backdrop and context for the human images. And by concentrating on ordinary workers, Reiss clearly opted to ignore and exclude the owners and managers of the businesses. The only person in the worker murals dressed in a business suit is the piano player in the radio mural.

Reiss’s bias for ordinary people is consistent throughout the Union Terminal murals. The Rotunda murals portray frontiersmen and farmers, roustabouts and packet boat captains, railroad engineers, and construction laborers. Only in one place did Reiss depict political and economic “leaders.” He sandwiched them on the cramped walls of the relatively narrow passage between the Rotunda and the concourse originally called the “checking lobby.” Clearly, Reiss placed his priorities with ordinary people performing everyday tasks. He strove to present them sympathetically, as strong, dignified contributors to society. These workers were responsible for the contemporary strength of Cincinnati.

It is ironic that at the very moment that Reiss was planning and executing his tribute to Cincinnati’s workers, the United States began its long
plunge into the Great Depression of the 1930s. Just when the murals were completed and dedicated, America's industrial workers faced the prospect of unprecedented hardship and challenge.

Local boosterish literature never tires of proclaiming that Cincinnati's diversified, locally owned, economy withstood the Depression better than one-industry cities like Detroit and Pittsburgh. But Cincinnati was far from "depression proof." Between 1929 and 1933, the year the Terminal opened, unemployment rose from 5.9 percent to 30.4 percent, and underemployment rose from 5.2 percent to 17.9 percent. The local trend matched the national averages almost perfectly.

In selecting which industries and workers to feature, Reiss had to make choices about what to include and what to exclude. The photos, preliminary sketches, and water color studies saved by his son, Tjark Reiss, clearly show that Winold Reiss seriously considered a mural featuring stone workers and another focused on watchmaking. In fact, a water color study featuring Gruen Watch Company suggests the artist not only played with alternative subjects, but also an alternative, more abstract, artistic style.

From the perspective of the 1990s many people looking at the murals think Reiss was trying to depict Cincinnati's industrial history. In fact, Reiss focused on the present and future prospects of Cincinnati industry as it existed in the early 1930s. Although many of the featured industries had deep roots in Cincinnati's nineteenth century economy, Reiss presented the workers and the factory processes as they existed in his day. None of the murals look back to the origins of soapmaking or machine tool manufacture.
If Ivory Soap and Kahn's meat helped fix Cincinnati's image among consumers, it was the city's machine tool companies that carried its name into factories and workshops around the world. Cincinnati Milling Machine (now Cincinnati Milacron) was not only the city's largest machine tool manufacturer, but it stamped "Cincinnati" prominently on every machine tool. (Figure #4)

Cincinnati's soap production rested on the ready accessibility of lard and oil byproducts of the city's meat packing industry. By the 1930s Cincinnati was no longer "Porkopolis," but meat packing companies, strung out along Spring Grove Avenue north of Union Terminal, were still major employers. The mural features workers on a modern production line at E. Kahn's Sons Company, the city's leading meat packer in the 1930s. (Figure #5)
While machinists in England and France learned about Cincinnati in their factories because of Cincinnati Milling Machine, millions of musicians learned of Cincinnati in their parlors and music halls while playing Baldwin Pianos that were "made in Cincinnati, Ohio." The company's roots reached back into the 1850s, but the mural is set at the Baldwin's modern factory on Gilbert Avenue. The two workers in the mural are shaping cases for Baldwin grand pianos. (Figure #6)
Although never moved to the airport, the two smaller murals featuring a potter and a kiln worker at Rookwood Pottery thematically fit the mold of depicting Cincinnati's oldest and most famous work traditions. In the 1920s Rookwood was at the height of its influence as one of the most innovative and creative art potteries in the world. Perched on the brow of Mt. Adams, at the top of the Incline, Rookwood was a magnet drawing both visitors and residents alike. Ironically, by focusing on a potter and kiln worker, Reiss ignored the workers who were the soul of Rookwood, the decorators. What distinguished Rookwood from hundreds of industrial potteries around the United States was the central role played by professional artists. The goal at Rookwood was beauty, not mass production. Today these two murals are exhibited in the Cincinnati Historical Society's special exhibits gallery.

Another cluster of murals also drew on long established, though not famous, local industrial work traditions. As early as the 1850s Cincinnati emerged as a major publishing and printing center. By the 1930s Cincinnati was home for over 300 commercial printing establishments not to mention dozens of typesetting firms.
Two murals draw on three different companies to tell the story of the workers in the printing industries. One mural is based on the work of the Ault & Weiborg Company that was founded in 1850 and was located at Dana Avenue and Montgomery Road in the 1930s. The company made a variety of industrial paint and varnish products, including the colorful printing inks Reiss chose to highlight in the mural. (Figure #9)

A related mural combines images from two companies related to printing. In the background two workers at U.S. Playing Card Company in Norwood operate a press printing red and blue decks of cards on a large, modern printing press. In the foreground Reiss superimposed a huge roll of paper and a worker from Champion Paper Company in Hamilton, Ohio. (Figure #10)
The mural based on the work of the William S. Merrell Company features a Cincinnati business that was formed in 1828, and had roots in Cincinnati as early as 1804. This made Merrell the oldest pharmaceutical manufacturer in the United States by the 1930s. The Merrell mural is the only one that depicts an African-American worker. The central figure in the mural is a white jacketed chemist. The African-American is presented as a laborer in the lower left portion of the mural.

This marginal presentation of African-Americans in Cincinnati’s industrial workforce is a relatively accurate portrayal of the marginal place black workers occupied in Cincinnati factories. Less than three percent of the black workforce found employment as skilled or semi-skilled industrial workers, and those usually had to take the least desirable jobs. Jim Powell worked in the foundry at Cincinnati Milling Machine, the dirtiest section of the plant. He would get covered every day with “pitch,” a gritty, greasy black substance. “You couldn’t wash it off. It would just cling to your skin. I messed up all my wife’s sheets, you could tell where I slept.”

The majority of African-Americans found employment outside Cincinnati factories. A small, but successful group, developed professional careers as teachers, doctors, and nurses. The vast majority worked as common laborers on construction sites, as domestics, or as unskilled workers in the service and transportation industries. The two roustabouts in the Rotunda mural recall that tradition.

The Merrell mural is the only one that depicts an African-American worker.
(Figure #11)
Although Pittsburgh was the center of the steel industry in the United States, the Cincinnati area also had a long history of metal working. Two murals highlight this tradition. One focused on the workers at the American Rolling Mills (Armco) of Middletown, Ohio, which employed about 4,000 people locally and 12,000 nationally in the 1930s. (Figure #12) The other mural in this group is based on the workers at the Newport Rolling Mill of the Andrews Steel Company in Newport, Kentucky. This mural depicts two workers using long tongs to carry a hot piece of rolled steel across the mill floor. (Figures #13 and 14)
One of the most obscure selections is the mural that features workers from the Philip Carey Manufacturing Company producing asphalt roofing shingles. Although many Cincinnati companies produced building materials, the city did not stand out as a famous center for this effort, and the Philip Carey Company (now Celotex) was not particularly renowned in its own right. Its inclusion, however, reflected the critical role its president, George Dent Crabbs, played in making the Union Terminal a reality. Beginning in 1923 Crabbs headed the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce's Committee on New Terminals and personally negotiated the agreement among the seven passenger railroad companies servicing Cincinnati to cooperate on the building of Union Terminal. A mural featuring workers from his company saturating felt with asphalt was a way of thanking the man who made the entire project possible.

The Philip Carey Company produced asphalt roofing shingles. (Figures #15 and 16)
The American Laundry Machine in Norwood was founded in 1909, but quickly became the world's largest manufacturer of laundry equipment for commercial laundries, hospitals, and hotels. (Figure #17)

A mural that grows out of Cincinnati nineteenth century industrial history depicts the workers at the American Oak Leather Company. Tanneries operated in Cincinnati from at least 1791 and flourished in the mid-nineteenth century as the processors of animal hides, a major byproduct of the meat packing process. American Oak Leather was the largest of the tanneries operating in the 1930s, employing about 550 people in the production of shoe soles, upholstery, patent, enamelled, and novelty leathers. (Figure #18)
The Crosley mural is a composite of two base photographs. The right side of the mural focuses on the artistic side of radio and features a piano player performing in a broadcast studio. The left side focuses on the technical side, an engineer monitoring a wall-sized control panel. (Figures #19, 20 and 21)
Two murals look more to what seemed like Cincinnati’s future than its past. In 1933 broadcasting was still in its infancy. Commercial radio was barely a decade old. Television was still something only futurists spun predictions about. But already Cincinnati had established itself as a leader in broadcasting. Besides the half dozen local radio stations similar to other cities its size, Cincinnati was also home to one of the industry’s true leaders, WLW. Founded by Powell Crosley in 1922, within a decade WLW established itself as the “Nation’s Station” able to reach most of the United States with its regular 50,000 watts of power and its additional 450,000 experimental watts.

The other future oriented mural features the workers at the Aeronca Company which was originally headquartered in a hanger at Lunken Airport. The mural depicts two workers assembling one of Aeronca’s small mass marketed planes. (Figures #22 and 23)
Almost as interesting as what Reiss chose to include, is what he decided to exclude. Because he focused on the present and future as it appeared in the early 1930s, he did not develop a mural dedicated to Cincinnati’s breweries, historically one of the city’s most important and colorful industries. When the project was planned, Prohibition was the law of the land, and Cincinnati’s once bustling breweries were either shuttered or limping along as soft drink manufacturers.

Harder to explain, and far more troubling, is the total absence of women workers in the murals. Not one woman appears in any of the finished murals.

Yet Reiss had opportunities to capture women at work in many of the factories he featured. A third of the decorators at Rookwood Pottery, for example, were always women. And, ironically, a woman did appear in one of the base photographs, but disappeared before the mural was completed. In the U.S. Playing Card base photograph a woman printer is shown working on a platform on the press. But by expanding the focus of the mural to include workers at Champion Paper, as well as printers, the huge paper roll from the second photograph covered the woman printer, and all the women she might have symbolized.

During the first third of the twentieth century an increasing number of Cincinnati women worked outside their homes, and an ever larger percentage of those women worked in area factories. Why didn’t Reiss find more women with his camera, or at least preserve the place of the one woman he did find — much as he preserved a lone African-American worker in the Merrell mural? The recognition of the roll of women faced two hurdles.

First, women tended to be confined to lower prestige and lower paying manufacturing jobs. Traditionally, women in manufacturing were assigned jobs that seemed to be outgrowths of domestic tasks — producing food products, pasting labels on cans and jars, or sewing clothes — or in office jobs. In Cincinnati women worked at Strietmann baking crackers, at Ibold boxing cigars, at Gibson assembling greeting cards, and at hundreds of the source photos for the U.S. Playing Card mural but disappeared before the mural was completed. (Figure #24)
Ivorydale packing bars of soap into splintered wooden boxes. “You had to watch, your hands got sore, splinters were all over your fingers.”13

Sixty years after their completion, the Cincinnati Worker Murals rank second only to the Tyler Davidson Fountain as a defining artistic image for Cincinnati. Winold Reiss’s commitment to putting ordinary people performing everyday tasks at the center of his images makes it easy for millions of people to see themselves reflected in the artist’s vision of the city. And his straightforward, bold artistic style makes the murals accessible to everyone.

What may be most amazing is the flexibility of the pieces. In their original setting, they were meant to be seen mounted high on the walls of the concourse. The advantage was that they could all be seen at once and make a collective statement.

At the Greater Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky International Airport they are scattered through three terminal buildings over two floors. Never more than three can be viewed at a time. But at the airport each mural is mounted at floor level. It is possible to walk up to the murals and to touch and enjoy them at close range. At Union Terminal the Crosley engineer wore a simple tan vest and white shirt. At the airport his vest is alive with tans, browns, rusts, and purples while his shirt is composed of white, off-white, and several shades of blue tiles.

According to his son, Tjark, Winold Reiss believed the Union Terminal murals were one of his father’s favorite commissions. “He believed, they expressed America, they expressed Cincinnati.”14

Sixty years after they were completed, the worker murals remain a powerful artistic and social statement. If we are to understand the multi-voiced story that is Cincinnati, we must understand and remember more than the experiences of business leaders who occupy the board rooms of Fourth Street, or the political leaders who deliberate in government offices on Plum and Court streets. We must pursue the path Winold Reiss set upon in the early 1930s. We must carefully observe the experiences, and listen to the wisdom, of the ordinary men and women who work on the factory floors from Newport to Middletown to build a greater Cincinnati.
1. When the Concourse was torn down in 1973, the Greater Cincinnati Airport in Northern Kentucky integrated fourteen worker murals into their expanding facility. Two smaller, but thematically related, murals featuring workers from Rookwood Pottery, were left at Union Terminal. These two murals originally stood above the offices of the Station Master and the Passenger Agent. In 1991 they were reinstalled in the special exhibits space at the Cincinnati Historical Society.

2. Oral interview for author, October 1988, for WKRC-TV special "Working in Mosaic."

3. Art History Department of the University of Cincinnati in cooperation with the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, *Art Deco and the Cincinnati Union Terminal,* (Cincinnati, 1973).

4. Oral history interview with Tjark Reiss by Daniel Hurley, January 23, 1988, for WKRC-TV special, "Working in Mosaic."


6. Based on an examination by the author of the working materials saved by Tjark Reiss.


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