

Research Bibliography Award

Application for Consideration

Student Name: **Katie McCarney**

Course Name & Number: **HIST 399 (Senior History Thesis), ART 381 (Senior Art History Thesis) and HONR 398 (Honors Thesis)**

Please provide a written description of your research process. This may include, but is not limited to, the keywords, databases, bibliographies, indexes, people and search engines you found most useful and why, the ways in which your focus and/or thesis changed and developed during the research process, how you evaluated and selected materials for inclusion or exclusion in your project, the most rewarding and most frustrating aspects of your research, what you would recommend other students do or not do in their own research. You may also refer judges to the appropriate page numbers or sections in your project where any of these are discussed. Attach another sheet if necessary.

I agree to have the library publish my essay, or my abstract and works cited list, at www.csbsju.edu/library if it wins. I will retain copyright of my work.

Signature _____ **Katie McCarney** _____

Date 3/25/04 _____

There is no question that my senior art history and history honors thesis project, *Art for a People: An Iconographic and Cultural Study of Mural Painting in Minnesota's New Deal Art Programs*, was the most intense research project I have ever undertaken. Nearly twelve months of research, dozens of sources and mural images, and hours of sorting, analyzing and writing came together in 71 pages of text and another 53 pages of appendixes, images, and bibliography. Looking back, it was a difficult journey of research and thought that tested my flexibility and patience, but one that was certainly rewarding in both the knowledge I gained and the final written result.

When I began this project, I knew very little about the New Deal art projects or the murals, so I had a difficult time knowing how to find research materials initially and it took a lot of creativity all the way along. The murals and New Deal art in general are topics that have not

been widely studied, so research materials were few and far between...and certainly difficult to find. The Minnesota mural projects themselves have actually never been studied specifically before. I began by searching for “WPA art” and then, when I discovered that—much to my surprise—there were four art projects not just one, I widened this search to include the other three, as well as “New Deal art” in general. This was the term most were classed under, so I found many more resources than I originally thought were available. The CSB/SJU library catalog was incredibly helpful, as was the full MnPALS catalog, the old PALS catalog for the rest of the state and the collection of the MN Historical Society library. Interlibrary loan was invaluable (for finding the majority of my sources that were not held by many libraries), as were trips to the Minnesota and Stearns County Historical Societies. Since there is little concentrated research on the New Deal murals themselves, I had to collect bits of knowledge from sources all over—books on specific and wider topics, journal articles, unpublished dissertations, newsletters, historical newspaper articles, websites, collections of papers on microfilm, and phone interviews—to put the picture together. I was very self-directed in most of my research. Since there has been so little scholarship on this area, my advisors were even uncertain of where to go for sources. I have never read bibliographies in the backs of books with such a passion before! Finding sources was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle or going from clue to clue on a treasure hunt. Reference librarians were very helpful in directing me to different sources for census statistics, legislative records, and other government documents. I particularly liked having the MSN reference help for questions that arose while I was at work on the writing, whether about a specific census number that I needed from St. John’s when I was at St. Ben’s, what was available online, or what I could find at each campus without actually making the trip there.

Doing research from both the history and art history disciplines also brought added challenges, not only in finding secondary research from both perspectives but also in finding the mural images themselves – a huge part of my project. I started with a set of slides of 12 murals at the MN Historical Society, and branched out into images from multimedia sources like books, websites, online visual databases, google searches, and even in-person visits on road trips across the state. It felt like a victory each time I found a new image! No one has ever made a “master list” of New Deal murals in the state, so creating that list was time-consuming and a project that took the entire year. Through my research I found numerous additions to the “official” lists used by other scholars in texts and dissertations.

One of the greatest challenges and oftentimes frustrations that I experienced was related to narrowing my topic. Because finding my research materials and the images I analyzed was a process that took the entire year, my conclusions and argument changed along with it. My main thesis statement changed significantly even just a relatively short time before my defense as I was writing and re-drafting the paper. What I had originally thought would be a very narrow topic turned out to be something difficult to access, but still quite broad with a dozen different ways to approach it. I began by studying the murals in general, then a more specific contrast of the two largest programs (once I realized there was more than one!). Then, second semester, I realized that an in-depth analysis of common themes in which the idealization of life in the murals is obvious was a much more fascinating and meaningful topic. Not long ago, I changed my entire focus to this and dropped the comparison from my main text completely into an appendix. I had to change directions significantly, but the research I had done for the first part of the thesis was necessary for me make my analysis conclusions at the end. I am still finishing the re-organization of my thesis, though certainly for the better.

Despite the frustrations and roadblocks that did inevitably come up, this project was still very rewarding. I love the idea that my research was original in an area in which there is such little study and even less common knowledge. It is exciting to think that I am now one of the foremost experts in the state on the subject of the New Deal murals in Minnesota. I loved the process of finding the images in so many different locations. I also really enjoyed the fact that this project was on a local topic, both so I could do in depth research around the state and because the end result was even more meaningful.

For other students doing a research project like this, I would certainly encourage them to choose a meaningful and intriguing topic that they will be happy to spend an entire year on and where they can actually come to realizations of new, interesting knowledge. That is very fulfilling. They should not be afraid to change their focus to strengthen the paper, even though that can be a difficult thought to adjust to at first. My topic of New Deal murals in Minnesota fascinated me and I feel like I have made a significant contribution in this field of study. After completing my thesis in its final form, I want to give a copy to the Minnesota and Stearns County Historical Societies, giving other researchers and scholars so much information that I wished I had at the beginning of this project. It has been a long process, but a very rewarding one in the end.