Have You Wondered About the Murals in Herbst Theatre?

The murals which now hang on the walls of the Herbst Theatre were originally painted by Frank Brangwyn as a commissioned work for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 in San Francisco.

The main purpose of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was to display the power, industry, and culture of the United States in the 20th Century. The exposition's organizers had in mind an American exhibit of the same proportions as the Great Exhibition in Britain of 1851 and the Paris Exhibition of 1889. The United States Government appointed a committee of leading architects to supervise layout and design, who then chose a group of artists and technicians to carry out the work. Buildings to house exhibits were constructed in the Marina, along Lombard Street. The Palace of Fine Arts, considered one of the most beautiful architectural works of the Exposition, is the only structure which still remains standing today.

Of all the artists selected to participate in the project, Frank Brangwyn was the only one who was not American. Brangwyn was born in Belgium and lived in England. However, he was known as one of the leading muralists of his day and received commissions from the world over. He had already painted works for both the Venice Exposition and the Chicago Exposition where he was awarded a medal. He was President of the Royal Society of British Artists and an honored member of La Société des Beaux Art, the Royal Academy of Milan, the Swedish Royal Academy, the Munich Secession, and the Association of Spanish Artists. Aside from having his work represented in many great museums of the world, his murals decorate the London Royal Exchange, Lloyd's Registry, London, the Cleveland Court House, the Missouri State Capitol, and many private residences. Ironically, although he completed many paintings along American themes for American commissions, he never once visited the United States and hence never saw his murals once they had been installed.

For the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, Brangwyn was instructed to paint eight panels for the Court of Abundance, part of the fine art section of the fair. Symbolically, the Court of Abundance was planned to be "an historical expression of the successive Ages of the World's growth," with its design based on representations of the four elements – earth, air, fire, and water. Brangwyn's panels were to be hung at right angles to one another in the four corners of a covered walkway around the open court.

Given these parameters, Brangwyn decided to group his panels in pairs, each of which would portray one of the four elements. Since the paintings would be quite large and would receive natural light, a medium had to be developed which would reduce reflection and the other effects of the changing sunlight. Brangwyn's solution was something technically described as "flat oil on absorbent canvas" which created a matt surface once the paint had dried.

Another stipulation placed upon all mural painters employed by the Exposition was that they were all to convene in San Francisco and work in one large studio where they were given only five or six basic colors. The idea behind this requirement was that the painters would constantly be influenced by one another's color schemes, harmoniously uniting all of the murals in chromatic conformity. Each painter was to play the part of a single instrument in a concert, striving for something larger than an individual effort.

Brangwyn, however, was assured enough to ignore this request. He executed all of his murals in England with the aid of four or five assistants, based upon a color scheme of his own choosing. The main colors of his palette for all eight paintings were blue, red,

The Fruit Pickers

Dancing the Grapes

The Windmill

The Hunters

and gold. His theory on color was: "The only thing which lasts is rich and primary color. One never gets tired of it, and it has the effect of reviving one's outlook. I feel that all of this tone and gentle harmony of color, born of looking at old and faded things, is not good for one." Interestingly enough, when installed, the warm tones of Brangwyn's murals matched quite compatibly with the rest of the murals which had been painted in the concert method. The panels, 18 feet by 25 feet with arched tops, were united in compositional structure as well as in color scheme. Prominent, sturdy figures appear in each foreground supported by strong horizontal and vertical lines in the background. Brangwyn was careful to create the figures in each panel on the same scale, making them all almost double life size.

Brangwyn was fairly disinterested in the Exposition's theme of 20th-Century advancement and working within his own style, created romantic, timeless representations of humanity in relationship with the four essential elements. Brangwyn seemed to be in his own element in these depictions of luscious growth and energetic figures compacted into ornamental and exuberant compositions. The two panels devoted to Earth are entitled *Dancing the Grapes* and *The Fruit Pickers*. In the first, two men dancing face to face and happy drinkers in the foreground are illuminated by dappled sunlight and the fermented fruits of their labor. In the second, another picture of

abundance, fruit pickers on ladders fill the overflowing baskets which are carried by figures in the foreground. Air is represented by *The Windmill* and *The Hunters*. The solid structure of the windmill provides a background for the group of nude boys flying kites and the farm workers with the wind billowing through their clothes in the wheat field below. In the light of late afternoon of the second panel, hunters at the edge of a forest shoot their arrows into the air towards a flock of birds flying towards them for the open fields. Fire is interpreted in two different ways, *Primitive Fire* and *Industrial Fire*. On an early autumn day, workers gather around the fire to warm themselves. In the next panel, fire is employed a in a kiln in the process of producing the decorative pots in the foreground. Figures are busily stoking the fire while the tension of their exertion is dramatically broken by a female figure standing alone on the right, bathed in the warm glow emanating from the kiln. Finally, *The Net* and *The Foundation* make up the somewhat softer and more placid pair of Water panels. Rugged fishermen stand among the water's reeds as they bring in their last haul of fish for the day while soft clouds hang low above the sea. In the second panel, a single jet of water falls gently from a fountain high on a bank of shrubbery towards the line of people gathered to fill their vessels.

As previously mentioned, Brangwyn never saw these murals once they had been installed, but he also never saw them in their

entirety because his studio was not tall enough. Whenever one end of the canvas was being worked on, the other end had to be rolled up. However, the murals attracted much attention from visitors to the Panama-Pacific Exposition, and on February 20, 1915, the *San Francisco Examiner* reproduced two of the panels in color on the front page of a special Exposition edition. The only criticism came from the architect of the Court of Abundance who thought Brangwyn was too romantic and wanted more literal examples of 20th-Century power such as planes, ships, and electrical plants.

Luckily, the Brangwyn murals have not become outdated, as depictions of planes and ships probably would have, and they found a new home when the records, books, and artworks of the Exposition were handed over to the Memorial Trustees who were, at the time, in the process of constructing the War Memorial complex to honor the soldiers and war workers of World War I. Frank Brangwyn's murals were then incorporated into the plans for the Herbst Theatre, where they have hung since its doors first opened in 1932.

Information on the Frank Brangwyn murals courtesy of the Archives of the Trustees of the War Memorial and Peter Fries, Assistant to the Managing Director of the War Memorial and Performing Arts Center.

The Net

The Fountain

Primitive Fire

Industrial Fire