

COMMUNITY, THE WWII HOMEFRONT, AND POW ART:
THE ST. MARY'S PROJECT IN UMBARGER, TEXAS

by

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To my mother who passed the SMP torch to me.

To the next generation, I pass it on to you

“be yours to hold it high.

If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow.”

ABSTRACT

St. Mary's Catholic Church in Umbarger, Texas, has become a local historic mecca and landmark in the state. In 1945, Italian prisoners of war, who were housed at the WWII prisoner camp in nearby Hereford, decorated the interior of the church with paintings and carvings—what I am calling “the St. Mary's Project” or SMP—making the church one of the rarest and most extensive examples of POW art in the United States. Not only did the artists leave their aesthetic mark on the region, and not only did the community of Umbarger leave an impression of kindness on the artists-POWs, but these two groups also built enduring connections. These prisoners and their families continued to return to the Umbarger church periodically over the last seven decades, where they were hosted as friends and even family by the Umbarger residents. While a few published sources have touched upon the Umbarger St. Mary's Project, my thesis explores the project in various new contexts. It offers the first concentrated art historical analysis of the church decorations, claiming they are deeply connected to historical Italian art as well as modernist art and in dialogue with international and contemporary trends of mural art. Likewise, my work here examines the cross-cultural connections that emerged in the SMP, between an immigrant German-American community and Italian POWs. I aim to understand how an art project in rural America acted as a catalyst for the development of an unusual trans-national community during and after WWII.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a child, growing up in Umbarger, the art of St. Mary's occupied my weekly Sunday daydreams. I found myself lost in the repeating patterns of the sanctuary wallpaper, wandering the plains of the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* scenes and seeking meaning in the many symbols that lined the church's walls. But my fascination went beyond the images because my connection to the SMP originated from my familial history and their deep friendships with artist Franco Di Bello. The charming Italian (pronounced in Umbarger eye-tail-an) artists frequented many conversations in Sunday School classes, at home and at many family gatherings. For my family, most especially for my maternal grandparents, Harvey and Ormalene Artho, one of their favorite pastimes was to regale their children and grandchildren of their many adventures. So, I learned from an early age the importance of maintaining an historical perspective to pass on to the next generation the stories of my family's past, and to instill their legacy for ages to come.

As I was considering topics for my thesis, wondering what subject I could connect deeply to, and still stay with during the trials of writing a master's thesis, my beloved cousin and best friend Rev. Grant Spinherne suggested I delve into the St. Mary's Project. As current pastor over the parish, surely there was no ulterior motive. But the more I thought about it, and considered my family's connection to the SMP as well as their predilection for history, especially family history, I knew that it was destiny. My research

into the SMP is not only beneficial to my interests and future career in art history, but is my chance to carry on the legacy that was ingrained into my life. I hope that this work will fulfill my self-appointed destiny and inspire future generations of my family.

Thank you to my great-grandparents; Louisa, Mary, and Paul Artho, and George and Mary Brockman for their initial devotion to family and cultivation of friendships. To my grandparents, Harvey and Ormalene Artho, for their fierce love and devotion, not only to their family but also to the many friends they made throughout their lifetime. To my parents, Laurie and Mike Wegman, for their constant unconditional love and support, especially during times of uncertainty, I am thankful for everything you both have sacrificed for me. To my siblings, Aubrey, Mark, Christina, and Kelley, I guess I have to love you. To Candice and Reid Copelin, Caleb and Megan Hubbard, Amanda and Jonathan Lawson, and Israel Rivera, thank you all for the many years of friendship, love, and support we have all enjoyed; may we continue on for many more years to come.

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INTRODUCTION

The war in Europe halted after the deaths of Hitler and Mussolini in April 1945, the Japanese defeat was not far behind, and the world's population was reeling from the war's effects. But a group of Italian Prisoners of War (hereafter POWs) in the Texas Panhandle exhibited the works of art they created during their captivity.¹ The Hereford Prisoner's Art Exhibition (fig. 1) would prove to be a unique catalyst for a historically significant art project that launched an unlikely community of German-Americans and Italian fascists.



Fig. 1 Photocopy of the Hereford Prisoner's Art Exhibition Pamphlet

The prison camps held by the war-torn European Allies were overcrowded, and food shortages crippled efforts to provide for their prisoners. For the first time in its history, the United States government

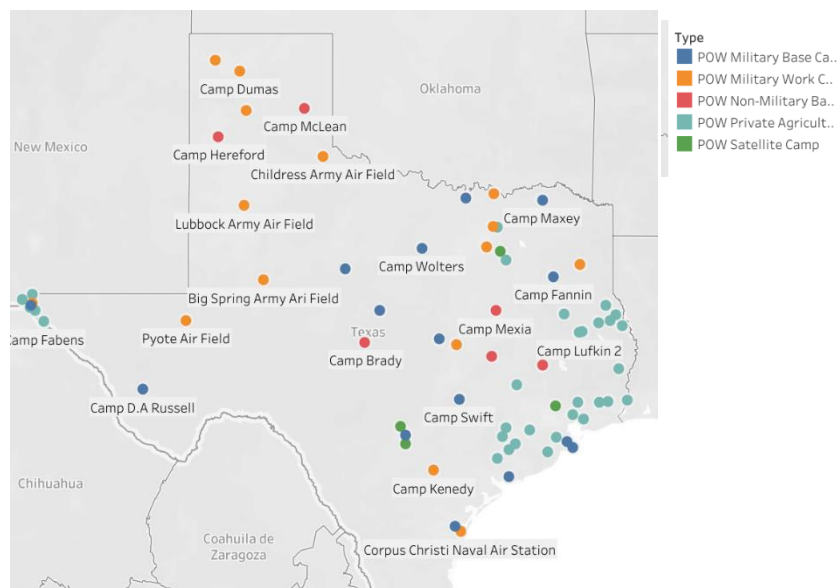


Fig. 2 Texas POW Camps

¹ "Loneliness, Longing for Home Reflected in Art Exhibit," *The Hereford Brand*, August 30, 1945.

had to make accommodations for foreign POWs in accordance with the newly formed regulations of the 1929 Geneva Convention.² From 1942 to 1945, approximately 600 camps were built throughout the U.S. to house the 425,000 POWs who were shipped stateside.³ Texas held the most, with seventy camps: seven base camps, such as the one at Camp Hereford, fourteen military installations, and forty-nine smaller branch camps (fig. 2).⁴

In most, if not all of these camps, there is evidence of POWs undertaking art activities. For instance, Camp Herne had classes in drawing and woodworking, which allowed POWs to produce their original work (fig. 3). Similarly, Camp Hereford had classes in drawing and painting. Enough works were created within the camp to create an exhibit of art created by POWs. Following this exhibition in late August 1945, a



Fig. 3 *Untitled Cityscape*, wood burning unknown German POW, Camp Herne

group of Italian prisoners with artistic interests or training were asked to paint the interior of St. Mary's Church in Umbarger.⁵ Every day for six weeks, from October to December of 1945, this group traveled the thirty miles in the back of an open truck from Camp

² "Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War," 1929, reproduced in Jeffery L. Littlejohn and Charles H. Ford, *The Enemy Within Never Did Without: German and Japanese Prisoner of War at Camp Huntsville, 1942-1945* (Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2015), 113-138.

³ Antonio Thompson, *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America During World War II* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2010).

⁴ Arnold Krammer, "When the Afrika Korps Came to Texas: World War II POWs in the Lone Star State," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (1977): 247-82.

⁵ In order to retain their cultural identity above and beyond their prisoner or enemy combatant status, I will refer to the artists and the assistants as the "Italian artists" or "SMP artists" rather than the "POW artists."

Hereford to Umbarger to decorate the church. Painters included Major Achille Cattanei, Captain Franco Di Bello, and Captain Dino Gambetti, who worked diligently to paint three



massive murals (Figs. 4-6), four angel figures (Figs. 7-9.), and numerous banners and symbols (Figs. 10-14.).⁶

Fig. 4 Annunciation, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 140 x 91 inches



Fig. 5 Visitation, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 140 x 91

⁶ Donald Mace Williams, *Interlude in Umbarger: Italian POWs and a Texas Church*, (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), 49-51. Franco Di Bello always signed his name with a capital “D”.



Fig. 6 Assumption, Gambetti with Cattanei, oil on canvas, 105 x 94 inches



Fig. 7 INRI Angel, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 53 x 21 inches

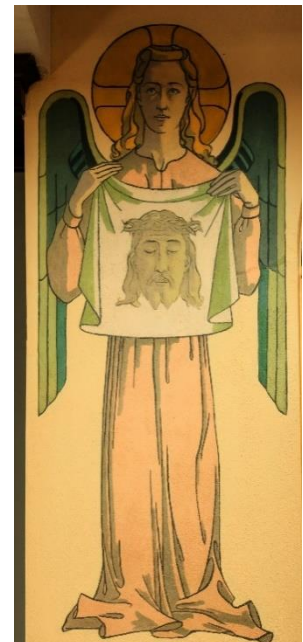


Fig. 8 Angel holding Veronica's Veil, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 53 x 21 inches



Fig. 9 Eucharist Angels, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 48 x 202 inches



Fig. 10 Grapes, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 16 x 101 inches



Fig. 11 Anchor & Fish, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 20-inch diameter



Fig. 12 Ancient Symbol of Trinity, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 20-inch diameter



Fig. 13 Eucharist, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 28 x 28 inches

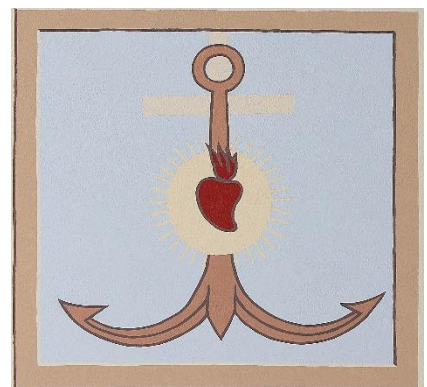


Fig. 14 Hope, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster, 28 x 28 inches

They were aided by two assistants, Lieutenant Mario de Cristofard and Lieutenant Leonida Gorlato, who would paint the neutral background before the artists painted the decorations. They would perform manual labor, such as moving and setting up the scaffolding. In addition to the paintings, Sergeants Caro Santivo and Enrico Zorzi carved four altarpieces (figs. 15-16.) and a carving after Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (fig. 17).⁷ Lastly, the St. Mary's parish had purchased twelve stained glass windows; within the last two weeks of the project, Sergeants Amedeo Maretto and Antonio Monetti created the ironwork to mold the glass pieces together.⁸



Fig. 15 Grape & Wheat, Sanvito & Zorzi, oak, 5 x 108 inches



Fig. 16 Grapes & Wheat with Dove, Sanvito & Zorzi, oak, 5 x 16 inches



Fig. 17 Last Supper, Sanvito & Zorzi, oak, 18 x 39 inches

⁷ Williams, *Interlude*, 51, 74, and Franco Di Bello to Donald Mace Williams, "Letter: Di Bello to Williams," July 2, 1981, Panhandle Plains Historical Museum Research Center, hereafter PPHMRC.

⁸ Williams, *Interlude*, 151.

The use of POW labor in the U.S. during WWII was commonplace. The U.S. deployed millions of male citizens to the European and Pacific theaters, and labor on the home front was greatly depleted, especially in the farm industry.⁹ To fill the labor void, the US government allowed POWs to leave the confines of their prison camps, under the supervision of a US military guard, and work for local farmers and companies. Under the Geneva Convention, enlisted POWs could be made to work in compensation for eighty cents per day. Non-commissioned officers were allowed to volunteer, but in a supervisory position only. And commissioned officers could not be made to work and were rarely offered work deployments.¹⁰

The St. Mary's Project (hereafter SMP), therefore, does not fit into this standard model of POW labor practices seen across the U.S. First, most of the Italian artists who worked on the SMP were commissioned officers. Second, they were not paid the minimum wage but were compensated through a daily meal provided by the parish women. And third, the Italian artists were part of a small group within the Italian POW population, specifically "non-collaborators." When Italy willingly entered the Armistice of Cassibile with the Allies in September 1943, the captured Italian POWs were asked to sign a loyalty oath to the newly installed government with Prime Minister Pietro Badoglio, under King Victor Emmanuel III.¹¹ Those POWs, in both Europe Allied camps and the U.S., who signed the oath were given more freedom in captivity, those who refused to sign were sequestered,

⁹ Thompson, *Men in German Uniform*, 81 and Melissa Ameteis Marsh, *Nebraska POW Camps: A History of World War II Prisoners in the Heartland* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014), 32.

¹⁰ "Geneva Convention."

¹¹ Phillip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007), 5, 104-106 and R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life Under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915-1945* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005). This new government's sole purpose was to remove Benito Mussolini from power; it was neither explicitly a royalist government nor a Fascist government.

and those held in the U.S. were shipped from various camps in the country to Camp Hereford.¹²

The Umbarger residents could not have fully foreseen the historical significance of the SMP. For them, at the time, these foreign Italian soldiers were nothing more than a group of imprisoned enemy men tasked to decorate their beloved church.¹³ Though some of the local population bonded with the artists and even formed lifelong friendships, the art within the church and the SMP's historical significance remained largely unrecognized beyond local accounts until the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁴ Though a rare event and perhaps an entirely peculiar phenomenon, the SMP can offer a rich case study for the exploration of numerous issues, including immigrant community isolation, cross-cultural connections during times of war, and POW behavior and practices connected to the production of an art project. Though there are a few published sources on the SMP, this thesis explores the project in multiple new contexts. It aims to produce a more historically accurate, archivally grounded, and broadly contextualized narrative. It seeks to analyze the two different communities that came together in the SMP: the German-American Catholic community centered upon St. Mary's parish and the Italian non-collaborative captives. And it explores their connection through the lens of the art project that united them. Not only does it illuminate the social connections formed between the two groups in the 1940s, but it also discusses the afterlife of the SMP in the longstanding friendships that continued throughout the lives of the artists and the Umbarger parish—a community I was born into.

¹² Marsh, *Nebraska POW Camps*, 57 and Franco Di Bello to Richard Keen, "Letter: Di Bello to Keen," May 18, 1988, PPHMRC. At least all of the officers in Camp Hereford were non-collaborators. There were some enlisted men within Camp Hereford who participated in local work details, so the population of non-collaborators among the enlisted men is unclear.

¹³ Interview with Laurie Wegman by the author, January 25, 2020.

¹⁴ Williams, *Interlude*, 1-2.

This thesis demonstrates how a new international bond was formed across two vastly different groups and cultures centered on St. Mary's art.

Moreover, this thesis offers the first concentrated art historical analysis of the church decorations, claiming a deep connection to historical Italian art and a connection to modernist art styles, including the international trends of mural art in the 1930s. This project is distinctly transatlantic between the US and Europe as it will conduct an in-depth stylistic and historical analysis of the artworks, drawing comparisons with Renaissance and early Christian religious art as the source material for the Italian artists and the SMP, while also demonstrating the project was in conversation with modern styles, such as Pre-Raphaelite modern religious art, mural art, and American regionalism.

There are a few studies to date on Umbarger, Camp Hereford, and the St. Mary's Project. Two relatively short, published monographs—Dr. Hubert Wilhelm Oppe's *Umbarger: Its History and People* and F. Stanley's *The Umbarger Texas Story*—outline the history and founding of Umbarger.¹⁵ Though both monographs only briefly cite and discuss the SMP, each provides and traces key details of Umbarger's settlement and development. Both focus on the handful of “founding families” and their influence on, as Oppe says, “the social structure” of Umbarger.¹⁶ Both explore Umbarger as a historically closed community, given the residents' tendency to intermarry with other German Catholic communities and hesitation to interact with outside communities and individuals.

Other relevant studies have focused explicitly on Camp Hereford. For instance, Joe Roger's master thesis discusses the particulars of the physical makeup of Camp Hereford,

¹⁵ Hubert Wilhelm Oppe, *Umbarger, Its History and People: Monograph on a German Settlement in the Texas Panhandle* (Canyon, TX: West Texas A&M University Faculty Publication Collection, 1964) and F. Stanley, *The Umbarger Texas Story* (Nazareth, TX: Self-Published, 1974).

¹⁶ Oppe, *Umbarger*, 1.

the daily lives of the prisoners, and the effects the camp had on the Hereford community.¹⁷ Rogers dutifully researched the camp's inner workings through military records, local newspapers, and personal interviews. Given his focus on the camp's effects on the Hereford community, Rogers understandably spends little time on the details of the SMP or the effects of the camp on the Umbarger community. The only monograph to study the SMP in any scholarly concentration is Don Mace Williams's *Interlude in Umbarger*.¹⁸ Williams follows artist Franco Di Bello's journey from childhood, to the military, through the war, and into captivity. Williams' study claims the SMP as the production and, in other words, the "masterpiece" of the "artist" Di Bello, an argument the historical record challenges in numerous ways. To be sure, the SMP was a highly collaborative endeavor from the beginning, involving patrons, artists, and parishioners alike. In other words, there is much more of the story to tell.

To contextualize the SMP, my research considered studies of POW camps in the U.S., ranging from a broad national scope to state and local levels. These examine every aspect of camp life. For instance, in *Nebraska POW Camps: A History of World War II Prisoners in the Heartland*, Melissa Marsh describes the POW's everyday experience, the relationships they had with each other as well as the local populations, and their recreation.¹⁹ Marsh explores how these POWs spent time studying and often performing plays and concerts, thereby touching upon art activities that took place within the camps.²⁰ Moreover, Marsh's positive rhetoric surrounding the POW's in Nebraska mirrors the

¹⁷ Joe D. Rogers, "The Italian POW Camp at Hereford During World War II," M.A. Thesis, West Texas State University, 1987.

¹⁸ Williams, *Interlude*.

¹⁹ Marsh, *Nebraska POW*.

²⁰ For more art examples in POW camps see Marsh, *Nebraska POW*, 66, 85, 106, 144; Thompson, *Men in German Uniform*, 109; and Elena Bellina, "Theatre and Gender Performance: WWII Italian POW Camps in East Africa," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 40, no. 3 (2018): 80-91.

attitude and rhetoric of the Umbarger people and by previous historians of the town, including Williams and other journalists, who emphasize how the POWs were cared for in their communities with kindness and how the POWs brought beneficial things to the area. My thesis examines such rhetoric and its notions of “reciprocal benefits” from a critical and historical perspective, rather than a simple retelling of the story from a celebratory perspective.

A more localized study on POWs' lives in Texas is *The Enemy Within Never Did Without: German and Japanese's Prisoners of War at Camp Huntsville, 1942-1946*. Authors Jeffery Littlejohn and Charles Ford study the daily lives and conditions of the Huntsville prisoners.²¹ Studies like these are essential to understand how the Italian POWs of Camp Hereford and elsewhere functioned within the US POW system, and specifically the reason the artists came to accept food in lieu of monetary payment, which became an important aspect of the SMP.²²

Whether considering POW artists or active soldier artists, art produced by soldiers during war rarely falls into a canon of art historical “masterpieces.” The dearth of quality materials limits the extent of the artists’ ability to produce sophisticated work, and wartime labor requirements limit their time to perfect pieces. “Soldier art” more often falls into the category of amateur art or folk art rather than a professional endeavor. Yet, the emotive power of wartime art can still be profound when it is studied and recognized. For instance, “trench art,” defined first during WWI, is fascinating for its poignant emotional content

²¹ Littlejohn and Ford, *The Enemy*.

²² In 1945, there was a worldwide food shortage that resulted in POW rations being cut. I will discuss this in depth in Chapter One.

and less for its skill in craftsmanship or its beauty of materials.²³ To be sure, the majority of trench art comprises awkward objects easily carried around by a soldier, like the water canteen found in figure 18. In its most narrow definition, “trench art” must be made literally in the battlefield's trenches during war. But Nicholas Saunders defines it more broadly as “any object made by soldiers, prisoners of war and civilians from war material or any other material as long as object and maker are associated in time and space with armed conflict or its consequences.”²⁴ This inclusive definition can be applied to the Italians' art in Camp Hereford and the SMP art. However, its highly refined style and sophisticated subject matter (figs. 4-6.) and its engagement with art historical traditions also elevates the SMP to a level beyond the common kinds of trench art. Nevertheless, its profound emotional connection to its makers—and those associated with Umbarger and Camp Hereford—resonates with Saunter’s definition of trench art. On the one hand, the SMP designs have tremendous emotional depth because they are tied directly to soldiers' experience in war and in captivity. On the other hand, the SMP can bring the largely underacknowledged trench art genre into a new context of art historical meaning and historical significance. These two forms of war art should not be disconnected, despite their different materials and appearances. The SMP gives a new and enlightening dimension to the stereotypically unsophisticated trench art.



Fig. 18 Water Canteen, unknown German POW, Camp Hearne

²³ Nicholas J. Saunders, *Trench Art* (Barnsley South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2001).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

The St. Mary's Project brought together German-American Umbarger parishioners, Italian artists, and, subsequently, many of Camp Hereford's broader population. Fundamentally, the SMP is an example of social art. In 1947, sociologist Arthur Katona published a study on creating art within a community. Katona hypothesized that art created at the local level for a specific community establishes a level of intimacy between the artist and the audience.²⁵ This certainly rings true for all those initially involved in the SMP. The many Umbarger women who took time out of their day to prepare the mid-day meal for the artists found common ground with them through food and the creation of this art project. Several Umbarger men had similar interactions with the artists, from building the tools needed, to keeping them company while they worked. The two communities connected through art, labor, shared Catholic religion, food, similar home-countries, and many other areas. There is too a social component in mural art, particularly the murals created by the New Deal and the WPA. In *New Deal for the Arts*, Bruce Bustard states, "Murals not only introduced art to many Americans for the first time, but this public art



Fig. 19 *Men and Wheat*, Joe Jones, 1939, oil on canvas, 15.5 x 35.25 inches

²⁵ Arthur Katona, "Social Art: A Community Approach," *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 21, no. 2 (1947): 65-67.

would ‘belong to the community.’”²⁶ Post Office murals such as the *Men and Wheat* in Seneca, Kansas (fig. 19) brought to life the plains and touched on the importance of the agriculture economy and ultimately became the town's property, giving the everyday population stake in art itself. Before the SMP, St. Mary's was a bare church, devoid of color, and any artistic expression (fig. 26). Rev. John Krukkert and the Italian artists brought art to the Umbarger community that was unique in their time and place. This thesis draws on theories of critical regionalism to show how the spheres of the local and international overlap in interesting ways, especially in the SMP. Critical regionalist methods analyze the interplay of local, national, and global identities even as they reveal the degree to which these terms are culturally constructed.²⁷

Certainly, the SMP is an example of socially-based art, as it was a cooperative exchange between two communities. And it continues to be restored and revisited by connected communities to this day. The idea that art can create new community bonds continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first and is still a fascination for artists, scholars, and community leaders alike. For instance, J. Ulbricht describes a study conducted between his art students and the community, concluding “that art is a cooperative and interdisciplinary endeavor.”²⁸ Certainly, the SMP is an example of socially-based art, as it was a cooperative exchange between two communities and continues to be restored and revisited by connected communities to this day. Just as mural art in the 1930s was set to provide art for and build communities, it is true today in street

²⁶ Bruce I. Bustard, *A New Deal for the Arts* (National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1997).

²⁷ See Kenneth Frampton, “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points for an Architecture of Resistance,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, 16-30, Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983; and Alex Hunt “Cornelia Adair: Transatlantic Rancher” in *Texas Women and Ranching*, ed. Deborah M. Liles, and Cecilia Gutierrez, 42-64, Texas A&M University Press, 2019.

²⁸ J. Ulbricht, “Learning about Community Art Behaviors,” *Art Education* 55, no. 5 (2002): 38.

art projects and community murals that continue to be produced in the region.²⁹ Moreover, the 2012 restoration of the SMP murals was undertaken in collaboration with art students at the nearby West Texas A&M University, which once again utilized the efforts of artists connected to the region.

This thesis is a historical and art historical study that attempts to understand two communities during a war and the connection that an art project created between them. In Umbarger, identity can be condensed into three basic identifiers: a German heritage, a Catholic religious affiliation, and an agricultural economy. Chapter One gives a brief history of the town and focuses on the origin of these three identifiers within the Umbarger structure. This section examines the community's ties to Europe, particularly Germany, and the issues the early settlers faced with Americanization, perceived racism, and anti-Catholicism in a largely Protestant region in the midst of two World Wars.³⁰ This section also analyzes the role that farming and the Catholic Church had in forming tight-knit bonds within the community and as potential barriers against those outsiders. These identifiers both constructed and isolated the Umbarger community and are important contexts to understand in their quick acceptance of the SMP's Italian artists.

Just as it is important to understand the Umbarger community's cultural characteristics, so too is it important to understand the political background that shaped the

²⁹ See Douglas Clark, "Barrio Neighborhood Project Mural Unveiled" *Amarillo Globe-News*, Aug. 6, 2019, online at: <https://www.amarillo.com/news/20190806/barrio-neighborhood-mural-project-unveiled> and Michelle Kraft, "Mural Project Honors the East Lubbock Community and Artist Vivian T. Cooke," *Glasstire*, July 15, 2019, online at: <https://glasstire.com/2019/07/15/mural-project-honors-the-east-lubbock-community-and-artist-vivian-t-cooke/>. Nola Hopkins, "WT Art Students Give 30-year-old Mural a Fresh Look with Panhandle History." *Canyon News*, June 27, 2019, online at: <http://www.canyonnews.com/wt-art-students-give-30-year-old-mural-a-fresh-look-with-panhandle-history/>.

³⁰ Laurie Wegman Interview; Mark Chapman, "American Evangelical Attitudes Toward Catholicism: World War II to Vatican II," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 33, no. 1 (2015): 25-54; and David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Italian artists. Chapter One will briefly examine Italian Fascism and Italy's role in World War II, focusing on the African Campaign, where, in 1943, many Italian soldiers were captured by Allied forces, including those interned at Camp Hereford.³¹ This basic understanding is significant to the SMP because whether or not the Italian artists, the so-called "dangerous" non-collaborators, were ardent Fascists or, if they were instead purely honor-bound to serve their homeland. Exploring these motivations is key to understand why they did not sign the oath to the new Italian government after Mussolini.³²

The German-American Umbarger community's quick acceptance of the Italian artists might appear strange, given wartime tensions, and so it offers an interesting study in and of itself. At the same time, this thesis also demonstrates how the SMP's art reveals a merging of art styles, including a blend of German and Italian influences. Chapter Two provides a close analysis of the artwork, showing connections to early Christian and Renaissance art in Italy, as well as to movements of modern art from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, the church decorations, including the medallions and banners, and in the background wallpapers, employ a longstanding Christian visual rhetoric. Chapter Two traces sources for this iconography; for instance, we know that the



Fig. 20 Close-up: wallpaper arch, Gambetti with Cattanei, & Di Bello, industrial paint on plaster

artists had access to a missal published in 1923 that included Christian images. Both the Umbarger parishioners and the Italian artists had a connection to Catholicism, and thus they shared a language of Christian iconography that needs to be recognized and analyzed. At the same time, the narrative and figurative

³¹ Morgan, *Fall of Mussolini*, 102.

³² *Ibid*, 104-6 and Marsh, *Nebraska POW*, 57.

images in the large mural paintings (figs. 4-6.) draw directly on precedents in Italian Renaissance art, which is no surprise given the Italian artists' background, training, and exposure while living in Italy. Chapter Two provides direct source examples for these compositions, but it also discusses some arguably overt Fascist symbolism embedded within the decorative program, including swastika patterns (fig. 20) and an emblem similar to that of Mussolini's official seal.

This chapter also traces how the subjects and styles simultaneously draw on modern trends, including the Christian narrative art of the English Pre-Raphaelite movement.³³ This movement began in the middle of the nineteenth century. It looked back to early Italian Renaissance art pre-dating Raphael for inspiration to break with the academic models taught in art schools. In other words, the Pre-Raphaelite artists were rebelling against the past as many "modern" artists did but drew influence from the past in so doing. When the Italian artists worked on the SMP, they couldn't help but respond to such modern and contemporary art trends, even while they drew on the comfortable models of past Italian art. The SMP also responded to the movements of modern mural art. I place the Umbarger murals into a contemporary context of WPA and Mexican mural movements in North America during the 1930s. One aspect of this contemporary style includes the use of a distinctly modernist color palette and industrially produced materials purchased at Sears and Roebuck. Likewise, the Pre-Raphaelite religious artists used industrial paint colors for the first time, and the Umbarger murals follow in this use of new technologies of materials and color.³⁴

³³ Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

³⁴ Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 148.

Finally, this chapter will delve into the combined interactions between the Umbarger residents and the Italian artists, using local oral histories to illustrate the tensions and connections that arose during the SMP. In particular, this section will focus on Umbarger women's role in building connections with and serving the artists meals during the project. Arguably, it was the women who were at the center in many of the stories, the women who did the most to maintain long-term connections with the Italian artists, and the women who most often continue to pass on the stories to their children and to visiting audiences. Without these women's willingness to provide their time to feed the hungry artists, the SMP would not have existed. The Italian artists never forgot the kindness they felt from the Umbarger women, and artists like Di Bello gave them the credit of saving his life.³⁵

Chapter Three, which also serves as a conclusion, will examine the SMP legacy and especially the town's attempts to memorialize the project from the late 1980s onward. For example, thirteen years after Camp Hereford disbanded and the POWs shipped home, Umbarger residents received a surprise guest during the Christmas holiday. Franco Di Bello returned to Umbarger to visit his many friends and to see his beloved art project.³⁶ This visit to Texas in mid-winter of 1959 was a catalyst to many visits between him and the Umbarger residents that eventually led to several POW reunions tours back to Camp Hereford beginning in 1988.³⁷ Chapter Three will explore these interactions, focusing on the three official POW reunion tours to the area in 1988, 1989, and 1993, to show why

³⁵ Williams, *Interlude*, 93 and Ormalene Artho, "Ormalene Artho Travel Journal: Rome-Switzerland," August 1, 1981, private collection.

³⁶ Williams, *Interlude*, 166.

³⁷ The three official POW Reunion tours to St. Mary's were commemorated with plaques in 1988, 1989, and 1993.

these POWs wanted to return to their place of captivity during WWII. The creative collaboration of the SMP production overshadowed the negative and traumatic memories, enough for the Italian artists to see Umbarger as a home rather than a prison. This chapter addresses the inconsistencies within the stories while it deals critically with issues of memory and eyewitness testimony. This chapter also explores the rhetoric used in the oral retellings of the SMP. For instance, in their statements, the Umbarger residents relate an especially idyllic tale of the “charming” Italian POWs and the community bonds created during the SMP.

This thesis attempts to piece together a less idealized and more contextualized narrative for the first time. For these later reunions, once again, women are at the center of the story. In 1946, they fed the artists, and as time passed, they became the gatekeepers of history and legacy of the SMP. To this day, it is the women of Umbarger who provide private tours in which they recount the histories of Umbarger and the SMP. For example, my mother, Laurie Wegman, is one of the tour guides of St. Mary’s Church, along with other women of the parish, and together they deliver close to twenty tours per year. The women of the parish are also active in the restoration and preservation of the SMP art. They have conducted interviews for various local magazines and TV stations to share the beauty and trace the history of the artworks with audiences beyond the parish members.³⁸ And perhaps most importantly, it is the women who are actively preparing the next generation to carry on their work, sharing the past stories to keep the memory of the captive Italian artists alive.

³⁸ Other publication besides the Williams book are Marcie Robinson, “Cathedral in the Desert: The POWs of Camp Hereford 31” (KACV, n.d.) and Joe Holley, “In Umbarger, Memories of POWs and Their Art Remain,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 24, 2014.

The St. Mary's Project offers a rare artistic gem in an otherwise typical rural Middle-American town. Beginning in WWI, Umbarger society became increasingly reclusive and introspective out of fear of racist and religious persecution. Residents avoided outsiders and trusted only their respected community members. Similarly, the Italian artists came from an encampment of ostracized non-collaborators who fended for themselves and learned to cope with the stresses of incarceration. The desire for and the production of an art project in a local church was the catalyst that brought these two communities and cultures together. The SMP married two different communities and combined a variety of art styles, both historical and modern. Though few published sources have examined the SMP extensively, this thesis does more than fill the SMP's void of art historical analysis. It also argues for the broader historical and cultural relevance of the SMP as an occurrence that crossed national boundaries and sheds light on art's role during times of war. Seventy-five years after the completion of the SMP, the art created is as central to Umbarger as its identity as a "German-Catholic farming community" in the Texas Panhandle, but its relevance reaches far beyond a single Panhandle town.

CHAPTER I
COMMUNITY ISOLATION, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH,
AND UMBARGER, TEXAS

Community identity is especially important to rural populations. From their arrival in the Texas Panhandle beginning in 1902, the Umbarger community has banded together under the categories of a German-American national identity and a Catholic religious identity. The small farming community has changed relatively little over the course of a century in terms of population growth, religion, and cultural norms. There is still a sparse population of fewer than 100 families, and the Catholic church is still at the center of social and spiritual life.³⁹ The settlement originated before World Wars split the social fabric of Americans, before the 1930s Dustbowl that devastated farms in the Panhandle—and before Italian POWs were held captive a mere thirty miles away.

In 1895, Civil War veteran S.G. Umbarger leased and eventually purchased a section of land from the Houston and Great Northern Railroad Co, which would eventually become the town's site.⁴⁰ Umbarger's ranch became an identifier in the area, which settlers used as a proximity indicator to their own lands. For example, a settler would say: "my land is five miles south of Umbarger's wagon yard." In 1908, another land spectator

³⁹ Since Umbarger is an unincorporated community and not an official city, the US government includes the population of the town into Canyon's population numbers. The only measure of population is done by the church which used the units of families. In 1945, there were 59 families on the parish register and an unofficial count of 150 residents living in the town. In 2020, there are 60 families on the register and an unofficial count of 327 residents.

⁴⁰ Oppe, *Umbarger*, 7. A section of land equals 640 acres, or 1 square mile.

John Huston filed the land of the town with Randall County, officially naming the town Umbarger.⁴¹ Between 1895 and 1902, several single men settled in the area—some railroad hands, some land spectators. While these men were important to the settlement of the land, it was the families that developed Umbarger's culture and society.

Beginning in 1902, families began to trickle in from the Texas Hill Country, a geographic area in central and south Texas.⁴² These families would recruit other family members from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland to come and live in the area, who would recruit more of their family in return. At first, these German-speaking Catholic families would travel once or twice a month to the similarly German-Catholic nearby Nazareth settlement for religious services.⁴³ But as the population grew, the need for their own parish



Fig. 21 *Marienkirch*, Umbarger's first church building, 1919

arose. Finally, in 1910 with the help of the Dallas Diocese and Rev. Joseph Reisdorff, Umbarger formed its own parish called *Marienkirche* and provided religious services to the

growing town and farmers of the area (fig. 21).⁴⁴ Because farming, which promotes a socially reclusive and isolated way of life, *Marienkirche* became the key, if not the primary place for social interaction in the community. The church quickly grew and became a focal

⁴¹ Oppe, *Umbarger History*, 8. While working to establish a permanent Catholic church, Reisdorff attempted to name the community Bethlehem, in connection to its sister community Nazareth, but the name Umbarger was already widely used and the idea was scrapped.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11. Nazareth is thirty miles south of Umbarger.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

point for all aspects of life in the Umbarger community—the center of education, school functions, baseball games, dances, and picnics (fig. 22) in addition to religious sacraments of birth, marriages, and deaths. The church offered a social structure and foundational identity for the



Fig. 22 Photograph, Umbarger school picnic at Buffalo Lake, 1942

community and even served in place of local government for the community's Catholic members.⁴⁵ For the first six years, *Marienkirche* did not have a steady pastor presiding over the community, and it is unclear exactly how the church functioned during this time.

However, the lack of official leadership may have helped establish the independent nature of the town and parish, as well as created a vacuum in which members disputed with



Fig. 23 Rev. John J. Dolje, oil on canvas, unknown artist

one another for some semblance of power. In 1916, Rev. John J. Dolje (fig. 23) took up the post of pastor and remained until he died in 1944. For nearly thirty years, Dolje guided and built the Umbarger community. Today Dolje is seen in the community as the primary founder of the Umbarger church. In 1927, the bishop of the newly formed Amarillo Diocese changed *Marienkirche* to the English translation, St.

⁴⁵ John Dolje, "Financial Journal: 1919," January 1, 1920, St. Mary's Parish Files.

Mary's. Around this time, the community, under the guidance of Dolje, began raising funds to build a new church structure and subsequent rectory. Construction was finished by 1929, and the rebranded St. Mary's community began to make their home in the blank-walled church, which still stands today (figs. 24-26).



Fig. 24 Photograph, construction St. Mary's current structure, circa 1929



Fig. 25 Photograph, completed St. Mary's structure, circa 1929

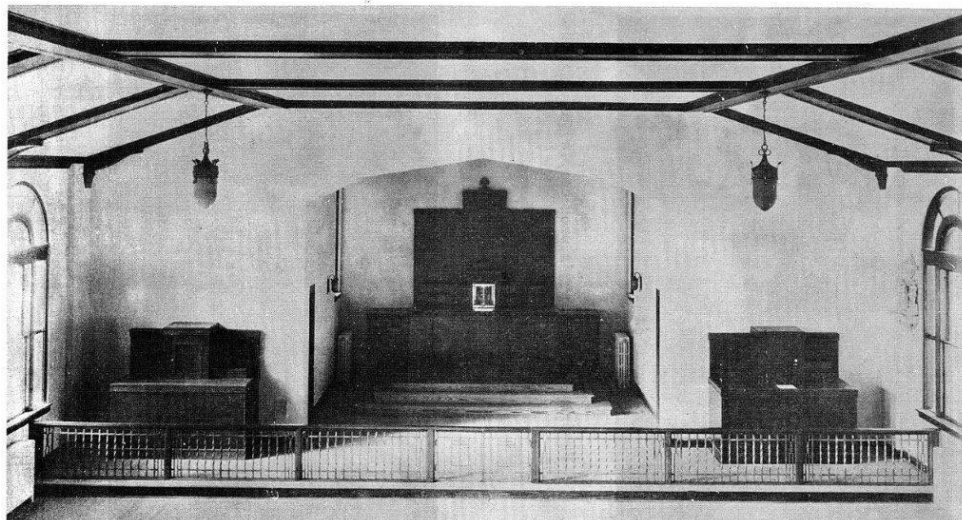


Fig. 26 Photograph, interior of St. Mary's, 1930

While some Umbarger residents immigrated from various German-speaking communities in Europe, others were naturalized US citizens migrating from German-American communities in south Texas and central Nebraska. Despite the varied homes

they came from, the community members of Umbarger bonded tightly under a shared German heritage and language, and Catholicism. But this identity would prove doubly problematic in the Panhandle region. According to a West Texas Catholic writer in the mid-1970s, though anti-Catholicism was always apparent in Protestant communities in the U.S. since groups of Catholics fled England in the seventeenth century, it was only in 1922 that “these prejudices had taken a new ominous turn toward violence.”⁴⁶ However, my research suggests that it was not anti-Catholicism alone that haunted the German-American communities of the Texas Panhandle, and violent prejudices were perceived earlier than 1922.

Alongside anti-Catholic sentiments, anti-German attitudes and actions also took hold in the U.S. during the years of WWI. Across the country, men and women of German descent were asked to register as “enemy aliens” and were put on a watch list to protect the country against spies.⁴⁷ The Umbarger community was not spared from this mistrust. Men of the community and “wives of German enemy aliens” were required to register, and their names were often printed in the Canyon newspaper.⁴⁸ Many stories of mistreated Germans in Nazareth have also surfaced during my research, though no direct stories have emerged regarding Umbarger. But it is likely the two towns had similar experiences due to their shared national and religious identity and geographic proximity. Laurie Wegman recalled a story told to her by Nazareth resident John Albracht in the 1990s:

He told me a story about one time, there was a man from Nazareth out in the field, and they [men from Dimmitt] came out there, and they said, “Take off your hat and say the Pledge of Allegiance.” And the man looked at them, and the men from Dimmitt were drunk usually when they would come to

⁴⁶ “Anti-Catholicism in West Texas,” *West Texas Catholic*, October 31, 1976 and “Slaton Priest Tarred, Feathered – 1922,” *West Texas Catholic*, October 31, 1976. Both in “Our Sunday Visitor” edition.

⁴⁷ “Fifteen Enemy Aliens Are Registered in Randall Co.,” *Randall County News*, February 14, 1918.

⁴⁸ “German Women Register,” *Randall County News*, June 20, 1918. Canyon is another nearby town.

do this, and he looked at them and said, “I don’t have a hat on.” And they got mad and threw a hat at him and said, “Say the Pledge of Allegiance.” He [Albracht] said they’d also demand loyalty oaths or whatever. Most of these men from Nazareth with first-generation Americans; they weren’t born in Germany.⁴⁹

While this particular story's date is unclear, it is apparent that these men from Dimmit were questioning Nazareth resident’s loyalty to America by asking them to repeat the Pledge of Allegiance.⁵⁰ In some cases, the Nazareth men were so intimidated they reverted back to German, the language most often used in their homes, which only ignited their persecutors’ rage.

But this cultural prejudice did not stop with newspaper and government reporting and occasional intimidation. The violent incident, which was referred to in the *West Texas Catholic* and mentioned above, was only one story of violence against a priest. In 1922, Slaton priest Rev. Joseph Keller was pulled from his home by an unidentified group of men in masks, and then tarred and feathered. The incident struck a chord in the Texas Panhandle Catholic community, and they claimed religious persecution.⁵¹ Another story of violence against a priest surfaced in the early 2000s Umbarger. Laurie Wegman recalls the story of Rev. Dolje, relayed to her by fellow resident Elise Friemel-Batenhorst. According to this account, a group of KKK members from Canyon sometime after 1919, and thus shortly after the end of WWI, went to the St. Mary’s rectory.⁵² This group reportedly:

pulled the priest out of the rectory and made him strip down to his underwear. They were rough with him. [Friemel-Batenhorst] didn’t say anything about hitting and whatever, but she said they were rough with him

⁴⁹ Laurie Wegman Interview.

⁵⁰ Dimmit is a predominantly Anglo-Protestant community twelve miles west of Nazareth.

⁵¹ “Slaton Priest,” *West Texas Catholic*. Interestingly, the Catholic priest was also of German descent, was unpopular with Slaton’s church community, and reportedly difficult to work with. There were allegedly several members of Slanton’s Catholic Church who signed the report acknowledging the attack.

⁵² I am not certain of the exact date. There is a photograph of the church with the cross dated 1919. When asked how they knew they were KKK members, Elise had told her that Umbarger people “just avoided these men because of their attitudes towards [Umbarger citizens].”

and poured motor oil all over him, and then went up to the top of the church and pulled the cross down” (the cross seen in fig. 21).⁵³

The perpetrators stole the cross, and the town quickly forgot about it, or rather those who knew the true story rarely talked about the incident. Other less extreme incidents were reported in Umbarger.⁵⁴ For example, the priests were not allowed to preach in German under threat of harm from the same people who would come from Dimmitt or Canyon to bully the residents. Schools stopped German language studies and would not allow students to speak German, and recommend parents speak only English within their homes.⁵⁵

Members of the German-Catholic communities in the Texas Panhandle soon learned to keep a low profile and stay within their towns' confines out of fear of violence. They continued to band with other German communities in the Panhandle. Catherine Frische-Przilas recalled:

The people got together. I can remember, usually on Sunday evenings, like during the summertime. I remember Mom and Daddy, you know, they had that big black cooker to have roast dinners, and people from Hereford, Vega, Nazareth, all the German people, you know, would come. And there would be people from Canyon, [even if], they were not Catholics, and they would come. So, there was people that, you know, [would] intermingle even if they were not from the church.”⁵⁶

While the German-American community found solace within their and other German-American communities, as Frische-Przilas describes, interactions with other non-German communities did not happen frequently. Such religious and cultural prejudice lays the groundwork for a German-Catholic community such as Umbarger becoming closely connected to Italian POWs in later years.

⁵³ “Wegman Interview”

⁵⁴ Mary Brockman, “Journal,” circa 1980s, private collection.

⁵⁵ Interview with Jerri Skarke-Gerber by the author, November 2, 2019; and Kennedy, *Over Here*, 54-55, 68.

⁵⁶ Interview with Catherine Frische-Przilas by the author, March 7, 2020.

Moreover, the families that historically interacted the most with the Italian artists during the SMP were themselves somewhat outsiders within the Umbarger community. While they were accepted as community members by all accounts, they were not what Oppe considered the “founding families.” As mentioned above, Oppe, in his monograph analyzing the social structure of Umbarger, separated the families of the town into three categories. The “Pioneer Families” were the four longstanding last names, the founders of Umbarger, who both immigrated from Germany and migrated from Nebraska and south Texas.⁵⁷ The “Other Pioneers” were the families who integrated and married into these founding families.⁵⁸ Finally, the German-Swiss immigrants were those who moved from Switzerland rather than Germany, like Meinrad Hollenstein, Paul Artho, and Henry Bracht, who would become well acquainted with the Italian artists during the SMP.⁵⁹ The other families who were also central in the SMP were the Brockmans and Skarkes, who moved into Umbarger in the late 1930s. If Oppe’s social structure is correct, then all the figures who interacted most often with the Italian artists were lower on the social hierarchy and perhaps sympathized more with the Italian artists’ newcomer status.

It is also worth reviewing the background of the Italian prisoners who wound up in West Texas. In WWI, Italy remained neutral, despite an alliance with the German Empire and Austria-Hungary. However, in April of 1915, the Triple Entente secretly negotiated the Treaty of London with Italy, effectively changing Italy’s alliance and promising large amounts of land from Austria-Hungary in the North to the Adriatic Sea.⁶⁰ After the war, the Treaty of Saint Germain upheld most of the secret pact, and Italy permanently gained

⁵⁷ Oppe, *Umbarger*, 13-21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 22-24.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 24-25.

⁶⁰ “Treaty of London,” 1915, <https://doi-org.databases.wtamu.edu/10.1111/j.1468-229X.1941.tb00752.x>.

the territories of Trentino and Tyrol.⁶¹ There continued to be tension in Italy because the entirety of the Treaty of London was not upheld.

Pre-WWI Italy was woefully behind in technological and industrial development. This lag pushed the artists' group named The Futurists to embrace machine technology as Italy's hygiene and the promise of a better future.⁶² During the war, a generation of Italian men was lost, including many Futurist artists, but their hopes for a better future for Italy continued to ring true in the postwar era. Fascist groups began to rise in both Germany and Italy. Benito Mussolini (fig. 27) found *fasci de combattiment* in March of 1919. For



Fig. 27 Photograph, Benito Mussolini

Italians, Fascism drew many of ideas and goals from Futurist theory, including a strong army and an abhorrence of religion. The *fasci de combattiment* demanded social

improvements, such as eight-hour workdays, improved state insurance for workers, and the voting age lowered to eighteen.⁶³ Over the next three years, Fascism grew more popular, and Italians “became self-conscious followers of Mussolini.” In 1920 the economy plummeted, the lira lost value, and strikes occurred more frequently, allowing unions and the Fascists to step in and fight for workers' rights.⁶⁴ At rallies, Mussolini charismatically captured the attention of the masses, conducting rousing speeches promoting Italy and the Italian people's future success.⁶⁵ In May of 1921, Mussolini was elected to parliament,

⁶¹ “Treaty of Saint Germain, 1919 https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/saint-germain_treaty_of.

⁶² F.T. Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” *Le Figaro*, February 20, 1909.

⁶³ Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 118.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 123-124.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 134 and 147.

taking Fascism to the national level.⁶⁶ By November of the same year, members of the *fasci de combattimento* official formed the National Fascist Party with Mussolini as the leader.⁶⁷

On October 28, 1922, Fascists and “blackshirts” marched on Rome to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Luigi Facta, whom they blamed for the death of the 3,000 Italians who died in the political and social instability since WWI.⁶⁸ Mussolini had manipulated and promoted himself within the Fascist Party to become the front runner for Facta’s replacement.⁶⁹ Controversially, King Victor Emmanuel III called upon Mussolini, who had stayed behind in Milan, to become Prime Minister and form a new constitutional monarchy.⁷⁰ Over the next three years, Mussolini continued to gain more support in the Parliament and slowly disbanded elements of the Italian constitutional conventions that were in place to prevent autocracy. For instance, he banned rival parties, exiled their leaders, and killed political opponents.⁷¹ He destroyed free press, replaced local rulers, appointed men loyal to him in their place, and set up a spy network.⁷² In January of 1925, Mussolini asserted his right to power, effectively declaring himself dictator, by stating, “I declare here, before this assembly and before the whole Italian people, that I, and I alone, assume political, moral and historic responsibility of all that has happened.”⁷³

Propaganda played a large part in Mussolini’s reign, and he was extremely effective at it. He built up his success and downplayed his failures.⁷⁴ Under Mussolini, corporations

⁶⁶ Ibid, 148.

⁶⁷ Ibid,

⁶⁸ Ibid, 178, 181. Blackshirts were a paramilitary wing of Italian Fascism.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 178.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 181-182.

⁷¹ Ibid, 2.

⁷² Ibid, 3.

⁷³ Ibid, 214.

⁷⁴ Valentina Follo, “The Power of Images in the Age of Mussolini,” PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2012.

were founded and thrived, and banks were bailed out in an attempt to bolster the economy. Corporations gave authority to the government, who could obtain a shorter work week and higher benefits, which helped the urban working class.⁷⁵ This social class was aided by lower rents, new roads and bridges, and trains that transported them to and from work.⁷⁶ Despite Fascism's abhorrence of organized religion, the Catholic Church in Rome also benefited from Mussolini's power. Though purportedly meant to cripple the church's influence and infrastructure, the Lateran Pacts of 1929 created the independent state of Vatican City and released it from nationalist ties.⁷⁷ But Mussolini's successes were only half of the story. During his long reign, the economy overall suffered greatly, wages were cut, unemployment began to rise, and foreign markets deteriorated.⁷⁸ Despite the worldwide economic failure and economic suffering at home in Italy, Mussolini retained a cult following. He portrayed himself, like the ancient Roman emperors, as godlike and indestructible.⁷⁹ He formed Fascist Youth groups to mold the young minds of the future.⁸⁰

Mussolini wanted to expand Italian territory in Africa and the Mediterranean, and he began to reinforce his army in Libya, eventually launched an attack on Ethiopia, despite a treaty of friendship. The Italo-Ethiopian War in 1936 raised concern among the British and French, leading the League of Nations to impose sanctions on Italy, ultimately isolating Mussolini, pushing him to seek refuge with Hitler.⁸¹ In June of 1940, Italy joined Germany in the Axis powers just as France had fallen to the Nazis. Mussolini intended to focus his

⁷⁵ Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 309.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁷⁷ "The Lateran Treaty," 1929, https://www.whitehorsemedia.com/docs/the_lateran_treaty.pdf.

⁷⁸ Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 272.

⁷⁹ Follo, "Power of Images."

⁸⁰ Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 77 and 281.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 327, 357-358.

military power on the British Empire, particularly their influence in Africa and the Middle East.

The Battle for French Tunisia between the Axis and Allied armies lasted from November 1942 to May 1943. For seven months, the opposing sides fought, with the Axis powers gaining ground until American reinforcements were sent in April 1943. At that point, over 230,000 Axis troops were captured, including most of the POWs who would eventually be sent to Camp Hereford. Due to overcrowding in the British-run POW camps, many of the captured prisoners were sent overseas to America, to port cities where they were processed and then sent by train to various camps across the U.S. Di Bello, in an interview with Williams, said he landed in Norfolk, Virginia, and was put on a train to Como, Mississippi, and eventually on to Hereford.⁸²

On September 8, 1943, Italy officially became an Allied Force with the Armistice of Cassibile.⁸³ Mussolini's army suffered greatly in the first three years of the war. Italy was continually defeated, and Italians felt they endured national humiliations as a result. Many Italians and government members wanted to end allegiance with Germany and switch sides once again, as they had in WWI. Fascists within the government began to lose their faith in their beloved Mussolini. In July of 1943, members of Parliament hatched a plan. King Victor Emmanuel III exercised his constitutional power and dismissed Mussolini as Prime Minister, then instated the retired Pietro Badoglio as head of the new government.⁸⁴ Over the next forty-five days, Italy appeared to continue as before but secretly negotiated a change of sides with the Allied forces.

⁸² Williams, *Interlude*, 15-16.

⁸³ "Armistice of Cassibile," 1943, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000003-0854.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Morgan, *Fall of Mussolini*, 23 and 85.

When Italy had officially become an Allied force, the captured Italian POWs held across the globe were asked to sign a collaboration agreement denouncing Mussolini, and pledging loyalty to the newly installed Italian government. This agreement had a clause that allowed the POWs to execute war-related work such as farming work if they signed the agreement. But many understandably hesitated to sign a document denouncing the former dictator. Germany was still in control of Northern Italy, fighting to restore Mussolini, and the POWs had to consider what it would mean if Mussolini was restored once more; if they signed support for the new government, they could be persecuted by Mussolini, or could be prohibited from returning home to their families. In addition, some of the POWs were loyal to Mussolini, and staunchly believed in the Fascist cause. They excused the atrocities committed by Mussolini on the Italian population and bought into the propaganda. Still, others refused to sign because they felt it was dishonorable to go back on their word and switch sides as soldiers mid-war. The SMP's Italian artists told the people of Umbarger that they were part of this third group; they said they "wanted to wait until they were home to settle their politics."⁸⁵ Those who did not sign were called "non-collaborators" and thus became ostracized from their fellow Italian POWs. In the U.S., they were separated and shipped to Camp Hereford.⁸⁶ The non-collaborators were confined to the POW camp and not allowed to be hired by farmers or other outside employers. While there were some enlisted POWs within Camp Hereford that did leave on work details, many of them, including the SMP officers, were those who did not sign, making the SMP work detail a unique and interesting set of circumstances.

⁸⁵ Laurie Wegman Interview.

⁸⁶ Marsh, Nebraska POW, 57 and Thompson, *Men in German Uniforms*, 58.

While it is now difficult to say what group the non-collaborating SMP artists fell into, R.J.B Bosworth posits that “historic Fascism had been a northern movement and....southern Fascist frequently seemed to possess a particular opportunity reading of party ideology.”⁸⁷ Interestingly, most of the SMP Italian Artists were from Northern Italy, except for de Cristofaro. The eldest and highest-ranking member of the SMP’s Italian artists was Major of Engineers, Achille Cattanei (fig. 28), who was born in 1896 in Turin,

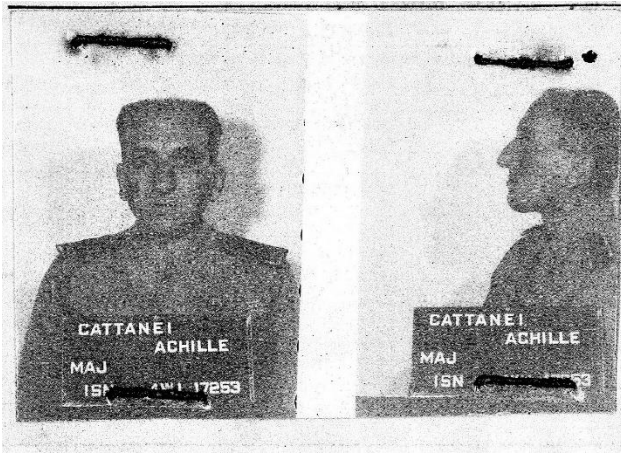


Fig. 28 Photocopy, Maj. Achille Cattanei, from Italian Defense Ministry’s Records

the capital city of Piedmont. Cattanei was in his mid-twenties when Mussolini took office as prime minister. The military file claims Cattanei’s occupation was as a silk factory worker, but Di Bello said that before the war, Cattanei and his wife operated an inter-decorating studio in

Milan. Cattanei was captured by Allied forces on May 7, 1943, in Tunisia at the age of forty-seven.⁸⁸ In Camp Hereford, Cattanei gave his fellow prisoners art lessons. Cattanei was a copyist by training; he painted many reproductions of others’ work and had no originals himself. He spent his time cultivating all aspects of art throughout the camp and compiled five canvas-bound books containing all the stories, paintings, plays, and music created in the camp.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Bosworth, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 547.

⁸⁸ “Achille Cattanei File,” Italian Defense Ministry, courtesy of Professor Flavio Giovanni Conti.

⁸⁹ Williams, *Interlude*, 47. The current location of these books is unknown. In the 1980s or 1990s, Clara Vick, the head of the Castro County Historical Society at the time, was gifted one of the books. Since her death in the early 2000s the book has been lost.

The translator of the group, Captain Franco Di Bello (fig. 29), was born in 1920 in Percoto in the province of Udine.⁹⁰ Di Bello was an ardent Fascist and never claimed to be otherwise. He was brought up in Mussolini's reign, attended Mussolini youth groups and military academy, starting his Army career. He was captured by English soldiers on May 2, 1943, in Tunisia at the age of twenty-two. Di Bello was a young and active man; he stayed active even during imprisonment and often played soccer and other sports while at Camp Hereford. But he also had an affinity for drawing.

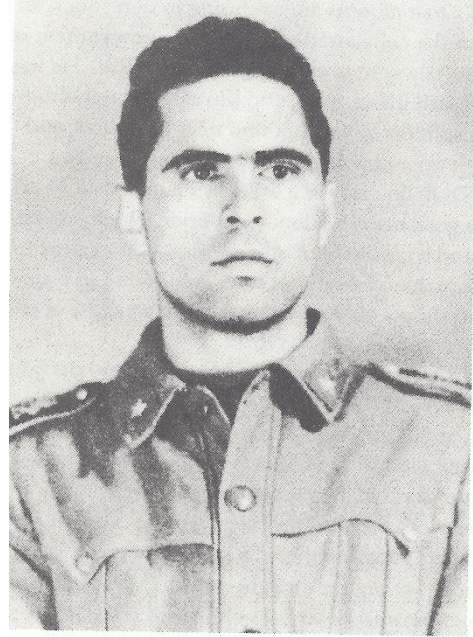


Fig. 29 Photocopy, Capt. Franco Di Bello from *Interlude in Umbarger*

While at the military academy, he took several drawing classes, rendered "ancient buildings freehand with sharp lines, good perspective, and accurate dimensions."⁹¹ Di Bello had no experience with painting; however, Cattanei took the young captain under his

wing and taught him how to paint.⁹²

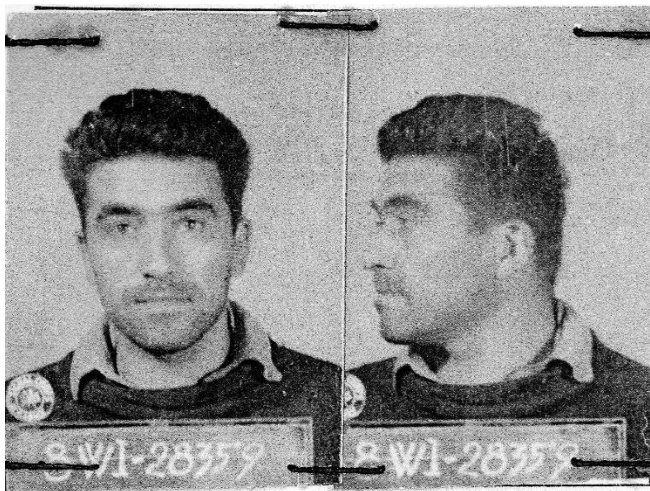


Fig. 30 Photocopy Capt. Dino Gambetti, from Italian Defense Ministry's Records

The master artist of the SMP was Captain of Engineers Dino Gambetti (fig. 30), a professional painter and sculptor and an experienced muralist. Born in 1907 in Quistello in the province of Mantua, Gambetti then

⁹⁰ "Franco Di Bello File," Italian Defense Ministry, courtesy of Professor Flavio Giovanni Conti.

⁹¹ Williams, *Interlude*, 11-12.

⁹² *Ibid.*

studied at the Albertina Academy of Fine Art in Turin. In the 1920s, Gambetti was active with the second wave Futurists, exhibiting with them in Milan in 1927 and Genoa in 1929 and 1938. He exhibited in two solo shows in 1939 and 1940 before being called up as a Reserve Officer.⁹³ Gambetti was captured in Tunisia on May 11, 1943, at the age of thirty-six.⁹⁴ Since Gambetti was an active painter before the war and had knowledge of mural construction, he was an obvious choice for the SMP.

Besides the main SMP artists mentioned above, others deserve our attention as well. For example, Cattanei's roommate in Camp Hereford and artist assistant Captain Artillery Leonida Gorlato (fig. 31) was born in 1911 in Pola, part of the land that was obtained by Italy in WWI. Before the war, he was a judge. He was captured in Tunisia on May 12, 1943, at the age of thirty-two.⁹⁵ Not much else is known about Gorlato as he

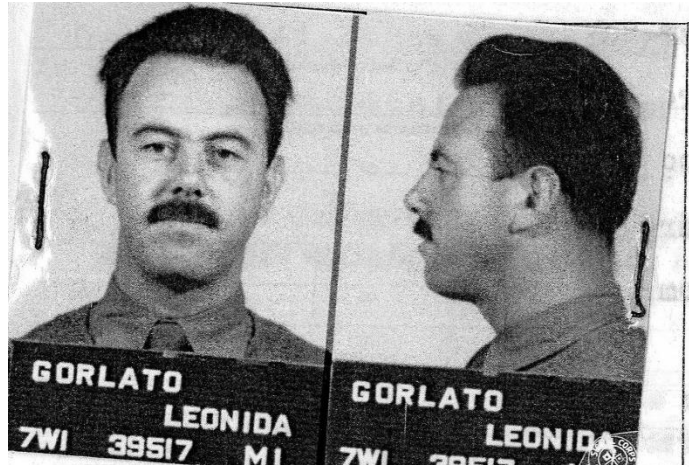


Fig. 31 Lt. Leonida Gorlato, from Italian Defense Ministry Records

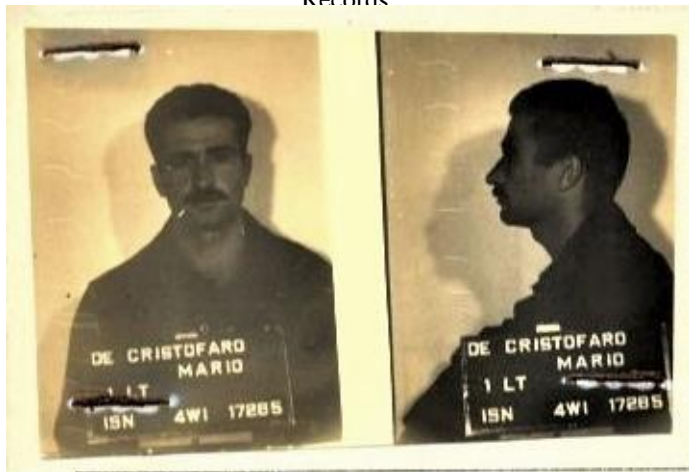


Fig. 32 Photocopy, Lt. Mario de Cristoforo, from Italian Defense Ministry's Records

⁹³ "Gambetti Dino: Futurism Yesterday and Today," <https://www.futurismo.org/artistas/dino-gambetti> and Di Bello to Williams.

⁹⁴ "Dino Gambetti," Italian Defense Ministry, courtesy of Conti.

⁹⁵ "Leonida Gorlato," Italian Defense Ministry, courtesy of Conti.



Fig. 33 Photocopy, Sgt. Maj. Carlo Sanvito, from Italian Defense Ministry's Records

mostly kept to himself.⁹⁶ Artist assistant 1st Lieutenant Cavalry Mario de Cristofaro (fig. 32), who was also the best friend of Di Bello, was born in 1914 in Naples, and thus was the only SMP artist from the south.⁹⁷ His military file states that his occupation was “businessman,”

so perhaps he was part of the urban population that Mussolini's government did so much for.⁹⁸ But like his friend Di Bello, he grew up in Fascist Italy and most likely attended his fair share of Fascist Youth groups. He was captured in Tunisia on May 7, 1942, at the age of twenty-eight.

Woodcarver Sergeant of Filed Artillery Carlo Sanvito (fig. 33) was born in 1917 in Barlassina, the province of Monza and Brianza. Before the war, he was a professional woodcarver, sculptor, and engraver. He was taken prisoner at Enfidaville, Tunisia on May 13,



Fig. 34 Photocopy, Sgt. Maj. Amedeo Maretto, from Italian Defense Ministry's Records

1943, at the age of twenty-six.⁹⁹ Window installer Sergeant Major Amedeo Maretto (fig.

⁹⁶ Di Bello to Williams.

⁹⁷ “Mario de Cristoforo,” Italian Defense Ministry, courtesy of Conti and Williams, *Interlude*, 48.

⁹⁸ “Mario de Cristoforo.”

⁹⁹ “Carlo Sanvito,” Italian Defense Ministry, courtesy of Conti.

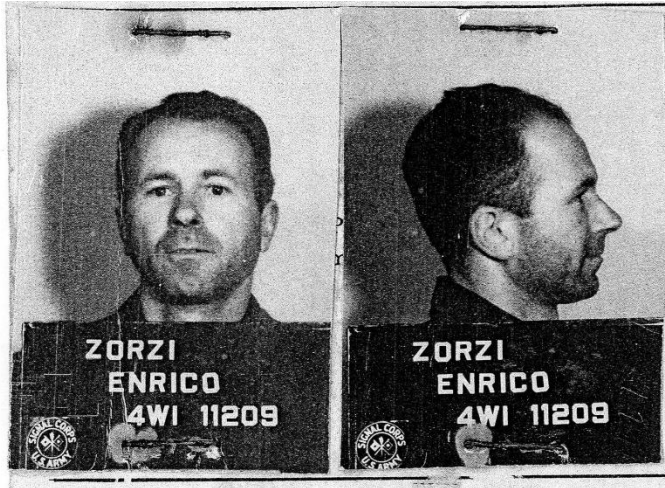


Fig. 35 Photocopy, Sgt. Enrico Zorzi, from Italian Defense Ministry's Records

34) of the engineer's division was born in 1917 in San Vlto Vigonza, province of Padua. He was a professional carpenter and did general woodworking. He was taken at Enfidaville, Tunisia on May 13, 1943, at the age of twenty-six.¹⁰⁰ Woodcarver Sergeant

Enrico Zorzi (fig. 35) of the infantry division was born in 1909 in Campofornio, province of Udine, but he lived and worked as a general carpenter in Villar Focchiardo Province of Turin. He was captured on July 21, 1943, in Sicily at the age of thirty-four.¹⁰¹ Window installer Sergeant Antonio Monetti (fig. 36) of the engineer's division was born in 1916 in Cameri province Novara. He was a professional carpenter. He was captured on May 8, 1943, in Tunisia at the age of twenty-seven.¹⁰²

In the military officers and enlisted are usually kept separate, discouraged from social interactions between the two classes. Most of the information available on the SMP artists came from Di Bello, because of his long military career, his knowledge of English, his

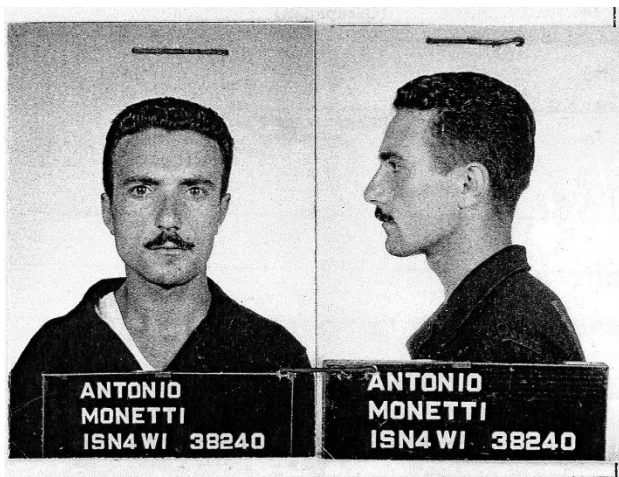


Fig. 36 Photocopy, Sgt. Antonio Monetti, from Italian Defense Ministry's Records

¹⁰⁰ "Amedeo Maretto," Ibid.

¹⁰¹ "Enrico Zorzi," Ibid.

¹⁰² "Antonio Monetti," Ibid.

long life, and his continued written correspondence with Umbarger residents. However, Di Bello's information only covers the officers and not the enlisted men. Because of the military's custom of separation of officers and enlisted, Di Bello was unable to keep in touch with the four enlisted men who worked on the SMP and was unable to provide much information on their time in captivity, but the Italian Defense Ministry's records provided and translated by Professor Flavio Giovanni Conti has provided basic facts, such as their rank, birthdate and birthplace and occupation.¹⁰³

In March 1945, Allied Forces began the liberation of POW Axis camps in Europe, including the Nazi Prison Camps. Americans were horrified at the prisoners' conditions, particularly at the weight they had lost due to lack of food. At the same time, POW rations were cut across the United States. Some believe that the ration was cut in retaliation for the treatment of Axis prisoners; others maintain that though rations were cut, the POWs still had ample amounts of food. But this decision began in 1942 when the US government was trying to organize for the first time POW camps according to the Geneva Convention.¹⁰⁴ In the beginning, POWs were given the same rations as a US military soldier. They were provided with choice meats and a balance of other foods. However, the general populace was put on food rations to conserve food for the war effort.¹⁰⁵ Beginning in the winter of 1944, many people complained to their congressmen that the POWs were being coddled and were upset that POWs were given the food they were sacrificing.¹⁰⁶ By July 1, 1944, officials lowered the POWs ration quality, but still, people protested. Then, on February 2,

¹⁰³ Di Bello always stated that the woodcarvers were non-commissioned officers, and the window installers were enlisted men. However, the military files show that Sanvito (woodcarver) and Maretto (window installer) were the non-commissioned officers, as their ranks were "Sergeant Major." Zorzi (woodcarver) and Monetti (window installer) were enlisted men.

¹⁰⁴ Pat Flynn, "Well-Fed Italians Happy in Interment Hereford," *The Amarillo Daily News*, July 14, 1943.

¹⁰⁵ Hal Foust, "1/2 Pound A Week Per Person Set as Sugar Ration," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 17, 1942

¹⁰⁶ Thompson, *Men in German Uniform*, 60-62.

1945, the rations were cut once again to 3,550 calories.¹⁰⁷ Two months later, only after the Axis camps had been liberated, did the *New York Times* pick up the ration reduction story. Spokesman Col. Clinton J Harrold stated, “no spirit of ‘retaliation’ for German treatment of American prisoners of war brought about the new menu.”¹⁰⁸

In Camp Hereford, Commander Col. Joseph Carvolth cut the rations from “pursuant to orders received from Washington, no-working prisoners ought to be assigned to a daily food [allotment] for 2,500 calories at least,” a thousand points lower than the official count of February 1945. According to the compound's head physician, Major Luigi Cabitto, who wrote a report supporting Bishop Lawrence FitzSimon’s letter to his congressman two and a half months later. The report stated, “this cipher of 2,500 calories was attained only a few times while often it lowered to 1,500 to 1,600 calories.”¹⁰⁹ While Maj. Cabitto does not give a specific date for Col. Carvolth’s initial cut to 2,500, it had to have been at least June 1945 because the report compares POWs’ weight drops from June to July. The Italian POWs called this period *la fame* or “the hunger.”¹¹⁰ The discrepancies between the official numbers reported by the *New York Times* and the numbers provided by Camp Hereford’s physician are inexplicable. Army records on POW camps are scarce. The military reportedly destroyed documents from the POW camps.¹¹¹ However, we can speculate that the camp commander, Col. Carvolth, was behind *la fame*. Williams’ research into Carvolth paints him as a hard and difficult man. Carvolth was a commander of three different POW

¹⁰⁷ Thompson *Men in German Uniform*, 71.

¹⁰⁸ Carl Wiegman, “Prisoner of War Menus Hit by Food Shortage,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 9, 1945; “Menus for German Prisoners Here Are Cut Because of Food Shortage,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1945; and Thompson, *Enemy Within*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ Cabitto Luigi, “Head Physician” (Italian P.O.W. Camp Hereford, Texas, August 17, 1945), Diocese of Amarillo Archive, hereafter DOAA.

¹¹⁰ Williams, *Interlude*, 42.

¹¹¹ Interview with Joe Rogers by the author, September 6, 2019.

camps in Texas from 1943-1945.¹¹² It is unclear why Carvolth was transferred so frequently, but it could indicate he may have had undocumented workplace issues. It is possible that Carvolth intentionally lowered the POW's rations way below what was ordered. In a phone interview with General Blackshear Morrison Bryan, he admitted that "this camp is just a dumping ground for the whole United States," suggesting that the prisoners at Camp Hereford were the equivalent of garbage.¹¹³ However, he nonetheless granted the Italian artists permission for the SMP project, which rewarded their labor with food, and the two actions somewhat oppose one another.

The Diocese of Amarillo was fairly active in POW camp life. Since many Italians had a Catholic heritage, the diocese provided a full-time priest as the chaplain, Rev. Achilles Ferreri, to offer religious services and spiritual guidance. Ferreri had firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of the camp and knew of the harsh ration cut. He unofficially shared the information of the reduction with Bishop FitzSimon, bishop of the Amarillo Diocese; he also shared that the commissary, where POWs could buy extra food, was closed. FitzSimon was enraged by the ill-treatment of his fellow humans, and fellow Catholic believers, and he set out to investigate for himself.

By 1945, Bishop FitzSimon had already visited the camp several times. He performed mass for the POWs and attended a play they produced.¹¹⁴ He was already familiar with the location and a few of the prisoners. In July 1945, FitzSimon made a rather unscheduled trip to Camp Hereford when he, with Rev. Ferreri, said a mass, talked with the POWs and noted a change in the prisoners' attitude. At lunchtime, Carvolth's men asked

¹¹² Ford and Littlejohn, *Enemy Within*, 38.

¹¹³ Williams, *Interlude*, 141.

¹¹⁴"Bishop by Italians in Hereford Camp," *The Register*, July 25, 1943, Texas Panhandle edition.

FitzSimon and Ferreri to come back to the commander's compound for the midday meal. But FitzSimon refused and insisted he would eat what the prisoners ate, under the guise of understanding their struggle. This meal gave FitzSimon the evidence he needed to change the ration circumstances at Camp Hereford. Rather than take the issue to the military, FitzSimon began to prepare a letter to his congressman, Representative Eugene Worley. FitzSimon wrote, "we were served a bowl of weak soup, containing pieces of gummy-like spaghetti, but absolutely tasteless...we each had a dry over-salted herring...then we had bread and water."¹¹⁵

In addition to his own testimony, FitzSimon asked Ferreri to prepare a report to support the claims. Though Ferreri was deeply concerned, he was also afraid to speak out against the commander for fear of losing his position and not being able to do anything to help. In conjunction with his colleague Rev. James Salir, the priest of St. Anthony's Church in Hereford, they gathered and presented the above-mentioned report from the compound's head physician and the POW representative.¹¹⁶ FitzSimon pleaded with the congressman to show the Italian POWs mercy and humanity. The letter and subsequent evidence were enough to launch an official military investigation into Camp Hereford and FitzSimon's claims. Though the report did not find anything concrete in the camp to support the claims, by November, the commissary was open once more, and food rations increased to 2,200 calories again, still well below the reported 3,550 calories from February 1945.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Lawrence FitzSimon to Eugene Worley, "Letter: FitzSimon to Worley," September 15, 1945, DOAA.

¹¹⁶ James Salir and Achilles Ferreri to Michael FitzSimon, "Letter: Camp Chaplains to FitzSimon," September 12, 1945, DOAA.

¹¹⁷ Williams, *Interlude* 140-150.

Over the course of their captivity, the non-collaborators who were not allowed to leave on work details would spend their time in camp in various ways. Many spent the days playing football and various sports, and the evenings watching the provided films. There

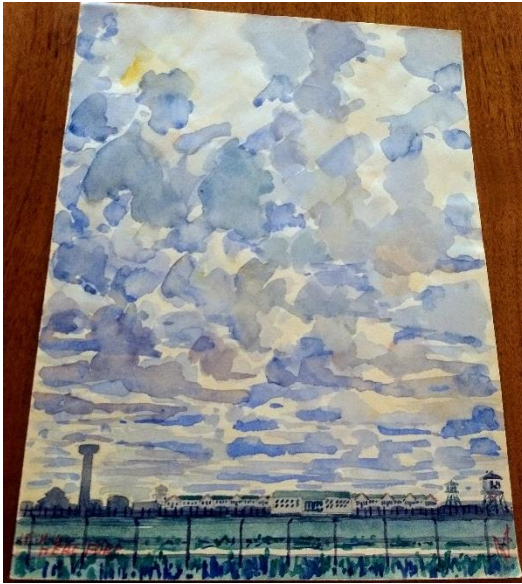


Fig. 37 Watercolor of Camp Hereford, unknown POW, formerly in a private collection, now in the PPHM

were also many classes offered by fellow POWs and occasionally teachers from West Texas State.¹¹⁸ Art making has three categories; education, recreation and labor, and in Camp Hereford all three of these categories are used. Cattanei giving art lessons to POWs such as Di Bello is the educational category. The second category, recreation is seen as many of the POWs, especially the officers, spent their time participating in the arts, including drawing,

painting, writing, playing music, and creating plays. Figure 37 is a watercolor painting of Camp Hereford, detailing the many barracks, the water tower, and the barbed wire fence, which would later become so important during their reunion tours.¹¹⁹ Works like these are important to Saunders' definition of trench art because it was created outside the trenches by a captive POW who while dealing with his own trauma and was reconciling his place in the war, created an



Fig. 38 Wood carving of St. Mary, unknown POW, Deaf Smith County Museum

¹¹⁸ Joe Rogers Interview.

¹¹⁹ This painting was in the private collection of a Hereford resident Lois Osburn. Upon her death in 2019 her family donated this, and other artworks created by Camp Hereford POWs to the PPHM.

art object that captured the place of his own captivity. Finally, the SMP plays in the labor category as the artists were paid, with food rather than money, to complete the works for the church.

Around May to August 1945, while the POWs were becoming desperately hungry and FitzSimon and Ferreri were preparing their report for the congressman, POWs like Di Bello, Cattanei, and Gambetti, among others, spent their days creating, because it was less taxing than other activities. These artists recreated and created original works of art, such as carvings, sculptures, and landscapes of the camp, portraits, drawings, and jewelry given as gifts for each other, for the guards, and for the Hereford residents (fig 38). This carving of St. Mary was given to a Hereford resident and has since been donated to the Deaf Smith County Museum in Hereford. It demonstrates the POWs religious art affiliation, similar to the SMP.

Another instance of POWs creating art objects as gifts was Franco Di Bello. He painted a portrait for Rev. Ferreri from a photograph of one of Ferreri's parents.¹²⁰ When Ferreri asked what he could do in return for the painting, Di Bello quickly replied, "Father, I'm hungry. Please, give me something to eat."¹²¹ Ferreri obliged and then asked Di Bello and his friend, de Cristofaro, to translate the New Testament into Italian. Ferreri did what

¹²⁰ Franco Di Bello to Donald Mace Williams, "Letter: Di Bello to Williams," July 15, 1981, PPHMRC.

¹²¹ Williams, *Interlude*, 48.



Fig. 39 Photo, 1945 Hereford Prisoner's Art Exhibition, courtesy of Joe Rogers

he could to help ease the hunger of those under his guidance. For example, in return for their help, Ferreri made sure that they had a plate full of donuts every morning.¹²² During these daily interactions, Ferreri asked that Di Bello help organize an art show for the Americans in Hereford

and surrounding areas so that the POWs could exhibit their talent, the art they created during their captivity, and bring art to the community.¹²³ In late August 1945, the POWs used an empty barrack for the exhibition (figs. 39-40). The Hereford Prisoner's Art Exhibition displayed 220 paintings, sculptures, and woodcarvings. More than one thousand people came to view the exhibit, including Ferreri's friend and colleague Rev. John Krukkert (fig. 41), a former California resident, art lover, and the current priest presiding over St. Mary's Church in Umbarger.¹²⁴

The story of Rev. Krukkert viewing the art in the POW exhibit varies from person to person, none



Fig. 40 Photo, 1945 Hereford Prisoner's Art Exhibition, courtesy of Joe Rogers

¹²² Di Bello to Williams.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.



Fig. 41 Rev. John Krukkert from passport

of which are verifiable. Since St. Mary's was built around the onset of the Great Depression, the church barely had enough money to cover the building of the structures. In fact, Rev. Dolje declined his personal paychecks until all the construction loans were paid in full, which happened near the end of 1943. In January of 1944, Dolje died and was replaced by Krukkert, who

reportedly hated the sight of the plain white walls. Krukkert was an architect by training and helped build the Catholic church structure in Pampa, another Texas Panhandle town. Umbarger residents say that he loved color; Kaye Frische-Prizillas describes this affinity:

Well, I knew that at one time, he thought the church looked drab, and he like bright things, bright colors. And I can just vaguely remember when we were at school, you know, and we would be drawing things, and he'd say, 'oh, take that red color,' or 'take that blue color.' You know, he liked bright things. I don't remember very much about it. You know, I was young, but I do remember that he liked neat things.¹²⁵

Other residents commented on his wealth, as he had just sold his home in California to come out of retirement and live in Umbarger. No one knows how much money Krukkert had, but in a small farming community, he had more than most. Krukkert, with his love of color and art, and with the dullness of the prairie church on his mind, walked around the POW art exhibit and thought of a way to make his church more beautiful, though they had no money to spare. So Krukkert set out to find a number of POW artists from the camp willing to work with him. He reportedly went to his friend, Ferreri, who used the guise of

¹²⁵ Catherine Frische-Prizillas Interview.

needing “translation” to enter into a “long series of talks” with Di Bello and de Cristofaro.¹²⁶

While Ferreri and Krukkert petitioned the diocese and the military, Di Bello helped form a potential team. As mentioned above, Di Bello was not a classically trained artist, and the only art education he had was drawing class at his military academy. He was an excellent draughtsman, and his art was limited to pen and paper, but since his captivity Di Bello had taken classes with Achille Cattanei, where he learned other techniques, particularly painting. Cattanei was the first person Di Bello asked to join him on the SMP. Though he did not produce many originals, “[Cattanei] had a well-developed gift for reproducing paintings by the masters.”¹²⁷ Cattanei’s knowledge of the masters therefore greatly influenced the art produced in the SMP, especially the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* murals, given the import of those themes for traditional Italian art and the many old masters’ examples to use as inspiration.

Though Di Bello was the primary recruiter for Krukkert and the SMP, there were certain prisoner-artists he was hesitant to ask. Di Bello was a traditional, well-mannered man and considered it impertinent for him, an amateur, to ask a master, such as Gambetti, for help. Cattanei, who was more acquainted with Gambetti, offered to help Di Bello recruit a crew and asked Gambetti himself. Gambetti was arguably the driving force for the SMP, though many Umbarger residents and historians—including Williams—argue that it was Di Bello, most likely because of his superior skills in English. But Gambetti was chosen for his past work experience in the visual arts. Before the war, he was a professional painter

¹²⁶ Di Bello to Williams.

¹²⁷ Williams, *Interlude*, 47.

who “had already done frescoes in churches in Genoa and Turin.”¹²⁸ Because of this experience, Gambetti emerged as a natural leader for the crew and took charge. He drew out sketches on butcher paper as templates for the other artists to follow, making him essentially the lead draftsman, and his design style is apparent throughout the majority of the works. Williams describes how the murals were done: “Gambetti spread brown paper on the floor and stood on it barefoot. Holding a stick with a piece of charcoal in the end, he drew the sketches of *Annunciation* and *Visitation*.”¹²⁹ This was a common technique used in Renaissance and mural paintings.

Although Williams and many of the residents credit Di Bello as the primary painter of the murals, I have found the reality to be more complicated. With Gambetti doing the preparatory drawings, it seems clear that Cattanei and Di Bello executed Gambetti’s vision of the murals. Nonetheless, Di Bello may have had some influence in the work, such as the linearity and hard-edged precision of the mural designs. As mentioned above, he had many drawing classes at his military academy, in which he excelled in “sharp lines, good perspective, and accurate dimensions.”¹³⁰ But what needs to be recognized is the overall collaborative nature of the SMP under Gambetti’s leadership.

Umbarger residents attest that the artists initially refused Krukkert, not wanting to work for “the enemy.” But it was not until Krukkert said, “we can’t pay you, but we can feed you,” that they agreed to take on the project.¹³¹ If this was the case, it was likely stated during the initial series of talks between the artists and the priests. Di Bello does not refute

¹²⁸ Williams, *Interlude*, 50.

¹²⁹ Williams, *Interlude*, 95.

¹³⁰ Williams, *Interlude* 12.

¹³¹ Interview of Debbie Batenhorst by the author, February 29, 2020.

this directly in his 1981 interview with Williams. But Di Bello said he was skeptical that the two priests could get the necessary permissions for the project:

We were kind of caught by surprise when, in the first week of October, Cattanei, Gambetti and myself were summoned by the Camp Commanding Officer and officially asked if we would accept to do the work. We answered that we would, but only on condition that our effort should be considered as a personal performance for the sake of Christian brotherhood and of mutual comprehension, not as a form of POWs cooperation; as a consequence we refused any form of remuneration for the achievement.¹³²

It is important to note that the Italian artists specified that their cooperation was a Christian gift. As non-collaborators, they wanted to distinguish the separation between the SMP project and their efforts as continued Fascists. In this statement, Di Bello contradicts the Umbarger residents' story by suggesting that the artists agreed to work "pro-bono," that they refused to take anything in exchange, lest it be construed as an act of helping the enemy. The Umbarger residents' tale, in contrast, paints the artists as desperately hungry, willing to do anything in exchange for food. The truth likely falls in the middle of the two opposing stories. The artists were hungry, a fact proven by the evidence above, but they were also proud, evident by their non-collaborator identity.

In Umbarger, before the Italian artists began the project, the church community was informed of their impending arrival. Volunteers—particularly women and girls—were asked to provide midday meals every day of the workweek, Monday through Friday. Though many parishioners initially hesitated to give aide to what they saw at first as "the enemy," enough women signed up to help make sure the team of artists were well fed. The schedule included one woman per day coordinating each afternoon meal, providing the main course, while other church members provided sides and desserts. It is important to

¹³² Di Bello to Williams.

note that during WWII, every family was on food and gas rations. For these women to sacrifice what little they had, exemplifies the connection they felt for their religion and eventually the Italian artists.¹³³

As stated above, Umbarger was built on three fundamental characteristics: German heritage, Catholic religion, and agricultural labor. Starting in WWI, anti-German attitudes spread across the country as US citizens questioned the loyalty of German immigrants and their German-American descents, including many of the Umbarger residents. Simultaneously, anti-Catholicism opinions also led to acts of violence and intimidation that involved Umbarger residents. Anti-German and anti-Catholicism became nearly synonymous—hard to distinguish—for the already isolated farming community. The nine Italian artists also experienced acute isolation. Their home country switched sides in the middle of the war, leaving their Fascist identity behind with the German army. Whether because of their political ideology or their ethical ideals, these men were isolated by their refusal to collaborate with an Allied Italy as well as their separation from their homeland and confinement in the foreign Texas Panhandle. However, the Italian POWs invited to participate in the SMP found a shared community among the Umbarger residents, based primarily on their shared Catholic religion, but also rooted in their shared rejection as untrustworthy “enemies” of America. In Umbarger, Rev. Dolje built up the Catholic church, both socially and structurally. In Camp Hereford, Rev. Ferreri and Bishop FitzSimon provided the prisoners spiritual guidance, as well as supplies for their moral

¹³³ Not every volunteer gave as much as the next. There are reports of one lady, Mary Batenhorst, who refused to organize the meal, because she did not want to serve the Italians, whom she despised. However, her connection to the church was so deep that she could not refuse to help outright and altogether. For her turn to provide meals, another woman would have to go to her home and pick up the bologna sandwiches she made, bologna being viewed as a subpar food.

wellbeing and advocated for them in light of military injustice. Finally, Rev. Ferreri and Rev. Krukkert came together to launch the art project that provided an opportunity that offered food in the short term and created a unique community bond that outlasted their struggles as POWs.

CHAPTER II: ART DESIGNS AND BUDDING FRIENDSHIPS

In October 1945, the Italian Artists from Camp Hereford were permitted to come into the Umbarger community to decorate St. Mary's. Over the next six weeks until December 1945, these nine POWs went from being a perceived enemy to being essentially adopted members of the Umbarger community. The generosity of a handful of Umbarger residents allowed the Italians to lower their guard and begin to interact as guests, rather than inmates, and eventually form friendships with Umbarger residents. As a fitting embodiment of this collaborative community of Italian POWs and German-Americans, the church's art merges Italian, German, and American styles and symbols. From the high art of the Italian Renaissance to embedded Nazi and Fascist iconography to regional and international modernism, the SMP presents a unique case study of collaborative and, therefore, "social" art.

As with any large-scale commissioned art project, the client or patron, Rev. Krukkert, had significant influence on the SMP's overarching design. On October 15, a week before the project was slated to begin, the three artists, Gambetti, Cattanei, and Di Bello, were driven by Rev. Ferreri out to Umbarger for an initial planning meeting. Di Bello described the experience in 1981: "The three of us happened to live the first day of actual freedom since the day we had been captured...then we had another experience we hadn't had in the last two and a half years: we sat at the table of Father Krukkert and were

served a magnificent lunch.”¹³⁴ It was the first proper and substantial meal the three had eaten since their rations were cut. No one is sure which of the St. Mary’s parishioners made and served this initial meal. Still, rumors quickly spread that one of the men [Di Bello] ate almost an entire chicken himself. The parish ladies were worried how they would manage to feed nine hungry men for the entirety of the project, especially given their own limited resources.¹³⁵

The artists and Krukkert spent the rest of the day taking measurements of the church and discussing their shared vision for the designs. Given their artistic expertise, they were treated as equals in the project and consulted on their opinions for the mural designs. Such treatment, given their status as captured POWs, would have likely been a welcome reprieve from the norms of captivity. Since the church was named after the Virgin Mary, Krukkert wanted scenes of her life to be the focal point for the larger murals and reportedly picked the “Annunciation,” “Visitation,” and “Assumption” for the subjects.¹³⁶ These scenes were conventional for any church dedicated to Mary: for instance, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. has many images of the life of Mary, including both the “Annunciation” and “Visitation.” However, none of the three artists had much training in religious iconography; though they had lived in Italy and were surrounded by churches with such imagery, they themselves were not outwardly religious, perhaps because their Fascist ties prohibited them from participating in religious activities.¹³⁷ We do know the source materials used for the scenes were directly “inspired

¹³⁴ Di Bello to Williams. Underscore in original.

¹³⁵ Jerri Skarke-Gerber Interview and Laurie Wegman Interview.

¹³⁶ Williams to Di Bello.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

by a color reproduction” from Krukkert’s *Roman Missal*, which mirrors most of the

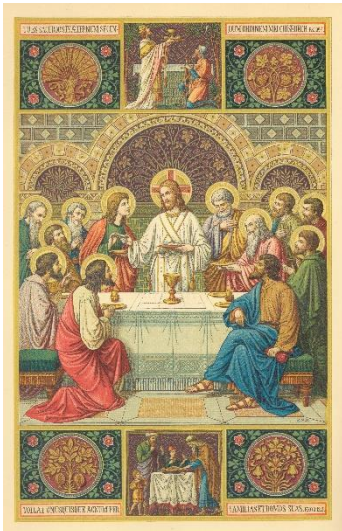


Fig. 42 *Roman Missal* front page, 1923

imagery found in St. Mary’s.¹³⁸ In my research, I have located a similar edition of the missal published in 1923, found in the archives of the Diocese of Amarillo. Figure 42 is the front page of the missal and has many of the same symbols and images found throughout the church. The three artists and Krukkert spent the afternoon exploring the book and selecting symbols and themes they thought would work well in the church.

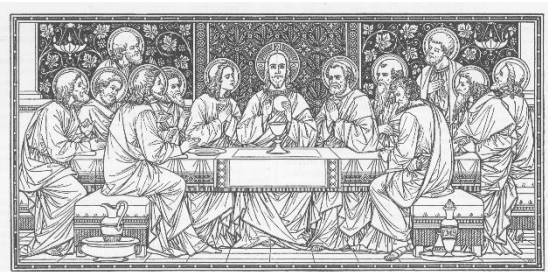


Fig. 43 *Praearatio ad Missam, Roman Missal*, 1923

The artists walked the sanctuary and the nave space, taking measurements and conceptualizing their vision. They decided to add a few wood carvings to the back altar, including the *Last Supper* (fig. 17), given that several artists from Camp

Hereford had specialization in wood carving, including Sanvito and Zorzi. The source from this section was also found in the *Roman Missal* (fig 43). The image of Christ’s Last Supper is also found on many altars in Catholic churches, including most famously the carved limewood altars of Tilman Riemenschneider in Germany made during the Renaissance (fig. 44).¹³⁹ This limewood carving connects directly to the SMP’s oak carvings, linking the German Renaissance with the Italian artists, and the German heritage of the

¹³⁸ Williams, *Interlude*, 56 and Di Bello to Williams.

¹³⁹ Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980).

parishioners with the Italians' skillsets. In the Schulenberg, Texas, Painted Church Tour of German-American churches in the area, four out of five back altars have similar carved images of Christ's Last Supper (fig. 45). This motif connects to the Eucharistic ritual in the mass, which



Fig. 44 *Altarpiece of the Holy Blood*, Tilman Riemenschneider, limewood, 1499-1505

the priest reenacts during each service from the Gospel of Luke.¹⁴⁰ So the SMP carving is a testament to Italian and German Renaissance art and conventional Christian rites and symbolism. Gambetti, Cattanei, and Di Bello left Umbarger with conceptualized designs based on Krukkert's ideas, and with their appetite filled, eager to start work on a project that would draw on their professional expertise and satisfy their neglected hunger.



Fig. 45 *Last Supper*, 1917, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, La Grange, Texas

Over the next week, Krukkert and other parishioners gathered the supplies for the SMP. Krukkert had personally gone to nearby Amarillo, the largest city in the region, to buy the paint and brushes, most likely from

Sears and Roebuck. Oscar Przilas, who was twelve at the time, remembers his parents commenting on how Krukkert had come to Umbarger with his own money, and it was with

¹⁴⁰ Luke 22:1-23.

that money that he was able to purchase the supplies.¹⁴¹ In addition to Krukkert, parishioner Joe Wieck went to Amarillo and “hunted” for the perfect wood for the carvings.¹⁴² Meinrad Hollenstein also donated the wood to make scaffolding and then helped the artist assistants to build it. Henry Bracht took the enlisted POW carpenters and window installers, remarkably without a guard, to his machine shop located on the opposite side of the tracks to build the other tools. The project was an investment of money and



Fig. 46 *The Annunciation*, Fra Angelico, 1426-1429, tempera and gold on panel, San Giovanni, Italy



Fig. 47 *Visitation*, Fra Angelico, 1433, tempera and gold on panel, Museo diocesano di Cortona

creativity on the part of Krukkert and of communal labor for both the Italian artists and the Umbarger parishioners. In order to evaluate the art historical significance of the SMP, a balance of tradition and modernity must be acknowledged.

Gambetti greatly used traditional imagery and art historical knowledge, largely because of the biblical subject matter because they featured important Marian events. After all, Luke's gospel details both scenes, and both were illustrated in the *Roman Missal*—these murals were highly

¹⁴¹ Interview with Oscar Przilas by the author, March 7, 2020.

¹⁴² Skarke-Gerber Interview.

traditional.¹⁴³ Devoted Medieval and Renaissance artists illustrated these tales, creating a long chain of influence that lasted dozens of generations. For example, the Florentine monk Fra Angelico painted well-known versions of both the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* in the early fifteenth century (figs. 46-47).

In many of these works, including the SMP murals, Mary occupies a separate space from the other figures in the images. Placing royalty and deities on pedestals and platforms, which set them apart from the everyday world and from “common” space, has been conventional in art history for centuries. In the SMP *Annunciation* (see fig. 4), Mary’s space is divided by the small platform she is prayerfully kneeling on, which appears to be an altar but also serves to elevate her above the material or the everyday world. Similarly, in Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation* (fig. 46), Mary sits prayerfully on a stool, slightly higher



Fig. 48 Photo of Hospital of the Innocents, Florence, Italy

than the everyday world. The rounded arch is another motif connected to Roman art and later Medieval Romanesque and Italian Renaissance art. The arch was arguably an invention of the ancient Romans and was appropriated in the Italian Renaissance by architects such as Filippo Brunelleschi in his Hospital of the Innocents (fig. 48), and then by every other revival of the style of either Romanesque or Roman art. Guy Carlander’s First Baptist Church in Amarillo, Texas (fig. 49) utilizes the arch,

than the everyday world. The rounded arch is another motif connected to Roman art and later Medieval Romanesque and Italian Renaissance art. The arch was arguably an



Fig. 49 Photo of First Baptist Church, Amarillo, Texas

¹⁴³ Luke 1: 5-56

commenting on the long tradition, dating back to the Romans. Here, the SMP artists could be adding a conscious reference to their Italian homeland, even while the arch is a commonplace architectural element.

In both Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (fig. 46) and Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Visitation* (fig. 50), Mary is framed within a rounded arch. Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* separates Mary from the angel by placing their two bodies under two arches separated by a column. The arch styles vary from artist to artist in the many Renaissance examples, but they all act as a dividing framework to indicate separate and sacred



Fig. 50 *Visitation*, Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1491, tempera on panel, Louvre, 67.6 x 64.9 inches

space. So too does the SMP murals utilize the arch. Mary is similarly framed beneath an arch in both the *Annunciation* (fig. 4) and the *Visitation* (fig. 5). However, not all



Fig. 51 *Cestello Annunciation*, Sandro Botticelli, 1489-1490, tempera on panel, Uffizi, Florence, 59 x 61.4 inches

Renaissance paintings have arches denoting space, but they demonstrate other ways to place Mary in a separate and special space. Sandro Botticelli's *Cestello Annunciation* (fig. 51) places Mary on a similar higher platform, like Fra Angelico (fig. 46). The pedestal has a similar resonance of an altar, once again indicated her prayerful, holy quality.

In contrast to the SMP murals and other *Annunciation* paintings, there are no arches in Botticelli's painting. Mary's fingers reach into a squared window space where the archangel Gabriel kneels to deliver the "annunciation" message from God. But Mary's fingers stop short of actually entering past the window line, resting in between the delineated "sacred space" and that of the outside world.

In the SMP *Visitation* (fig. 5), Mary now moves into the center of the arch, along with Elizabeth, as the narrative of Mary's life progresses. Another similarity between Italian Renaissance paintings of Mary and the SMP murals is the interaction between Mary and Elizabeth. In Umbarger's *Visitation*, Elizabeth moves to join Mary on the platform, the sacred space, which no longer has the reference to an altar and appears to be there for the women to stand on, like a carpet. The older woman gently cups the younger Mary's elbows as though she is pulling her in for an intimate moment. The greeting is indicative of their familial relationship, but also their similar level of holiness. Again, Fra Angelico's subjects in *Visitation* (fig. 47) both hold one another's arms, again indicating an intimate, familial embrace. In Ghirlandaio's painting (fig. 50), Mary bends before the keeling Elizabeth, perhaps bestowing a blessing and demonstrating her status as a higher level of being—the mother of Christ. The SMP mural brings both familial intimacy and elite status into the composition. Mary remains wholly on the platform, allowing Elizabeth to greet her in an embrace. Elizabeth steps with one foot on the platform, being welcomed into that sacred space with Mary. At the same time, Mary's left hand is held up, as if she is bestowing a blessing upon Elizabeth.

Of particular interest are the floor tiles in both Botticelli's *Annunciation* (fig. 51) and the SMP murals. In Botticelli's painting, the floor tiles are pink, and though they do not expand as far as they do in the SMP murals, the tiles are perfectly aligned in a linear perspective grid. This shows, like the nod to the rounded arch, is credit due to historical Italian artists' invention of linear perspective. In the mid-twentieth century, after the rise of cubism and abstraction in modern art had undermined the centrality of linear perspective for rendering pictorial space, an obvious use of this technique would have registered as highly traditional. But in this case, we can also read the perspectival grid as a reference to the Italian artists' heritage rather than simply a retrograde style of spatial construction. However, unlike conventional linear perspective in religious art, where the orthogonal lines converge on a central focal point in the sacred scene—as they do on Christ's head in Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (fig. 52)—these lines in the SMP murals converge on the depiction of the High Plains homesteads in the background. This could be an innovative way to join traditional Italian artistic traditions with contemporary German-American farming culture. In their construction of space, the Italian artists drew focus not on Mary but instead on the rural homestead as the companion way of life in Umbarger to Catholicism.



Fig. 52 *Last Supper*, Leonardo Da Vinci, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy, 181 x 348 inches

But lest we think the SMP murals entirely shirked the more updated traditions of modern art, we can clearly see ways they are in dialogue with distinctly modern styles and techniques. For instance, in the mid-nineteenth century, the British artist group of the Pre-Raphaelites sought to move away from the traditional art of the academies in Europe—which privileged the Renaissance art after Raphael and his followers—and sought instead to embrace more “primitive” earlier Italian art, including that of Fra Angelico and Botticelli, as depicted above. They did this to find a new modern language of art that they felt was closer to “nature,” more honest and less theatrical. Pre-Raphaelites “aimed to



Fig. 53 Ecce Ancilla Domini, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1849-1850, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, 28.5 x 16.5 inches

revive aspects from art from before the time of Raphael, to reform British painting.”¹⁴⁴ They rejected centuries of artistic tradition even while they still painted religious scenes.¹⁴⁵ They believed that “the early Italian painters had themselves observed the natural world rather than merely repeating conventional forms like their successors,” something they admired and sought to follow themselves.¹⁴⁶ The way the SMP artists also pulled on earlier Italian examples rather than high Renaissance art like the more

¹⁴⁴ Barringer *Pre-Raphaelites*, 7.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

theatrical works of Raphael might show an influence of the Pre-Raphaelites or at least a comparable approach.



Fig. 54 *The Flower of God*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1862, Private Collection, 23.6 x 20.9 inches

Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti embraced religious scenes from the Christian bible, including and especially those of Mary. In Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (fig. 53), Mary sits timidly on a raised platform, such as the one in the SMP *Annunciation* that appears to be a bed, an indication of a more private setting. In one of Burne-Jones' renditions of the scene, the *Annunciation*, which he entitles *The Flower of God* (fig

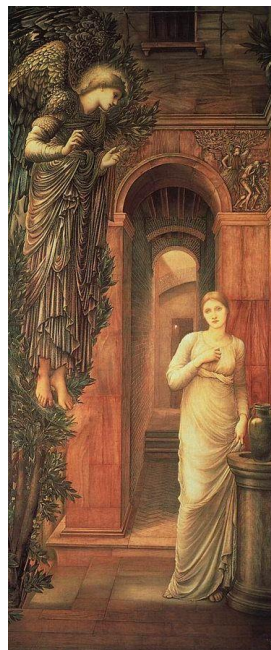


Fig. 55 *The Annunciation*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1879, Lady Lever Art Gallery, 41 x 98.4 inches

54), Mary occupies a bedroom, kneeling, as if in prayer, before the angel, who peers into her windows. In these works, it is evident that the angel is crossing the intimate threshold of a bedroom. In contrast, Italian Renaissance painters portrayed the scene in a more public space, similar to a throne room (see fig. 51). The SMP *Annunciation* once again melds these two ideas. They place Mary on a raised platform in a position of prayer and reference the homestead in the distance, almost pointing to the idea that she is inside a rural farmhouse or ranch house instead of a church sanctuary.



Fig. 56 *Salutation or the Visitation*, Evelyn Pickering de Morgan, 1883, oil on canvas, Private Collection

Not only do the Pre-Raphaelites borrow Christian subject matter and embrace the same scenes that so many Italian Renaissance painters used, but they also use the trope of the rounded arch as well. In Burne-Jones' other rendition of *The Annunciation* (fig. 55) Mary stands partially within the arch, similar to the SMP mural, under the spotlight of the hovering angel, whereas Mary in the SMP *Visitation* is fully under the arch. In

Evelyn Pickering de Morgan's *Salutation or The Visitation* (fig. 56), the arch stands in the background. This shows that the Pre-Raphaelites and the SMP artists are both drawing on ancient, classical structures and similar topics. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary* (fig. 57), Mary observes and stitches a lily plant onto a piece of fabric. The same type of lily also makes an appearance in the SMP *Annunciation*, as the angel Gabriel holds a nearly identical long stem white lily as a gift presented to Mary. In Christian art, the lily is a conventional symbol of purity and holiness, but the rather naturalistic way it is painted in Rossetti's work and the SMP mural is noteworthy. Rossetti makes use of the lily often, in his *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, the angel offers the flower to Mary, as though he is physically giving her purity while relaying the message of her impending child. The angel presenting a lily to Mary is a common theme



Fig. 57 *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1840, oil on canvas, Tate Britain 32.7 x 25.7 inches

in Annunciation paintings, not only does it occur in the SMP mural and Italian Renaissance paintings, such as Botticelli's *Cestello Annunciation*, but in other Pre-Raphaelite works such as Burne-Jones' *The Flower of God*, and the SMP mural. Lilies are also present in other Pre-Raphaelite works. In Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* at the foot of the bed, there is a banner needle-work lily, perhaps the same banner, now completed, which Mary created in Rossetti's *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*. In the background on Pickering de Morgan's *The Visitation*, lily plants line the walls behind Mary and Elizabeth, signifying the two women's purity and holiness.

Italian and Northern Renaissance artists used anachronistic local references in their paintings. Prominent in Northern Renaissance works of Robert Campin or the Van Eyck brothers where despite the biblical nature of the scenes clearly depicted is Dutch architecture and 17th century clothing, meant to connect the local/regional audience to the biblical scenes.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, in Italian Renaissance paintings such as Ghirlandaio *Visitation* (fig. 50) and Botticelli's *Cestello Annunciation* (fig. 51) Italian cities, architecture and



Fig. 58 *Christ in the House of His Parents*, John Everett Millais, 1849-1850, oil on canvas, Tate Britain, 34 x 55 inches

landscape lay in the background. The Pre-Raphaelites and the SMP artists both follow suit using anachronistic references of landscape, such as the homesteads in the SMP murals.

¹⁴⁷ Craig Harbison, *The Mirror of the Artist: Northern Renaissance Art in its Historical Context*, (Pearson Education, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1995).

In Rossetti's painting, the lily points to the direct observations of nature that form part of Pre-Raphaelite art. Pre-Raphaelites often focused on landscape details, similar to the homesteads and the lily in the SMP murals, connecting their images to their specific time and space. For example, in John Everett Millais' *Christ in the House of His Parents* (fig. 58), Millais depicts Christ's family at work, in their home in Nazareth. In the background outside the door, the landscape is green, like that of Scotland or Ireland, with craggy rocks and natural-looking sheep and the detailed rose bush sitting just outside the door.



Fig. 59 Paul Artho (right)

We have direct evidence that the Italian artists drew from the observation of nature for their depictions of these scenes. While the Italian artists worked in the church, one parishioner and an immigrant from Switzerland, Paul Artho (fig. 59), would often sit in the church while the Italian artists worked.¹⁴⁸ He talked to them in broken Italian and asked them all about their homeland, political ideas, and opinions on the war. Artho had been unable to return to Switzerland in his thirty years in America and was desperate to hear of his homeland region. But Artho was also

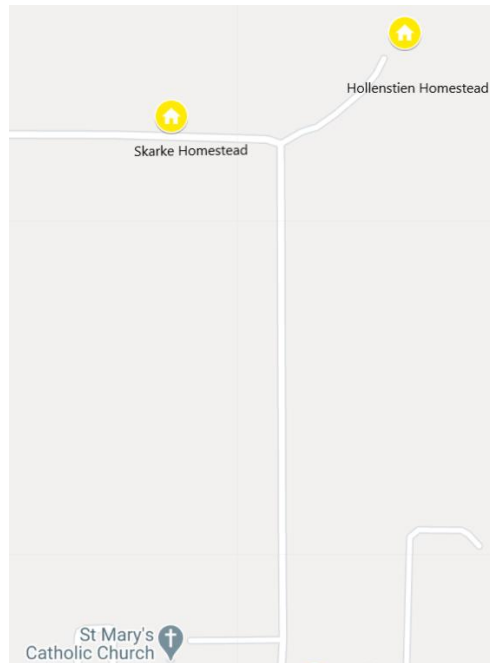


Fig. 60 Map of homesteads in relation to St. Mary's

¹⁴⁸ Williams, *Interlude*, 100.

an intelligent man, desperate to learn and understand the world outside Umbarger. Every day, Artho would bring the artists two packs of cigarettes in return for their company and conversation and spent upwards of two hours interacting with them. Artho's genuine interest in their work and lives created an opening for friendship that was displayed not only in social connections that lasted beyond the project but also within the art they created. The artists would take breaks, go out the back of the church, and smoke the cigarettes Artho had given them. They would look out into the horizon. A half-mile north of the church, they would have seen these two homesteads of the Skarke and Hollenstein families (fig. 60), a scene similar to that which appears in the background of the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* murals. It

Pre-Raphaelite art tended to vividly tell a story in each painting. According to Elizabeth Prettejohn, "Pre-Raphaelite art is essentially 'literary in nature.'"¹⁴⁹ The SMP murals are also highly literary and narrative in their composition. In Catholicism, these images clearly reference frequently told stories: the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary the conception and birth of Jesus; and the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, when the unborn John the Baptist jumped in the womb upon hearing Mary's voice. In *Visitation*, the third figure is assumed to be Zachariah, Elizabeth's husband. As the story goes, an angel visited Zachariah in the temple and told him that his wife, who was well beyond childbearing years, would finally have a son. Zachariah scorned the angel, saying that it was impossible, and as punishment, the angel took his voice away, so he could no longer speak. Upon Mary's visitation, his muteness was miraculously healed. In the SMP image, Zachariah's muteness is indicated through the "pad and pen" he holds in his hand. The St. Mary's

¹⁴⁹ Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, 135.

members would have easily recognized this iconography, and the narrative the SMP artists were referencing.

Another defining technique of the Pre-Raphaelites' style is "figural angularity and precision of detail," which again drew upon the early Italian Renaissance artists like Fra Angelico. Fra Angelico and the Pre-Raphaelites both used sharply defined edges, flat areas of color, and soft shading without an overabundance of volume being rendered. We see these techniques in the SMP murals, with the bodies of the figures being defined more linearly than through volumetric shading and with the flat areas of matte color. This technique required precise drawing and labor to execute, which Di Bello was well equipped for in his training with the military, as was Cattanei with his practice copying the old masters.¹⁵⁰

Moreover, the sharply defined, unmodulated areas of color are also strikingly modernist, relating not only to Pre-Raphaelite art but also to the mural movements of the 1930s. Starting in the mid-1800s, new synthetic pigments "such as emerald greens and vivid yellows...and a new range of purples" were being invented through scientific discovery.¹⁵¹ Here is where Pre-Raphaelite artists move distinctly beyond their Italian Renaissance predecessors who used naturally-made, softer, and more chalky pigments. Pre-Raphaelites were also able to paint outside, drawing directly from the colors of nature, more easily because of synthetic paints and "collapsible metal tubes for ready-mixed paint."¹⁵² This movement away from traditional paints and into modern, synthetic pigments was also seen in the mural art produced during the Great Depression. While Diego Rivera,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 142.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 148.

¹⁵² Ibid, 152.

a leading muralist in Mexico, was trained in the Italian Renaissance fresco style and sought to reproduce that traditional mural technique in his murals in Mexico City, he soon found the technique was not entirely suited to Mexico's climate. Therefore, he began using other mural painting techniques, such as supplementing old fresco mortar of lime, marble dust, and water, for cement.¹⁵³ Likewise, muralist artists in the U.S. did not always adhere to Italy's fresco secco techniques but utilized modern advances in paint technology instead.¹⁵⁴

When the POWs in Camp Hereford produced paintings, as for the art exhibition in August 1946, they rarely had access to oil paints. Instead, they tended to work in cheaper and more readily available mediums such as watercolors and synthetic paints. According to Chriss Clifford, and art restorer, the paint used on the church for the SMP “was interior flat wall paint...purchased through Sears and Roebuck.”¹⁵⁵ But when the artists used readily available house paints from a department store, they were not merely employing the cheapest, most accessible paints. They also participated in broader modernist techniques that utilized the latest industrial technologies. Clifford speculated that the Italian



Fig. 61 *Convergence*, Jackson Pollock, 1952, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 93.5 x 155

artists first tried to use a brand-new latex product, which Sears had just begun to market. But the formula in this new paint did not hold color well. When applied, it was too light in color and faded quickly, which was unacceptable to the Italian

¹⁵³ Mary K. Coffey, “All Mexico on a Wall’: Diego Rivera’s Murals at the Ministry of Public Education, *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History* (University of California Press, 2012): 56-74.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Chris Albracht “Restoring the Beauty of a Panhandle Treasure,” *West Texas Catholic*, November 19, 2012, and Interview with Chriss Clifford by the author, November 4, 2019.

artists. So, they turned to general wall paint instead. In doing so, they employed some of the latest mid-century mass production developments and distribution systems, which included the rise of chain stores with locations even in the remote Texas Panhandle. This choice allowed them to obtain brightly colored paint that was easy to work with and dried quickly enough to be efficient for the largescale job within its short timeline. It is perhaps worth noting that in the same years of the SMP at mid-century, the most cutting-edge avant-garde artists in New York, such as Jackson Pollock, also turned to mass-produced house paint for their largescale works of art (fig. 61).¹⁵⁶ Pollock appreciated the ease of holding an industrially produced paint-can in his hand and dipping a paint-stirring stick into the can to drip and fling his paints onto canvases placed on the floor of his studio, as in the painting *Convergence*. So too did the Italian artists of the SMP appreciate the efficiency and ease of the same kinds of paints.

The colors chosen for the SMP were also distinctly modern, including the synthetically produced pink, turquoise, and bright yellow. These colors were all popular during the time period and were colors that would not have been used in the Italian Renaissance. Such bright colors had been central to movements of Southwestern and Western art, such as that of the California artist Franz Bischoff in *Zion Park* (fig. 62) during the 1920s. *Zion* uses bright yellows to depict the sunlight which shines down on sharply colored mountain ranges and canyon floors. We should remember too

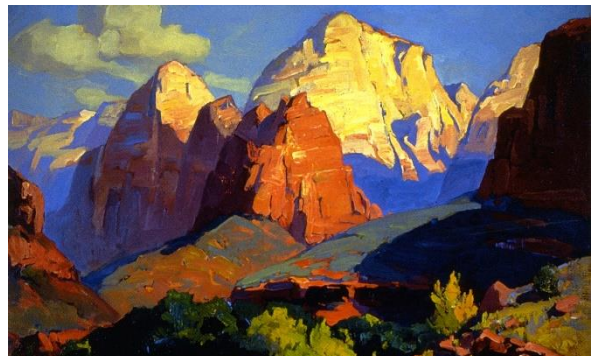


Fig. 62 *Zion Park*, Franz Bischoff, 1928, oil on canvas

¹⁵⁶ See “Jackson Pollock: Methods and Materials,” published by the Hirshhorn Museum and the Smithsonian Institution, online at: <https://hirshhorn.si.edu/explore/jackson-pollock-methods-materials/>.

that Krukkert lived in San Clemente, California, in the 1930s and could have chosen or suggested such “California-style” colors for the murals.

The principal scenes of the *Annunciation* and *Visitation* in the SMP are also reminiscent of the murals done by the Work Project Administration’s (WPA) murals completed in the 1930s and 1940s.



Fig. 63 *The Crossroads Town*, Emil Bisttram, 1939, Post Office, Ranger, Texas

The WPA murals were commissions that had to fit the project's context and existing architecture, like the SMP murals. They were executed in a relatively realistic style that enabled narrative content to be clearly conveyed and avoided modernist abstraction for its elitism. Artists like Emil Bisttram, who completed murals for the Taos Court House, the Justice Department in Washington, D.C., and the Post Office in Ranger, Texas, offers an excellent example of this (fig. 63).

Bisttram’s mural designs, inspired by Diego Rivera, with whom he studied in Mexico City in 1931, are illustrative, figural, and naturalistic. They show the figures participating in actions that



Fig. 64 *Untitled - Lines with Eyes*, Emil Bisttram, 52 x 31 inches, no date

convey a meaningful story for their context.

In contrast, Bisttram’s non-commissioned work was often completely non-objective, having no narrative, figural, or naturalistic subject matter (fig. 64).¹⁵⁷ The SMP

¹⁵⁷ Walt Wiggins, *The Transcendental Art of Emil Bisttram* (Ruidoso Downs, NM: Pintores, 1988).

murals were likewise illustrative of known biblical scenes, figural with a focus on scenes from Mary's life, and naturalistic with the inclusion of plants like the lily, and landscape sense like the homestead in the distance. Similar to Bisttram, Gambetti's non-commissioned work shifts from the figural to impressionistic, cubistic, and non-objective. Figure 65 employs a brilliant use of bright light, somewhat similar to his use of light in the *Assumption*. In figure 66,



Fig. 65 *Untitled*, Dino Gambetti



Fig. 66 *Sulla Terrazza*, Dino Gambetti, oil on canvas

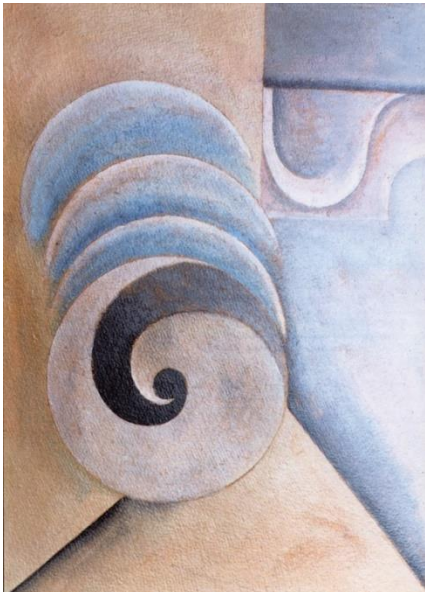


Fig. 67 *Vortice*, Dino Gambetti, 1924

Gambetti paints in a cubistic style in the geometric shapes of the table and chairs. In the SMP murals, he uses similar techniques creating geometric, cubistic plots of land in the background of the murals. Finally, Gambetti's non-objective work came during his time with the second wave Futurists. Figure 67 plays with movement and shape, just as he utilizes the same kind of motion in the clouds of the *Assumption*.

Another similarity between the SMP murals and WPA murals include how both showcased local issues, histories, and accomplishments. For instance, Thomas Hart Benton and Harold Dow Bugbee were both regional artists paid by the WPA to complete murals in Middle American locations. As



Fig. 68 *Boomtown*, Thomas Hart Benton, 1927-1928, oil on canvas

Annie Dell’Aria states, regionalism is “[a] movement in American art that focused on local, representational subject-matter.”¹⁵⁸ Benton and Bugbee often painted scenes associated with the West. Benton painted an image of Borger as an oil boomtown, for instance (fig. 68), while Bugbee’s murals in the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum depict celebratory pioneering stories of the region, including Native Americans settlements, the Spanish Conquistadors, the Anglo cowboys and ranchers as the most recent regional “heroes.” These murals tell conventional histories of the West with a clear narrative of progress and the taming of the landscape by white Americans. Regionalism was highly popular among general audiences in the 1930s and 1940s because it exhibited “an artist’s desire to connect with his or her surroundings rather than to universal themes.”¹⁵⁹ The styles and messages were local, clear, and uplifting, at least for those in power.

Texan artist Jerry Bywaters, to offer a third comparative example, spent his career elevating Texas art by using subjects regionally connected to his home state. Bywaters’

¹⁵⁸ Annie, Dell’Aria “Regionalism (ii),” *Grove Art Online*.

¹⁵⁹ Dell’Aria, “Regionalism”.

WPA post office mural in Quanah, Texas, *The Naming of Quanah* (fig. 69), depicts a scene from the life of the famous Quanah Parker being named chief of the Comanche tribe. Parker was born in Texas, allegedly near the site of the city of Quanah. Though he fought against the expansion of the Anglo-Americans into Native American territory, he became a strong advocate for peace between the two cultural groups. Bywaters uses Parker as a focal point for



his

Fig. 69 The Naming of Quanah, Jerry Bywaters, 1938, Quanah, Texas

mural but also includes images of industrialization important to the regional area, such as oil and agriculture.

Similarly, the SMP artists built local connections and contexts into their murals. For example, their images use regionalist styles by depicting the two local homesteads and the surrounding plains landscape. These spaces were something that the Italian artists would have been struck by upon their arrival in the Panhandle. Unlike the hills and mountains of their homeland, that broad expanse of the plains must have made an impression on them. And of course, while working on the church, the Italian artists during their breaks would have gazed out into the vast openness of the Panhandle and viewed the local Hollenstein and Skarke homesteads behind the church. And the artists would have also won favor with the Umbarger community through these local references in the church scenes. In painting these homesteads, the SMP created a local connection and means of civic pride important to the Umbarger people.



Fig. 70 *Landscape 1913*, Charles Sheeler, 1913

The stark, bare geometry of the landscape in the background of the SMP murals, which of course responded to the rectangular shape of the plots of land sectioned off in the American West, could also be reminiscent of some early twentieth-century modernist styles, such as Precisionism and Cubism. Comparing the SMP murals to Charles Sheeler's *Landscape 1913* (fig. 70) shows an emphasis on the geometry of the sectioned-off land. Wheat production and other farm crops were the primary source of revenue for many in the small farming community of Umbarger, something that connected the residents to their new life in the U.S. as well as to their ancestral culture of Eastern Europe. The Italians final design of the murals provided a local sense of local familiarity and the celebration of the American heartland that coincides with other modernist movements in the mid-century.

While the SMP murals demonstrate a unique blend of Italian Renaissance and modernist styles, the chosen symbols used in the mural program also offer an interesting blend of contexts and cultures. For instance, as discussed earlier, the Italian artists used Krukkert's *Roman Missal* as source material, not only in the depiction of Marian themes but also for the decorative medallion designs. Eighteen medallions surround the top of the nave walls, and ten of those images are found—if not exactly copied then clearly inspired by—designs in the *Roman Missal*. These include *Baptism*, *Christ the King*, *Crown of Thorns*, *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, *Eucharist with Doves*, *Feeding the Multitudes*,

Resurrection, Grape Leaves, and Wheat Stalk. The other medallion designs have their roots in early Christen symbolism, dating back to the Roman period: *Anchor and the Fish* (fig. 11), *Christ the Alpha and Omega, Christ Conquer Over Death, Holy Spirit, Saint Andrew’s Cross/Hope, Son of God, Victory, Divine Presence/Burning Love.* Seven out of the eight symbols across the choir loft balcony also come from the Roman Missal: *Eucharist* (fig. 13), *Hope* (fig. 14), *Peter’s Papacy, The Kingdom of Heaven,* and the four evangelists, *St. Luke, St. Mark, St. John, St. Matthew.*

Besides these medallion subjects and symbols, the Italian artists also used similar background images from the *Roman Missal.* The pattern found on the cover page (fig. 42) in the background behind Christ is the same background used in the arch behind the statues of St. Mary and Jesus (figs. 20 & 71). The artists even used the same color scheme. However, what might be hard to recognize is that within the reproduction of the Byzantine cross is the shape Adolf Hitler twisted and an angle to form the infamous Nazi symbol (fig. 20). We know that this reference to the Nazi symbol was done purposefully because the Italian artists pointed it out on one of their return visits. Di Bello said they painted them as a lark, “we managed to paint those symbols (even if in reverse.)”¹⁶⁰

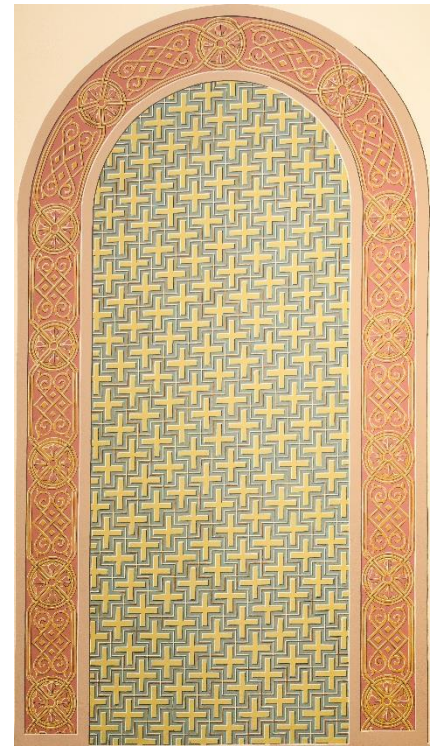


Fig. 71 Statue Alcove, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster 107 x 72 inches

¹⁶⁰ Franco Di Bello, “Questions for Franco,” interview by Donald Mace Williams, March 19, 1983, PPHMRC.



Fig. 72 *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster, 20 inches



Fig. 73 *Eucharist with Doves*, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster, 20 inches



Fig. 74 Nazi Helmet, Castro County Museum



Fig. 75 Italian Symbol of Fascism



Fig. 76 Nazi Parteiadler Eagle

Other images also have recognizable Fascist undertones. The birds in *Descent of the Holy Spirit* (fig. 72) and *Eucharist with Doves* (fig. 73) are reminiscent of the eagle used in Fascist symbolism. The outstretched wings of the dove in *Descent of the Holy Spirit* look similar to the eagle

found on a Nazi helmet (fig. 74) as well as the Italian Symbol of Fascism (fig. 75). The doves in *Eucharist with Doves* have the same angular structure as the Nazi Parteiadler eagle (fig. 76). But even more interesting are the symbols that line the choir loft. The Evangelists

symbols follow the standard iconography of *St. Luke*, the ox; *St. Mark*, the lion; *St. John*, the eagle; and *St. Matthew*, the man (figs. 77-80). Besides the order of the Evangelists, and the direction the subjects face, the symbols remain mostly the same in the Roman Missal

images, *Sacratissimi Cordis Jesu* (fig. 81) and *In Festo Ssmae Trinitatis* (fig. 82). Traditionally, the Evangelists follow two orders, chronologically as they are placed in the bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, or chronologically as they were written over time, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.



Fig. 77 St. Luke, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster, 28 x 28 inches



Fig. 78 St. Mark, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster, 28 x 28 inches



Fig. 79 St. John, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster, 28 x 28 inches



Fig. 80 St. Matthew, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster, 28 x 28 inches



Fig. 81 *Sacratissimi Cordis Jesu*, in the Roman Missal



Fig. 82 *In Festo Ssmæ Trinitatis* in the Roman Missal



Fig. 83 Choir Loft

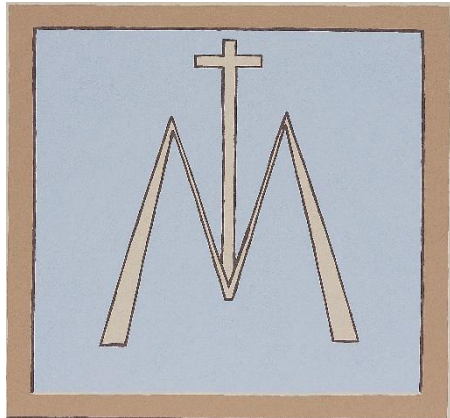


Fig. 84 *Mary's Monograph*, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster 28 x 28 inches



Fig. 85 *Miraculous medal*



Fig. 86 Mussolini's Monograph, Foro Mussolini



Fig. 87 Italy surround by the Arts, Foro Mussolini

But the SMP does not follow either of these orders (fig. 83). In the middle of the balcony is *Mary's Monograph*, which is a simple capital "M" with a cross extending from the center (fig. 84). The closest image to this one is from the miraculous medal, an image that first appeared in France in the mid-nineteenth century (fig. 85). Both images contain an "M" and a cross, though the medal image has a wider styled letter and a bar interwoven between the letter's tops. However, in Foro Mussolini, now Foro Italico, a sports complex built under Mussolini's reign, Mussolini's monograph appears in the mosaic surrounding the fountain (fig. 86). It has a thin inner line, similar to the thinness of *Mary's Monograph* and the fasces with the head of the eagle planted in the middle of the letter. Another mosaic at Foro Mussolini portrays "Italy," represented as a man surrounded by the arts (fig. 87). This image also contains three animals, two of which connect not only to Rome but to the SMP. On the far right of Italy is an eagle, which is an ancient symbol of imperial power.¹⁶¹ On the far left is a lion, which was not only an ancient symbol of Rome, but Mussolini often used to represent himself, as his astrological sign was Leo, a lion.¹⁶² On the choir loft balcony, *Mary's Monograph* appears strikingly similar to Mussolini's monograph and is placed between *St*

¹⁶¹ Follo, "The Power of Images," 167.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 150, 167.

Mark, the lion on the left, and *St. John*, the eagle on the right. Again, both the lion and the eagle were symbols of imperial power and Fascism.

While religious connection and worship was discouraged under Fascism, POW captivity offered a re-education. It is impossible to know if the POWs in Camp Hereford or the SMP artists had become more religious during their imprisonment or if they had hidden their religious affiliations under the fascist regime. As mentioned previously, the SMP artists had no religious art training, but that does not mean they were not religious in some way themselves, only that they were unfamiliar with Catholic iconography. Di Bello for example was not religious, he told Harvey Artho later in life that the war had made him a disbeliever.¹⁶³ This suggests that at one point Di Bello had at least some ties to a spiritual life, but we do not know to what extent it was. It is possible that the other SMP artists either during their time in captivity or over the course of this project developed religious ties. But we cannot know that for certain because of a lack of resources from their personal lives.

Another personal mark the Italians left in St. Mary's was the large painting of the *Assumption* behind the altar (fig. 6). Di Bello said that they modeled it after Murillo's *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1670 (fig. 88). Though the SMP painting is more impressionistic than Murillo's style, Mary's forward-facing body, outstretched hand, and costume are the same, as is the cherub with an



Fig. 88 *The Assumption of the Virgin*, Bartolome Esteban Murillo, 1670, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 77 x 57 inches

outstretched hand directly below Mary. In 1993 after Gambetti's death, his daughter

¹⁶³ Laurie Wegman Interview.

Leitizia came to Umbarger, the third official POW reunion tour. When she looked at *The Assumption*, she cried. Ormalene Brockman-Artho, who was there with her, tried to comfort her. Leitizia then pulled out a picture of her and her mother, which her father carried during the war. Gambetti painted Mary in the likeness of his wife Luisa and the small cherub in his daughter's likeness, who was a small child during WWII. So too is the *Assumption* expressionistic in the dramatic motion of the angels which form cloud-like waves of color and light.

Alongside their inclusion of references to masterpieces of art history, the Italian artists also sought to include aspects from the community in their murals, as discussed above with the plains landscapes and homesteads. Much like Gambetti modeled his *Assumption* painting on his own wife and daughter, the Italian artists wanted to use local young women for the faces of painted angels. The SMP plans included angels painted above the sanctuary (fig. 9) and in the choir loft. On either side of a stained-glass window depicting Christ's crucifixion, are two angels, *IRNI Angel* and *Angel Holding Veronica's Veil* (figs. 7 & 8).

Similar angels can be found in *Sabbato Sancto* in the *Roman Missal*, in the upper left and right corners, on either side of an image of the dead Christ being carried into a tomb (fig. 89). The Italian artists wanted to use a local schoolgirl as a model

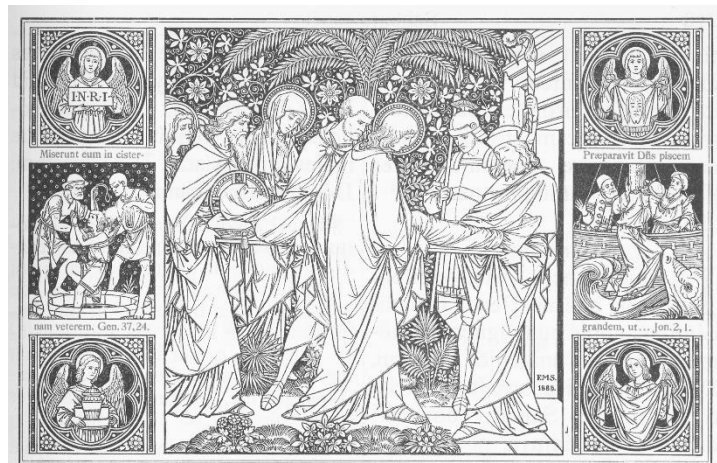


Fig. 89 *Sabbato Sancto* in the *Roman Missal*

for the angel figures. It was rumored that they walked over to the Umbarger school searching for Ormalene Brockman, as they had spent a lot of time with her and her mother and had developed close friendships with her. However, on the day Di Bello was sent to the school, Ormalene was in Amarillo with her mother, so he took Theresa Evers and Theresa Westhoff instead. Di Bello sat them on in the front pew facing each other and did sketches from all angles. In the 1980s, interviews with Williams disclosed that they did not use the girls' sketches, but that everyone in Umbarger believed they had.¹⁶⁴ However, if



Fig. 90 Theresa Evers



Fig. 91 Back of Theresa Evers
Hair (right)

you look at the angels' hairstyles in comparison to pictures of Theresa Evers (figs. 90-91), there is indeed a similarity. The soft blonde curls and victory rolls on the head's crown are the same, for instance. The artists may not have used the likeness of the

girls' faces, but their blonde hair and blue eyes are still an apparent inspiration.

Though there was a set schedule for midday meals during the SMP, there were days when the scheduled woman was suddenly unable to be there. On those days, Fr. Krukkert would call upon two women who lived in town: Amalia Bracht and Mary Brockman. Both women had fourteen-year-old daughters, Pauline Higgins-Farmer and Ormalene Brockman-Artho. Due to this, they had a lot of interaction with the Italian artists.

¹⁶⁴ Franco Di Bello to Donald Mace Williams, "Letter: Di Bello to Williams," June 9, 1982, PPHMRC.

Brockman-Artho and Mario de Cristofard, for instance, became close friends (fig. 92). Though some would say that they had a crush on one another, Brockman-Artho said, “He was my friend! He was a nice guy, but I never thought of him as anything more than a friend.”

Again, the fact that young women were allowed to consider the artists “nice” and “friends” shows an unusual relationship between prisoners and the townspeople. They even exchanged gifts, ones that would be treasured to this day, and passed down through the families. For instance, de Cristofard asked Brockman-Artho for a dime so that he could make her a piece of jewelry (fig. 93). She initially hesitated because they

were told not to give the prisoners anything. But her father, George Brockman, to her, “Go ahead and give it to him! There is nothing he can do with a dime.” So she went ahead and gave him the coin, and the next day he returned with a heart-shaped pendant with her initials engraved upon it. She said, “It was so beautiful. It's something that I will always treasure.”¹⁶⁵

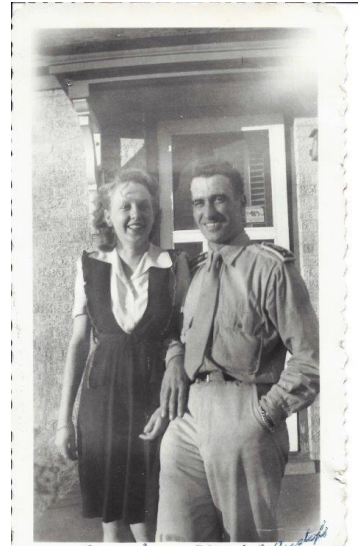


Fig. 92 Ormalene Brockman-Artho & Mario de Cristoforo



Fig. 93 Heart-shaped pendant made by POW for Ormalene Brockman-Artho

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Ormalene Brockman-Artho, by the author, December 20, 2019.



Fig. 94 Jerri Skarke-Gerber

Other such examples include Skarke-Gerber (fig. 94) recalling came with her mother several times to help with the midday meals. One day she was serving the artists, and she had an embarrassing moment. She said,

When I walked in, they gestured to him [Di Bello] and said, ‘Bambino! Bambino!’ I thought that was just his name; I didn’t know. I offered him some water and said, ‘here you go, bambino.’ They all laughed, and I ran out of the church. I had called him ‘baby!’ I tell you, I was so embarrassed, but I didn’t know.¹⁶⁶

She recalled another story about their time in Umbarger: “Franco [Di Bello] and I were just standing outside alone, I don’t even remember how it happened. Anyway, he just grabbed me and kissed me! Now, Franco was such a nice-looking young man, but I had a boyfriend! And now everyone makes it out to be a big romantic thing.”¹⁶⁷ These stories reveal how social connections between the Umbarger residents and the Italian artists had begun to develop. The artists were no longer treated like prisoners, or even like hired

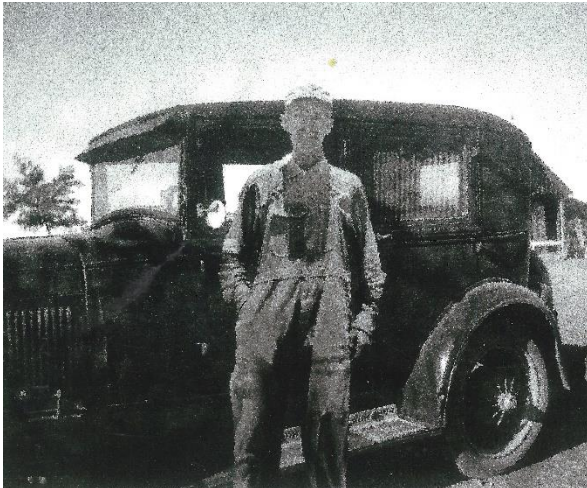


Fig. 95 Meinrad Hollenstein

laborers, but like guests of the church and the community in an interesting way.

As stated, earlier Meinrad Hollenstein (fig. 95) had donated the supplies for the scaffolding and help the assistants build it, but that was not all Hollenstein did. Like Paul Artho

¹⁶⁶ Skarke-Gerber Interview.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

mentioned above, Hollenstein was an immigrant from Switzerland and had lived in Umbarger for at least thirty years. He was a generous and reliable man. Krukkert often called upon him to do various maintenance projects on the church, and every day during the SMP, Hollenstein would walk the half-mile to the church in the early morning to light the boilers so the building would be warm for the artists as they worked. He became acquainted with all of the men, but more specifically, the guard, John Coyle. One day Hollenstein complained to Coyle that the jackrabbits were destroying his crops. So, Coyle grabbed his gun, left the Italian artists unattended, and went with Hollenstein to hunt jackrabbits. They brought a few of them back to the church gutted and skinned, and at the end of the day, tied them to the inside of the artists' pants to be sneaked into camp so the other prisoners could have something to eat.¹⁶⁸ Hollenstein not only kept the Italian artists warm while they worked but provided their friends back at camp with supplementary food to sustain them.

In late November or early December, the Allies and Germany were preparing to



Fig. 96 Close-up of Cattanei's & Gambetti's signature on *The Assumption*

ship their POWs back to their respective homes, finalizing the Paris Peace Treaties. The US military informed the SMP artists that their time on the project was ending, and they could not go back. The artists begged the commander for just three more days, so they could finish up the work they had begun and say their

goodbyes to their new American friends and community. Fortunately, the extra three days were granted, and they hurried to put on the last details. Cattanei began helping Gambetti

¹⁶⁸ Williams, *Interlude*, 138-139

finish up the large oil *Assumption*. The windows which had arrived two weeks prior were finalized, and a dedication was quickly planned. And two of the three artists left their literal signature in St. Mary's. At the bottom right corner of *The Assumption* are the signatures of Gambetti and Cattanei (fig 96). Though the painting was completed mostly by Gambetti and Cattanei, Di Bello did help complete the work, especially as they were running short on time. Di Bello, however, did not sign it, though he may have been invited to, perhaps because he considered the others to be the masters and himself merely an apprentice.¹⁶⁹ However, his name, and the name of all the others who worked on the SMP, were not forgotten. They had a plaque made (fig. 97). which listed all nine names, and this inscription: "Italian soldiers, prisoners in this total and dazzling new war, made this work to praise the glory of God and to reverence the memory of their unhappy, faraway country." On Saturday, December 8, the feast day of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop Fitzsimons,

Rev. John Steinlage, the nine SMP artists, and the Umbarger community came together one last time to celebrate mass, dedicate the work that was done, and to thank the Italians for all they had accomplished (fig. 98). There was a final dinner, provided by the parish women,

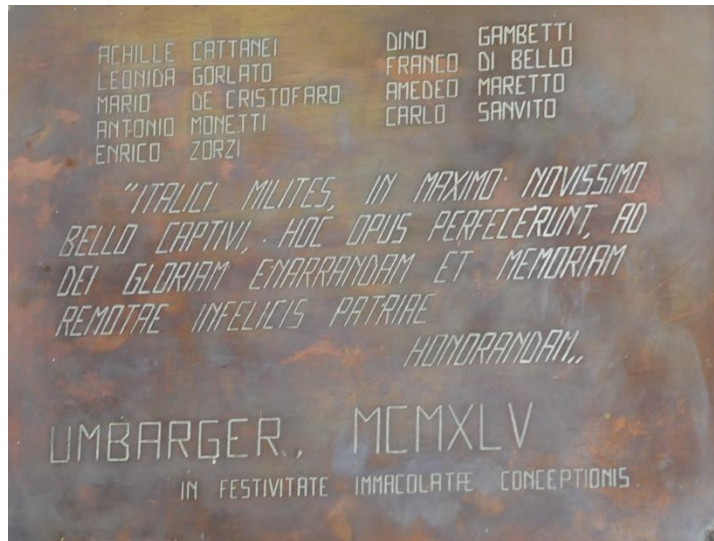


Fig. 97 Plaque made by Italian artists to dedicate the SMP

and then many tearful goodbyes. These captured enemy prisoners had become a part of the

¹⁶⁹ Franco Di Bello to Donald Mace Williams, "Letter: Di Bello to Williams," October 2, 1982, PPHMRC.

community in their role as artists. They shared many meals with the church's women, created friendships with many parishioners, and were adopted and accepted as part of this close-knit and traditionally closed community.



Fig. 98 Bottom row, left to right: John Coyle, Rev. John Steinlage, Bishop Fitzsimmons, Rev. John Krukkert, Franco Di Bello, Carlo Sanvito, Amedeo Mareto. Top row, left to right: Leonida Gorlato, Dino Gambetti, Achille Cattanei, Mario de Cristoforo, Enrico Zorzi, Antonio Monetti

CHAPTER III:
THE LEGACY OF THE SMP: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP, ENDURING
FRIENDSHIPS AND MAINTAINING A HISTORY

After the end of the SMP, all POWs were sequestered to the camp to begin the process of shipping home. The Italian artists remained in Camp Hereford until late January 1946. When they were finally shipped out on January 22 from the Hereford train station, only one Umbarger resident, Paul Artho, went to see them off.¹⁷⁰ The SMP artists had spent a short but intense six weeks in Umbarger and felt that they had a deep connection with the people there. Di Bello was deeply touched at Artho's efforts to say one last goodbye. After the project, the St. Mary's parishioners went back to their usual lives, as the town's young men began returning from the war. They were met with a surprise when they walked into church their first Sunday back. The blank white walls they left had transformed into an unrecognizable place, with colorful murals full of meaningful Christian symbolism.¹⁷¹ For those men coming home, the new additions were a pleasant surprise; it must have felt as if the art was welcoming them home from their own difficult time during the war.

Since the close of the SMP, the Italian artists' role has been continually talked about as part of the parish's history. But today, there are many within the parish who are unaware of St. Mary's interesting and unique history with the Italian POWs and are desensitized to

¹⁷⁰ Laurie Wegman Interview.

¹⁷¹ Ormalene Brockman-Artho Interview.

the murals that surrounded them.¹⁷² With time, the individual identities of these artists—with Di Bello as a notable exception—were all but forgotten. Their role in the church was collapsed into the category of prisoners and POWs, rather than the artists they clearly were.¹⁷³ St. Mary’s parishioner Melvin Wieck and his family moved back to Umbarger in the mid-1950s when he was five years old. He said: “Growing up in the church, we didn’t appreciate all the artwork and stuff, in that, was in there, we saw it every day. Yeah, we knew that the prisoners did it. No big deal. But it is kind of a big deal.”¹⁷⁴ For many, like Wieck, the art became almost inconsequential, subsumed into their everyday lives and part of their church that almost goes unnoticed. But for others, like Laurie Wegman, its history became something to highlight rather than overlook when she returned to Umbarger in the 2000s. Wegman was born in the town but left with her family in 1968 and did not return to the parish until decades later.¹⁷⁵ She recalled her experience: “You know when I grew up in Umbarger, I didn’t know the church was special. I didn’t even know any of this stuff back then, about the history of it [...] I didn’t really find out about [the history] until I moved back to Umbarger [...] when I was learning more about the church and the art.”¹⁷⁶

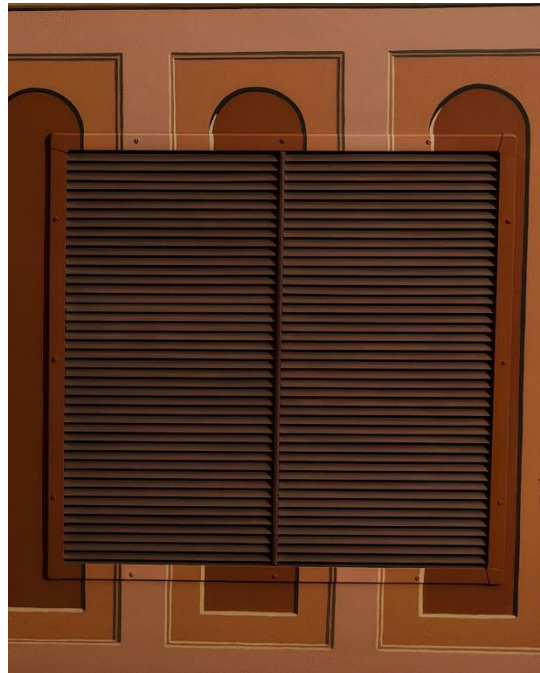


Fig. 99 Heating and Air Modifications

¹⁷² Debbie Batenhorst Interview and Laurie Wegman Interview.

¹⁷³ Catherine Frische-Przilas Interview, Debbie Batenhorst Interview, and Jerri Skarke-Gerber Interview.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Melvin Weick by the author, March 3, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Laurie Wegman Interview.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*



Fig. 100 Assumption with Curtain

After Rev. Krukkert died in 1947, the next presiding priest, Rev. Andrew Marthaler oversaw several changes that would alter some of the art. A new heating and air system added a necessary upgrade but required a portion of the wall to be removed (fig. 99). This update cut out a small section of the SMP artists' seemingly without any consideration. Marthaler also felt that Gambetti's *Assumption* was ostentatious and distracting and had it covered up around 1958 (fig. 100): "he drilled through the canvas of that painting, and put the curtain rod across and hung up these heavy [red] velvet curtains."¹⁷⁷ The curtain damaged a small part of the canvas, but it also protected the work from various elements, including a bell tower fire in the 1960s that would discolor much of the church's artwork. But it prevented people from seeing the painting, as the curtains were only opened on special occasions.¹⁷⁸ During the bell tower fire, the majority of the artworks sustained considerable smoke damage.¹⁷⁹ While the church structure remained intact, and repairs were done on the damage, the art was not properly cleaned following the fire. Around the same time, the sacristy was repainted. Most of the SMP art in the room was covered up,

¹⁷⁷ Laurie Wegman Interview.

¹⁷⁸ In 2013, the parish took a vote to remove the curtain from the image it now is displayed all the time. Debbie Batenhorst Interview, and Laurie Wegman Interview.

¹⁷⁹ Chriss Clifford Interview and Laurie Wegman Interview.

except for the fountain (figs. 101-102). Part of the painted chair rail was rediscovered beneath the overpainting by a West Texas A&M University student in 2020.

It seemed that many of the parishioners had forgotten about the SMP and its Italian artists, but there were a few who had kept in contact with Di Bello.¹⁸⁰ Mary Brockman and Paul Artho exchanged occasional letters with Di Bello, in which they updated each other on events of their lives. Brockman's daughter, Ormalene, married one of Paul Artho's sons, Harvey, in 1949, thereby connecting the families of two of Di Bello's



Fig. 101 *Sacrarium*, Gambetti with Cattanei & Di Bello, 1945, industrial paint on plaster, 48 x 42 inches



Fig. 102 Sacristy Chair rail, rediscovered by Ixchel Houseal, 2020

Umberger friends. Di Bello stayed in the military after the war and rose through the ranks, eventually retiring as a general in 1978. In 1959, Di Bello was stationed in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to study at the Command and General Staff College.¹⁸¹ For Christmas that year, he and his wife, Ines, drove to Texas and out to Paul Artho's home to

¹⁸⁰ It is unknown if anyone kept in contact with the other artists. They most likely kept in contact with Di Bello because his English was the strongest.

¹⁸¹ Williams, *Interlude*, 166.

surprise him. Di Bello knocked on Artho's door and was greeted by a suspicious and irritated Artho and one of his daughters. At first, Artho did not recognize Di Bello, but when he finally revealed he was the young artist, Artho pulled out a map from his wallet, which Di Bello had drawn of his hometown. Though the two had not seen each other in nearly thirteen years, Artho kept the picture to remind him of his Italian friend.¹⁸² Ines and Franco stayed with Artho over the holiday. They attended Christmas mass in what Di Bello dubbed as "his" church.¹⁸³ Jerri Gerber remembered, "He and his wife came to a midnight Christmas mass. I didn't go up [to them]. They were surrounded by people, and Ray [her husband] was ready to go, so we went home. I never talked to him. I'd got a glimpse of his wife; that's the only time I ever saw her."¹⁸⁴

Di Bello visited with many people from Umbarger, including the Brachts and Brockmans. The day after Christmas, the Brockmans had a party in honor of Di Bello's return, to which they invited their three children and their families to celebrate with them.¹⁸⁵ Then the Di Bellos and Arthos, all twelve of Paul's children and their families, spent the new year together.¹⁸⁶ Harvey Artho, who was in the Pacific theater at the time of the SMP, met Di Bello for the first time, and the two men made an instant connection of friendship, which would last for the rest of their lives. Harvey and Ormalene Artho and Franco and Ines Di Bello would visit one another in their respective countries multiple times over their lives and became quite close friends (fig. 103). The Arthos visited Italy

¹⁸² Ibid, 167.

¹⁸³ "POW Pilgrimage is Tearful," *The Castro County News*, May 5, 1988.

¹⁸⁴ Jerri Skarke-Gerber Interview

¹⁸⁵ Williams, *Interlude*, 168 and Laurie Wegman Interview.

¹⁸⁶ Janie Reinart-Banner to Franco Di Bello, May 16, 1988, Private collection.



Fig. 103 Photo, Franco Di Bello & Ormalene Brockman-Artho, 1988

and the Di Bellos four times in the 1980s. And Di Bello visited the Arthos at least twice after 1959.¹⁸⁷ In 1981, on one of his trips to Texas, Harvey Artho took Di Bello out to the Camp Hereford site.¹⁸⁸ Di Bello reminisced for a while. He pointed out where the barracks and guard towers used to be and told Artho about his time in captivity. At that date, the only structures still left from the camp were the water tower, the swimming pool and the chapel, and bits of the barbed wire that used to hold them in (fig. 37). Artho asked Di Bello if he wanted a piece of the barbed wire as a souvenir. When Di Bello said yes, Artho cut a bit off and give it to Di Bello.¹⁸⁹

Di Bello also stayed in contact with many of his fellow officer inmates, including those of the SMP artists. In the 1980s, there was a resurgence of interest in WWII history in Italy including many studies of the Fascist period and the war.¹⁹⁰ The Camp Hereford POWs began to have annual reunions in Italy. After Artho cut the barbed wire from Camp



Fig. 104 1988 POW Reunion Tour, from *Castro County Newspaper*

Hereford, Di Bello took it to the next reunion and showed it to his fellow POWs, and told them about his excursion to the prison campsite. They decided to put together a reunion tour and go back to the U.S., back to

¹⁸⁷ The family is unsure of how many times Di Bello stayed with them.

¹⁸⁸ This trip Di Bello traveled with his brother Bruno. Williams, *Interlude*, 170-171, and Di Bello to Williams.

¹⁸⁹ Laurie Wegman Interview, and Ormalene Brockman Interview.

¹⁹⁰ Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, 232.

the place of their captivity, but also back to where they completed a collaborative work of art for St. Mary's and Umbarger. In May of 1988, more than fifty POWs and their families, around two hundred people in total, returned to Camp Hereford (fig. 104).¹⁹¹ They toured the old campsite, as well as Palo Duro Canyon, and then visited St. Mary's in Umbarger. The county provided each visiting POW with an "18-inch strand of the camp's barbed wire" tied with a colored ribbon of the US and Italian flag colors because Artho's gift to Di Bello had so moved them and motivated them to return.¹⁹² While they were at the old campsite, they noticed the disrepair of their prison chapel. The Castro County Historical Society had been in the process of raising funds for its restoration since 1981.¹⁹³ The POWs passed around a hat and collected \$1,400 to contribute.¹⁹⁴ They had also brought with them wreaths to lay on the graves of their five fallen comrades but were surprised to discover the graves had been moved to Fort Reno, OK after the base was closed in 1946.¹⁹⁵



Fig. 105 POW gift to St. Mary's 1988

For the prisoners of St. Mary's, they offered a tile picture with the image of Mary and John at the foot of the cross and an accompanying plaque that read: "In Memory of their brothers, dead in captivity and as a token of the new friendship between the Italian and the American peoples" (fig. 105). Though many of the visitors on the reunion trip were viewing the church and its art for the first time in 1988, it nonetheless became a

¹⁹¹ "POW Pilgrimage is Tearful," and "Italian ex-POWs will return Saturday," *The Castro County News*, April 28, 1988.

¹⁹² "POW Mementos Needed," *The Castro County News*, April 21, 1988.

¹⁹³ "POW Artisans, historians want chapel preserved," *The Castro County News*, November 26, 1981.

¹⁹⁴ "POW Pilgrimage is Tearful."

¹⁹⁵ "'Site Sale' Slated at Hereford POW Camp for Nov. 13," *The Castro County News*, November 7, 1946.

symbol of friendship between their homeland of Italy and the U.S. They immediately noticed the swastika pattern of the decorative panels behind the statues flanking the apse and recognize this design as a pro-Fascist symbol. They pointed this out to a few of the St. Mary's parishioners who accompanied them on this excursion.¹⁹⁶ It had been forty-two years since the SMP's completion, and no parishioners had claimed to have noticed this background pattern. But the Italian artists and their POW colleagues saw it right away. Di Bello later told Harvey and Ormalene Artho that the SMP artists had intentionally used the symbol as both a reference to their fascist ties and as a kind of hidden joke.¹⁹⁷

In June 1989, the chapel restoration was completed, and twenty-three POWs and their families returned once more for its dedication. The chapel restoration reproduced the original structure, including recreating a replica of the original altarpiece (figs. 106-107) and added a lined gravel path from the road to the chapel with a tall replica barbed wire fence. The POWs brought with them Luca Della Robbia's sculpture for the Madonna and Child (fig. 108) to hang in the chapel. Della Robbia was a



Fig. 106 Former POWs: Rino Bosso, Oreste Giorgetti, Adriano Angerille, & Lucioli Egio inside renovated chapel



Fig. 107 Replica of original alter piece, now at Castro County Museum

¹⁹⁶ Jerri Skarke-Gerber Interview.

¹⁹⁷ Laurie Wegman Interview and Williams, "Questions for Franco."

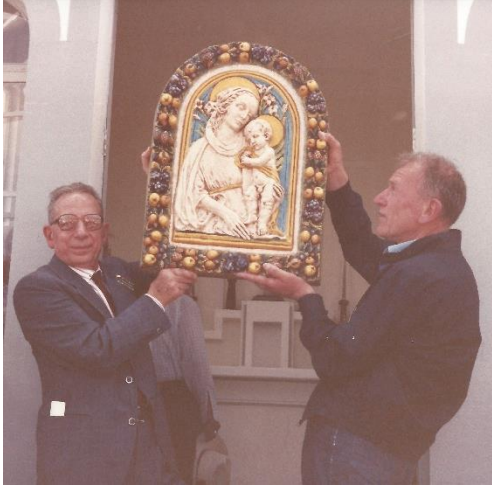


Fig. 108 Two former POWs hold the Della Robbia gift to Castro County, current location unknown

Florentine Renaissance artist, and his terra cotta religious sculptures continue to be highly valued today. In other words, this gift offered a valuable historical Italian artwork to commemorate the restoration of a sacred space used during their imprisonment. This reminds us of how religion and especially Catholicism offered a reprieve for the challenges of life in captivity. During the

restoration ceremony, the organizers allowed former POWs to unveil a memorial tombstone in memory of the POWs who died while in captivity in Camp Hereford (fig. 109). Finally, the participants of this reunion trip returned once more to



Fig. 109 Two POWs unveil a memorial headstone

Umberger to view the SMP's art and brought with them a San Dominican Cross (fig. 110) as a gift to reiterate yet again their feelings of gratefulness and friendship for the Umberger community.



Fig. 110 POW gift to St. Mary's 1989



Fig. 111 Former POW standing by Camp Herford's Historical Landmark Sign

In 1993, the chapel gained historical landmark status, and forty-four POWs and their families returned again (fig. 111).¹⁹⁸ Interestingly the only SMP artist to return to Umbarger in all three of these tours was Di Bello, as he was the only one alive and in good health in the late 1980s. However, Gambetti's daughter Leitzia visited in place of her father, who had died in August 1988. The tour visited the same places, including the old campsite and St. Mary's. As mentioned above, when the *Assumption* was unveiled, Leitzia began to cry.

She told Ormalene Brockman-Artho how her father carried a picture of her and her mother during the war and how their likeness was captured in the painting.

As they had twice before, the POW reunion group left the St. Mary's parishioners with one last gift—this time it was a copy of the fresco *Annunciazione Alla Vergine* made by Hereford POW Spinello Aretino (fig. 112), as the accompanied plaque states; “frescoes are the first token of



Fig. 112 POW gift to St. Mary's, 1993

¹⁹⁸ “44 Italians expected at chapel dedication,” *The Castro County News*, May 6, 1993 and “Italian visitors well received” *The Castro County News*, May 13, 1993.

their friendship.” Fittingly, it was the murals that brought these Italian POWs in contact with the Umbarger community. It was that art project that provided them with peace for a short period during their captivity. And this final gift of a mural replica seemed a perfect legacy for the SMP: the Italian POWs and their families presented the Umbarger community with a reproduction of a famous artwork from their homeland completed by a POW artist.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, most of the POWs from Camp Hereford had died. Achille Cattanei, the eldest of the artists, died in 1956. Mario de Cristofaro died from cancer in 1964 at the age of 50. Carlo Sanvito died in 1969, he never talked about his time in Camp Hereford, and did not ever mention his work on the SMP to his family. Leonida Gorlato died in 1984. Gambetti, as previously mentioned, died in 1988. Amedeo Maretto died in 1991. Enrico Zorzi died in 1992. Finally, Franco Di Bello died in 1998.¹⁹⁹ And yet, a few POWs and others who knew the story of the SMP, including journalists and a few tourists, continued to visit Umbarger and the church. Parishioners Jerri Skarke-Gerber and Elise Friemel-Batenhorst offered their time to those passing through Umbarger who wanted to see the church. But formal tours of St. Mary’s did not begin until the early 2000s.

This thesis has relied heavily on the oral tradition of history maintenance that has been such a central part of the SMP and its legacy. Since its foundation in the early twentieth century, there has been a strong oral tradition within the Umbarger community, as is the case in many rural US communities. Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson argue for the crucial importance of oral history in the field of historical studies.²⁰⁰ They claim that a good oral historian must analyze oral retellings with an objective lens as much as it

¹⁹⁹ “On the Go,” *The Castro County News*, December 10, 1998.

²⁰⁰ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

is possible. Oral historians must also observe the non-verbal aspects of the stories, including the silences, mood and tone, and other aspects beyond just the content of what is said. At the same time, it is necessary to combine the analysis of oral statements with other information and broader historical context to put the spoken words into a rich and complicated perspective. Though a few written studies have been published since WWII, the Umbarger community has relied primarily on oral history as their main catalog of history. As such, many of the stories surrounding the SMP and the Italian artists now exist only in the memories of the living citizens passed down from those who came before. My thesis collected those memories while carefully building historical context through other documents, both written and visual.

I recognize that my interviews conducted with Umbarger locals are somewhat problematic due to the fluidity and unreliability of memory.²⁰¹ Two Umbarger women, for instance, who were teenagers during the SMP and are now in their late eighties, have recounted their stories multiple times since the 1980s, due to the publication of studies and local publicity of the POW reunion tours. And in those decades of relating their experience, their recollections have often changed. Now, seventy-five years after they were part of the SMP, their stories are often muddled with other memories or completely forgotten.²⁰² For example, Skarke-Gerber stated in her 2019 interview with me that “these men never did give us a reason to be scared.”²⁰³ But this could be more of a retrospective outlook, one made by an older woman looking back over the years of friendship and denying that any fear was present in 1945. In contrast, there are multiple accounts of the teenage girls

²⁰¹ Robinson, “Cathedral in the Desert.”

²⁰² Debbie Batenhorst Interview.

²⁰³ Jerri Skarke-Gerber Interview.

sneaking quietly up and down the stairs to get a peek of the Italians, too frightened to get close. The women who worked in the many POW camps across the nation as nurses and secretaries were told not to interact with the prisoners, going so far as to turn and walk in another direction away from the prisoners should they see them coming.²⁰⁴ In Umbarger, other residents recall being “warned not to talk to them” or give them anything.

Although their guard, John Coyle, was lax with them—as discussed above when he left them to hunt jackrabbits with Hollenstein—he reportedly told Brockman and Bracht to keep their teenaged daughters away from the SMP artists, not to let them be alone with each other.²⁰⁵ Though Brockman and Bracht ignored the guard’s advice, Coyle must have had some suspicion that the POWs were too dangerous to be left alone. Therefore, it is important to balance the older generation’s stories with other accounts, collecting as many documents as possible—stated, written, and visual. To be sure, all the photographic evidence offers primary documents that must be analyzed as well, which show a striking closeness between the artists and the townspeople. In this photograph of de Cristofaro and Ormalene Brockman-Artho (fig. 92), we see the two of them standing close together as friends. The photograph shows this close friendship between the two and is a reminder that the Italian artists were strangely but clearly accepted as part of the community. And we must remember too that the works of art of the SMP are themselves visual and material documents that tell a history alongside other forms of evidence.

Under the St. Mary’s Christian Mother’s organization, Skarke-Gerber, and Friemel-Batenhorst began advertising tours of the church and its artworks in 2002. They would act as docents and tour guides, reciting rehearsed “talks” about the history of Umbarger and

²⁰⁴ Camp Herne Museum.

²⁰⁵ Ormalene Brockman-Artho Interview.

the Italian POW artists. In the eleven years that Skarke-Gerber and Friemel-Batenhorst conducted tours, from 2002 to 2013, they recorded 3,700 visitors to the church.²⁰⁶ In 2013, after Friemel-Batenhorst died, and after Skarke-Gerber moved from Umbarger, Debbie Batenhorst and Laurie Artho-Wegman took their places. Today the church sees around twenty tours per year, in addition to all the visitors they host for their annual Sausage Festival fundraiser.²⁰⁷ This includes tours of West Texas A&M art students, as my work during graduate school has brought more local attention to the SMP among members of the university community. I intend to publish at least parts of this thesis in a local historical studies journal, such as the *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* or the *Journal of Southern History*, and foresee a continued if not increased number of visitors to the church into the future.

During the SMP, as discussed above, women emerged at the center of the project. While male priests had instigated the endeavor, and male artists executed it, it was the parish women who formed the heart of the project. Without their volunteer labor, the arrangement never could have taken place. The women who gave their time to procure and prepare food for the artists made their creative labor possible, made their days as prisoners much more comfortable, and might have even saved some of their lives.²⁰⁸ After the completion of the SMP, the women of the parish continued to be at the center of the legacy of the SMP by becoming literal gatekeepers to the church; they organized a docent-led tour project and served as amateur historians of the SMP, and women even today continue to work to promote and preserve the church's history including its artwork. Around 2012, the

²⁰⁶ Debbie Batenhorst Interview.

²⁰⁷ Laurie Wegman Interview.

²⁰⁸ Di Bello to Williams.



Fig. 113 *Annunciation* before restoration

women of St. Mary’s began to see how much the paint of the murals had faded, the evidence of water and fire damage in the art images, as well as several earthquakes that left cracks in the walls. It became clear that restoration work needed to be

done to conserve the art of the SMP (fig. 113). At that time, parish council president Kristi Frerich-Batenhorst—a woman, which should be no surprise to us now—authorized a committee to research the restoration process and to find potential contractors for the work.²⁰⁹ In January of 2012, Sorellas Studio, Chriss Clifford, and Associates began restoring the work. They cleaned and sealed the original work done by the SMP artists and then painstakingly repainted most everything to match as closely as possible to the original.²¹⁰ Such repainting and touchup work is required for mural painting if they are to last beyond a few decades. Mural restoration is commonplace, the most famous example being the Sistine Chapel, which was restored in the late twentieth century.²¹¹

On its most simple level, the SMP provided sustenance for nine hungry POWs. But the project offered so much more as well. It created a sense of hope and friendship during a trying time for many of the POWs incarnated at Camp Hereford and the Umbarger

²⁰⁹ Laurie Wegman Interview.

²¹⁰ Albracht, “Restoring the Beauty of a Panhandle Treasure,” and Chriss Clifford Interview.

²¹¹ Sarah Cascone Preserving the Sistine Chapel Is a Never-Ending Task. See Stunning Behind-the-Scenes Photos of What It Takes,” *Artnet News*, March 28, 2019, sec. Art World, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/conservation-sistine-chapel-1499899>.

community. This friendship remained important to those closest to the project—including Di Bello and the Artho and Brockman families—for the remainder of their lives and carried into the next generation. Today, the SMP remains integral to the Umbarger community identity. Much like the unique shared community the SMP created, the art in St. Mary's continues to represent a blend of wartime history, religious symbolism, traditional Renaissance art, and modern twentieth-century design, and a shared creation produced collaboratively by Italian soldiers and German-American small-town citizens. While POW art was not uncommon in US camps, given as gifts to various community members and kept as souvenirs, it has rarely reached the richness of meaning held in the SMP, obtaining a permanence and quality to identify it as “high art.” Despite the trauma of war and captivity the SMP art offered the POWs and the Umbarger community a counterbalance of hope, and a new sense of community.

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