

PAN-AMERICANISM (DIS) UNITY: Culture & Diplomacy in UNM's "Good Neighbor" Murals

BREANNE ROBERTSON, Greenleaf Visiting Library Scholar

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In the late 1930s and early 1940s, university president James Fulton Zimmerman invited American muralist Kenneth Adams and Mexican modernist Jesús Guerrero Galván to work as artists-in-residence at the University of New Mexico. As part of this agreement, each artist designed and executed a mural to adorn a new campus building.

Adams painted The Three Peoples Mural (1938-1940) for the west wing of Zimmerman Library, and Guerrero Galván completed Union of the Americas (1942-1943) (pictured) for the corridor of Scholes Hall. Both murals address the theme of pan-American solidarity, a key diplomatic aim of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. This paper examines Adams' and Guerrero Galván's murals to reveal divergent national conceptions of and strategies for attaining inter-American unity. By situating these works within the international context of World War II and by analyzing the local circumstances surrounding their commissions, their distinct styles and iconography, and, where possible, their public reception, Robertson unpacks the competing intercultural attitudes expressed in these two murals in order to elucidate prevailing racial ideologies and to explain the limited transformative effect of this diplomatic endeavor.

Breanne Robertson is an Assistant Professor of American Art, Art History, and American Studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT. She visits the University of New Mexico as a Richard E. Greenleaf Visiting Library Scholar during the summer of 2014. Her research interests focus on cross-cultural exchange between the United States and Mexico in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American art. Her current book project, titled "Pan-Americanism, Identity, and Ideology: Mexican Antiquity in the Art of Hemispheric Defense," examines the disparate treatment of Maya and Aztec subject matter in U.S. art in order to elucidate the intersection of U.S.-Latin American foreign policy and U.S. domestic race relations under the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration.