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The Zimmerman Library Mural in the National Register of Historic Places
A Working Paper and Timeline
Samuel Sisneros 8/11/2020

Timeline of the Zimmerman Library building nomination and listing in the National Register:

- Submitted to the National Register - **July 8, 2016**
- Entered into National Register - **Aug. 22, 2016**
- Date of Action by the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office - **Nov. 10, 2016**

The Zimmerman Library is listed in the National Register of Historic Places under the Architectural Classification - Late 19th and Early 20th Century Revivals: Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival. The four-panel Kenneth Adams mural *Three Peoples* is included as a “contributing object” to the Zimmerman Library building. The 2016 nomination wording lacks solid evidence as to why the four canvas oil paintings pasted on to the walls are historically integral to the library building. It mentions the mural is WPA-like in style and focuses on the artist’s credentials and the private funding from the Carnegie Foundation which was separate from New Deal programs’ funding of the library construction.¹ It also offers as evidence of the historical value of the mural the fact that it was protested against during the 1970s, but it leaves out the extensive protests during 1993-1995 and also the more recent objections just before the 2016 nomination submittal (discussed later on in this paper). Despite mentioning the period and style of the artwork, the artist’s bio, funding, and early opposition to the paintings, the nomination wording sidestepped to focus on the usual justification narrative - that these set of paintings are educational.

¹ The Carnegie Foundation is an organization of the Carnegie Corporation. Between 1931-1932, the Carnegie Corporation funded and published a large scientific research project that espoused eugenicist ideas in South Africa and made recommendations for segregation, which many believe was used as a blueprint for apartheid. See: Willoughby-Herard, Tiffany, *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability*, Chapter 4. “The Roots of White Poverty” University of California Press, 2015.

During the onset of the 20th century a possible example of UNM support of Social Darwinism theories of eugenics that could have foreshadowed Zimmerman’s and Adams’ concepts for the mural is found in the work of UNM science professor John Weinzirl, who was instrumental in starting the UNM Science Department (employed 1896 to 1907). He wrote about Native Nuevomexicanos: “*As a rule, these Mexicans are honest, peaceable, hardworking people. They belong almost entirely to the Catholic church, speak and read (so far as they can read at all) the Spanish language, many being unable to comprehend a word of English. These people represent the civilization which established Santa Fe - the second oldest town in the United States. Upon this old civilization our active and energetic American civilization is being superimposed. The two people have almost nothing in common, the one is ragged, dirty and slouchy; the other clean, neat and stylish. The former is slow, lazy and careless; the latter is active, energetic and ambitious. In short the one is unprogressive, the other progressive. The two races do not blend readily, the Mexicans preferring their old time methods and customs. The Mexicans are rapidly becoming only a laboring class. They are hard and faithful workers and as they live upon the cheapest of foods, need little shelter and support no luxuries, no other class can compete with them in the field or labor.*” See: Scrapbook, Folder 2, John Weinzirl Papers, Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico.

Weinzirl’s primary work was on air-born bacteria, which was key in building the tuberculosis industry in New Mexico in the early 1900s. His claims that Native Hispanic and Indian New Mexicans were immune to TB and his promotion of a high and dry climate brought many health seekers to New Mexico, which transferred the disease to native peoples becoming a regional health crisis up until the 1940s.

The nomination states, without any citation, that architecture scholar, Chris Wilson, and others “have argued” that the murals “now function as an educational opportunity whereby students and professors can discuss theory, explore social history, and understand how cultural dominance can be perpetuated through public art.” This phrase in the nomination narrative is not only insulting to members of the cultures depicted in the paintings’ imagery as being dominated, but it also perpetuates the systemic normalcy of White/Anglo-American “cultural dominance.” This concept of teaching how racism is perpetuated in public art with a work of racist public art is contradicting and nonsensical. Furthermore, this entire “educational” concept as justification for the painting’s preservation simply because the mural affords the “educational opportunity” is an unscrupulous form of cultural appropriation and exploitation of underrepresented or misrepresented cultures. This “educational” argument is very weak considering that the mural is in a setting that is well housed with volumes of primary and secondary resources, which are easily available for the study of racism, history, public art, and many other topics.²

The nomination also notes, without giving any examples, that the paintings emphasize social issues. On the contrary, the paintings do not purposely and or explicitly depict any social issue or historical event. The only social issues that have been extrapolated from the paintings are expressions of social hierarchies and the notions of racial purity and White supremacy. Chris Wilson, the authority used in the nomination to favor the paintings’ supposed educational value, stated in 2003 that the Adams library paintings convey racial and gender hierarchies that became “painfully transparent” to UNM students in the 1970s. (see citation in Sisneros, p. 28) Furthermore, the wording in the nomination (and listing) parallels and perpetuates the same exclusionary tricultural myth and an inaccurate racial hierarchy and stereotypical social roles (contributions) that the imagery in the artwork is criticized and protested for. An example being the following nomination wording, written as if the precept of what it claims the murals express was factual and comprehensive - “The theme of the library murals was to illustrate the union of the three predominant cultural groups that have historically resided in the region: Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo-American, emphasizing each group’s contribution to the character of the southwest.”

In addition to the insensitive phrasing about cultural dominance and other inaccurate claims, and the perpetuation of racialized myths and social roles, the nomination failed to note the continued protests after the 1970s - such as the activism primarily between 1993-1995 and the most recent 2016 activism by UNM Libraries staff and by Native American UNM students (Sisneros, 2019). The Native American student group brought up the paintings in their April 29, 2016 “Abolition of Racist Imagery and Cultural

² I have listened in on many class discussions in front of the murals. Although many do discuss the controversy and the oppressive imagery, I have also heard UNM professors and especially outside elementary to high school teachers discuss the paintings in a manner that continues to propagate the tricultural myth and stigmatize the social roles or “contributions” depicted in the artwork. Many of these classes have a high percentage of local and regional Native American and Hispanic students. Often, I have witnessed observers (of all races) shaking their heads looking shocked, bewildered, or insulted – some voicing their objections to themselves or others.

Appropriation” statement. This Statement was read and given to UNM Board of Regents over two months before the July 8, 2016 submittal of the Zimmerman Library building register nomination. The Native American student’s demands presented to the Regents, were advocated by a representative from the UNM Division of Equity and Inclusion (Sisneros, p. 48). Simultaneously, library staff wrote a well thought out statement for the removal of the mural and circulated it for signatures on October 24, 2016 (drafts emailed out even earlier). Their main reasons for calling for the removal of the paintings was that they believe the artwork creates a hostile work and study environment and it is not a viable educational tool. The statement was signed by twenty library staff and faculty and sent on Nov. 2, 2016, to the Dean of the University Libraries. The dean then forwarded it to UNM’s Office of Equal Opportunity, Academic Affairs, and the VP for Equity and Inclusion on Nov. 4, 2016. (Statement and related correspondence in Vertical Files, CSWR.)

The omission in the nomination of the 1993-95 student protests and the 2016 statements by Native American students and from the UNM library staff, does not give an accurate account of the history of the controversy of the paintings. These later protests and statements could have either been included at the time of nomination or later submitted as an addendum to the registration. Or an even more prudent measure would have been for the UNM leadership to halt the nomination since they had in their hands the statements by the two UNM groups during the time the nomination was going through the acceptance process and final action on Nov. 10, 2016.

The wording in the nomination also fails to make a strong connection between the relationship of the mural and the library building, especially during the initial stages of the building’s conception, construction, and operation (see timeline and sections of the nomination below). Although it is not mentioned in the nomination, at least two publications prior to the nomination promote the belief that J.G. Meem early on intended the murals to be art for the library. This belief has become the canon of the mural preservationists. However, a search in the UNM archives did not confirm notations about any works of art for the library walls in the interior floor plans nor mention in early correspondence.³

It is little known that the nomination and listing of the Library building in the national register, with the Adams mural as a contributing object, took place as current as 2016.⁴ The questionable timing and wording of the nomination in conjunction with the long history of objection to the mural and the current national outcry for restorative justice makes the fact that the mural being on the national register is just as problematic as the mural itself. The question now arises - is the mural’s designation in the national register

³ For further discussion and citations see timeline entries [May 4, 1937](#) and [Nov. 9, 1937](#).

⁴ It may be important to note that there could be a conflict of interest given that one of the authors of the register nomination is also the chair of the UNM Board of Regents’ Historic Preservation Committee, the UNM entity that is charged with making decisions about the Mural.

a legally binding status or can the register listing be amended. Perhaps a more important question is - do human/civil rights and equality overrule the register?

References:

Sisneros, Samuel E. 2019. "Student Activism and the Three Peoples Paintings: Challenging Settler Mythology at the University of New Mexico" *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*.

"UNM Adams Mural" vertical file, CSWR, UNM.

Zimmerman Library, Kenneth Adams Paintings – Opposition Material (MSS 1067 BC), Center for Southwest Research and Special Collections, University of New Mexico Libraries.

Historical Timeline of the Planning and Installation of the Adams "Three Peoples" Paintings 1935 - 1940

The following documented timeline of Zimmerman Library's conception, construction, and opening and the installation of the Adams paintings contradicts the narrative that the murals were fully part of the building plans from the "onset." Firstly, the timeline demonstrates that for a year and five months into the construction there was no mention of murals to be painted in the new library until the one mention that there was not going to be murals in the library. On the contrary, when then UNM President, James Zimmerman was seeking Carnegie funding, he still had the idea open to other UNM campus locations for the installation of the Adams paintings. Secondly, it wasn't until a year and nine months after the start of construction that it was announced that Adams would be painting the murals - and halfway through the painting process, it was announced that the paintings were to be purely ornamental. Furthermore, the paintings were not completed and brought to the library to be installed until over two years after the new library's opening. The four panels were painted off-site and stored away until they were pasted onto the walls while no one was around during spring break with no involvement or witnesses by the larger UNM community of the painting and installation processes. This timeline also discredits the earlier installation dates of 1938 and 1939 and dismisses the myth that they were WPA sponsored. The timeline also gives the impression that the Zimmerman Library location for the mural was an afterthought as was perhaps the inclusion of the Adams mural added into the Zimmerman Library's National Register nomination.

- **1935-1938** – Zimmerman Library construction. Library architect John Gaw Meem's interior elevation floor plans contain no notations of any proposed works of art for the west wing four-bay walls. (Citation: University of New Mexico Library Interior floor elevations, 1935, 1936, 1938, Job no. 215, 215-B-2, B-3, Oversize folder, stack 1, drawer 10, John Gaw Meem Drawings and Plans, CSWR) See 1935 plan at <http://econtent.unm.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/meemdraw/id/37/rec/414>
- **May 1, 1936; Dec. 9, 1936** – Daily Lobo announcements of construction of new library. No mention of murals.
- **Feb. 6, 1937** – *Daily Lobo* update of new library construction including a sentence simply saying "There will be no murals in the library." This is an odd notation being that there is no *Daily Lobo* mention previously about a discussion of having a mural or not. Either there was some kind of internal discussion, or it could simply be in reference to the fact that there were two unrelated murals in the old library and there were to be none in the new library.
- **May 1, 1937, Sept. 22, 1937** – *Daily Lobo* updates on the near completion of new library with no mention of murals.
- **May 4, 1937** – Letter from Zimmerman to Meem: Zimmerman urges Meem to "settle the question of the Kenneth Adams murals." No other detail is given of the "question" or location of the murals. Apparently, there was discussion

or a problem that Zimmerman had with Adams and was asking for intervention from Meem. (Citation: John Gaw Meem Job Files, MSS 790BC, Box 13, folder 2, CSWR.) - Audra Belmore, in both of her journal articles "The University of New Mexico's Zimmerman Library" (NMHR, Spring 2013) and "Three Sets of Neal Deal Era Murals at the University of New Mexico" (Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America, vol. 32, Spring 2013), cites letters from Meem to Adams or to PWA to demonstrate that "From the onset Meem planned to include a large-scale set of murals in four recessed bays in the library's great hall." This quote is from Belmore's "The University of New Mexico's Zimmerman Library" article and the citation for her statement is the floor plans from the CSWR John Gaw Meem Drawings and Plans collection (See first item of this timeline). Other citations are given but because they are incomplete or the letters could have been displaced or missing, I was unable to confirm them.

- **Nov. 29, 1937** – Letter from Zimmerman to K.P. Keppel, President of Carnegie Corporation seeking assistance in employing Adams to teach and engage in "painting of murals in two or three of the new buildings which we have just had constructed under the PWA program." Zimmerman further stated - "We have some very fine places for murals in the new Student Union Building, in the new Administration Building, and in our new Library." (Citation: Zimmerman to Keppel, Grant-In-Aid for Resident Artist Kenneth Adams, Carnegie Corp. of New York, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Series III. A.6. N, Box 262, folder 10; Copies in UNMA 028, Facility Planning, box 66, Zimmerman Library folder, CSWR). Zimmerman's request was not specific to the library. Zimmerman and Keppel exchanged several letters after this initial letter also found in the same collection (Dec. 6, 1937; Dec. 21, 1937; Dec. 30, 1937; Jan. 12, 1938, Jan. 20, 1938; August 10, 1938; Aug. 16, 1938). The letters mostly discuss pay and Adams art classes, but none mention a location for the murals. The **Jan. 20, 1938** letter is an award announcement from Keppel for funds to Adams.
- **Feb. 16, 1938** – *Daily Lobo* announcement that Adams will paint murals in new library employed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- **March – May 1938** – *Daily Lobo* announcements that both new and old libraries were opened to the Public. Audra Bellmore gives the official opening date of the library as **April 1 1938** as cited from the "University of New Mexico Bulletin: Twelfth Annual Report of the Librarian, 1937-1938." See: Bellmore, Audra "The University of New Mexico's Zimmerman Library" NMHR, Spring 2013, p.133.
- **Oct 18, 1938** – *Albuquerque Journal* announces Adams as resident artist employed to "decorate" the interior of the library.
- **Oct. 22, 1938** - *Daily Lobo* featured an image of Adams with an announcement that he was going to begin work on the canvas panels and that it would be "several weeks before actual work is begun."
- **Feb. 8, 1939** – *Daily Lobo* announces mural will be painted by Adams and gives specifics about their size and how they are to be fit into place as "purely architectural decoration." The announcement also gives specifics about the canvases and how they were to be attached – "They are to be painted on canvas, which will be attached to the walls. The canvas will have a backing of lead-white and varnish. It will be pressed flat against the wall and then rolled down tight."
- **Oct. 27, 1939** – "Letter of Zimmerman to Keppel (Carnegie Corp.)" mentions two of the panels were completed and were stored in a dark room. He ended the letter by saying "We expect the murals to be finished at the end of this year." (Citation: Zimmerman to Keppel, Grant-In-Aid for Resident Artist Kenneth Adams, Carnegie Corp. of New York, Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries. Series III. A.6. N, Box 262, folder 10; Copies in UNMA 028, Facility Planning, box 66, Zimmerman Library folder, CSWR).
- **March 19, 1940** - *Daily Lobo* notice that the library was to be closed during Easter vacation (Easter Sunday - March 24 in 1940) to "enable Mr. Kenneth Adams to paint several murals in the main lobby and halls of the library." Obviously, they were installed and not actually painted during this time.
- **May 10, 1940** - *Daily Lobo* announcement of "Adams mural Exhibition" to take place Sunday, May 12, 1940 in the library.

Along with the archival documentation presented in this timeline, the following historical photos, dated 1938-1939, offer further evidence that the Zimmerman Library west wing existed and was in operation for over two years irrespective of the Adams paintings.



B&W photo, dated 1938. (UNMA #028) Facilities Planning Job Files, Box 70, West Wing Fixtures folder, CSWR, Zimmerman Library, UNM. B&W photo, dated 1938. (UNMA #028) Facilities Planning Job Files, Box 70, West Wing Fixtures folder, CSWR, Zimmerman Library, UNM.



East wall with four recessed bays in the "Great Hall", West Wing, Zimmerman Library. B&W photos, dated 1939, (PICT 000-675) John Gaw Meem collection of non-job-specific photos, Box 10, CSWR, Zimmerman Library, UNM. Bay dimensions: 10.5 ft. long by 5.5 ft. high at the sides and 7.25 ft. high at the center.

Sections of National Register of the Zimmerman Library building that discuss the Kenneth Adams paintings:

NPS Form 10-902a
(8-86)

GMB No. 1024-0218

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

Section _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 16000549


Date Listed: 08/22/2016

Zimmerman Library
Property Name

Bernalillo NM
County State

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

_____
Signature of the Keeper

11/10/2016
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination:

Classification:
The Resource Count columns on the cover page were transposed. The correct count should read: 1 contributing building, 2 contributing sites, and 2 contributing objects, as described correctly in the narrative description on page 7. There are no non-contributing resources.

Summary Paragraph

Zimmerman Library, the main library for the University of New Mexico, is located in the center of campus in Albuquerque in Bernalillo County, New Mexico. The Spanish-Pueblo Revival-style library is one of the largest and finest buildings by New Mexico master architect John Gaw Meem. Constructed between 1936 and 1938 with PWA and WPA funds, the library is organized around the Great Hall, with three reading rooms projecting from the north end of the hall and two on the south end. A nine-story fire-proof stacks tower with vertical bands of windows and decorative spandrel panels was designed to hold 225,000 volumes. Meem infused the Spanish-Pueblo Revival design and interior furnishings and fixtures with Native American and Hispanic designs by local craftsmen. Four murals in the Great Hall depict the Anglo, Hispanic, and Native American cultures in New Mexico. The nomination includes the Castetter Succulent Garden and the WPA Grove of evergreens. The east side of the library had been planned for expansion, and in 1966 the Albuquerque firm Ferguson, Stevens, Mallory and Pearl completed a three-story addition. In 1973, Dean, Hunt, Krueger and Associates completed a second major addition on the east side of the 1966 addition. In 1991-1993, the Albuquerque architect Van H. Gilbert with the Boston firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson, and Abbott remodeled the interior, including spaces in the Meem library.

Sections 9-end page 4

Contributing and Noncontributing Resources

Zimmerman Library is counted as one contributing building.
The WPA Grove of evergreens is counted as one contributing site.
The Castetter Succulent Garden is counted as one contributing site.
The four murals in the Great Hall are counted as one contributing object.
The interior and exterior furnishings, including tables, chairs, and light fixtures, and hardware, are counted as one contributing object.

There are no noncontributing resources associated with this National Register nomination.

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Zimmerman Library is eligible for listing in the National Register at the state level of significance under Criterion C in the area of architecture under the Multiple Property Documentation Form, "Buildings of John Gaw Meem" as an example of the associated property type, public and institutional buildings. The library is among the largest and finest work of New Mexico master architect John Gaw Meem, who designed a state-of-the-art academic library in the Spanish Pueblo-Revival style, with a fireproof stacks tower and reading rooms, which are reminiscent of the interiors of Spanish mission churches. The Zimmerman Library is eligible for listing in the National Register at the state level of significance under Criterion C in the area of art because of the four "tricultural" murals in the Great Hall by Kenneth Miller Adams and the furnishings, fixtures, and hardware, many designed by Meem in the Spanish Colonial Revival style and handmade by local craftsman, harmonize with the design of the library. The Zimmerman Library is eligible for listing in the National Register at the state level of significance under Criterion C in the area of landscape architecture because the Castetter Succulent Garden is among the first succulent gardens in New Mexico and in the Southwest. The Zimmerman Library is eligible for listing in the National Register at the state level of significance under Criterion A in the area of education because the library has served as the principal library for University of New Mexico students and residents of the state. The Zimmerman Library is eligible for listing in the National Register at the state level of significance under Criterion A in the area of politics/government because the library, funded by the New Deal programs, the PWA and WPA, represents one of the highest achievements in New Mexico in architecture, art, decorative arts, and landscape architecture during the Great Depression, when only the federal government had the ability to fund large public works projects across the nation.

Murals by Kenneth Miller Adams (1937-1938)

The four murals in the Great Hall in Zimmerman Library were funded through a grant by the Carnegie Corporation, a program sponsoring Artists-in-Residence programs at universities throughout the country during the Great Depression. The artist, Kenneth Miller Adams, arrived in Taos with his art professor, Andrew Dasburg, in 1926. Adams, at twenty-nine years of age became the final and youngest member to join the Taos Society of Artists, one of the most distinctive schools of art in the U.S. in the 1920s. Adams studied in France during the 1920s and was influenced by French modernist painters, especially Cezanne. During his career he was funded by the PWA and he received several commissions for public art. While Adams was working on the Zimmerman murals through a Carnegie Corporation grant as an Artist in Residence at the University of New Mexico, he was offered a faculty position at the university, where taught until his retirement in 1964.

¹⁰ Tey Marianna Nunn, *Nun Sin Nombre: Hispana and Hispano artists of the New Deal Era*. (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 78-79.

¹¹ Nunn, 86.

Sections 9-end page 15

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service / National Register of Historic Places Registration Form
NPS Form 10-900 OMB No. 1024-0018

Zimmerman Library
Name of Property

Bernalillo County, NM
County and State

In his murals in the Great Hall, Kenneth Miller Adams worked on canvas, which he affixed to four prepared plaster walls with a lead sealing solution. The four murals are situated along the east wall of the Delivery Room, as it was originally called. The murals are similar in tone, design, and execution to other WPA-funded murals of the period, with an emphasis upon social issues and the democratic spirit in which people come together and work toward a common goal. WPA murals were strongly influenced by the socialist art that was emerging in Eastern Europe and Mexico. The Zimmerman murals derive from this artistic tradition, with flat, two-dimensional representations of people interacting through work, with an environment that reflects the social climate and regional history. The theme of the library murals was to illustrate the union of the three predominant cultural groups that have historically resided in the region: Native American, Hispanic, and Anglo-American, emphasizing each group's contribution to the character of the Southwest.

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of the Native American, Chicano, and women's movements, the Zimmerman murals became controversial. Critics noted that the murals displayed racial, cultural, and gender biases in how they presented the Native American and Hispanic communities as stereotypes. The Native Americans represent primitive artistry and the Hispanics are engaged in agriculture with primitive technology. Many female figures are portrayed in kneeling, subservient postures. The mural representing the Anglo contribution to the region includes blond-haired males with technical and scientific equipment. In the final mural, the blond-haired Anglo male stands in the center of a group that includes a Native American and Hispanic male on either side. The Native American and Hispanic men are looking toward the Anglo male, whose gaze looks out toward the future.¹² The final panel was twice subject to vandalism in the 1970s. Architectural Historian Chris Wilson and others have argued that these murals now function as an educational opportunity whereby students and professors can discuss critical theory, explore social history, and understand how cultural dominance can be perpetuated through public art.