

THE FRANCES PERKINS CENTER

CARRYING ON THE WORK OF THE FIRST FEMALE CABINET SECRETARY, PRINCIPAL AUTHOR OF THE NEW DEAL, AND DEDICATED ADVOCATE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, ECONOMIC FAIRNESS, AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKING PEOPLE EVERYWHERE

Missing: One Three-Year-Old Labor History Mural, Whereabouts Unknown

The Frances Perkins Center deplores the secret removal of the Maine Department of Labor's mural depicting Maine workers through the centuries and asks that it be safely returned.

March 29, 2011 (Newcastle, Maine)—Frances Perkins, the nation's longest serving secretary of labor and the first woman to be a U.S. Cabinet secretary, was a supporter of the arts. She was also a daughter of Maine, having inherited a beloved family homestead that has been in the Perkins family since the 1750s. It's ironic that a mural installed in the Maine Department of Labor, which portrayed Perkins along with the workers whose lives she helped improve through passage of such measures as unemployment insurance, minimum wage legislation, child labor laws, and Social Security, would be removed from view by the Maine governor.

Later this year, a new edition of *The Roosevelt I Knew* by Frances Perkins will be published by Penguin Classics. In the book, Perkins describes how the WPA art projects of the 1930s came about: a "family member of a Cabinet secretary" suggested that the arts be included in the Works Progress Administration. In fact, that relative was Perkins's teenaged daughter, Susanna. Perkins recognized the validity of Susanna's suggestion, and joined with others advocating for the inclusion of artists, performers, musicians, and writers in the WPA, an idea that President Roosevelt also strongly supported. The Federal Art Project was born, and during the Great Depression, it created jobs for more than 5,000 artists. More than 225,000 works of art were created for the American people.

Many of the works were murals in public places. Some still remain, three-quarters of a century later. These often depict scenes from local history; others portray factory workers, or farm laborers. The intent was to show all sorts of people in their everyday lives, to honor the history and work of the nation.

Harking back to those WPA murals, in 2008 the Maine Department of Labor commissioned a mural for its new lobby. Painted by Maine artist Judy Taylor, and paid for by tax dollars through federal funding, the mural depicted the history of centuries of Maine workers. Evidently, after viewing the mural, a visiting businessperson faxed an anonymous complaint. As a result, one week ago, Maine's governor decreed that the mural would be removed as soon as a new home was found for it.

On Monday, it was gone. Shockingly, the mural was removed over the weekend. There were no witnesses. No new home has been announced. The government of Maine, a state that prides itself on its artistic tradition and knows well the monetary value of its Creative Economy, has now "disappeared" a work of art.

What remains are the questions. Where has the mural been taken? Why is it no longer on public display? What was the urgency for its removal?

Frances Perkins's grandson and only surviving descendent, Tomlin Perkins Coggeshall, also wonders, "Was the artwork properly removed? Is it in a safe place, suitable for the storage of art?" He is especially sensitive to this issue, as Susanna's son. His father was the well-known painter, Calvert Coggeshall.

The Frances Perkins Center is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Newcastle, Maine, at Perkins's beloved historic homestead. The center celebrates Perkins's accomplishments and seeks to carry on her commitment to economic security and social justice.

"This is a chilling act," said Barbara Burt, executive director of the Frances Perkins Center. "We are concerned about the condition of the art. We are also aghast at the message of censorship that this action conveys. Removing this artwork is an attempt to erase the significance of Frances Perkins and the heroic struggles of Maine workers. We believe that the mural should be returned to the place for which it was specifically created, at the Department of Labor."

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