

The Artist Tells the Whole Story

The controversy over the post office mural is detailed here in full for the first time, with all the relevant documents

By Rockwell Kent

“PUERTO-RICOMIUNUN ILAPTICNUM! KE HA CHIMMEULAKUT ENGAY-SCAACUT, AMNA KETCHIMMI AT-TUNIM CHULI WAPTICTUN ITTICLEORAATIGUT!”

On Saturday, September 4, two paintings, measuring 6 feet 6 inches by 13 feet each, were mounted in one of the corridors of the Federal Post Office building in Washington. One of the paintings was an Arctic scene, and showed groups of Eskimos attending the departure of an airmail plane; there were reindeer and dog sledges laden with mail. The other scene was tropical. Its foreground was a level, sandy floor. Beyond this stretched the ocean. Groups of Negro figures were shown either waving farewell to a departing seaplane, carrying sacks of mail up the embankment of the shore, or showing eager, light-hearted excitement over a letter that presumably had just been received. A mail-carrier, white, occupied the central, dominating position of the picture. He was mounted on horseback.

The group whose interest was centered on the letter consisted entirely of women. One, presumably the recipient of the letter, held it playfully away from the importunate curiosity of the others. As she held it, its text was clearly readable to any spectator of the picture who might have the curiosity to approach close enough to read its normal script. That text has been quoted at the beginning of this story.

Because it is here printed, rather than written by hand, and because its flow is uninterrupted by the black thumb which in the picture made its reading somewhat difficult, it is to be much more easily read than in the picture. And on this printed page it is infinitely more conspicuous. In fact, in the picture, the letter occupied so relatively small and inconspicuous an area, that of the many people—several of them officials or employees of the Treasury Department's Procurement Division which had sponsored the paintings—few even looked close enough to see the writing, and none spoke of it. Not even when, on that same Saturday, the paintings were illuminated by floodlights for the taking of the official photographs, did anyone concern himself with the text of the letter.

On the following Tuesday, the event of two new paintings in the Federal Post Office building was given to the press, and photographs were distributed for publication.

The artist, meanwhile, heartened by the official praise which had been bestowed upon him, rejoicing in the assurances that the speak-

easy lights of the corridor would soon be replaced by lights of adequate power, and confident of at last receiving not only those payments for his work which were already long overdue, but the final payment, returned to his home in the Adirondacks.

He needed the money, for his work on the decorations had of necessity been prolonged over a period of two years. No one had regretted this prolongation more than himself, but the reasons for it, the prevailing low rate of compensation for federal art projects, had made it impossible to lay more remunerative work entirely aside. Moreover, the research and travel that the subjects of the painting necessitated had occupied much time and cost much money.

Figure, if you like, the cost of a trip to Cape Prince of Wales in northern Alaska, of a trip to Puerto Rico, of several trips from the Adirondacks to Washington and back; add to this the wages of an assistant, the cost of materials, of canvas, stretchers made to order, of packing, of transportation, the pay of a crew of men for mounting the decorations, the cost of the materials for that mounting; deduct this from the contract price for the two paintings, a total of \$3000. It will be clear that little was now left as compensation for the many months of time that the artist himself had spent on the pictures.

But what of that? He, like many others who had undertaken work for the government, had been primarily actuated by the thought of serving so profoundly worthy an employer, his government, and, let us say, by the thought of the honor that such high employment conferred.

Perhaps only artists can know what relief and freedom is felt after the completion of long and arduous work. The painter—let me call him “I”—did feel it strongly. I got into my car and drove away for three or four day's change of scene.

Meanwhile, however, a keen-eyed Washington reporter was attracted by the strange language of the letter's text. “Puerto-Ricomunun”: she knew Puerto Rico. These words, whatever they should prove to mean, might be of special interest to herself, might even hold a story. That the language was not Spanish she knew. It was therefore presumably as unintelligible to the Negro girls as to herself.

Copying the words, she carried the message first to Gustav Verveeck, of the Post Office Department, who is known to speak ten languages fluently and knows something about

most others. He said it looked a little bit like Finnish. A pretty Finnish girl from the Postal Savings Bureau was brought in. “Not Finnish,” she pronounced. Mr. Verveeck, now interested, called in some other experts. “Must be Haitian patois,” said one. “Aztec,” guessed another. But it was decided that I didn't know any Aztec.

A bright young man now had a thought. “It must be Eskimo,” he said, “for Kent, I think, speaks Eskimo.”

With that cue, the reporter dashed off to see Dr. Ales Hrdlicka, the Smithsonian anthropologist, a learned man. But he denied all knowledge of the Eskimo language, and guessed that nobody in the Smithsonian Institution knew anything about it. The reporter then tried the Department of State; Alaskan Delegate Anthony Dimond; the office of Indian affairs; the Division of Territories and Island Possessions. She returned to the Smithsonian and tried Mr. Alexander Wetmore. He suggested Mr. Henry B. Collins, Jr., of the ethnology division.

Mr. Collins suspected that the reporter's copy might be in error. Perhaps it was, although the letter had been scrutinized through a magnifying glass. Mr. Collins got interested. He fetched two Eskimo dictionaries. He looked up whole words; he looked up separate syllables. He began to discover a meaning. “‘Ke’ means ‘Go ahead’ in Eskimo,” he said. “If it's in Eskimo there is just one man who can translate it. He knows every dialect and every way of recording the language.”

“Where is he?” cried the reporter, reaching for the letter and her hat and cape.

“In Denmark,” said Mr. Collins.

They tried to reach me at my home; no luck. The reporter then tried Stefansson. Why Stefansson had not been thought of earlier I don't know. He is the outstanding authority in America on everything concerning the Arctic and its inhabitants. Living years among the Eskimos, he has acquired, I believe, a thorough knowledge of the basic principles of the language in general, and a speaking familiarity with many of its dialects. So Stefansson—not easily, we are told, for there are many dialects of Alaskan Eskimo—translated it as follows:

“To the peoples of Puerto Rico, our friends: Go ahead, let us change chiefs. That alone can make us equal and free.”

When I returned from my short vacation, I was told that, since eighteen hours before, the press had been telephoning for a statement from me about the message. I learned that

sensational news about that message had been published. Clippings began to pour in from all over.

"Shocking! Eskimo Urges Puerto Rico to Toss Off the Yoke of Uncle Sam," was an early headline in a Washington paper. "Eskimo Inscription Urging Free Puerto Rico Intrigues Capitol"; "Revolt Plea Seen in Kent's Murals," read New York papers.

The tone of most of the editorials and articles which began to appear was one of amusement, though there was an attempt made by a section of the press to give the story a more somber tone. Accordingly, on September 14, I wrote Forbes Watson of the Procurement Division the following letter:

September 14, 1937.

Mr. Forbes Watson
Section of Painting and Sculpture
Procurement Division
Treasury Department
Washington, D. C.

Dear Forbes:

It is too bad the newspaper people's interest in getting a translation to my mural letter came at a moment when I was away from home and out of reach. The translation that I would have given would have been prosaic enough to have robbed it of all news value. The first call that got through to me was from, I believe, United Press. They had by then gotten Stefansson's translation.

That translation was literally accurate but they

alleged a Stefansson interpretation which I instantly repudiated. I am relieved to find by press notices that have reached me in the mail that Stefansson had said nothing of the sort. This calling upon Puerto Ricans to start a revolution is nonsense. As far as the words are concerned, Stefansson's actual interpretation was absolutely correct. He has been quoted as follows:

"Perhaps instead of the word 'chiefs' you might use some such word as 'guides.' The Eskimos never had chiefs. They had no government except public opinion. They did those things which their neighbors approved. You might interpret the message to mean that they should change their form of government. This would not necessarily imply revolution or violence. It might, for example, imply such a change as we had in the United States when Roosevelt defeated Hoover for President. That was revolution, but not violent revolution.

"It might easily imply that they should seek independence, and the establishment of their own republic. It might merely mean a change in the people who now govern them. Since the Eskimos really had no government except public opinion, and since the idea of 'chiefs,' recently imported into the language, is new, they do not fully understand all the distinctions we might make in the variations of such words as chiefs, guides, governors, government, and forms of government."

Stefansson particularly emphasized that no encouragement to violence or revolution could be interpreted into the message, as this is foreign to the Eskimo idea. But, he admitted, the letter is non-committal on the subject of how Puerto Ricans can be "equal and free."

The only word that I would change in the Stefansson translation is the word "chiefs." I would interpret it as "leaders." Puerto Rico is, of course, much in the news in recent months because of its growing movement for independence, a movement in which, despite the stupidity of some of our officials, they have not only the sympathy of most of our public but have even had the administration's assurance that it would be submitted to a plebiscite.

As Stefansson has said, nothing but a peaceful settlement of disputes is comprehensible to the Eskimo mind. That greeting from the most peace-loving race on the globe, our farthest northern citizens, to our farthest southern citizens has unfortunately suffered misinterpretation by our blood-thirsty, fire-eating, white race.

Faithfully yours,

Meanwhile, news in the press had subsided. People had had their little laugh. As news the matter was closed, but not, apparently for Señors Santiago Iglesias, resident commissioner of Puerto Rico, and Rafael Martinez Nadal, president of the Puerto Rican Senate. For reasons, apparently, of career—to advertise themselves, it would seem, to that particular Puerto Rican group which numbers their constituents—they must come to the front. "Puerto Ricans Draft Protest over Mural," reads a headline of September 14.

"The painting does not represent Puerto Rico at all," Mr. Iglesias said, 'and I want to



The Puerto Rico panel. The letter in the center contains the message that caused the controversy.

World Wide Photo

disabuse the minds of people who may have been misled to thinking it symbolizes our culture. It is nothing but perverse propaganda against our country.'

"Rafael Martinez Nadal, president of the Puerto Rican Senate, declared the mural was a calumny and insult because it depicted 'a bunch of half-naked African bushmen' receiving an air-mail letter from the Eskimos."

Mr. Iglesias and Senator Martinez Nadal said, according to the *New York Times*, "The message was of no significance politically in the Island. It was the subject matter of the picture to which they objected. 'The mural is not Puerto Rican at all,' Mr. Iglesias declared. 'Caramba!' exclaimed the president of the Island's Senate. 'It is an insult! It must be wiped out. I protest!'"

So far, it will be noted, nothing offensive or inflammatory or of political significance had been discovered in the text. Was it perhaps in the course of preparing his protest with the shallow and irresponsible purpose only of concocting objections that Mr. Iglesias attacked the text; or didn't he attack it at all, and was the stand subsequently taken by the Procurement Division of their own contrivance, cooked up as a technical excuse for rejecting the murals in response to the race-hatred jingoism of the Puerto Rican patriots?

At any rate, Secretary Morgenthau replied as follows:

When the preliminary designs for this work were approved by the National Commission of Fine Arts, copy attached, no message appeared on any of the letter mail included in any of the designs. Since the artist did include a message, in an Eskimo dialect, in the finished mural, which constitutes a departure from the original intent, the translation and purpose of the message is now being investigated by the Procurement Division.

It is regrettable that the Procurement Division had already misinformed their superior, for on the only full-sized sketch submitted by me, there *had* appeared a written message. And now, it appears, the Procurement Division has at last embarked upon its silly quest for what the writing means. In reply to Mr. Iglesias's publicity, the *New York Times* published the following:

"I am not one to stand upon what are called 'artists' rights,'" Mr. Kent wrote. "I would like to please my public. Although my decorations as they now appear in Washington were made in faithful adherence to the sketches approved by the Treasury Department, I will, with the Treasury Department's approval, paint in an adequate number of assorted members of the Camara de Representantes.

"I'll guarantee to make those portraits so that nobody can mistake them, and I'll do the whole thing absolutely free of charge. Moreover, I'll represent the president of the Senate himself as in the act of tearing up that message of goodwill to the people of Puerto Rico." The artist added, however, that "painting the members of the Camara de Representantes, as their faces look out at me from a two-page, halftone spread, might with good cause give some offense to those Puerto Ricans who are not politicians."

That there might be no misunderstanding

Two Poems

I

Autumn Song for Anti-Fascists

The leaves come down with little grieving,

Soft in the season of unleafing.

Secure in change, in temporary

Death, the old sad heart is merry.

Delicate death, and leaf-stem pliant. . . .

General death no nature fears,

Indifferent to tears.

Grief in the world strides like a giant.

Grief's mask, his bully forehead bare

Comes catapulting close, his stare

Frightens to stone the old and ill.

Here the mould of green, the chill

Comforts the pulse, the black heart-ache,

So that we listen while the bland trees
shake

And put aside all fear

In the innocent withering of the year.

The brave assault the bully, bleed

Red on grasses and dying weed,

And redden the trampled ground.

Soldier dead, sleep sound.

Leaves of pale yellow softly pile

Where we put you, single-file.

II

To Sam Levinger, Milton Herndon, Ben Leider, and Many Others

The front of trouble draws

Our best, and there they die.

O Magnet, O great Cause

That drew these young ones, I

Feel in their death, the pull,

The finality they add.

No fighter ever had

A grave so powerful.

O Magnet, O great Cause.

GENEVIEVE TAGGARD.

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by the Procurement Division of the reasons of my having made a further statement to the press, nor of my thoughts about the whole controversy, I wrote Mr. Forbes Watson on September 23, the following letter:

Dear Forbes:

I want to compliment you and your department on the dignified silence that you have maintained throughout this teapot tempest.

I don't subscribe to a press-clipping bureau, but I am being deluged by press articles and editorials in English and Spanish. We have letters from Puerto Rican patriots and Puerto Rican societies, the whole salted in about the proportion of salt to soup by criticism from what I take to be the Ameri-

can sugar interests. One Martinez Nadal, president, I believe, of the Puerto Rican Senate, expressed himself in such terms that I simply had to hit back. I wrote a letter that was the basis of a column in the *New York Times* yesterday. I send you a copy of that letter.

My offer to the offended Puerto Ricans is, of course, genuine. I doubt, however, that it will be accepted. The impression that I get from the newspaper reports and editorials that have been sent to me is that the journalists, with their tongues in their cheeks, are having a lot of fun with a story that appears to have news value. It definitely has news value; and that, just on general principles, is a good thing for art. It is heartening that people nowadays are taking art to be controversial. I mean that the masses are beginning to get excited about this or that in a picture. The furor over the Rivera decorations at Rockefeller Center was good for art. It's good for art when a society woman attacks a prize-winning picture, as, according to *Life*, one did attack Doris Lee's picture. It's a good thing that there's a stir about the naked women mural in the Postmaster General's office. And it's a good thing for art that this excitement has occurred over my Puerto Rican mural.

We know, of course, that the occasion for the controversy is so trivial or at least so minute as to make it laughable. The press seems to know that too. Americans have a sense of humor. I realize, however, that this may be putting you people on the spot. What can we do about it? I am assuming that there must be some fire behind the smoke that the newspapers are blowing about. It's hard for me to believe that Postmaster General Farley or Secretary Morgenthau will seriously turn to the department and inform you that something must be done about this scandal. Yet you may be put in just such a position. I am wondering what you'll do.

The charges against the mural seem to be of two kinds. The indignation expressed by Señor Martinez Nadal is based on the picture misrepresenting Puerto Rico. Well, it happens not to misrepresent Puerto Rico, as I can affirm by a few dozen Leica photographs which I took there. The silly pride of a white man feeling that his country and his race have been maligned by picturing Negroes as among its inhabitants is just as foolish as if white sourdoughs of Alaska should protest the Alaskan picture on the same grounds. If I painted the Negroes out it would be unfair to those United States citizens in Puerto Rico who happen to be of African blood. If I mixed in whites, mingled a number of them, let us say, with the group of Negro girls, what an offense that would be!

The other attack is based as we know, on the possible interpretation of a minute bit of writing in an obscure Eskimo dialect on a picture of a piece of paper. Obviously, something has to be on that piece of paper. I didn't like to put on a text as trivial as, say, this: "Dear Marie, I am well. Hope you and the kids in Puerto Rico are the same. Best wishes, George Aghupuk." (It would have to be in Eskimo, of course, because my idea is that our great American mail service has brought a letter clear from the Arctic circle to the tropics.) I can imagine the American taxpayer as saying, "What! Are we running into a deficit every year for the mere sake of carrying around such tripe as this?" No, there had to be writing. There is writing on every paper surface in the picture that would allow it except the little bit that is fluttering onto the ground at the extreme right of the Puerto Rican picture. I even signed my name in the form of an addressed package in the Puerto Rican picture and an addressed envelope in the Alaskan picture. And, in fact, in the full-sized detail sketch for the Alaskan picture. Why in thunder you people, see-