



8-16-2012

"...our hearts tell us there is something else out there.": Prowling the Halls of the MIB

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rudy, John M., "'...our hearts tell us there is something else out there.': Prowling the Halls of the MIB" (2012). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 119.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/119>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

"...our hearts tell us there is something else out there.": Prowling the Halls of the MIB

Abstract

In the basement corridor of the Main Interior Building in Washington, D.C. is the most beautiful painting I've even seen. I've gotten the chance on a couple of occasions, while visiting the Department of the Interior Headquarters for meetings and whatnot for work to wander down outside of the cafeteria to see the mural. It is pure beauty, mostly forgotten and ignored by the folks who work in that building everyday. I get these weird looks while I stand in awe of the massive canvas, like I shouldn't stop and stare. I don't care. I take pictures. I gawk. My mouth hangs agape. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Washington DC, Lincoln Memorial, Marian Anderson

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

Creative Commons License

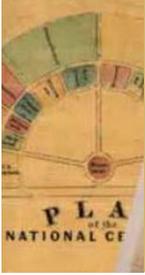
Creative

Commons
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)
License

Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com

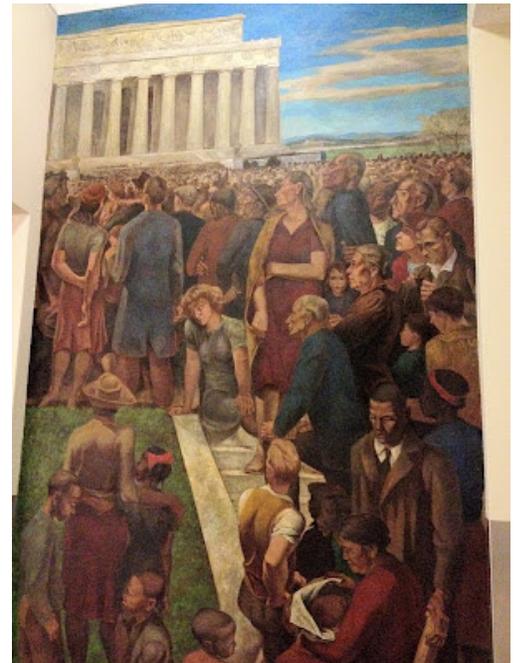


"...our hearts tell us there is something else out there.": Prowling the Halls of the MIB

THURSDAY, AUGUST 16, 2012

In the basement corridor of the Main Interior Building in Washington, D.C. is the most beautiful painting I've even seen. I've gotten the chance on a couple of occasions, while visiting the Department of the Interior Headquarters for meetings and whatnot for work to wander down outside of the cafeteria to see the mural. It is pure beauty, mostly forgotten and ignored by the folks who work in that building everyday. I get these weird looks while I stand in awe of the massive canvas, like I shouldn't stop and stare. I don't care. I take pictures. I gawk. My mouth hangs agape.

An Incident in Contemporary American Life by Mitchell Jamieson, installed in 1942, is my favorite painting. And true to form, my love has as much to do with the subject as the art. The floor-to-ceiling mural, so vivid you could step into it's muted colors, is an amazing window into the past. And that moment is a quintessentially American day in 1939 when Harold Ickes stood up for equality of opportunity. He offered up the Lincoln Memorial as an altar of freedom from which Marian Anderson would sing after the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let her use their stage because of the color of her skin.



But Ickes and Anderson have nothing to do with this painting. If you look at [this massive image of the painting from the DOI website](#), you can see that the black songbird and the Secretary are specks on the stage in the distance.

The painting is about the act of listening, of observing. The painting is about the people, the ordinary people, who witness grand moments in history. They're white, they're black. Unlike the crowd [at the dedication of that vast temple to liberty](#), the crowd Anderson's concert was integrated. And in each face, a story starts to bubble to the surface. This man looks on in hope, that one bows his head in sorrow. This woman eagerly listens to the wafting music, that gazes into the eyes of her child. Is she dreaming of a future? Or is she fearing that the world he grows up in won't be much different than the one she has?

History is made by people, not the ones on stages, but the ones in the crowds. And every member of that crowd has a story. A painting is not an image, it is only paint on canvas in coordinated brush

strokes. The mural of history is exactly the same. If we pause to look at all those brush strokes at once, give them all their individual due in the grand larger picture, history becomes beautiful and complete.

And if we put our noses right up to that canvas, like I did last time I was in the basement outside of the cafeteria, and look at one of those simple brushstroke, it too speaks volumes.

