

"GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY LIGHT"

A Mural
by
LEO KATZ



One of the One Hundred and Fourteen Panels
Which Make Up the Mural

On exhibition in the
JOHNS-MANVILLE BUILDING
A CENTURY OF PROGRESS EXPOSITION
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, U. S. A.

1933



COLD

HEAT

SOUND

MOTION

"GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY LIGHT" . . .

An explanation of the Leo Katz Mural in the Johns-Manville Building.

This work, which combines abstract symbolism and brutal realism, has a message, a significance which is best described in the artist's own words. We quote him verbatim in the following paragraphs—dictated as he worked in his Englewood, N. J., studio.

"Originally my theme was, 'The control of nature is the answer to the creative prayer of Genius.' But current conditions altered this. Right now mankind is sadly in need of leadership and of light. So after much thought I evolved this theme, and this is my message: Let the prayer of our time be, 'Give us this day our daily light.' Ample bread is assured in all seasons. Give us now the light!

The Cold Section

"The Monster of Cold, with its expression of hypnotizing horror, its feeling of power and age and cruelty, is a giant astride a horse that struggles to get upon its feet. In the background is a figure, floating through the air,

freezing the water into enormous icicles with its breath. The other figures symbolize the human qualities capable of surviving in the presence of the Monster. These are love and charity—the mother and child—and hope and courage, symbolized in the explorer. The seals and the polar bear represent the adaptability of Life which also fights for survival in the presence of Cold.

Heat

"From time immemorial the dragon has been a symbol of the universal fire, heat, both as the destroyer and the guardian of life.

"The central group of the heat section represents its human aspects, the passions in blind, orgiastic motions. The next two figures express the inevitable infernal suffering—the man in wild despair and pain, the woman in silent agony. Heat the destroyer.

Sound

"This section concentrates upon the painful aspects of noise (sound uncontrolled). I tried

to treat this from the psychological point of view by symbolizing the primitive urges to violent noise.

"The first figure in front of the microphone represents the insane screaming of the hysteric who, though he puts his fingers into his own ears, yet needs the assurance of an audience.

"The following face, near the base line, represents wailing, stupefied grief. The next head just screams. The two figures above stand for the bucolic urge to make the maximum of sound—by using the magnifying powers of the enormous brass and the three pipes.

"These primitive impulses lead over to the jungle sounds of the savage beating the drum with melancholy monotony, the trumpeting of the elephant and the open mouth of the hippopotamus. Between them is a cannon firing, symbolizing the lowest level of the jungle urge in man.

"This leads us over to the fourth section of

Mechanical Motion

"The details in this section represent different useful machines, symbolizing material progress, which, properly used, will defy the robot. Cor-

responding to the monster of cold on the left we find a huge artificial monster, a super-robot, symbolizing the nightmare of soulless mechanization which, without the balance of inner light, threatens to dominate humanity. These machines, by the way, I painted from studies made in the sponsor's factories.

The Central Figure

"This went through several phases during the process of execution. The idea of putting a figure, symbolizing humanity, in perfect control of the forces of nature was rejected because it was basically untrue. We have not yet reached the point where we know how to exert control for the benefit of all humanity. Obviously we are not in perfect control.

"As much as we have achieved of a certain power over the forces of nature we owe to the sacrifices of an endless chain of creative geniuses throughout the ages. So the theme became, 'The control of Nature's forces is the answer to the creative prayer of genius.' The great philosopher Kant, said: 'Genius is the individual through whom nature dictates her laws to humanity.'

"From a study of the history of genius we find

that, no matter how proud and overbearing some of them may have acted in life, they received the benediction of inspiration only after humble, silent meditation.

"So, still adhering to my original theme, I felt that the Genius of Mankind had to be depicted in a heroic gesture of prayer, kneeling on hard angular ground, ready to receive some rays of light as an answer to frantic need.

"During the work a hammer and a shovel, symbols of labor, and a few smokestacks without smoke, were added spontaneously. This broadened the meaning of the figure and, as it were, brought it up to the minute so that finally its meaning grew beyond the original conception of genius. It became the personified, desperate cry of our time; the cry for enlightenment which now emanates from all strata of humanity.

"It is curious how a picture has a life of its own and evolves during the work far beyond the artist's original plans. First meant to represent that special concept of creative genius, this figure finally came to represent the universal cry of our day, when the leading minds are trembling for the very survival of our civilization. So much knowledge and technical equipment seems to turn into a fatal trap that will destroy us unless we become ready to receive those light rays

which could guide us from chaos towards a true mastery of the forces within ourselves and of the instruments we have brought into existence.

"This is the message I put into the mural and which I finally crystallized into the inscription, 'Give us this day our daily light.' It is my hope that this will become a part of the standard prayer of the new era, whose terrific labor pains we are now experiencing."

The Background

The rest of the mural consists of a background shading from an intense, saturated blue at the two ends through lighter blues to the center of brilliant light above the main figure. This central light represents not only the optical climax of the picture—it is the psychological focal point of the whole room.

In the structure which houses the mural, Leo Katz, the artist, and Ely Jacques Kahn, the architect, cooperated to demonstrate the possibility of a complete symphonic composition of a room. The usual procedure is to erect a building and, after the architecture is finished and sometimes has stood for a considerable number of years, some of the empty wall spaces are covered with a picture the choice of which often is left neither to the architect nor to the artist.

This room represents a radical departure from the usual method. The whole color scheme was from the beginning planned, composed and controlled by the artist in relation to the mural. Not only is a unity achieved but the artist's spiritual message is brought to a central climax.

Walls a Part of Ensemble

To this end the walls opposite the picture are divided into stripes of black and dark blue moving into a lighter gray as they approach the two extremes of the mural. The floor also moves in semi-circles from a dark, cold black-gray towards lighter grays in the center, broken only by a few warmer yellowish and reddish tints below the central section of the mural. In the same way the ceiling moves in semi-circles of dark blue on the outer edge towards a white center of light above the praying figure.

The area to be covered by Mr. Katz was so divided into 114 Transite Asbestos panels of different sizes that a simple pattern was achieved which would not interfere with the vital forms of the individual figures and groups. All the work, except for the final touching up after erection, was done in the artist's home in Englewood, N. J. Considering that he had only a little over five months in which to plan and execute the entire mural, it will be seen that it all involved a difficult feat of organization. The problem was to adhere from the very beginning to a very elaborate plan of mathematical precision without diminishing the freedom and temperamental swing of the original conception.

Color

The color program deserves especial attention. We again quote Leo Katz:

"The colors which I chose have nothing to do

with naturalistic descriptive vision, although an enormous number of studies of the natural forms of figures and animals were made both in my studio and at the zoo. Because the whole composition contains so many abstract elements, a symbolic treatment of the color aspects was justified.

"For the cold section I chose greenish gray and black, which was equally suited to the mechanical section. Red, orange and yellow, representing the warm part of the spectrum, next to the invisible infra-red and quasi-optical rays, was chosen as the logical color scheme for the heat section. For the sound section almost identical colors were used because physically and psychologically speaking, red, orange and yellow are the 'loudest' colors."

The Border

Along the base line of the mural is a border in close relationship with the color and meaning of the sections above. Snow crystal forms, based on studies of modern micro-photography, constitute the pattern below the cold section. Below the mechanical section machinery wheels correspond to the pattern of the snow crystals.

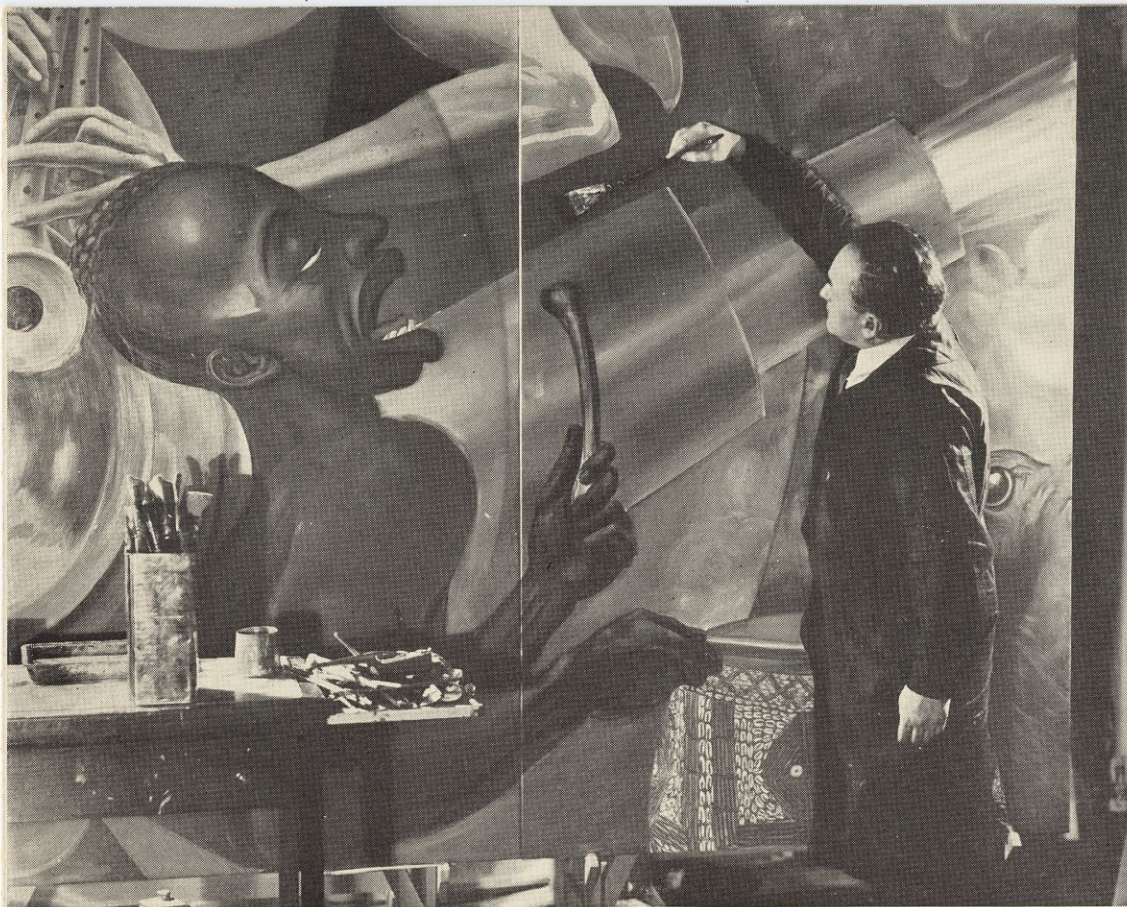
The border below the heat group symbolizes heat waves and continues on the other side into a representation of the wave motion of sound.

Conclusion

Every effort was made to prevent the exhibit cases from interfering with the general effect of the room. As a result the composition includes not only the details of the picture, but the entire contents of the room. All colors are kept cold and dark at the entrance, and the warm reds and yellows are near the center of the mural. The very panelling below the mural is carefully colored, and everything in the room moves toward the Light, optically, mentally and emotionally the keynote of the entire exhibit.



A shrine to mural art! The Johns-Manville structure will long be remembered by artists and architects as an instance of that rare and happy occasion when the architect and the mural painter worked for a single end.



Only those who are enabled to examine the actual work, to feel its power and observe its color and technique, will be in a position to even partially comprehend the magnificence and originality of the conception. Here the artist is touching up the place where two panels meet.

LEO KATZ—the Artist . . .

Murals and mural painters became conversational material for the man on the street while Leo Katz was still busy on this work. This led an interviewer to ask for an expression of the artist's opinion of the objectives of mural painting versus mere wall decoration. His attitude toward his chosen medium—toward art as a whole, will be perceived in his answer.

"A mural has two functions. First, it must be in direct relationship to the architecture, and secondly, since a mural in a public or semi-public building is not for just a few aesthetically trained people, it should have a message, a theme, which is of importance to humanity or to a period. Or, it should contain a message from the artist to his time. Otherwise, why paint a mural?

"Of course, the most popular theme does not make a work of art. Whether the public is aware of it or not, every mural which survives as a contribution to art does so on its merits of composition and other aesthetic values, or its treatment of aesthetic problems."

Leo Katz needs no outside authority for making the statement which he crystallizes in the mural. Were he unknown to every American, the wisdom of his message would be enough to elevate him to authority. But his history is in itself interesting, for it is the story of a man who has filled every moment of his life with growth. Early in his career he became interested in the arts of Egypt and the East, of India, Persia, China and Japan. To understand these fully he realized that he must know the religions, the philosophies and the acts that produced them. So he read the great philosophies of the past.

He is known throughout the United States as a lecturer on modern art and for several years he has devoted his energies to arousing the public to consciousness of the impor-

tance of modern American art. This is a subject on which he is qualified to speak by his intense studies, extending from the latest work executed by the younger groups back to the products of the artists of pre-Columbian times.

From Los Angeles to the Metropolitan Museum in New York he has lectured, giving much of his time to discussing the fundamental problems of modern art. In many of our colleges he is remembered as the first lecturer to relate in the minds of the students the arts and the activities of modern America. He also devotes much effort to trying to convey to those who would be patrons of art their responsibility for aiding spontaneous creativeness rather than for merely collecting the finer works of the past. There is a great difference between the mere collector and the useful patron! Never a member of any artistic group, Mr. Katz does not in his mural represent any one -ic or -ism.

To the crystallizing of his message in this work he brings a profound knowledge and appreciation of the best in every current art movement.

The works of Leo Katz have been exhibited in many of the leading museums and galleries in the United States. He is now lecturing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art under the auspices of New York University.

Leo Katz with the beautifully executed study sketch and the head of the central figure which dominates the ninety-foot mural.

