VII. MURALS: PROPOSALS AND DRAWINGS

"... eighteen months of solid work ..." - Wells

Valuable practical experience was acquired by the artists chosen to execute the murals at the Chicago Exposition; except for Blashfield and Maynard, all were neophytes. They initially misunderstood the limitations and requirements of their craft in simply enlarging their easel pictures to mammoth scale but slowly adapted themselves to the special conditions of mural work: distorted views due to positioning under a dome or under a ceiling demanded altered...
perspectives; murals were generally higher than eye level and decreased visibility of details had to be anticipated; and inadequate light, unexpected shadows and color changes had to be met with appropriate solutions.

To be aesthetically significant, it was imperative that murals be an integral part of the architecture. Wells appreciated this basic concept when he wrote that the wall surface was to be embellished, not "negated; the rendition of natural appearance must not be carried to that point of realism which imitates relief in space, which is perfectly legitimate in easel painting. Such treatment makes holes in the walls instead of decorating them. These are requirements which too many mural painters have forgotten or ignored, painting their wall surfaces as if they were independent of all surroundings."¹

While the response to mural paintings was growing, most American artists of the nineties were not given the chance to practice their theories. Wells later confided that he had always been ambitious to create such a work, but "such opportunities are rare, and come but a few times in the lives of even greater artists than I dare flatter myself that I am: "² He had been studying in Paris when Draper wrote to

¹ Wells, _Brush and Pencil_, 229.

² Champaign County _News_, Mar. 17, 1900.
tell him of the new library building and the competition for the decorations; several letters were exchanged and the artist outlined his ideas, noting that he would be working "for reputation and not for money. The importance of the institution and the consequent publicity given to the work is my deciding motive, I frankly confess."²

Wells modified and altered his compositional schemes several times before painting the canvases. Three complete sets of drawings remain (only the first in its original form) and they provide us with valuable evidence of his artistic and iconographic sources.

The original proposal (Ill. 9) was based on the architects' suggestion that the lunettes represent each of the four colleges. Wells captioned the drawing with brief explanations:

Gardens of Mecenas. College of Literature and Arts. Historical characters from Greek and Roman History to be introduced here. More persons than already indicated can be introduced.

¹ Draper to Wells, June 20, 1896.

² Wells to Ricker and White, c. May 14, 1897, University Architect.
Triumph of Agriculture. Portraits may also be introduced here. Persons who have contributed to the prosperity of the state or the college.

Science. Group of ten or a dozen representative scientists from antiquity to modern times.

Engineering. Group of Engineers famous in history. (Text, Ill. 9)

The contract for the Illinois decorations was obtained, and after completing the first stage of the project, Wells returned to Paris to prepare a series of preliminary designs and cartoons for the mural compositions. The first set of scale drawings—he said they were "entirely from imagination"—was rendered in chalk at one quarter inch per foot (Ills. 76-79); they lacked precise detail but clearly indicated how the figures were to be arranged in the architectural space. Only after the artist was satisfied with the general effect, were models employed to pose for more careful studies (Ills. 80-82), "in the majority of cases from the nude, the thin drapery necessitating an absolutely correct drawing of the anatomy."\(^2\)

Upon completion of the chalk compositions, Wells laid out enlarged panels at two and a quarter inches per foot, and upon these he traced the figures, animals and background from the separate studies.

\(^1\) Wells, Brush and Pencil, 230.

\(^2\) Chicago Sunday Tribune, Mar. 26, 1899. See Appendix D.
"I found it desirable," Wells recalled, "to make more or less change from the original imaginary studies."¹

More time was spent in experimenting with color schemes, preparing the plaster walls, stretching and nailing canvas onto walls, and finally transferring his outline drawings before actually applying paint. As one lunette neared completion--The Sacred Wood of the Muses, in March of 1899--the Chicago Sunday Tribune ran a feature story on the murals, the illustrations presumably by Wells, and based on the enlarged panels(Ill. 83).

The muralist painted with a mixture of oil paints and dissolved white wax that dried slowly and did not discolor; another advantage of using wax instead of turpentine, Wells wrote, was that its use produced a "perfectly flat and lusterless surface, with a delicate and aerial bloom, like that of real fresco; and not the least of its good qualities is its preserving influence upon the color, protecting it from the contact of coal-gas, the bête noire of decorators in our climate."²

After about a year of work, Wells' "great allegorical paintings"

¹Wells, Brush and Pencil, 231.
²Ibid., 235-36.
--as Ricker and White termed them ---were unveiled, and "satisfaction was marked on the faces of everyone present," reported the Gazette, "when the American flags which had hidden the work from view were drawn."²

¹ 20th Report (1900), 261.

² Champaign County Gazette, Mar. 14, 1900. Wells was paid $3500 for the decorations and murals. In a statement submitted to the Trustees at the time of the unveiling he said that after expenses and "eighteen months of solid work . . . it has been the most arduous and the least remunerative piece of work that I have ever executed, but I beg the President and the Board not to interpret this statement as a complaint, as I foresaw all of this when I first undertook the work, and was willing to undertake it for the opportunity which it afforded to show what I could do, and also for the privilege of impressing my own personality upon the art of my time in so important a work. I am not ashamed of my work, and if the President, the Board of Trustees, and the Architects, are satisfied with it, I shall feel amply repaid for all the time, toil, and anxiety which it has cost me." 20th Report (1900), 26.

Evidently his work pleased everyone concerned, for Wells stayed on at Illinois, first as Professor of the History and Practice of Painting, and from 1903 until his retirement in 1919, as Professor of Architectural Decoration. "Faculty Record," 1912.