VIII. THE FOUR MURALS

"... choice spirits ... separated from each other by centuries of time." - Wells

Control of one's emotions was considered an ideal virtue and calm, restrained figures not only conveyed an untroubled mood, but self-assurance as well. All four of Wells' murals express that attitude, an attitude which ultimately finds its source in the Library planners' profound confidence in the University's achievements and status.

True devotees of classical culture would have abhorred the frenetic revelers in Bouguereau's bacchanal (Ill. 73), but Wells discerned much in Bouguereau's art and philosophy to emulate: "I am very eclectic as you can see," observed the academician, "I accept and respect all schools of painting which have as their basis the
sincere study of nature, the search for the true and the beautiful.  

The American artist discovered truth and beauty in the staid academy aesthetic, and studied--in the spirit of acceptance and respect--the paintings of other artists; eclecticism was considered good form, even desirable, but Wells' borrowing seemingly bordered on kleptomania. It is both instructive and interesting to read the artist's comments on his works:

*The Sacred Wood of the Muses* (Ill. 84):

Casting about in my mind for a suitable setting and title for such a picture it occurred to me that the "wood sacred to the muses" would make not only an appropriate, but a well sounding title, and I immediately conceived a sunny glade among the wooded hills, a glade sheltered by ancient trees, and threaded by pleasant walks, where choice spirits might love to retire during leisure hours to discuss lofty themes or listen to Homeric tales.

I have not thought it best to insist upon too definite an identity of the personages represented, but rather to impart to the whole scene that air of contemplative repose which is essential to an education of profound intellectual problems.

It is true, however, that while composing the group gathered beneath the great cypress, on the left, I was thinking of those legendary days when Homer went from city to city reciting his immortal epic and so let that group stand for imaginary literature. While occupied with the group emerging from the shadows of the wood on the right, I was thinking of Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, who represent philosophy--both speculative and practical--idealism and realism. In the three maidens on the extreme right, you may if you choose, recognize the arts of music and dancing, while upon the tall central figure buried in thought, you may hang the mantle of Demosthenes. The group of two at his right suggested to my mind the young Phidias making sketches from nature while his friend and patron Pericles looked interestedly over his shoulder.

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Thus I might go on until every figure in the composition had been given a definite character and significance, but that was not my purpose so much as it was to impart to the whole an impression of intellectual activity in an environment of peaceful repose, a repose that is never troubled by the presence of "cooking care."

What matters if these suggested personages were actually separated from each other by centuries of time? As we look backward down the long perspective of a far distant past, their shades seem to our mental vision to be walking together in one elysium, that of classic antiquity, and so I have ventured to represent them.

Determined to produce "reposeful" compositions, Wells apparently responded to the pervasively serene work of Puvis de Chavannes, The renowned French painter's desire for "Greek simplicity and grandeur [and for] Gothic sentiment and directness of expression," explained Kenyon Cox, led to "ever new suppressions of the useless, the insignificant, the cumbrous. . . . On the classic side his highest expression is perhaps in the Sacred Wood. Could the sense of idyllic peace and noble tranquility be more perfectly rendered?"

Puvis' ethereal, scantily draped muses (Ill. 92) glide and posture in the painting that must have furnished title and composition to the library muralist, but in the course of various revisions (Ills. 88-91), Wells eliminated classical architecture, pressed figures closer to the

1 Champaign County News, Mar. 17, 1900. The News' account of the formal unveiling ceremony included the speech which Wells had read.

2 Modern French Painters, 25.
picture plane, and managed to transform naturalistic landscape into a stage set with backdrop: for Wells' "choice spirits" were nineteenth-century vintage, and their stilted, self-conscious poses reminiscent of living statues in Homeric tableaux.1

A common problem in composing lunettes and pediments is that of filling in the sloping ends of the architectural space, and the solution in this instance—Wells' dancing and lyre-playing muses at the extreme right—may have been suggested by a study of the central and side figures in McEwen's murals (ills. 93-94). For the pretty piper, further research material was very likely provided in the paintings of Simmler and Bulleid (ills. 95-96).

_Arcadia_ (ill. 85):

Agriculture also is as old as antiquity, and it was but natural that I should, while still under the spell of the mood induced by the "sacred wood," find my imagination picturing a rustic festival celebrating the 'gathering of the first fruits' in Arcadia. The van is led by young maidens bearing the sacred fire of the hearthstone and the loaf which typifies bodily sustenance. Following them are a youth and maidens bearing garlands and flowers and typical of the joys of love and courtship which lead to hymen's altar, the foundation stone of the home. Close upon their steps comes the family with its loved burdens and happy cares, and behind them troop the domestic animals to the sound of pan pipes, and guided by stalwart men and youths, whose lustyhood speaks of a life of freedom and frugality.2

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1 Wells was reported to have worked on his landscape studies "in the garden of the Luxembourg at Versailles." Chicago Sunday Tribune, Mar. 26, 1899.

2 Champaign County News, Mar. 17, 1900.
Wells' bucolic festival derives from Melchers' battle processions (Ills. 101-102); *Arts of War* was a temporary mural at the Columbian Exposition, while the more elaborate *War* was painted for perpetuity in the Library of Congress in 1897. The University artist most probably saw the original paintings or the photographs that appeared in guide books and periodicals, but his familiarity with Melchers' compositions is evidenced by the vaguely outlined figure holding a banner in the original chalk drawing (Ill. 98), and in the more obviously similar rearing horse, straining dog, and pubescent youths that found their way, more or less, into Wells' completed mural.

"The introduction of the domestic animals is a striking feature," the *Tribune* noted, "and an interesting item in regard to the stallion which is being led by a youth, is that Mr. Wells obtained a drawing for it at the horse market in Paris from which Rosa Bonheur painted her noted picture, *The Horse Fair.*"¹ That might have been so. Wells might also have studied the sculptured frieze from the Parthenon (Ill. 103), as plaster casts of classical art were commonly available in art schools in this country and abroad.²


²A cast of this frieze segment now hangs in the Ricker Art Library at the University, and it probably was in the original collection of plaster casts purchased for the University Art Museum which opened in 1875.
Details in Bouguereau's canvases (Ills. 104-105) appealed to Wells, and the image of a rather large child scrambling up onto the stoic provider is echoed in Wells' chalk sketch (Ill. 98). Wells' maiden on her way to hymen's alter (Ill. 100) resembles St. John Harper's garlanded dancer (Ill. 106) in tilt of head, posturing and draperies—but the Illinois figure is swathed in gauzier fabric and manages to bare her breast, a not unseemly thing to do, in light of the direction she has taken.

The Laboratory of Minerva (Ill. 86):

Upon the western lunette, allotted to the college of science, I have chosen to represent an imaginary scene in which Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, stands at her reading desk instructing her hand-maidens from the book of knowledge. At her right sits Astronomy with the crystal globe of the heavens resting on her knee; next to her is Biology examining—well it may be a microscope—through one of Dr. Burrill's microscopes of latest model. Beyond her sits Physics with her balances and incandescent lamp. On the left of the goddess sits Mathematics with her measuring scale, Chemistry with her test tube, and below them stands Geology, busy with her hammer and fossils.

As a matter of pure caprice I have chosen to give to the draperies of these seven virginal figures, the colors of the rainbow arranged in their order of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet and purple.

\[1\] Madonnas and children frequently figured in Bouguereau's compositions and perhaps the Art Journal's correspondent was viewing such works when he wrote: "Of horribly realistic pictures it is sufficient to remark that they are as abounding as ever, and those with representations of vierges and demi-vierges occupy one-half the Salon. "The Paris Salons of 1896," Art Journal XLVIII (1896), 195.

\[2\] Champaign County News, Mar. 17, 1900.
Wells accommodated himself to American moral standards. 1 The shifting drapery and unrestrained nudity that the French relished were obviously unsuited for high-minded college students; chitons might carelessly slip from shoulders, limbs might conceivably be indicated under voluminous garments, but the "seven virginal figures"--in the mural--were fully dressed (Ill. 110), their ripe, substantial forms covered in quasi-Greek garments very like those affected by their sorority counterparts (Ills. 111-112). These wholesome coeds might even have sat for the artist; one young student (on the right in the 1900 group portrait) resembles the seated figure of Physics holding an incandescent lamp. Actually, Wells scarcely

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1 Morals, nudity and eroticism were as controversial in the nineties as now. In 1895, the New York State legislature attempted to prohibit the exhibition of the nude figure "under any circumstances," and the Decorator and Furnisher interviewed Napoleon Sarony--"that prince of photographers"--on the matter.

The seventy-year old artist stated in part: "The greatest minds recognize the truth that the highest effort of art is the human figure clothed only with ideal grace. . . . The white light of moral and physical truth that is radiated from such figures as these (and here Sarony showed his visitor about a dozen new and captivating productions) can only be appreciated by the purest and most artistic souls. . . .

"Legislative interference with art should address itself to cleansing the Augean stable of filthy-mindedness in the masses, and the best method of doing this is to disseminate everywhere the ideal portraiture of the human form in its perfection, not simply the 'nude' in art, but the nude figure clothed with a refined, poetic interpretation of nature . . . that unconscious yet captivating beauty of the flesh that expresses the purest movement of the spirit." William Bradshaw, "The Nude in Art," Decorator and Furnisher, XXIV (June, 1895), 91-92.
lacked suitable models, for the type he favored persistently appeared in art publications of his day (Ills. 113-115).

In the various stages of planning the mural (Ills. 107-110), Wells turned bodies, removed columns, substituted props--protractor for coiled wires, globe for gear, microscope for ship model--and, most interestingly, transformed the robust figure of war into the buxom handmaiden of Physics.

"... face to face with the activities of the twentieth century." - Wells

The Forge of Vulcan (Ill. 87):

Turning now to the eastern lunette you will perhaps feel something of a mental wrench, for this mood induced by historical association and antique legend is suddenly dissipated, and in its stead we are brought face to face with the activities of the twentieth century.

Possibly we may think of the forge of the Vulcan and the labors of the Cyclops, but they are the Vulcan and the Cyclops of today, and they are forging one of those great steamers shafts whose strength is born of fire and force.

    For a hundred times must the furnace heat
    And a thousand blows must the hammer beat,
    'Ere the mighty shaft for its task is mete.

What scene more appropriate to represent the genius of modern engineering--the harnessing of force--the taming of that fire which Prometheus stole from heaven in order to make man an equal to the gods? ¹

An unabashedly unclassical theme distinguishes this lunette from the others, and no information is available which would explain

¹ Champaign County News, Mar. 17, 1900.
the substitution. Wells had originally projected the idea of painting a group of famous engineers but worked out a composition of a foundry interior instead (Ills. 116-119), a subject, explained the Tribune, which was "taken from a twentieth century standpoint, and shows an immense steel hammer forging a modern steam shaft. . . . The drawing of this interior was made at Cleveland, where is located one of the largest steam hammers in the country."\(^1\)

In order to obtain the most authentic drawings possible, Wells might have gone to Ohio, but more likely he used photographs as a guide for this, the most realistic and unromanticized of his four murals. President Draper was Cleveland School Superintendent from 1892 to 1894 and it is conceivable that he furnished the artist with illustrated material on the Cleveland foundries.

Wells made no attempt to idealize the workers: stocky, balding men absorbed in their task, oblivious of the spectator. No muses, no symbolism, no pretense—for the muralist had, in fact, created a straightforward and untheatrical depiction of a then-current engineering achievement. "Each of the four frescoes is beautiful and significant," commented the Tribune. "but the Forge of Vulcan, the one modern subject, will appeal to many as being the strongest."\(^2\)

\(^1\) Chicago Sunday Tribune, Mar. 26, 1899.

\(^2\) Ibid., Mar. 14, 1900.
And the Illini thought that the "panels are all excellent, but if there is any choice, many would doubtless give it to the Forge of Vulcan representing the College of Engineering. . . . The play of the clouds of steam and smoke is magnificent. The chief charm about this panel is the decided contrast which it forms with the other three."¹

New murals, new century—but cultural tastemakers and their public continued to anachronistically yearn for some remote, euphoric past in an age of increasing technology and scientific demands. Nevertheless, an American iconography was emerging—as indicated by just one of Wells' murals, the Forge of Vulcan—and the farm and working youth who had come to the University for an education must have found that realistic picture most compelling and relevant.

¹Illini, Mar. 17, 1900.