

History of Transportation: A Mural Study by Helen Lundeberg

Helen Lundeberg struggled to make a living as an artist in Southern California in the 1930s. Although she was an early advocate for Modernist art, Lundeberg turned away from its abstract and avant-garde sensibilities during the Great Depression, and instead embraced representational painting. She worked alongside hundreds of other artists who were commissioned by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project to design public murals for post offices, government buildings, and outdoor spaces.

Commissioned by the WPA, Lundeberg proposed a concept for a public mural that celebrated the ongoing contributions of workers to society. The proposed mural was titled *History of Transportation*, and its subject matter traced a progression of labor from pre-European contact to the dawn of the airline industry in the 1940s. It also included illustrations of Spanish explorers, Chinese railroad laborers, the introduction of the automobile, and the rise of public transportation.

Using her precise, finely-executed study as a guide, WPA laborers constructed *History of Transportation* in the Southern California community of Inglewood. At the time, it was the largest mural project in the United States. Once installed, it was intended to be seen by passengers on the nearby Pacific Electric Street Railway—explaining why the narrative of the mural progresses from right to left, rather than left to right.

Throughout her life, Lundeberg remained a staunch supporter of the WPA efforts. "Altogether, it was a great thing for most artists," she once said, "My being an artist had been a worrisome thing for my family. But the project saved the day."

The History of Transportation is part of the E. L. Wiegand Collection at the Nevada Museum of Art. Founded in 1987, the E. L. Wiegand Collection features artworks with a thematic focus on the work ethic in American Art.