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## Memorial of War, Memorial of Hope

Contemplating the creation, destruction, and re-creation of  
Fred Ross' mural *The Destruction of War / Rebuilding the  
World Through Education*, 1948, 1954, and 2011

Kirk Niergarth

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## RESEARCH NOTE / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

# Memorial of War, Memorial of Hope: Contemplating the creation, destruction, and re-creation of Fred Ross' mural *The Destruction of War / Rebuilding the World Through Education*, 1948, 1954, and 2011

**Kirk Niergarth**

Under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience. To the extent that we encourage monuments to do our memory-work for us, we become that much more forgetful. In effect, the initial impulse to memorialize events ... may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them.

– James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory*<sup>1</sup>

Paintings are defenceless. Paintings are survivors.

– T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death*<sup>2</sup>

AT SOME FUTURE HOME GAME, if distracted from the action on the court below, University of New Brunswick students in the Currie Center's grandstand might notice the large mural that was installed in 2011 on the wall adjacent to their seats (plate 1). It might surprise them. With a nuclear explosion in the background and a dead child in her mother's arms in the foreground, the 16 by 10-foot mural titled *Destruction of War* contains imagery that is not commonly encountered in university gymnasiums. Maybe at halftime, some will

1. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT, 1993), 5.

2. T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 241.

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Kirk Niergarth, "Memorial of War, Memorial of Hope: Contemplating the creation, destruction, and re-creation of Fred Ross' mural *The Destruction of War / Rebuilding the World Through Education*, 1948, 1954, and 2011," *Labour/Le Travail*, 72 (Fall 2013), 149–175.

take a moment to have a sustained look at the mural and consider the story it tells about World War II. This re-created version of a memorial mural Fred Ross painted between 1946 and 1948 now has an opportunity to spur such contemplation, an opportunity that the original murals, taken down in 1954 and subsequently destroyed, were long denied.

The nuclear explosion is the central common element of the two panels of the re-created mural. Its mushroom cloud not only hangs over *The Destruction of War* but also reaches across *Rebuilding the World Through Education* like an enormous shadow of doubt. The pillar of radioactive fire bridges the gap between the panels at the apex of the triangular arrangement of figures on either side who illustrate, as the titles suggest, the contrasting states of war and peace. On the left in *Destruction* are depictions of ruin, combat, torture, starvation, madness, and death. On the right in *Rebuilding* are examples of work, study, and play, undoubtedly familiar to student viewers of the mural in its original setting, the auditorium of Fredericton High School (FHS) where it was unveiled in 1948 (figure 1). The athletic scenes, at least, seem appropriate to the location of the new version of the mural in the gymnasium of the recently constructed Currie Center on the campus of the University of New Brunswick where the re-created mural was unveiled in 2011.

Fred Ross was on hand for both debuts, only 21 years old the first time, an octogenarian the second. The original panels had taken Ross two years to complete; they were the young muralist's first project after his graduation from Saint John, New Brunswick's vocational school. To re-create the panels more than 60 years later, Ross assisted a team of younger artists who worked using Ross' full-scale original drawings (called, for murals, "cartoons").<sup>3</sup> Both the original mural and the one newly re-created were initially greeted with reverence and acclaim. The 1948 unveiling was accompanied by a ceremony broadcast by the local radio station and attended by New Brunswick's Premier and Lieutenant Governor.<sup>4</sup> The word "permanent" was used a dozen times in the formal speeches.<sup>5</sup> The fact that permanent in this case amounted to

3. These cartoons were misplaced for more than 40 years, but unlike the original mural panels they were recovered in 1992 and are now part of the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Some discrepancies between the original mural and the re-created version are explicable because the team of artists was working from these drawings. In the 1948 mural, for example, on the right side of *Destruction of War* above the two figures tied to posts awaiting execution, Ross had painted three figures whose faces appear extremely emaciated – the one at the edge of the canvas is perhaps only a skull. In the re-created mural, there is only the one figure that Ross included in the original drawing. The most obvious discrepancy, however, is the omission of the list of the names of the war dead from the re-created version. This was a decision, an unfortunate one in my view, that has not been explained in published sources surrounding the re-creation.

4. The ceremony, held on 21 May 1948, was broadcast on the radio station CFNB. The closing hymn, appropriate to the mural's theme, was "Jerusalem." The program is in the Fredericton High School Library, RG4 R526.

5. This count comes from Mike Landry, "Lost and Found," *Telegraph Journal* [Saint John], 21

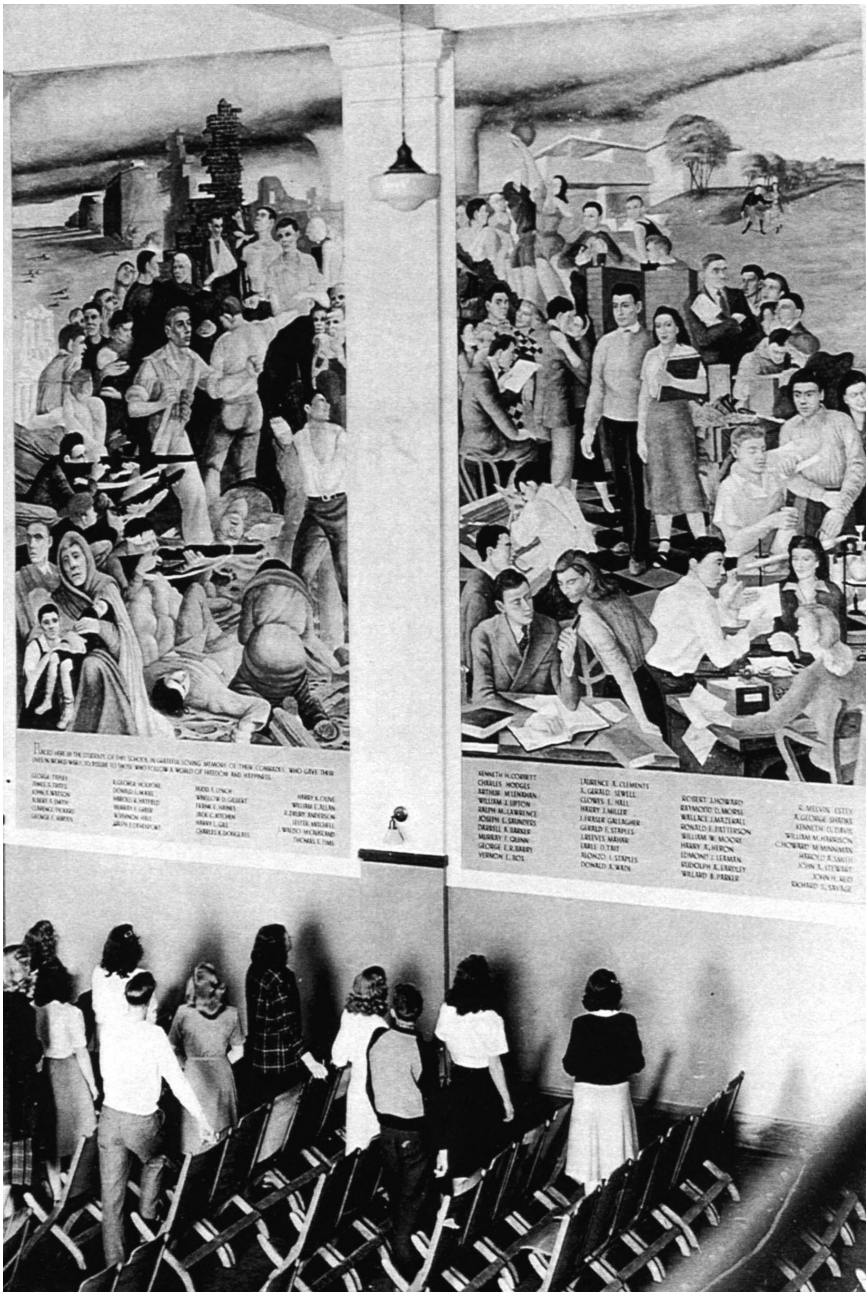


Figure 1: Fred Ross, *Destruction of the World Through War and Rebuilding the World Through Education* (1948) in situ Fredericton High School, photograph circa 1948. Courtesy of FHS Archives.

about six years was not lost on Mike Landry, a journalist who in 2011 wrote an extended account of the mural's history in celebration of its re-creation. "Ross' mural will again be unveiled as a memorial and warning for future generations," Landry observed, but "only time will tell whether we listen or let Ross' ideas fade away once again."<sup>6</sup> Ross, speaking to Landry, thought it "remarkable" that "there is interest and concern about work that I did that long ago" and seems to hold no grudge about the neglect and destruction of the originals that made the re-creation necessary: "I'm a realist, for starters. I understand art and the history of art. Greater works than mine have been lost and destroyed. This isn't anything unique – indifference and lack of knowledge ... are the greatest enemies art has."<sup>7</sup>

"Paintings are survivors," T.J. Clark writes, but if he was being entirely honest, he would have added the qualifier "some." *Some* paintings are survivors: the ones that survive. Think of the plaster dust that was once Diego Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads* in the Rockefeller Center, or the original panels of Ross' *Destruction/Rebuilding* lying, as they probably do, in a landfill or under the floor of a classroom somewhere in New Brunswick. In both cases, however, these works were re-created in alternate venues for new and supportive audiences – albeit Rivera, unlike Ross, did not have to wait 57 years for this to happen.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, then, material destruction is not the determining factor when it comes to the life and death of images. A painting is defenceless, but when it remains meaningful, or when memories of its meaningfulness survive, a work of art is hard to kill.

The story of Rivera's Rockefeller mural is much better known than the story of Ross' neglected, lost, and now re-created war memorial.<sup>9</sup> To put this story into context, a symposium on the history of New Brunswick murals was held at the Currie Center in proximity to Ross' new/old mural in October 2012.<sup>10</sup>

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May 2011, S1, S4-6.

6. Landry, "Lost and Found," S6.

7. Landry, "Lost and Found," S4, S6.

8. Dora Apel, "Diego Rivera and the Left: The Destruction and Recreation of the Rockefeller Center Mural," *left history*, 6, no. 1 (1999): 57–75.

9. For Ross' murals, the most complete telling is available in John Leroux, "The Murals of Fred Ross: A Quest for Relevance," MA thesis, Concordia, 2002. See also Kirk Niergarth, "Art and Democracy: New Brunswick Artists and Canadian Culture between the Great Depression and the Cold War," PhD thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2007, 294–324.

10. New Brunswick's Mural Legacy: The State of the Art Symposium, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, 10 October 2012. This event was made possible with the financial support of the Decorated School Research Network, an initiative funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK). In what follows, I am indebted in particular to two unpublished papers presented at the symposium: John Leroux, "Revision and Recovery: Fred Ross' Fredericton High School Memorial Murals," and Peter Larocque, "Finding a Place for Miller Brittain's *Place of Healing in the Transformation of the World From War to Peace*" (Copies in my possession).

My contribution to this event, which is largely reproduced here, was a speculative reflection on the mural's Cold War hibernation after its removal from the walls of the FHS auditorium in 1954. That this mural was *not* on display for more than 50 years is a significant part of its legacy. Over the course of these years, the mural was taken down, misplaced, damaged, found (but not repaired), misplaced again, and found again (not repaired, again) before being lost for what seems to be the final time.<sup>11</sup> What made its absence tolerable? Could any other war memorial have been desecrated in this way without much outcry, without instant demand for reparation? The recent re-creation gives this mural's story a happy ending (for now), but its previous incarnation's loss and destruction are worth considering when we read the mural today. The way Ross' mural imagined and remembered World War II was, but did not remain, part of popular imagination and popular memory. It deviated from common memorial tropes and metaphors, and hence was unable to satisfy, in changing times, the demands that James Young and others have observed are placed upon memorials to facilitate not only remembering but also forgetting.<sup>12</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that there was ever a decision made to permanently remove Ross' mural from public display, or to destroy it. Its destruction was not akin to the deliberate censorship that removed Rivera's work from the wall of the Rockefeller Center. If one is content with happenstance as historical explanation – and, to be sure, it is the cause of many things – one can place the case of Ross' disappearing mural in the thick file of unfortunate historical accidents. Absence, neglect, apathy, indifference, and the other defining characteristics of non-action and non-protest are difficult to document; they leave few traces. But, if we work from the reasonable premise that this was an accident that could have been easily prevented or rectified, we are drawn to the conclusion that the mural, with its list of names of those killed but a decade before, was not considered sufficiently valuable to treat carefully, to recover, to restore, or to replace. Looking now at the re-created mural, Ross recalled what his younger self was trying to achieve: "It's just like if you're writing a novel and you say you want it to express the fears and hopes of your generation – for people to read it and go, 'My God, that's just what it was like.'"<sup>13</sup> In 1948, the FHS yearbook editor thought Ross had achieved exactly this. "Let the striking reality of this mural," he wrote, "be an incentive to the students of this school to endeavour to live up to the standards for which these boys gave their lives."<sup>14</sup> Had these standards become too difficult to live up to by 1954? Did Ross fail

11. Ted Jones, "The Case of the Missing Mural," *The Atlantic Advocate*, 78, no. 10 (June 1988): 10–13.

12. Young, *The Texture of Memory*. See also Dan Stone, "Holocaust Memory, Memorials and Museums," in his *History, Memory, and Mass Atrocity: Essays on the Holocaust and Genocide* (Portland, OR, 2006), 148–173.

13. Quoted in Landry, "Lost and Found," 56.

14. Quoted in Leroux, "The Murals of Fred Ross," 51.



to express the fears and hopes of his generation, or did he succeed too well? In 1954, did students at FHS not want to be reminded of “just what it was like” when the war ended and the long-talked-about peace and reconstruction could finally begin?

Six years is not long, but it is enough for the passing of a generation in the life of a school: the youngest students to have witnessed the unveiling in 1948 were, one hopes, graduates by 1954. High school seniors in that year would have been less than ten years old on VE day, but no doubt many of them – through their fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins, and siblings – had been touched or scarred by the six years of war that the mural memorialized. They were young enough, though, to adapt to the new realities of the Cold War world; realities that made Ross’ mural not simply the stuff of unpleasant memories.<sup>15</sup>

Of these new realities, life under the bomb was perhaps the most significant. “The atomic bomb was a very important part of our life at that time,” Ross recalls. “You don’t realize it now, but it affected our basic thinking.”<sup>16</sup> This sentiment was even more applicable when Ross’ mural came down than when it went up. Ross had considerable prescience when he extended the mushroom cloud far into the “peace” panel of his mural. The mural, unveiled a month before the Berlin blockade, had already been hanging for a year before the first Soviet nuclear test. When Ross designed it, the explosion it depicts connected to viewers’ fears of the devastating capacity of the technology itself. When Ross’ mural was taken down shortly after the Korean War ended, a conflict that had very nearly provoked a nuclear war, atomic fears were much less abstract. Canadian Civil Defence planners and organizations had begun to prepare the public for the arrival of Soviet bombers. Fredericton viewers of the CBC could watch their compatriots in Calgary participate in the most elaborate demonstration of these preparations the year after Ross’ mural was removed from its original venue. Operation “Lifesaver” was intended to evacuate one-quarter of Calgary’s population in a massive air raid drill (although there is evidence to suggest that the rate of public participation was much less impressive than the CBC’s coverage of the event led viewers to believe).<sup>17</sup> It seems entirely likely that FHS students might have been gathered in the school’s auditorium to be briefed on emergency procedures, preparing for what many must have realized would amount to an apocalypse, with the mushroom cloud in Ross’ mural

15. For the temper of these times, the best overview is still Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945–1957* (Toronto, 1994).

16. Quoted in Landry, “Lost and Found,” S5.

17. The film, broadcast on CBC on October 8, 1955, can be viewed at the CBC *Digital Archives*, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Digital+Archives/War+and+Conflict/Cold+War/ID/1638238325/?sort=MostPopular>. On Operation “Lifesaver” and civil defence in Canada in the early Cold War, see Frances Reilly, “Operation ‘Lifesaver’: Canadian Atomic Culture and Cold War Civil Defence,” *Past Imperfect*, 14 (2008): 46–85. For more on Canadians’ ambivalent responses to the state’s exhortations to prepare for nuclear bombardment, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto, 2009), 49–76.

looming above them. With the prospect that on any given day the mural might need to be read from the right panel to the left – from peace to devastating war – rather than left to right, it is not difficult to imagine that many students may have chosen to avert their eyes from it.

“Peace” was a concept that became more contested as the Cold War heated up. In the early 1950s, Canadian advocates for peace in organizations such as the Peace Congress were called Communist sympathizers, traitors, or worse.<sup>18</sup> The Canadian art world was not immune from Red-scare hysteria. The 1953 annual exhibition of the Canadian Society for Graphic Art (CSGA) became the centre of a scandal when the organization’s former president, Toronto artist William Newcombe, publicly accused the current executive of being infiltrated by Communists and favouring submissions to the exhibition that followed the Communist Party line. Two drawings were singled out by Newcombe: one was of a dove, the other of a boy with a kite (in Newcombe’s mind, at least, both symbolized peace). The *Toronto Telegram* made Newcombe’s accusations front-page news with banner headlines, and the CSGA was pressured into having a new jury re-adjudicate the show. Even this was not sufficient proof of innocence for many of the group’s members, who joined Newcombe in resigning, nearly destroying the organization.<sup>19</sup>

Infamously, at least in retrospect, Canada’s Red scare also led to postwar purges at the National Film Board (NFB).<sup>20</sup> Before this institution was viewed as a nest of potential subversives, it had produced films that framed the war in essentially similar terms to the ones conveyed in Ross’ mural. This had been the people’s war against fascism, and films such as *The War for Men’s Minds* (1943) stressed the importance of ideas in the struggle. Meanwhile, films such as *Tomorrow’s World* (1944) explained how these ideas would be applied to produce a peaceful and equitable postwar order. In keeping with these films, Ross’ mural is internationalist in perspective – note rebuilding the “world,” not “Canada.” In the same years that Ross was at work on his mural, John Peters Humphrey – the cousin of one of Ross’ mentors, Saint John painter Jack Humphrey – was assisting in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the United Nations.<sup>21</sup> By 1954, with the bipolar world of the Cold

18. Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto, 2012), 127–131.

19. “Artist Charges Reds Rigged Show,” *Toronto Telegram*, 18 March 1953. A less inflammatory treatment of Newcombe’s allegations was published as “Society Denies Reds Influenced Painting Choice,” *Toronto Star*, 18 March 1953. Clippings about the scandal and Aba Bayefsky’s recollections of its effect on the organization can be found in Library and Archives Canada, Aba Bayefsky Papers R3940. Notably, prominent New Brunswick artists Miller Brittain and Jack Humphrey stayed in the organization and later served on its executive.

20. Mark Kristmanson, *Plateaus of Freedom: Nationality, Culture, and State Security in Canada, 1940–1960* (Don Mills, ON, 2003), 137–180.

21. “John Peters Humphrey” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed 29 April 2013, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/john-peters-humphrey>.



War firmly entrenched, optimism about worldwide international cooperation had preceded Ross' mural in disappearing from public display.<sup>22</sup>

Another factor to consider in terms of the displacement of Ross' mural that is less directly connected to the Cold War is that Fred Ross was no Diego Rivera.<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly, the young Ross had not attained Rivera's international reputation, and murals had not attained the same popular cultural significance in Canada as they had in Mexico, or even in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Ross was only at the beginning of his career as a muralist when enthusiasm for murals in North America had begun to wane.<sup>25</sup> In 1948, neither Ross nor his patron, the FHS students' council, anticipated this. Ross used some of the \$700 he was paid for *Destruction/Rebuilding* – not excessive for two years' work, but to a teenager who had grown up poor in the Depression, it “seemed like paradise” – to travel to Mexico to study mural painting.<sup>26</sup> After completing his next mural in New Brunswick, *City Slums* (1950, plate 2), Ross returned to Mexico, and on this trip, managed to arrange a meeting with the muralist he most admired, Diego Rivera. “Canada is wonderful and has a great history, and is interesting and beautiful,” the old master told Ross. “Why don't you go back home and try to get walls so that you can do murals?”<sup>27</sup> This was precisely what an inspired Ross intended to do.

Ross had learned about Rivera and other contemporary muralists during his training at the Saint John Vocational School. Becoming a muralist, or even a “fine” as opposed to “commercial” artist, was not a career path Ross had

22. Serge Guilbaut puts this more elegantly than I have: “The hope that many people had harbored during the long years of struggle, of finally being able to create ‘One World,’ vanished with the breakup of the Popular Front and the growing specter of a third world war.” From *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago, 1983), 102.

23. By comparison to the fate of Ross' original mural, consider the treatment of the mural Rivera completed in the same year, 1948. When the hotel that housed *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda* [*Sueno de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central*] was rendered structurally unsound by the earthquake of 1985, extraordinary effort was made to salvage the wall containing the mural and to transport it to a museum specially designed for its preservation and display. The history of the mural and the move can be found at <http://www.museomuraldiegorivera.bellasartes.gob.mx>.

24. The history of muralism in Canada in this period is discussed at greater length in Kirk Niergarth, “Mexico is the Dream: Mexican Muralism, Canadian Art, and Cultural Nationalism, 1920–1950,” in Andrew Nurse and Mike Fox, eds., *Dynamics and Trajectories: Canada and/in North America* (Halifax, 2011), 44–71; and Niergarth, “Art, Education, and a ‘New World Society’: Joseph McCulley's Pickering College and Canadian Muralism, 1934–1950,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 41 (January 2007): 172–201.

25. For more on the New York-led rejection of forms of “social art” of the 1930s in the postwar years, see Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

26. As quoted in Landry, “Lost and Found,” S6.

27. As quoted in Leroux, “The Murals of Fred Ross,” 64.

anticipated when he entered the school. But his teachers in the art department were keen to inspire and foster the creativity of the school's working-class students, particularly for those such as Ross with natural talent and evident potential. It was the financial support raised by one of Ross' teachers, Ted Campbell, that allowed Ross to spend the summer of 1945 painting a mural, *Annual School Picnic*, around a window in a school stairwell instead of unloading 100-pound bags of sugar alongside his father at the Atlantic Sugar Refinery. This mural came to the attention of a reporter for the *Montréal Standard* (it seems entirely in character that Campbell might have drawn the reporter's attention to it) and resulted in a 1946 article that, in turn, led to the FHS memorial mural.<sup>28</sup>

The *Standard* reporter seemed to be as interested in eighteen-year-old "Freddie" Ross' working-class origins as in his prodigious artistic talent. The subject of the story was *Annual School Picnic*, but its "angle" was the juxtaposition between Ross' origins and his abilities. Ross' passion for art caused "real difficulty at home," the *Standard* reported. His parents were "alarmed that he was carrying this useless pastime too far, [and] said he would have to learn to earn a living."<sup>29</sup> Only the completion of the mural convinced Ross' father of the "importance" of his son's talent. Now he was "ready to help, but a working-man's salary won't stretch far from home." The photo spread accompanying the article concludes with an image of Ross and his twin sister sitting at the supper table with their father; in the background, Ross' mother uses a teacup to ladle soup out of a pot. This vision of the happy domestic life of the honest working man serves the function of the rough from which the artistic diamond Freddie Ross was being cut at the vocational (figure 2).

The publicity afforded Ross' mural would directly increase his ability to "earn a living" through art; and ultimately, this is largely the way he has since earned his living. The *Standard* article attracted the attention of the Fredericton High School Student Government Association, which had only the month before included the idea of a mural among possible memorials to honour the school's war dead.<sup>30</sup> Inquiries were made, and shortly thereafter Ross received the commission for what would become *Destruction/Rebuilding*. The memorial mural launched Ross into what proved to be a remarkably long and successful career as an artist. In 1950, less than two years after his FHS mural had been unveiled, Ross addressed those in attendance at the opening of his first

28. The art department of the Saint John Vocational and the cultural scene in Saint John in these years is discussed at length in Niergarth, "Art and Democracy."

29. "Mural Artist Freddie Ross, Untrained 18-Year-Old, Paints School Wall in Saint John, N.B." *The Standard* [Montréal], 21 June 1946, 14–17. The story did not exaggerate Ross' humble origins. Ross recalls being told that he and his sister, the youngest of five, shared a dresser drawer as their first crib. When I asked him about what books he might have been exposed to in childhood, he replied: "Books? Very few books ...we were really quite poor, all the time I was growing up. Books? I really can't remember." Fred Ross, interview by author, 28 April 2003.

30. Leroux, "Revision and Recovery."

one-man show, held in the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John. Ross spoke with the optimism of youth: "I suppose that a person of my age has not had the knocks and disappointments an older artist may have encountered, and I may be inclined to see the world through rose-coloured glasses."<sup>31</sup> There is nothing in the text of the rest of the speech that suggests this line was delivered ironically. Yet on display at the exhibition were the preparatory drawings of Ross' current mural project, *City Slums*, a work he would realize in the foyer of the vocational school where he now worked as a teacher. Ross' depiction of street life on the wrong side of the tracks in Saint John hardly suggests "rose-coloured glasses," but he was not talking about the world of his images, rather the place of his images in the world. Fortune was smiling upon him. Here he was with a one-man show at 23 years of age, at work on a fourth major mural having returned from training in Mexico, where muralism had become almost a state religion.

Ross' rose-coloured glasses tarnished quickly. Few walls would be offered in the coming years, and the ones he had already painted met with indifference. *City Slums*, with its impoverished children, idle youths (who may be prostitutes), and striking workers (Saint John had just witnessed the brutal defeat of the 1949 Canadian Seamen's Union strike), might have been expected to provoke comment or controversy.<sup>32</sup> Instead, in Ross' words, "There was no reaction, no reaction.... Canada is such a dull country when it comes to the arts, nobody gets excited; I mean 'good,' 'bad,' it doesn't matter, they say 'oh yeah, another painting.' They don't have any spirit or emotional involvement in any of this, and that's why for a young person [in Mexico], it was so exciting, because you literally had to take sides."<sup>33</sup> He had created art for the people, but it did not seem to be the kind of art the people craved. Three years would pass before Ross began work on the companion mural to *City Slums*, *The Promise of Humanistic Education*. This project elicited even less response than *City Slums*. The publicity it received, he recalled, was "very sparse," and his own enthusiasm for the project waned.<sup>34</sup> The year after that, as we know, the war memorial mural at Fredericton High School was taken down "temporarily." Temporarily became permanently. Fred Ross, mural painter had little choice but to become Fred Ross, easel painter.

Even at the height of their appeal, modern muralists knew they faced stiff competition for the attention of the public. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, "the Age of Catastrophe was the age of the large cinema screen ... as Depression

31. Fred Ross, "Know Your Own Artists" speech delivered 12 January 1950, New Brunswick Museum (NBM) Art Department Records, "Know Your Own Artists" series no. v1, "Fred Ross."

32. David Frank, "No More Walls: The Social Realist Art of Fred Ross," *New Maritimes*, 13 (November/December 1994): 6.

33. Fred Ross, interview by John Leroux, 13 December 1997, unpublished, in possession of the author.

34. As quoted in Leroux, "The Murals of Fred Ross," 80.



**Figure 2: Photograph illustrating "Mural Artist Freddie Ross, Untrained 18-Year-Old, Paints School Wall in Saint John, NB"**

*The Standard* [Montréal], 21 June 1946, 17.

deepened and the world was swept by war, Western cinema attendances reached their all-time peak."<sup>35</sup> Diego Rivera acknowledged as much in his mural *Pan-American Unity* when he celebrated the films of Charlie Chaplin as the United States' greatest contribution to the culture of North America. The scale of modern murals and their narratives undoubtedly have some relationship to the cinematic culture contemporaneous with them. And yet they were by no means an elite cultural anachronism in an age of mechanical reproduction. In March of 1933, 10 000 people crammed themselves into the Detroit Institute of Arts to see the unveiling of Rivera's murals: "Socialites Elbow Laborers in Jam to View Murals," reported the *Detroit Evening Times*.<sup>36</sup> Fred Ross was not commissioned by wealthy patrons to execute his FHS murals, but by students. Since Ross himself was not yet twenty years old, this was a mural by, for, and of the young, in memory of those whose youth was ended by war.

35. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short History of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1994), 193.

36. Linda Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals* (New York, 1999), 175.

Murals did have some advantages over the cinema. They were, for one thing, less ephemeral. Even the mere six years that Ross' mural hung far exceeded a theatrical run of a film. They were perennially on display and, when in a public building, perennially accessible. Despite the Cold War art world's dismissal of the form's didactic narratives, the murals that matter are complex – they tell multiple stories, and afford viewers a variety of perspectives from which to read them. Consider that Rivera's Detroit murals were a delight to his patron, Edsel Ford, who saw them, like many of today's critics of the mural, as a romanticization of mass production industry. The murals, however, were also the site to which United Auto Workers organizers brought hesitant workers to convince them to sign a union card.<sup>37</sup> Murals do not afford a single reading, but they do require reading – of one kind or another – to communicate meaning. In the Cold War years, Ross could apparently find few willing readers.

Ross was not alone in having his career as a muralist derailed and his murals neglected or destroyed. The FHS mural has plenty of good company among the ranks of neglected, damaged, and destroyed murals of its era. Harold Haydon's remarkable 1934 utopian socialist mural at Pickering College in Ontario, for example, has since been allowed to die the death of a thousand errant basketballs.<sup>38</sup> Even murals with much higher profiles have not been safe. While Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals are today lovingly restored by the artists' former assistants, and are certainly the major attraction of the Detroit Institute of Art, Linda Bank Downs explains that they were a neglected "orphan" in the museum's collection for half a century: "it took fifty years for the murals to become the subject of scholarly study; it was fifty years before the cartoons were discovered in storage ... and it was over sixty years before the murals were cleaned and repaired." In the 1970s, when the mural courtyard was being used as a smoking lounge and banquet hall, water from a leaking skylight had begun to damage the mural and "a fine layer of tobacco smoke covered the frescoes with a gray shroud." In 1979, the museum's director supported an architect's plan to put a stairwell in the middle of the courtyard, a plan only abandoned because of the determined resistance of some museum staff members and individuals in the community.<sup>39</sup> Murals themselves are defenceless, but some murals can mobilize able defenders.

Ross was not the only Canadian muralist to use the form to commemorate World War II. It is quite likely no coincidence that one of Ross' mentors, fellow New Brunswick artist Miller Brittain, would later tackle similar themes in a similar way in his mural for the Veteran's Hospital in Saint John, entitled *The Place of Healing in the Transformation from War to Peace* (1954, plate 3). Brittain, a veteran who was a bomb aimer on 37 bomber missions over

37. Dylan A.T. Miner, "El renegade comunista: Diego Rivera, *La Liga de Obreros y Campesinos* and Mexican Repatriation in Detroit," *Third Text*, 19 (November 2005): 651–652.

38. Niergarth, "Art, Education, and a 'New World Society.'"

39. Bank Downs, *Diego Rivera*, 181, 183.





Plate 1: Re-created version of Fred Ross, *Destruction of the World Through War and Rebuilding the World Through Education* (2011) *in situ* The Currie Center, University of New Brunswick.

Photograph by John Ryan, 2011.



Plate 2: Fred Ross, *City Slums* (1950), *in situ* Harbour View High School (Formerly Saint John Vocational).

Photograph by Kirk Niergarth, 2003.





Plate 3: Miller Brittain, *The Place of Healing in the Transformation from War to Peace* (1954), 156 x 729 cm.  
Collection of Horizon Health Network, photograph courtesy of the New Brunswick Museum, reproduced with the permission of the estate of Miller Gore Brittain.



Plate 4: Thomas Luzny, *Humanity in the Beginning of the Atomic Era* (1953), in situ on display at the Canadian War Museum.  
Photograph taken in 2013 of cwm 19910202-007, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, © Canadian War Museum.



Plate 5: José Clemente Orozco, *Epic of American Civilization: Modern Migration of the Spirit* (1934) *in situ*, Baker Library.

Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.



Plate 6: José Clemente Orozco, *Epic of American Civilization: Modern Human Sacrifice* (1934) *in situ*, Baker Library.

Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.





Plate 7: José Clemente Orozco, *Epic of American Civilization: Gods of the Modern World* (1934), *in situ* Baker Library.  
Commissioned by the Trustees of Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

Germany before being named an official war artist, would have been one of Ross' influences in developing *Destruction/Rebuilding*. Brittain's mural was, like Ross', a work of imaginative rather than documentary realism. The view from altitude did not often afford a personalized view of horror. Watching his bombs explode on the city below, he once wrote, was a surreal visual experience, like seeing "a casket of jewels opening up in some Walt Disney film." For Brittain, "there was no inspiration there." He was nevertheless well aware of the very real human devastation occurring below the incendiary spectacle. On October 18, 1944, he wrote to his parents: "The German cities, particularly in the Ruhr valley where most of our trips are, are taking an awful pounding. Duisburg was simply flattened. It was a big industrial city.... The destruction is terrible. I hate it but don't see how it can be avoided."<sup>40</sup> After another bombing run the next month, Brittain was left wondering about the "beastliness of man." Only victory, Brittain wrote, would allow "friends to talk together about making a new world really believing what they say."<sup>41</sup>

On each of Brittain's bomber missions he carried with him a copy of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and, like these poems, *The Place of Healing* shows "two contrary states of the human soul."<sup>42</sup> On the left, a terrible figure flies over a "flattened" city and its suffering inhabitants. This figure calls to mind Blake's apocalyptic imagery:

Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!  
Bring me my chariot of fire!  
I will not cease from mental strife  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land.

On the right side of the mural, Jerusalem is being built. The base of the city on the right is horizontally aligned with the top of the ruined skyline of the city on the left. It is a city on a hill.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the figures on the left – where a mother mourns with a child's corpse in her arms, a woman prays for mercy, and a man raises his fists in anger – the figures on the right are affectionate, cooperative, and celebratory. The men looking at blueprints suggest that this city is being carefully planned, and the father directing his son's gaze

40. "Letters Home," Miller Brittain to Mr. and Mrs. James Firth Brittain, esq., 5 November 1944 and 18 October 1944, Canadian War Museum (cwm) Archival Collection, F/L Miller Gore Brittain, 58A, 1, 82.8.

41. "Miller Brittain," Miller Brittain to Kjeld and Erica Deichmann, 8 July 1944, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, Deichmann-Gregg Papers, file 352.

42. Tom Smart, *Miller Brittain: When the Stars Threw Down Their Spears* (Fredericton, NB, 2007), 104.

43. "Ye are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand and give light to everyone in the house" (Matthew 5:14).

shows that it is built with future generations in mind. As in Ross' *Destruction/Rebuilding*, there is no trace of nationalism. Likewise, it is less interested in celebrating victory in war than demanding that peace ultimately be victorious.

Unlike Ross' mural, Brittain's survived, albeit not without difficulty. When the Veteran's Hospital was closed in the 1970s, the mural moved with the residents to the then-new Ridgewood Veterans' Health Wing. The mural was installed in a reading room, and then later transferred to the lobby. In the process it was seriously damaged; eventually it was dismantled and placed in storage. Restored in 1986, it did not reappear in public until mounted in the lobby of the Saint John Regional Hospital in 1991. After four years in this location, 250 staff members signed a petition to have it taken down, citing public complaints and claiming that it scared children. This petition was unsuccessful, but questions about the appropriateness of a hospital lobby as the venue for Brittain's mural remained. In 2005, the mural was removed during renovations and placed in storage in the New Brunswick Museum, where it remains today.<sup>44</sup>

Thomas Luzny, a veteran like Brittain, also reflected on the meaning of World War II in a series of murals he painted in the early 1950s. In this case, the similarities to Ross' imagery and themes must have been coincidental. Born in Inwood, Manitoba and educated in Winnipeg, Luzny served with the infantry in Italy and Normandy before, late in the war, becoming a cartoonist for the Canadian army newspaper, *The Maple Leaf*. A February 1946 issue of that paper announced that Luzny, a "wild-eyed young man of 22," was planning to take up a "promising career as a muralist" in England after his discharge.<sup>45</sup> He studied with British muralist Frank Brangwyn and, after his training, spent two years on a series of nine murals entitled *War and Peace*, which were unveiled in the London offices of the Canadian Department of Veterans Affairs in 1953.<sup>46</sup> Panels entitled *Refugees* and *Humanity at the Beginning of the Atomic Era* (plate 4), which feature a skull grinning out from the centre of a mushroom cloud at fleeing civilians, are obviously comparable to Ross' *Destruction*. Likewise, *The Crafts of Peace* and *Barn Dance* bear comparison to Ross' *Rebuilding*. Luzny's murals stayed up a little longer than Ross': they went into storage in 1961 and, after making their way across the Atlantic and being transferred from Veterans Affairs to the Canadian War Museum, the panels have been recently restored and put on display in that museum and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

There were, as well, three murals executed in the Veterans Affairs Building in Ottawa in 1955 by André Biéler, George Pepper, and Charles Comfort. Each

44. Larocque, "Finding a Place."

45. "...by Luzny," *The Maple Leaf*, 23 February 1946, 4. I am indebted to the anonymous reader who suggested the Luzny murals for comparison to Ross' mural, and to Laura Brandon at the Canadian War Museum who provided me with her research on the background of these works.

46. Clare Street, "In London Town," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 14 November 1953, 20.

of these artists, too, were veterans and much older than nineteen-year-old "Freddie" Ross who had been assigned to design the war memorial for FHS. In 1946, Ross had none of the later murals to look to, nor, evidently, did he draw inspiration from earlier artists who had commemorated Canada's participation in World War I. Of these, the most comparable to Ross' *Destruction/Rebuilding* in its monumental scale and memorial intent is British artist Charles Sims' massive canvas *Sacrifice* (1918).<sup>47</sup> Sims, like Ross, depicted the horrors of modern warfare. In the aftermath of a battle, Sims shows soldiers collecting bodies in the rain, amid mud and debris. Below this scene, framed by what appears to be the clean snow of Canada, family members mourn lost loved ones at the foot of an enormous cross, seen from the rear, on which hangs the body of Christ. In case viewers might somehow miss the significance of this symbol, Sims has painted the word SACRIFICE across the horizontal beam of the cross. Above this word are the coats of arms of Canada's provinces. The message is similar to that conveyed in James Byam Shaw's *The Flag* (1918).<sup>48</sup> While Sims' bodies look more authentically like corpses than the flag-clutching dead soldier in Byam Shaw's image, here too is the grieving family and, in the truncated image of the imperial lion statue, the readily identifiable cause for which the sacrifice was necessary: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.<sup>49</sup>

Noble, patriotic sacrifice was, as Jonathan Vance and others have shown, a common theme for Canadian war memorial art.<sup>50</sup> But, in Ross' *Destruction of War*, there is no sign of a victory arch. No allegorical angels to offer hosannas to fallen patriots who made an ultimate, Christ-like sacrifice. No symbols of nation or empire. There are soldiers here, but little sign of the military, conventionally uniformed and organized. The civilian clothes on most of Ross' combatants suggest resistance fighters, partisans. The men and women dead and dying, tortured and survivors of torture in Ross' image are civilians, not soldiers.

Only the central figure here is in quasi-military attire. He strides forward, his rifle hanging on his shoulder. His fist is clenched and this gesture, the international symbol of anti-fascist solidarity, is repeated by a civilian whose back is turned to us.<sup>51</sup> According to the FHS 1948 yearbook, the artist intended

47. *Sacrifice* is part of the collection of the Canadian War Museum. An image of the painting is available on their website, <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/canvas/cwa101e.shtml>.

48. *The Flag* is also part of the collection of the Canadian War Museum, but the best image of it available on the web is courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, <http://100masters.wag.ca/artwork>.

49. A similar patriotic theme is evoked by the recently unveiled memorial in Trenton, Ontario, to those Canadians killed in Afghanistan. Their names are engraved on a granite maple leaf.

50. Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, 1997).

51. A preliminary drawing for *Destruction of War* was more explicitly anti-fascist. As John Leroux describes it, "the looming figures of Hitler and Mussolini [are] the central figures in



the central figure to symbolize “the idea of the brotherhood of man breaking down all national barriers.”<sup>52</sup> In this internationalism, Ross’ figure is quite unlike the soldiers of Sims or Byam Shaw. He is in the midst of battle, but he is not fighting – not conventionally, at least. He is neither victorious nor defeated, but persistent and determined. He calls to mind not the Christ of Sims’ *Sacrifice* but the Christ of José Clemente Orozco’s 1934 mural *Epic of American Civilization* at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire (plate 5). Here, in *Modern Migration of the Spirit*, Christ has destroyed his own cross, refusing to die for the sins of humankind, shedding the skin of his own graven image and raging against the symbols and cant that sustained the industrialized brutality so characteristic of the 20th century. This Christ is no Christian: He suggests that we will be responsible for our own salvation, if we will be saved at all. He appears in the pendant panel to *Modern Human Sacrifice*, in which wreaths of entrails are laid upon a skeleton in army boots while fine speeches are made and the brass bands play beneath the flags of every nation, in front of euphemistic war memorials everywhere (plate 6). This was exactly the kind of war memorial Ross was clearly determined that *Destruction/Rebuilding* would not emulate.

That the dead in *The Destruction of War* are civilians is atypical for a war memorial, but that there are *any* images of corpses is actually unlike most earlier Canadian war art. Laura Brandon has recently written about the depiction of death in official Canadian war art.<sup>53</sup> Among more than 13,000 images, she found only 63 showing bodies or graves. Perhaps, in some way, Ross, sheltered by youth and distance from the war itself, was able to depict its awful consequences in part because he had *not* himself experienced them. When asked about his youth in Saint John during the war, Ross’ memories were vague. He remembered his mother taking in boarders and “a certain amount of rationing.” He remembered seeing soldiers and sailors who were stationed in Saint John, and hearing of a tragic incident when two of these young men were killed patrolling the harbour in a storm. He remembered the announcement and celebration of the end of the war.<sup>54</sup> Personal experience, in a direct sense at least, was not where the images depicted in *Destruction of War* came from. Ross’ images of survivors of wartime atrocities were inspired by what

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front of an architectural background reminiscent of Albert Speer’s Nuremberg Rally stadium, complete with Nazi banners and dead hanging victims of persecution.” Leroux, “Revision and Recovery.”

52. Margaret Desaulniers, “Mural: The Memorial,” 1948 *Fredericton High School Yearbook* 61, quoted in Leroux, “Revision and Recovery,” 8.

53. Laura Brandon, “Above or Below Ground? Depicting Corpses in First and Second World War Official Canadian War Art,” in Sherrill Grace, Patrick Imbert, and Tiffany Johnstone, eds., *Bearing Witness: Perspectives on War and Peace from the Arts and Humanities* (Montréal and Kingston, 2012), 93–106.

54. Fred Ross, interview by author, 28 April 2003.

was available in the popular media. In particular, Ross recalls using *Life* magazine as a source, and almost certainly he was referring to photographs taken by Margaret Bourke-White, George Rodger, and others at Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, published in *Life* in the weeks following.<sup>55</sup>

Seeing photographs of this kind could, in itself, be a powerful experience. Susan Sontag recalls her encounter with these photos, at twelve years of age, in California: "Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, and instantaneously."<sup>56</sup> To have visited the camps did not necessarily mean one was more able to confront and represent the horror they contained. Canadian war artist Alex Colville recalled his experience at Belsen: "One felt badly because one didn't feel worse. That is, you see one dead person and it is bad: 500 is not 500 times worse. There is a certain point at which you begin to feel nothing. There must have been 35,000 bodies in the place and there were people dying all the time."<sup>57</sup> Aba Bayefsky was another Canadian artist who visited the liberated camps and while this experience was, in his words, the "determining factor in everything I have done since," he too struggled to find a way to portray scenes of industrial murder.<sup>58</sup> While it is possible to question Laura Brandon's specific judgement that Bayefsky's *Belsen Concentration Camp Pit* (1945) requires the viewer to bring to the image his or her own "repulsion, horror, and sorrow" – images of skeletal and emaciated corpses in large numbers, however stylized, are not particularly time-bound in their significations – she is correct in suggesting that neither Colville nor Bayefsky depicted the camps with "documentary accuracy" compared to photographs and films in wide circulation.<sup>59</sup>

It is precisely the wide circulation and repeated reproduction of Holocaust photographs that have given scholars pause over their morality and viewer effects. Few of these photographs were taken by the victims themselves, nor made with their consent. The survivors or bodies in the images are usually anonymous. In some cases, as Marianne Hirsch observes, the work of the camera is in lockstep with the work of the gun: victims are "shot before they are shot."<sup>60</sup> For Susan Crane, "the violence perpetrated on the victim is redoubled through the faithfulness of the camera to the horrors it is used to

55. Fred Ross, interview by author, 28 April 2003; "Atrocities," *Life Magazine*, 7 May 1945, 32–37. See the online version in "LIFE Behind the Picture: The Liberation of Buchenwald," accessed 23 April 2013, <http://life.time.com/history/buchenwald-photos-from-the-liberation-of-the-camp-april-1945/#1>.

56. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977), 19.

57. Quoted in Graham Metson and Cheryl Lean, eds., *Alex Colville: Diary of a War Artist* (Halifax, NS, 1981), 19.

58. Quoted in Brandon, "Above or Below Ground?" 104.

59. Brandon, "Above or Below Ground?" 101, 104.

60. Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14 (Spring 2001): 24.

witness.”<sup>61</sup> Contemplating frequently reproduced photographs of bulldozers pushing corpses into mass graves, Hirsch writes:

These images are the epitome of dehumanization, the inability, even after liberation to give the victims an individual human burial.... [W]e stare at the picture in ... shock, amazement, and disbelief. But, at the same time, the opposite is taking place: the bodies are being buried, the traces are being concealed, forgetting has begun.<sup>62</sup>

Fred Ross saw the piles of corpses in *Life* magazine, but these were not depicted in *Destruction of the World*. Ross chose instead, largely, to depict survivors. One notable exception is the child in the lower left foreground being carried by her mother; her brother stands alongside. In the re-created version of the mural, at least, this child appears to be a corpse. Unlike one of Bayefsky's bodies in a pit, however, this corpse is situated in a context that identifies her as a daughter and a sister. While she is anonymous, she is not, significantly, only a corpse.

What the FHS yearbook editor called the “striking reality” of Ross’ mural was an apt judgement. The figures in the mural belong to the artistic tradition of “realism” insofar as they refer, metaphorically, to actual events and people. There is, however, a distinction to be made between this form of realism and the documentary accuracy of atrocity photographs. The victims of war in Ross’ mural are not human beings who appeared, often unwillingly or posthumously, before a camera’s lens. They are, rather, representations: of loss (when we look at the dead child); of madness (when we look at the screaming figure); of suffering; of the results of torture; and crucially, of survival. Ross’ mural shares much with the kinds of creative representations Hirsch calls “postmemorials,” works that use images of the Holocaust to “adopt” the memories of those who experienced it. “Postmemory is a powerful form of memory,” Hirsch writes, “precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation.... It is defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma.... It is a question of an *ethical* relation to the oppressed or persecuted.”<sup>63</sup> The dead child and her family in Ross’ mural are at the bottom of the panel, and hence are close to the viewers who would have looked up from the floor of FHS’ auditorium. They invite identification and a relation that at least has the potential to be an ethical one.

“Affliction and monstrosity,” T.J. Clark concludes in *The Sight of Death*, “we have to re-learn are always the true face of utopia – the face it presents as it leaps up out of the immovable, out of the insufferable everyday.”<sup>64</sup> If Ross’

61. Susan A. Crane, “Choosing Not to Look: Representation, Reparation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography,” *History and Theory*, 47 (October 2008): 311.

62. Hirsch, “Surviving Images,” 19–20.

63. Hirsch, “Surviving Images,” 9, 10.

64. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 239–240.

*Destruction of War* shows affliction and monstrosity, *Rebuilding the World through Education* shows an alternative society, also within the range of human capacity. Here we see high school students engaged in study and play; above them is a representation of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater*, which was for Ross a "symbol of optimism" that humanity could harness modern technology in harmony with nature to forward the aims of a peaceful society.<sup>65</sup> The mushroom cloud's presence in this panel shows that this vision of a peaceful society was fundamentally contingent. Victory had not ushered in the Millennium. Rather, peace existed only through the continuous exercise of collective will to resist the forces of destruction.

The dichotomy of *Destruction/Rebuilding* was typical of Ross' murals. In his first endeavour in this genre, *Annual School Picnic* (a work that has been in storage for decades), he followed his teacher's instructions to design a mural based on "something you know" (figure 3). The mural surrounded a 4 by 12-foot window in the school's main stairway. Ross knew the idyllic summer picnic pastoral scene he depicted, using his classmates and friends as models. Ross also knew, however, what students at the Voc would see when they looked out the window the mural surrounded. The view functioned as "experience" to juxtapose against *Annual School Picnic's* "innocence." A photograph of the mural *in situ* reveals through the window a scene of snow-covered industrial Saint John: a pulp and paper mill, warehouses, and the provincial mental asylum are all visible. Ross was quite familiar with life on these streets. One of the first drawings he completed at the Voc, he recalled in an interview, was called *Paradise Row*, named after a street he had lived on before his father started working at the sugar refinery. The name of the street was unintentionally ironic, the drawing intentionally so – Paradise Row was no paradise. His drawing was a variation on the theme Ross would revisit in his mural *City Slums* with its answering panel, *The Promise of Humanistic Education*.<sup>66</sup>

In our interview ten years ago, Ross was reluctant to offer his own reading of his murals. On one point, though, he was reasonably clear: in *Rebuilding the World through Education* and *Humanistic Education* he did not, as the titles suggest, intend to offer education as a solution to the world's problems. Rather, and Ross was definite on this point, a good education is only made possible *after* the essential conditions – peace and affluence – have been achieved. Education is part of what Ross conceived to be the good life, not a road to it. One imagines Ross could see the good luck that helped transport him from Paradise Row to *Annual School Picnic*. His murals suggest that these kinds of opportunities are too essential to be left to chance. This is exactly the message conveyed more directly by the symbol of the blueprint in Miller Brittain's *Place of Healing* mural.

65. Leroux, "Revision and Recovery."

66. Fred Ross, interview by author, 28 April 2003.



**Figure 3: Fred Ross, *Annual School Picnic* (1945) in situ Saint John Vocational School. Ross' teacher, Ted Campbell, is in the foreground.**  
Photo courtesy of New Brunswick Museum.



A decade before he started painting *The Place of Healing*, and half a century before a petition was circulated to have that war memorial mural removed from public view, Brittain told a Fredericton audience that “when art develops naturally, as a result of seeing and knowing, it is understood by everyone.”<sup>67</sup> The difficulty the *Place of Healing* has had in finding a place for hanging, and the treatment received by Ross’ *Destruction/Rebuilding* between 1954 and 2011 suggests that the things Brittain and Ross saw and knew were not, in fact, well understood by subsequent generations. Will the re-created Ross mural be understood “naturally” now? Certainly, Ross’ images of torture, suffering, and death can hardly be shocking in an early 21st-century culture where such images proliferate. What is more significant to contemplate is the answer that was appropriate to these images in the aftermath of World War II. Not more war, certainly. Not more and better weaponry, more sophisticated surveillance and policing. The only way to honour the memory of the dead was to build a more peaceful world and to remember, under the shadow of the mushroom cloud, that the prospect of a return to violence must be constantly resisted.

Contemplation, it seems, is a difficult thing to manage in 21st-century North America. We are living, T.J. Clark writes, “through a terrible moment in the politics of imaging”:

the more a regime of visual flow, displacement disembodiment, endless available revisability of the image, endless ostensible transparency and multi-dimensionality and sewing together of everything in nets and webs – the more this pseudo-utopia presents itself as the very form of self-knowledge, self-production, self-control – the more necessary it becomes to recapture what imaging can be: to suggest what is involved in truly getting to know something by making a picture of it: to state the grounds for believing that some depictions are worth returning to, and that this returning ... is a form of politics in itself, meeting other forms head on.<sup>68</sup>

Only 21st-century professional academics, Clark goes on to say, “chained to their image-displacement machines like lab animals to dispensers of morphine or 220 volts, could be so blind to think that [such] looking is a matter of nostalgia or elitism, or some such canting parrot-cry.” Orozco too, more than 70 years earlier, was cynical about the academy. *Gods of the Modern World* (1934, plate 7) presents a very different vision of education than those conveyed in Ross’ murals. Here, skeleton academics oversee the birth of a skeletal fetus – lifeless knowledge begetting lifeless knowledge. Like Clark too, Orozco also suggests that resistance is not futile. In the most optimistic of his panels at Dartmouth, *Modern Industrial Man* (1934), Orozco portrays the miracles of technology (symbolized by the in-progress skyscraper in the background) affording a reclining worker with a book the great liberty of independent study and thought. This was exactly the kind of liberty given to “Freddie” Ross as he worked on the large preparatory drawings for his FHS mural on the floor

67. “Art Club Met,” *The Daily Gleaner* (Fredericton), 24 March 1942.

68. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 121–122.



of his parents' small home in Saint John. This was exactly the kind of liberty, afforded to everyone, that Ross envisioned in *Rebuilding the World*.

Ross' was not an exceptional world view in 1948, and this is the heart of the reason why returning to his mural is important today. It responds to the greatest horrors, to the best evidence of humanity's capacity for evil, with continued belief in humanity's capacity for better. As Canadian poet Frank Scott put it during the war, "a green seed/ Lies on the ground, under a lifeless tree."<sup>69</sup> Scott, like Ross, did not fight in the war, but Miller Brittain did, and while stationed in England, he warned his parents: "I believe all our training has made us impatient with all that stands still," he wrote. "That kind of impatience is needed in Saint John as well as here and you will find a noisy bunch of progressives coming home."<sup>70</sup> Ross may have been wearing what he thought of as the "rose-coloured glasses" of youth, but he was hardly alone in envisioning a "humanistic" postwar world in which the "brotherhood of man" would break down "all national barriers."

This basic optimism did not negate the fact that Ross' panels were a difficult memorial. To face a mushroom cloud, a dead child, and Holocaust survivors on a daily basis would have been challenging for the students of FHS. It may be challenging today for daily users of the Currie Center at the University of New Brunswick. This is a challenge worth rising to meet. In a culture of reality television and embedded journalists, it is worthwhile to be confronted, to be forced to engage with images such as Ross' that present suffering, cruelty, and death without euphemism or voyeurism. Clark again reflects,

Sorrow, misfortune, anguish, adversity distress – words that once loomed large in the language, and which now seem less and less spoken, less and less speakable.... Nonetheless, I am more and more certain that part of what will have to be rethought in the years to come (standing at the end of one long form of opposition to modernity, and looking, some of us, for the elements of a new one) is the possibility of recognizing – of drawing back into consciousness – those aspects of the human lifespan that the new irreligion has not to see, not to say. A socialism, if that's what we shall persist in calling it, that starts from misfortune, pain, and death.<sup>71</sup>

Orozco, author of those skeleton professors, wrote that mural art was an art "for the people ... for ALL," but now we know he was wrong.<sup>72</sup> It was people, after all, who took *Destruction/Rebuilding* down from the wall. People, too, did not protest its absence, or did not do so with sufficient vehemence to prevent it from being hidden from view for half a century. The re-created murals, too,

69. Quoted in Sandra Djwa, "Canadian Poets on War," in Grace, Imbert, and Johnstone, eds., *Bearing Witness*, 48.

70. Miller Brittain to Mr. and Mrs. James Firth Brittain, esq., 2 January 1944. Canadian War Museum, Archival Collection, F/L Miller Gore Brittain, 58A, 1, 82.8.

71. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 239–240.

72. Quoted in Mary K. Coffey, "Toward an Industrial Golden Age? Orozco's *Epic of American Civilization*," in *Orozco at Dartmouth: The Epic of American Civilization* (Hanover, 2007), n.p.

will not be for “ALL,” but now the possibility has been afforded that they will be for at least some, and possibly for many. These new viewers will determine what kind of second life the murals are given. They may use them to think about the legacy of the war and consider how inappropriate it would be to claim for this legacy an endorsement for increased militarism. Readers of the re-created murals will learn to speak in the vernacular of another time, a metaphorical language, then called realism, which allowed Ross to make a claim in the field of commemoration that opposed peddlers of jingoism and nostalgia.<sup>73</sup> It was a memorial mural, but it was aimed at the future, not the past. The nuclear explosion should be thought of less as a division between the panels than a distorting mirror. On one side is the way of life afforded by war; on the other is the kind of society that can be built through sustained commitment to peace. Viewers of the re-created mural might remember that both these avenues remain open; the choice remains ours.

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73. Those who command the field in Canada today are discussed in Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *Warrior Nation*.