

SAVE OUR HERITAGE ORGANISATION PRESENTS

Architecture and Art

The WPA in San Diego



A SELF-GUIDED TOUR

INTRODUCTION

The New Deal included a series of visionary programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States between 1933 and 1939. This self-guided tour focuses on the architecture in San Diego and the art of these buildings from one of the pre-eminent of these federal projects: the Works Progress Administration program, the WPA.

The Great Depression of the 1930s was an economic disaster of tremendous proportions. The WPA was designed to provide relief for the unemployed by creating jobs and income for millions of Americans. New Deal programs employed many thousands of San Diego's citizens.

Under the WPA, historic preservation materialized as restoration and rehabilitation, design and construction, fine art, craftsmanship, and production—all in service of the national recovery, meanwhile engendering widespread pride.

A restored nation—as evinced through its preserved historic architecture—celebrated past American achievements, ingenuity, and diverse local histories that gave the nation its distinctive multicultural character. - Stephanie E. Gray

As the most progressive arts and culture programs in our nation's history, along with crucial infrastructure projects, the WPA also brought three significant preservation acts as symbols of the country's commitment to history and learning.

- National Archives and Records Administration (1934)
America's national repository for historic documents, photographs, and other records.
- Historic Sites Act (1935)
Assigned the conservation of historic sites to the National Park Service and gave it power to survey, select, and preserve buildings and sites of national significance. This was America's initial declaration that historic preservation was national policy and laid the groundwork for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.
- Historical Records Survey (1935)
Inventoried and cataloged federal, state, and local records of all kinds for use by historians, researchers, and genealogists.

The legacy of the WPA remains ever present in historic architecture throughout San Diego and in our preservation laws. Designed primarily in the Spanish Colonial Revival and Art Deco styles, or a hybrid of the two, our tour's 12 publicly accessible buildings and sites intertwine art and architecture and historic preservation.

The WPA's scope was so great and its cultural impact so profound for our country that the term "WPA" is often used to describe all New Deal art. However, it was the New Deal's combination of programs working together that gave us so many architectural landmarks and artworks. Programs like the Federal Art Project (FAP) and the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) supported new U.S. post offices and their iconic murals, for example. Funds from combined programs created several San Diego buildings and their artworks, murals, and sculptures. Notably, the WPA encouraged or required an interdisciplinary effort for each project. This priority employed more people and usually assured delivery of a well-conceived, valuable public asset.

For SOHO's tour, we are using "WPA" as an umbrella term for the entire WPA era and all its programs. Sites that have been heavily modified or have only remnants left are not included. And, while there is other wonderful WPA art to be found throughout San Diego, the art highlighted here includes only those works that were a part of the original site and building design.

Many of the buildings and places that represent San Diego's WPA legacy can be experienced in person today because preservationists, organizations, and individuals safeguarded them through activism and occasional fundraising campaigns. Balboa Park buildings in the Palisades and the County Administration Building are two prominent examples. Today, raising public awareness of these important but sometimes overlooked historic places can help protect them for years to come.

SOHO scoured online blogs, journals, newspapers, books, theses, the San Diego History Center, Office of the City Clerk - City of San Diego archives, County Clerk, County of San Diego, and SOHO historians to bring you this tour.

For deeper study into this fascinating chapter of San Diego's architectural history, we recommend these excellent resources:

- [New Deal Art Registry](#)
- [The Living New Deal](#)
- [The WPA in San Diego County, 1935-1943, a Boondoggle or Saving Grace?](#)
- [Restoring America: Historic Preservation and the New Deal](#)

ADOBE CHAPEL RECONSTRUCTION, 1937

3963 Conde Street, San Diego CA 92110

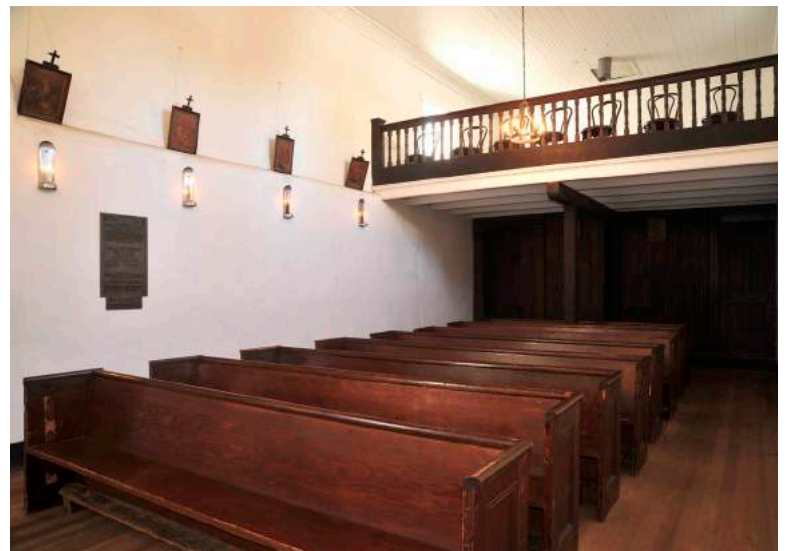
Originally built in 1850 as a home, the building was converted to a church by Don José Aguirre in 1858. In 1937, the adobe was in the way of a street realignment. An important community touchstone, it was salvaged before demolition, and a faithful reconstruction was done a few hundred feet away. Much of the original interior was retained, including the tabernacle, the altar with its marbled finish, the woodwork and doors, the confessional, and pews. Don Aguirre's marble tombstone is laid in the floor, as it was originally. WPA

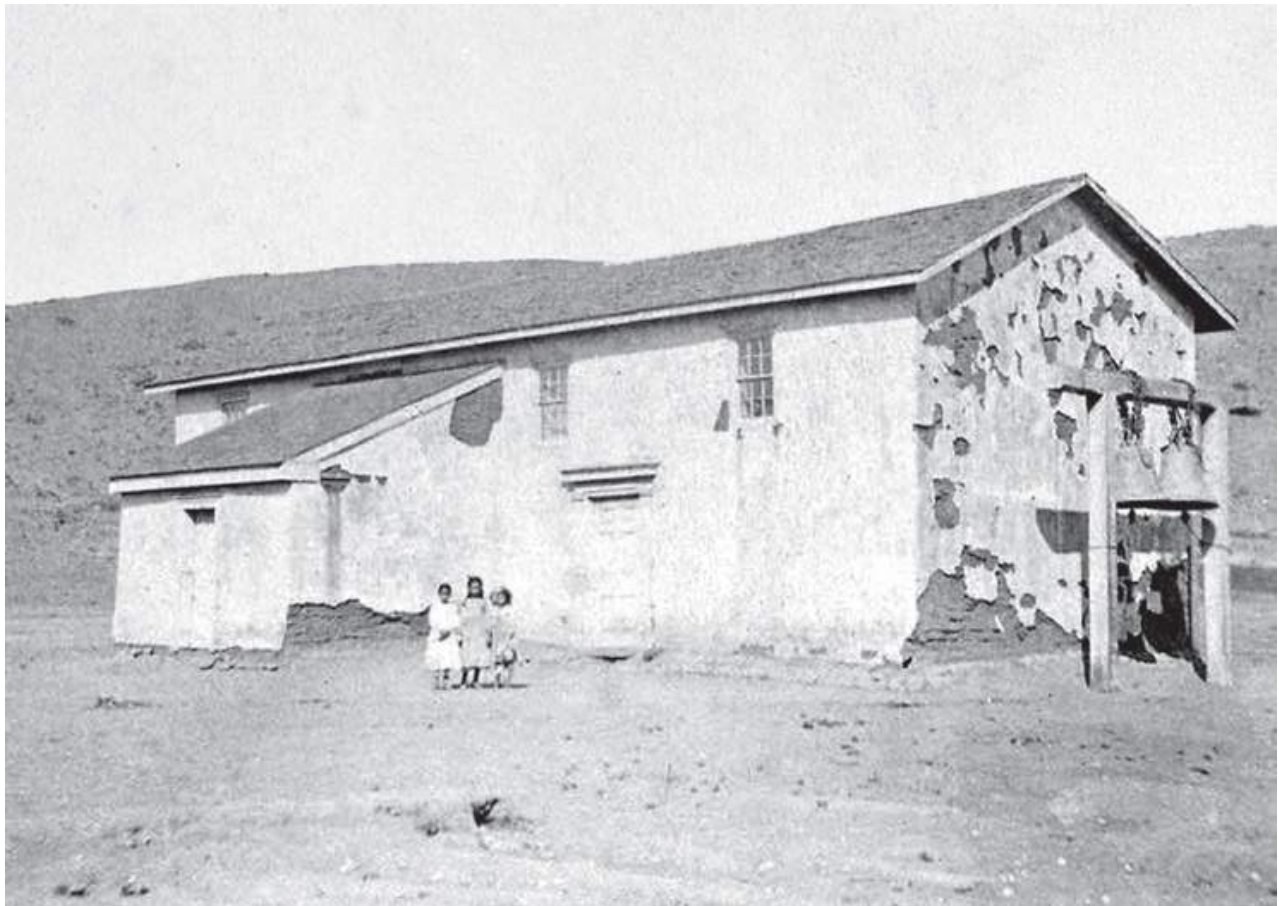


workers made the adobe bricks by hand on site just as they were made by hand and on site almost 100 years earlier. The WPA's historic reconstructions were fairly exacting. The chapel was used for many things, including a school, town meetings, and special events.

Owned by the City of San Diego and operated by Save Our Heritage Organisation, it functions today as a museum with educational, arts, and cultural purposes and hosts special events.

As of August 2022, the building is closed and undergoing an earthquake retrofit and adobe repairs.





CORONADO HIGH SCHOOL, 1939

650 D Avenue, Coronado CA 92118

Agency: Federal Arts Project (FAP), Works Progress Administration (WPA)

Artist: Donal Hord



Founded in 1913, the original building was demolished and rebuilt in 1939 through the WPA Schools program. Part of the 1939 building remains standing as the current 600 Building. Its original relief mural, *Legend of California*, sculpted by Donal Hord, is intact and consists of seven 6' x 9' incised relief panels, carved from Indiana limestone.

Hord's relief depicts the story of early California and its diverse indigenous peoples who settled and roamed the state. Queen

Caláfia is shown at the center as the mythical ruler after whom California was named. She is shown with her attendants, one who bears a crown of peace, the other a helmet of war. Residents portrayed represent Diegueño, Spanish, Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, Italian, and Basque people.

Another figure, a guardian of California, is also guardian of the sea and holds the key to the ocean entrance, while another guardian of the desert possesses the key to the land entrance to the state.





A Spanish padre is shown establishing the missions. Two figures symbolize music and dance, including a man with a violin, representing cultural growth. The panels also show Eliza Lovell Tibbets, the woman who brought the first navel orange tree to California. Interestingly, Tibbets also played a prominent role in the suffragism movement and worked on other progressive causes, including freedmen's rights.



DOWNTOWN SAN DIEGO POST OFFICE, 1938

815 E Street, San Diego CA 92101

Agency: Treasury Section of Fine Arts (TSFA)

Architect: William Templeton Johnson

Artist: Archibald Garner



Designed by San Diego architect William Templeton Johnson in 1938, this stately 69,000-square-foot, steel and concrete building was funded by the federal government and constructed under the Treasury Section of Fine Arts. Still a busy commercial and social hub, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985.

The decorations for federal buildings fell under the jurisdiction of the Treasury Department, which held competitions to select artists. Los Angeles sculptor Archibald Garner won the competition for ornamentation on the main San Diego Post Office.

Garner produced nine 3' x 9' glazed, terra cotta ceramic relief panels illustrating an enduring theme, *Transportation of the Mail*. The sculpted frieze above the E

Street entrance shows an airplane, a car, a ship, and a train, and, for good measure, an eagle holding lightning bolts. Inscribed above the panels and running the full length of the building are the lyrical words: "Through science and the toil of patient men, the nation's thoughts traverse land, sea, and air."





FEDERAL BUILDING, 1936

Now the Comic-Con Museum

1594 El Prado, San Diego, CA 92101

Architect Richard S. Requa

Art direction: Juan Larrínaga



Originally known as the Federal Building, this ornate Mayan Revival structure designed by Richard Requa was built in 1935 for the exposition. The 30,335-square-foot building went up quickly, in just over two months after Congress authorized the funds expressly for the exposition's exhibits. Constructed to be a permanent addition to the Palisades, the building has concrete walls and steel roof trusses. Various civic organizations, including the Works Projects Administration itself, have called this building home.

An exterior paint renovation took place in 2021, led by the Committee of One Hundred, a nonprofit group devoted to preserving Balboa Park's historic architecture, gardens, and public spaces.



LA JOLLA FIRE STATION NO. 13 (FORMER), 1935

Now Shepherd YMCA Firehouse

7877 Herschel Avenue, La Jolla, CA 92037

Architect: Harold Abrams

Restoration and Adaptive Reuse: Bennett + Associates



July 1937. Courtesy The Living New Deal



A handsome Mission Revival building commissioned by the WPA in 1937, San Diego Fire Station No. 13 replaced the 1914 station. Rising from a busy city block, the building is a City of San Diego historic landmark and began as much more than a fire station. Simultaneously, it also housed La Jolla's first city hall, a police station complete with jail cell, a hospital room, and the water department until 1976. After remaining unused for about a decade, the YMCA leased it from the City in the 1980s and did an interior

renovation at that time. In 2016, the exterior was restored and repainted its original color. Windows were restored and storefront entries were replicated using historic photographs. The apparatus door was converted to a glass roll-up door that is often left open to passersby. The building is now operated as the Shepherd YMCA Firehouse.

LA JOLLA POST OFFICE, 1935

1140 Wall Street, La Jolla CA 92037

Agency: Treasury Department, Public Works Administration

Architect: Louis A. Simon

Artist: Belle Baranceanu



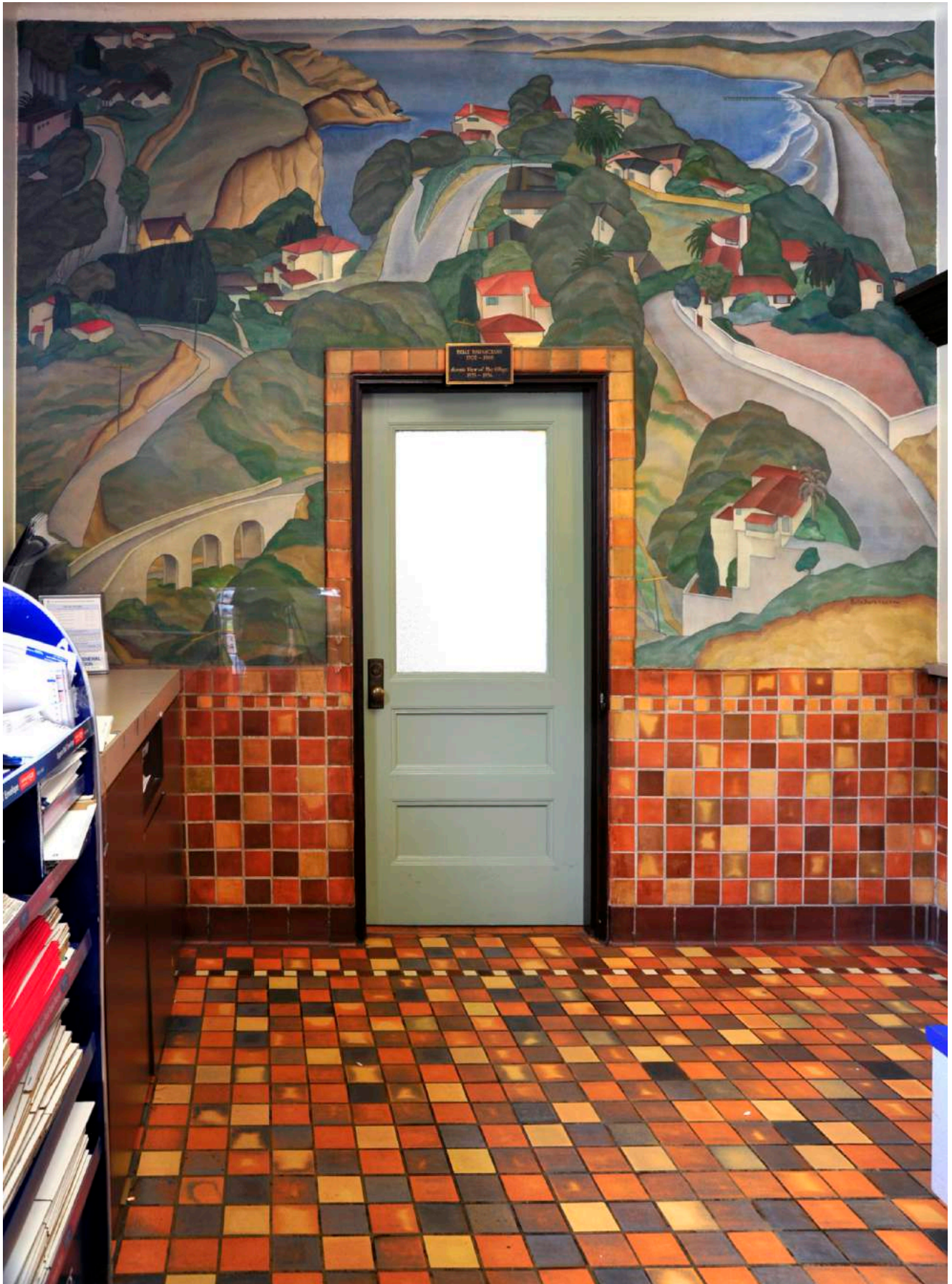
The La Jolla Post Office was built in 1935 in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. Louis Adolphe Simon, the supervising architect for the U.S. Department of the Treasury from 1933 until 1939, designed it. After that, the office moved to the Public Works Administration/Works Progress Administration.

Inside is a soaring, bird's-eye view mural of La Jolla painted by Belle Baranceanu in 1939. Titled Scenic View of the Village, the 15-by-12-foot mural is one of only two Baranceanu works that can still be seen still in their original historic settings.

The post office was sensitively expanded in the 1960s by New Mexico architect William Lumpkins with a sizeable addition to the rear.

Threatened with closure and sale by the federal government in 2012, the La Jolla Historical Society created a task force of its preservationists and community members. They successfully protected the post office by getting it listed on the National Register of Historic Places in January 2013, thereby saving both the building and the mural.





PALACE OF EDUCATION, 1935

Now the Balboa Park Club

2144 Pan American Road West, San Diego CA 92101

Architect: Richard S. Requa

Artists: Belle Baranceanu, Frederick Schweigardt

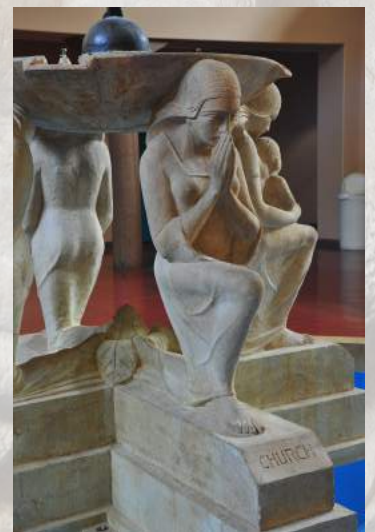


San Diego architect Richard S. Requa designed and supervised the construction of many new buildings in the park for the 1935-36 California Pacific International Exposition, with much of this work underwritten by WPA funds.

New areas of the park were developed, including the Palisades, where the WPA offices were housed. Unlike most world's fair structures, many of these 1935 buildings are still in use.

First constructed for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition as the New Mexico building, Requa remodeled and significantly enlarged this distinctive structure that would be at home in Santa Fe to become the Palace of Education in 1935. After many uses over the years, and a number of inappropriate alterations, it became the Balboa Park Club, and in 1992 it was sensitively renovated following National Park Service guidelines.

Upon entering the Pueblo Revival-style building's interior court, a large fountain and sculpture titled the *Four Cornerstones of American Democracy* by Frederick Schweigardt takes center stage. A bronze dancing nude expresses exuberance in





contrast with figures of four solemn women cast in cement, representing Home, School, Community, and Church.

Schweigardt's artwork provides a dramatic foreground for painter Belle Baranceanu's mural, *Education and Culture*, on the interior court's back wall. Illustrating the progress of humankind, the mural depicts technology and society in 1935. Above it, an inscription reads, "Through education we communicate to our children the heritage of the past." A second inscription below adds, "Education for good life." It is one of only two of Baranceanu's murals to survive in their original location.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY ADMINISTRATION CENTER, 1939

1600 Pacific Highway, San Diego CA 92101

Program: WPA Federal Art Project (WPA-FAP)

Architects: Samuel W. Hamill, Louis Gill, Richard Requa, William Templeton Johnson

Artists: Arthur Ames, Jean Goodwin, and Donal Hord



This landmark building began as the Civic Center, a combined home for offices of the City and the County. The City occupied the southern half, the County the northern side. Designed jointly by San Diego architects Samuel W. Hamill, Louis Gill, Richard Requa, and William Templeton Johnson, the WPA-funded project was the last great effort of civic leader George Marston.

Construction began in 1936 and the Civic Center was officially dedicated on July 16, 1938 by President Roosevelt, who gave a short speech and noted the engraved motto inscribed on its portal: "I would like to say that I like especially the sentiment expressed here, 'The noblest motive is the public good,'" the president said. "I think if we all carry that motto in our hearts, in every city and community in the land, there is no question but the proper thing, American democracy, will survive."

Marston and others endorsed the City Beautiful Movement, which greatly influenced the Civic Center's design and the selection of its spectacular harbor-front location. Red tile roofs, glazed inlaid pottery tile, and arched door and window openings intentionally echo the Spanish Colonial Revival style of architecture found in Balboa Park, combined with

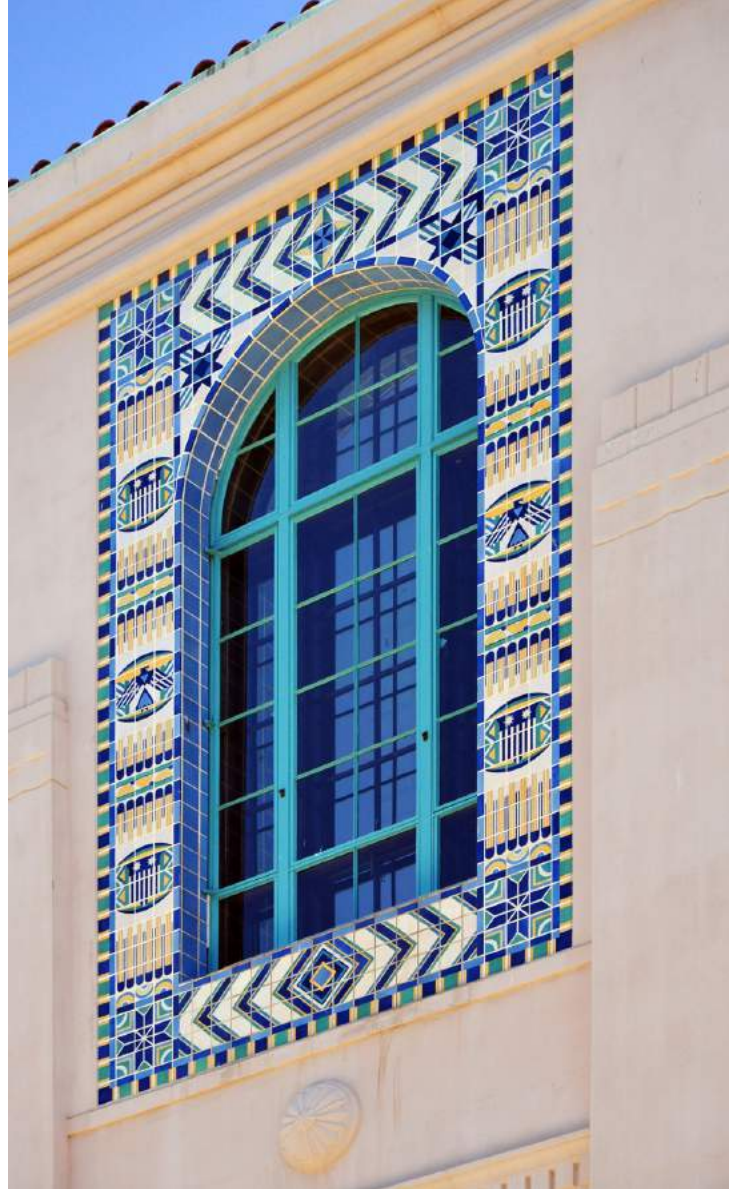


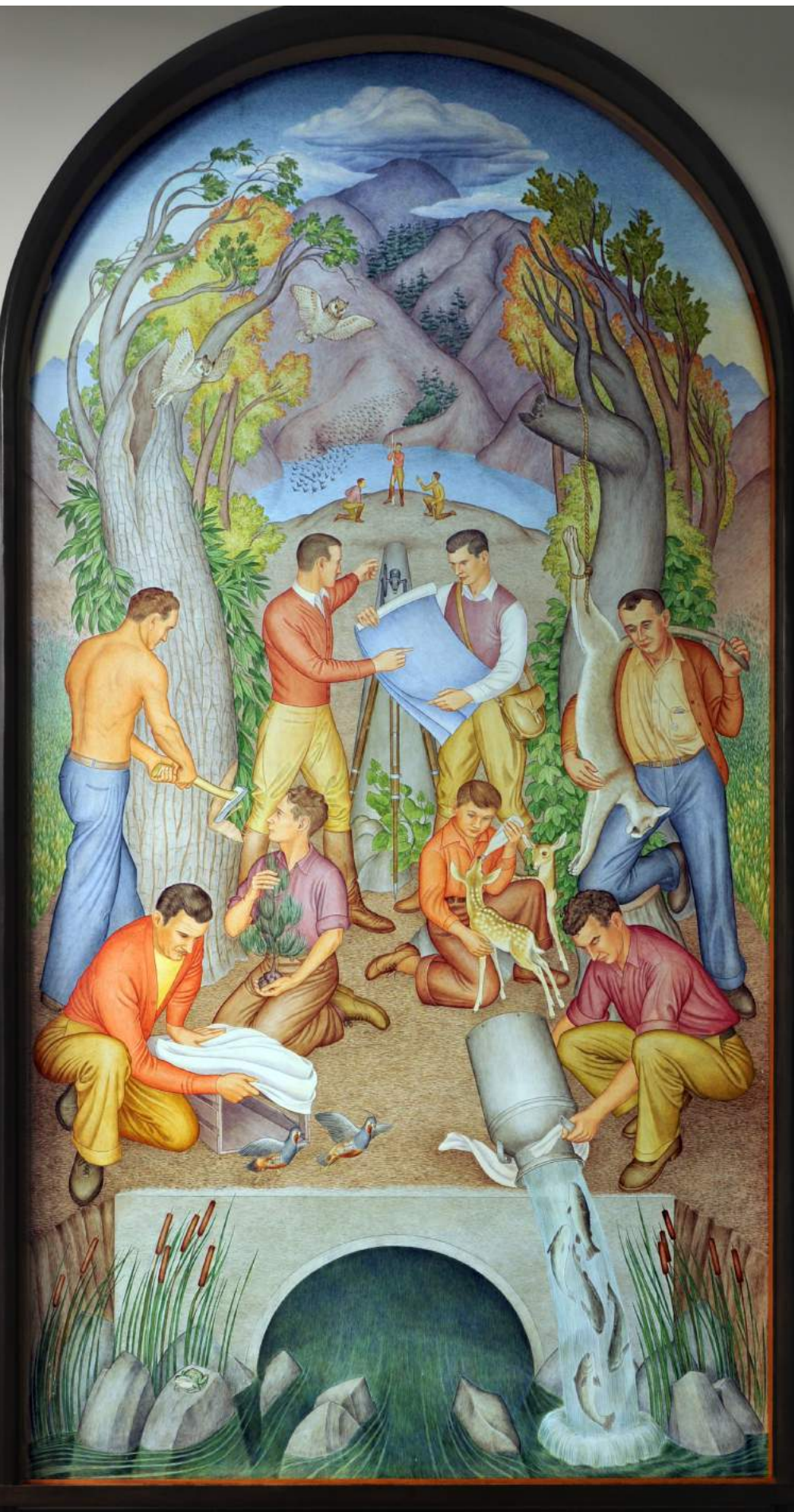
classical Beaux Arts elements. Additional WPA Moderne and Zigzag Moderne flourishes make for lively facades and an inviting public landmark.

Constructed of poured concrete, the exterior pays tribute to San Diego government with a rich display of architectural symbols and detailing. Decorative tile, thought to be Gladding, McBean from Tropico Potteries, adorns the building's 10-foot tower that rises from the roof above the entrance. More tile accents the arches above and surrounds the entry doors and windows.

At the bayside approach to the center, visitors encounter an enormous granite sculpture and fountain that rise to a 22-foot height. Called *Guardian of Water*, San Diego artist Donal Hord's monumental statement is integral to the building's landscaped grounds. Hord spent more than two years shaping a 22-ton granite block from a Lakeside quarry. The sculpture of a 13-foot-high woman holding an olla on her left shoulder symbolizes San Diego's responsibility for one of its most precious resources: water. The mosaic base of kneeling nudes, symbolizing clouds, pour water from jars over a dam into a bountiful citrus orchard. Carved shapes of dolphins and fish decorate the interior basin, while sea snail designs cling to the basin's circumference.

The mosaics shimmering on the east and west entrance walls pay tribute to the region's history. A

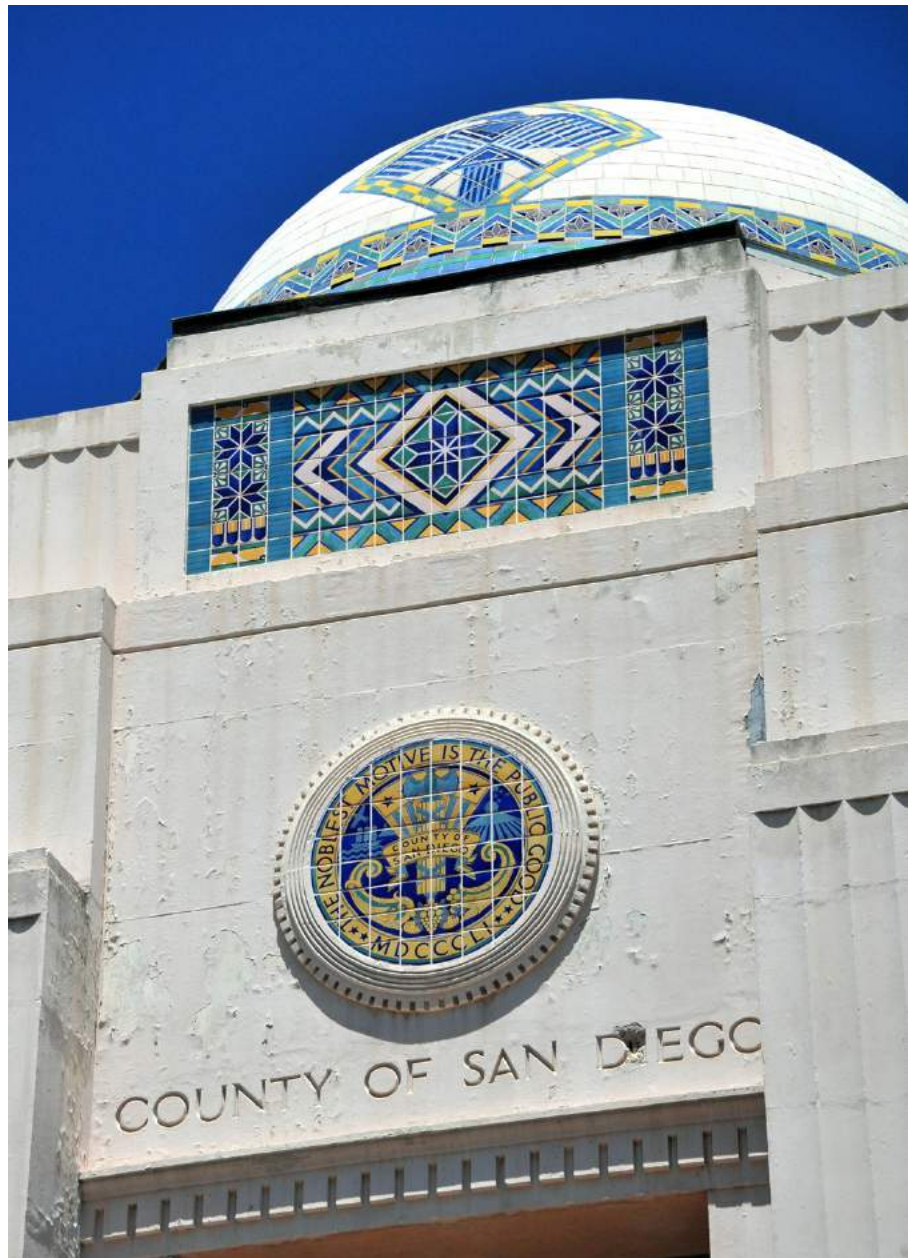




representation of an airplane bisects the numerals of the year 1936, when construction began on the building. Beneath that are depictions of Balboa Park's California Tower, ships at sea, fish, and 1542, commemorating the year Cabrillo entered San Diego Bay.

Inside the County Board of Supervisors's Chamber, Room 30, are three murals, each representing an aspect of San Diego life: Recreation, Agriculture, and Conservation. Jean Goodwin and Arthur Ames (who later married) created the murals with assistance from Alloys Bohner, William McAulby, and Hazel Scheckler. Each 20-foot high mural is painted in egg tempera on muslin canvas over a gesso surface.

By the 1980s, the County Board of Supervisors considered potentially lucrative commercial leasing that would allow hotels to be built on the nine acres of parking lots surrounding the County Administration Center. Hundreds of people led by the Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 protested this and other ill-conceived ideas, such as tearing down their WPA building to build a bigger, more utilitarian edifice. Through C-3's efforts backed by the public, the CAC received National Register status in 1988, and San Diegans were able to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the saved building's dedication.



SAN DIEGO FIRE STATION NO. 4, 1937

404 8th Avenue, San Diego CA 92101



The Art Deco two-company fire station is the oldest operating fire station in the city, and today still serves East Village and its surrounding areas. The building is modestly scaled: the ground floor measures 50' x 80' with a tower visible for several blocks rising to 70 feet.

Saved from demolition in 2005 by a settlement agreement with SOHO, Fire Station No. 4 completes a block of historic buildings along J Street. The retention of



the fire station and neighboring landmarks enhance the sense of the past here in the core of the nine-block historic warehouse district.



OCEANSIDE POST OFFICE, 1935

517 Seagaze Drive, Oceanside CA 92054

Agency: Treasury Department

Architect: Louis A. Simon

Artists: Elise Seeds, Stuart Holmes



The Treasury Department built over 1,100 post offices during the New Deal era, many of them enhanced with public art that reflected back to citizens their regional landscapes, history, and legends.

The Oceanside Post Office was constructed in 1935, and dedicated in 1936. It was likely designed by WPA Supervising Architect Louis A. Simon, and features two WPA art elements. The interior holds Elise Seeds's 1937 oil on canvas mural called *Air Mail*, of a plane soaring above the San Luis Rey Valley, and installed above the entrance doorway, is a 1936 wooden coat of arms with an eagle carved by Stuart Holmes.



ARTISTS

Jean Goodwin Ames (1903-1986) and Arthur Ames (1906-1975)

Jean was a native Californian, born in 1903 on an orange ranch near Santa Ana. She was a Professor at Claremont Graduate School and served as professor emeritus until her death.

Jean and Arthur collaborated on a number of projects throughout their careers, including decorative works for the mural division of the WPA. During this time, they became leaders in the revival of ancient decorative mural techniques and were among the first in California to use mosaics.

In 1939 they worked with the fresco secco technique for three murals titled *Agriculture, Recreation, and Conservation* for the Council of San Diego County. Their mosaic work for the WPA was the springboard to a long and successful joint career. Their works decorate buildings throughout Southern California. In 1958, Jean Ames received the Los Angeles Woman of the Year in Art award along with Jane Wyman and Lucille Ball.

Belle Goldschlager Baranceanu (1902-1988)

A muralist, printmaker, teacher, and portrait artist who experimented with modern abstraction, Baranceanu made several murals during the California Pacific International Exposition in 1935-36 and other public works for the WPA. A public favorite is her 1939 mural called *Scenic View of the Village* inside the La Jolla post office, 1140 Wall Street. In 1944, she designed posters and murals to help with the war effort illustrating war scenes for display windows at Marston's Department Store. She taught at the San Diego School of Arts and Crafts in La Jolla for five years and at Francis Parker School in Mission Hills for twenty-three years.

Lorraine Archibald Garner (1904-1969)

Archibald Garner established a reputation as a versatile artist, working as a portrait sculptor and as a sculptor, designer, and graphic artist for 20th Century Fox Studios. Arch, as he was called, received commissions for the Federal Art Project. An exponent of modern art, his style was termed "hard edge."

Donal Hord (1902-1966)

At age 15, Hord began taking art classes from Anna Marie Valentien at San Diego Evening High School. Valentien and her husband, Albert Robert Valentien, were prominent artists working in various media in San Diego's Arts and Crafts Movement. From Anna Valentien, Hord began learning modeling and sculpture, and continued his education in the 1920s, aided by grants and scholarships. He learned bronze casting at the Santa Barbara School of the Arts and spent almost a year in Mexico studying both ancient and modern forms of art that would strongly influence his personal artistic style.

In 1934, Hord was accepted into the Federal Art Project and given a salary of \$75 a month. The opportunity to carve in stone followed and he found a love for sculpting with hard stone in particular. In addition to the standard limestone, granite, marble, cast stone, terra cotta, and bronze, Hord worked in various tropical woods and in minerals such as obsidian, diorite, onyx, nephrite, and jade. Beginning in the 1920s, he was a part of the “direct carving” school of sculpture, meaning that rather than carving from a previously produced model, Hord allowed the grain and “spirit” of the material to influence his sculpting. Two of his most important figurative sculptures grace the entrance to the County Administration Building and a courtyard at Balboa Park’s House of Hospitality.

Frederick Schweigardt (1885-1948)

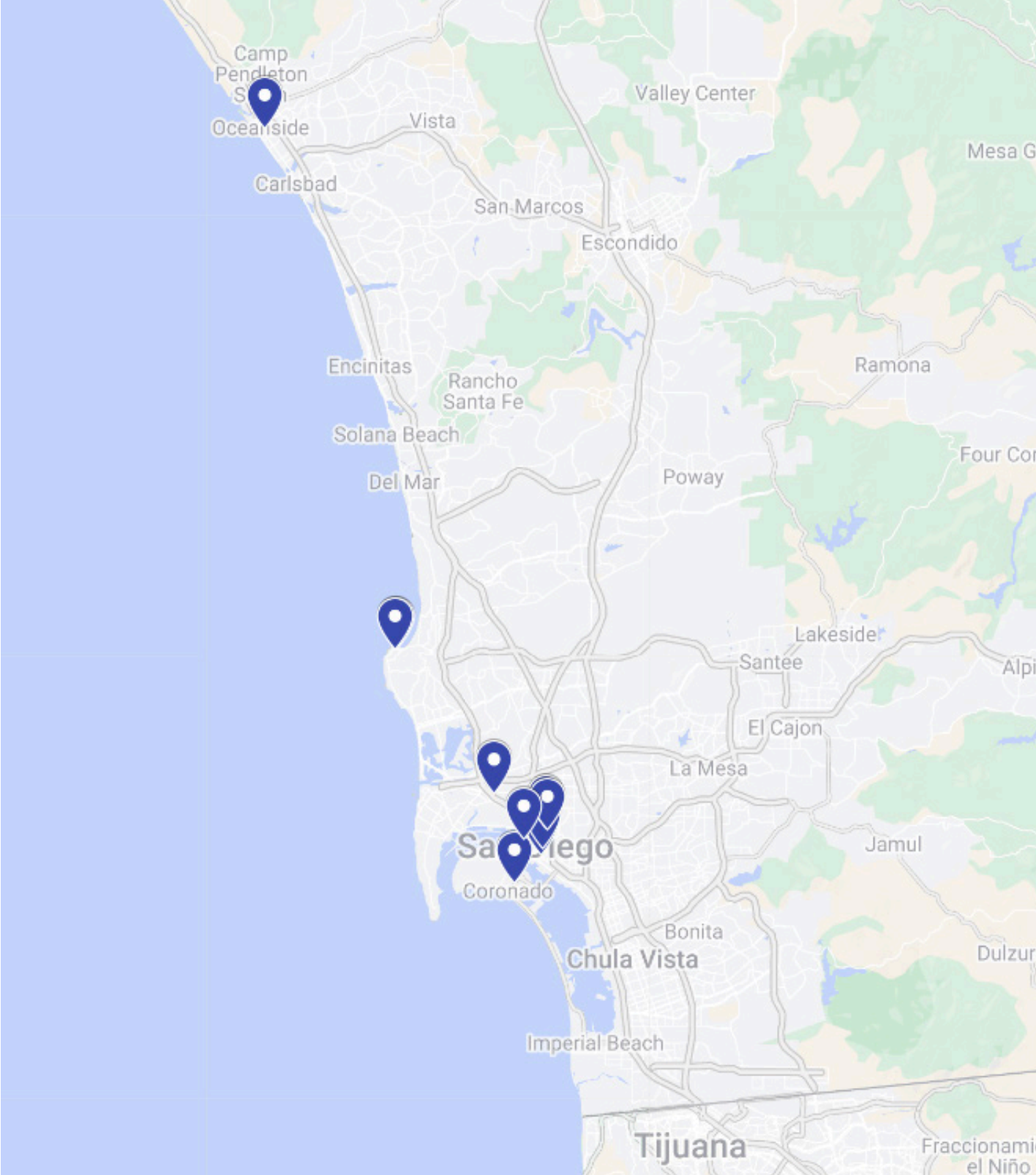
A student of the Stuttgart and Munich art academies in Germany, Frederick Schweigardt also studied with Auguste Rodin in Paris, where he received first prize at the Paris Exposition of 1913. Schweigardt was named the “official sculptor for the exposition” for San Diego’s California Pacific International Exposition in 1935-36. At that time in his Balboa Park studio, he made busts of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Will Rogers, and Albert Einstein.

Elise Seeds (1902-1963)

Painter, muralist, and lithographer, Elise Seeds was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She studied with Daniel Garber, Hugh Breckenridge, and at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. In the 1920s, she studied dance with Isadora Duncan and acted as W.C. Field’s comic partner in the Ziegfeld Follies. After settling in Los Angeles in the 1930s, she was active in the local art scene and on the Public Works of Art Project. Her art was part of San Diego’s California Pacific International Exposition and she created a mural for the Oceanside post office. Six feet tall and married at least three times, she was eccentric and sported purple hair. She died in Los Angeles on May 12, 1963. A modernist, her works are mostly abstractions.

MAP

Click on the map below to open an interactive Google map that will help guide you to each of the ten sites on the tour.



RESEARCH, EDITORIAL, PRODUCTION, AND DESIGN

Alana Coons
Ann Jarmusch
Sandé Lollis

PHOTOGRAPHY

Sandé Lollis
Except where otherwise noted

