

IT'S TIME TO RESTORE THE WHS MURALS

We Need Your Assistance

Weequahic High School is home to one of the most important installations of public art in New Jersey: the "*Enlightenment of Man*," a New Deal-era mural painted by Michael Lenson, who was the director of NJ mural activities for the *Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)*.

Recently, we had the murals evaluated by a firm in New York City. We received a report that detailed the present conditions of the murals and the treatments that are required. The conclusion was that after 67 years the murals are in need of serious repair. Their estimate to restore the murals was \$45,000 with a time period of 3 to 4 weeks to complete the work.

During the next few months, we will continue to receive other proposals and then make a decision on the best way to proceed. In the meantime, we want to begin seeking funds from a variety of sources: government, foundations, corporate - and the generosity of our alumni.

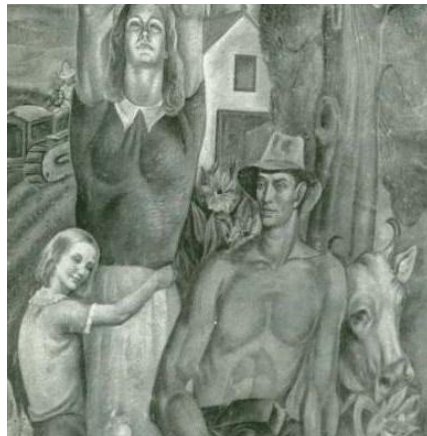
We urge you to begin making donations NOW so that we can raise the funds that are needed for this restoration. When the work is done, we plan to apply for local and state historic landmark status.

Please send checks to WHS Alumni Association (*write mural restoration in the memo area*), P.O. Box 494, Newark, NJ 07101.

The Story of the Weequahic Murals

Excerpts from an article by Barry Lenson, the son of artist Michael Lenson.

People who pass through the Weequahic lobby often pause to wonder where the murals came from. I'm happy to provide a closer look. *The Newark Evening News* reported that my father stood up and



remarked, "We of the WPA are of the people and we are painting for you, the people." He personally painted murals for the Verona Sanitarium, the City Council Chambers in Newark City Hall and the New Jersey Pavilion of the 1939 World's Fair, along with other locations. The 1999 edition of *Who Was Who in American Art* calls my father "Jersey's most important muralist."

He was also art critic of the *Newark Sunday News* from 1956-1971 and director of the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts for a time. His paintings are in the Newark Museum and many major institutions across the country.

The Weequahic murals are only loosely tied to actual events and places. This gave him more freedom to create highly personal images of mankind's progress from ignorance to enlightenment. The story is easy to follow on the walls. As you stand inside the lobby, face the entry doors and start with the panel just to their left. As you move leftwards around the room, you'll find the story clearly delineated:

○ **PREHISTORY:** Early women and men seek a cave's protection against a sabertooth tiger, lightning and other natural threats. Ignorance makes these primitives fearful, yet they have created cave paintings to lend order to the world around them. In art, the spark of enlightenment has been struck.

○ **EARLY CIVILIZATIONS:** Images of ancient Egypt, Rome and Greece depict the social progress of mankind. The forces of Sparta and Rome, starkly shown, will recede from philosophy and humanism.

○ **THE DARK AGES:** Monks preserve the scholarly classical tradition. A scientific experiment represents the dawn of modern science.

○ **THE RENAISSANCE:** Savonarola, the fanatical Italian monk, is preaching for the destruction of art and science. Yet Michelangelo, Leonardo, Erasmus, and Dante are there too - a strong starting lineup on any team. Enlightenment will win out in the end.

○ **THE ENLIGHTENMENT:** An austere-looking scholar sits in his study, surrounded by thick books.

○ **THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION:** Workers operate a cotton gin, reflecting the Depression-era belief that automation would liberate mankind from demeaning physical labor.

○ **MODERN TIMES:** The entire West lobby wall depicts contemporary society in a very positive light. We see an airplane, a dam, a bridge, skyscrapers and girders. A farm represents America's natural resources. A mine disaster is also in progress.

○ **THE FUTURE:** In the final panel, a man and woman, enlightened at last, lift their arms heavenward. It's one of the most moving images in my father's entire output. A shattered cannon wheel expresses the hope that man will one day put an end to militarism.

Painter of the Murals in Weequahic's Lobby Gains Wider National Recognition

Michael Lenson, the artist whose 1939 "Enlightenment of Man" murals surround the staircase in Weequahic's entrance lobby, has been gaining greater fame as one of America's most important social realist painters. The result could be that our murals will soon be rightfully regarded as national treasures, not just works that are significant to Weequahic, Newark or New Jersey alone.

Major Lenson Retrospective in Ohio Last Year

One indication of Lenson's growing fame was a major retrospective exhibition of his works that was presented by the Butler Institute of American Art late last year. In his introduction to that exhibition's catalog, the Butler's Director Louis A. Zona wrote:

"Michael Lenson's work is complex. It asks that we immerse ourselves in it and carefully examine both theme and execution. It is only through such exposure that we come to discover the range of its content and know the full power and effectiveness of its aesthetic message.

"Michael Lenson's work reminds us that great art, art that distinguishes itself at any time in man's history, is timeless. The issues that he raised and dealt with so many decades ago, in one form or another, continue to be front and center. The human struggle and triumph that Lenson portrayed on canvas remain relevant and germane.

"And while styles and movements do change, quality still rises to the top and significant artistic expression seen in this work is still prized and admired."

More Lenson Exhibitions Will Follow

As we prepare this edition of *The Calumet*, three more Lenson exhibitions are being planned for the next few years. One will be at the Noyes Museum of Art in Oceanville, New Jersey, a second at the Morven Museum and Garden in Princeton, and a third at the Quick Center for the Arts at Saint Bonaventure University in Olean, New York.

"The interest in my father's work is due in large part to the extraordinary murals that he painted for Weequahic's lobby," says Barry Lenson, son of the artist. "My father also painted the 'History of Newark' murals in Newark City Hall, and 'Mining' in the Post Office in Mount Hope, West Virginia. But there is something exceptional about his Weequahic murals, which trace the history of human thought from prehistoric times through our modern age."

Helping to Preserve the Murals

As readers of this newsletter may know, your Alumni Association has been raising funds to finance the restoration and preservation of Lenson's murals. We believe that as the artist's fame grows, more donors will be motivated to step in and provide the funds that are still needed to complete the work.

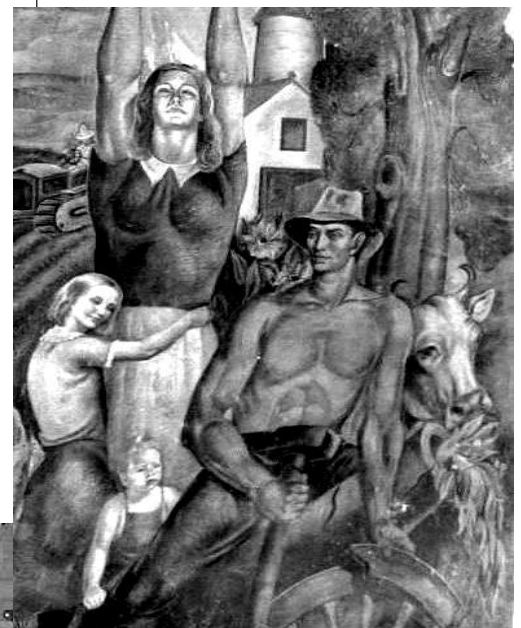
\$45,000 was the estimate given to us a few years ago for the restoration work to be completed. So far, we have raised \$23,000 - with \$3,000 recently used to install a Plexiglas covering to protect the bottom portion of the murals.

If you would like to contribute, please make out a check to **WHSAA** with "murals" written in the memo area. Mail to **WHS Alumni Association, P.O. Box 494, Newark, NJ 07101.**

A self-portrait of Michael Lenson



From the mural at Weequahic



From the mural at Newark City Hall