WPA Murals in California: a small digitization project

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Origins of the project

- Several murals were uncovered on the San Diego State University (SDSU) campus, dating from the 1930’s.
- The murals are being restored and relocated in the library.

“NRA Packages” by Genevieve Burgeson Bredo
Implications

Inspired by the discoveries on campus, Laurel Bliss and Lisa Lamont received a $10,000 faculty grant from SDSU’s Research Foundation to research and document Works Progress Administration (WPA) murals in California.
Goals of the grant

- Create authoritative list of WPA murals
- Photograph existing murals around the state
- Link digital images to metadata
- Launch a publicly accessible online database
- Put SDSU murals in historical context
Immediate challenges

- No digital asset management system
- Existing fields in VRA core didn’t quite match our needs
- No comprehensive list of WPA murals
- SDSU murals are WPA-era, not WPA
- Grant money was due to expire in eight months
Coping with challenges

Lisa took on the technical issues: buying Luna Insight, training staff, creating metadata fields, making site visits to photograph murals.

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<tr>
<th>VRA Core Element</th>
<th>XML element</th>
<th>XML attributes</th>
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</table>
Coping with challenges

Laurel took on the content issues: research, contacting mural sites, creating website to support the image database, getting an extension on the grant through June 2008.
Where to go for information?

- Books on WPA and/or specific artists
- Dissertations
- WPA websites
- National Archives and Record Administration’s records
- Full text interviews with artists on Archives of American Art website

http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/hord64.htm
Conclusions

- 347 WPA murals in California.
- Each requires extensive research, possible site visits, metadata creation, and image "massaging."
- How many hours of work per mural?
- Not scalable in current format.
Conclusions

- People were amazingly helpful: post office workers, local historians, school principals, WPA enthusiasts.
- WPA project may serve as a “dry run” for other digital projects at SDSU.
- Digitization projects are much easier when you own the items.
Still left to do…

- Resolve firewall issues – database only available in a test version on campus.
- More photographing.
- More metadata creation.
- Beef up narratives and information on the project’s website.
- Possible GPS mapping of sites.
Questions?

Contact Laurel Bliss
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