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Archaeologists Uncover an Artist

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When archaeological findings are of interest to the art world, they are usually rare ceramic urns or frescos from classical Greek, Roman, or Egyptian civilizations. One does not expect to find great art at an American military base. But Dr. Richard Edging, cultural resource manager at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, has believed for the last six years that a large 10.5 by 4 foot mural located along the back wall of the base environmental office was something special, and today many others are coming to the same conclusion.

As part of his responsibilities to see that the military base complies with historic preservation law, Edging has been working to oversee archaeological and architectural surveys. Part of that responsibility includes revealing the history of buildings built at Fort Leonard Wood during World War II. What especially intrigued him about his own office was that, although looking to an outsider like a dull, standard temporary administrative building, it had always been called the black officers' club. As the story goes, black officers stationed at the base during the war were refused entry at the main officers' club, and the commander ordered a building built for the exclusive (read segregated) use of black officers. There was something to the story, for the mural above the fireplace mantel on the building's back wall depicted a black couple at a picnic, and certainly this is not the expected theme for a mural at a white officers' club, Army administrative building, or much else at that time. Furthermore, the mural was signed, but the signature was obscure. Only "S/Sgt." and the last acquired Department of Defense Legacy funds to hire me to research the building's history and if possible discover who painted the mural. I began the research in October 1997, traveling to Fort Leonard Wood, the National Archives, and the Center for Military History in Washington DC, to try to wrest the history of the building and the mural from countless letters, reports, files, and newspaper accounts on Fort Leonard Wood. Through the Fall and Winter
to our knowledge of black soldiers and their segregated lives during the war. But the one area where I was having no luck was in identifying the artist. I found plenty of information on the Army Art Program. Further, article after article in the base’s World War II era newspaper, called the Fort Wood News, had stories about the base artists and their murals. But not one article discussed the mural at the black officers’ club, known officially as the “Officers’ Club Annex.”

With the draft report overdue in March 1998, I telephoned Edging and Walaszek to tell them that I was giving up and writing what I had. One morning in May I sent the draft report to the printers. But that afternoon, I wasn’t having much luck trying to get my mind focused on the next project. A few weeks earlier, while attempting to locate another Fort Leonard Wood artist, my wife Pat, a reference librarian, suggested that I could search for that artist in any number of published art indexes. Although that research had turned into a dead-end, the idea came back. I had been attempting to answer the artist question using Army records. What would happen if I abandoned that track and made a few assumptions? First, I assumed that the artist was black, even though no black artists were depicted in the installation newspaper. Second, I assumed that the mural artist had earned a reputation for his talent sometime during his life, thus ensuring his listing in the art indices of black artists. With these assumptions, and the last letters of the artist’s name, I sat down in the library and began to pore over the indexes. In about two hours, I came across a name—Countee. The last four letters of Countee’s name fit the mural’s signature. From that point on, through an amazing series of serendipitous events, Edging, Walaszek, and I confirmed that Samuel Albert Countee was the mural’s artist.

The first piece of luck was finding Countee’s name among hundreds of black artists in the numerous indices of black artists. Many of these works do not mention Countee. The second was finding an original 1940 copy of “The Negro In Art,” which had published Countee’s painting Little Brown Boy. Cautious before, I became more convinced when I saw the artist’s signature in the book—it matched the mural’s signature in style exactly. Begging the librarian to allow me to copy the signature from the rare book, I excitedly telephoned Edging “I think we’ve got our guy.” Edging walked over to the building and after looking at the painting again, called me back and asked “Could the first name be Samuel or Daniel?” I faxed a copy of the signature block enlarged, and Edging was delighted.

Still there was a lot of work to do. If the mural’s artist was Countee, how did he get there? Was he in the Army, or was he a civilian artist on tour? The name fit but the signature match could still be simply a heart-wrenching coincidence. Edging, Walaszek and I decided to postpone announcing our find until we could find evidence confirming that Countee was at Fort Leonard Wood. Thus began a period of about three weeks in which we all engaged in an intensive museum records search on Countee, who seems to have disappeared from the art world around World War II. No major art museums knew of Countee or if they did, they only knew the little that we had already discovered on our own. The
Then the third serendipitous event happened. Finding an obituary in the New York Times that dated Countee's death to 1959, I read that Countee's widow, Mary Countee, had lived at that time in New Hempstead, New York. I did an internet phone and address search for her name and found a Mary Countee listed in Jamaica, New York, a town just west of New Hempstead on Long Island. When I called the number Mr. Don Smith answered. Disappointed, I asked Don if he happened to know what happened to a Mary Countee who used to have that phone number. Don answered, "Mary was my wife, she died a few years ago." I apologized for the intrusion but tentatively asked, "Was she formerly married to Samuel Countee?" There was both great relief and joy when Don Smith laughed, "Who, Sam Countee, sure, Sam was a great artist but died in the late 1950s. I married Mary many years later."

Don Smith confirmed Samuel Countee’s military record, noting that he was buried in the Veteran's Cemetery on Long Island, and gave me the names of several living relatives. From that point on, more evidence came in about Samuel Countee, confirming that he was a soldier stationed at Fort Leonard Wood during the war. Much of this information was due largely to the generous sharing of his life history by his living niece, Ms. Sammie Whiting-Ellis of Washington DC. "Its absolutely fantastic. We're very, very proud of my uncle," Sammie recently told an AP reporter. Whiting-Ellis even traveled at her own expense to St. Louis to retrieve Countee's military records from the records center there, and then traveled on to Fort Leonard Wood to see the mural.

What we have learned about Countee to date is fascinating. Countee received scholarships to Bishop College and the Boston Museum School and was several times acknowledged as a bright talent, winning prizes for his art in the 1930s and early 1940s. His talent was unrecognized outside of the black art world though, and Countee was drafted into the Army like many young men. He trained at Fort Leonard Wood as a common soldier, but sometime while he was there he must have stood out, for when he was shipped overseas as part of an Engineer Dump Truck Unit to the Persian Gulf Command, Countee ended up restoring paintings in the palace of the Shah of Iran. I like to think, but cannot prove at this point, that Countee may have volunteered to paint the mural at Fort Leonard Wood, and that was the turning point in his military career overseas. After the war Countee made his way to New York where he painted and gave private lessons until his death.

Countee's art is distinctive and deserving of the wider recognition it is beginning to receive. Two of his pieces on the open market have been appraised at $9,000 and $11,000 each. Countee's art can be found in Houston, New York, and at universities like Fisk and Howard. Much of his work is still in the family's possession. I am continuing research on Samuel Countee, and I am working with the family to find support for a major exhibition of Countee's work. What we're hoping is that this discovery will lead to a greater appreciation of Samuel Countee's art.