

# Three Carmelites and the Coit Tower Murals

## PRESERVING A PIECE OF CALIFORNIA HISTORY

Coit Tower is one of San Francisco's most prominent landmarks. Atop Telegraph Hill, it commands spectacular views. When first built in 1933, the Tower was probably the highest point on the San Francisco skyline, welcoming people arriving on ferryboats from Sausalito or Oakland.

Coit Tower honors Lillie Hitchcock Coit, a wealthy eccentric patroness of the City's firefighters. When she died in 1929, she bequeathed a sizeable sum "for the purpose of adding to the beauty of the city I have always loved." These funds were used to build the Tower, as designed by Arthur Brown, Jr., who also designed San Francisco's City Hall.

Though not a part of the original architectural plan, after the Tower's completion, a group of twenty-five artists were engaged to paint murals on its interior walls. The project was underwritten by the federal Public Works of Art Project, the precursor to the WPA Federal Art Project.

In the April 29, 2014 *Examiner*, Ruth Gottstein and Jon Golinger wrote, "With the broad charge to create art depicting the theme of 'Life in California,' the Coit Tower painters brought their very different backgrounds, perspectives and skills to work every morning to blend the reality on the streets they saw and the hopeful future they believed in to 22 fresco murals and five oil paintings that are so collaborative many people mistakenly believe they were all created by a single artist."

During the years following their completion in 1934, the murals suffered the devastating effects of neglect and abuse. In 2014, after San Francisco voters passed a Coit Tower Preservation Policy ballot initiative, an extensive rehabilitation project was completed, restoring the murals to their original grandeur.

Undoubtedly, many people who worked on the original project spent time in Carmel, but three became long-term residents: Colonel Harold Mack, Maxine Albro, and Parker Hall. Colonel Mack was a member of the four-man committee appointed by the federal government to monitor the project. Maxine and Parker were among the twenty-five artists. For their murals, Parker was assigned the theme of collegiate sports; Maxine was assigned the theme of California's agriculture.

After completing her formal education at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, the Art Students League in New York and l'Académie de la Grand Chaumière in Paris, Maxine went to Mexico to learn fresco painting. Although they never had a formal teacher-student relationship, she spent many hours observing Diego Rivera at work. She also studied with one of Rivera's assistants. Maxine became one of the few American women to establish a reputation as a fresco muralist, leading to her appointment on the Coit Tower project. Later commissions included murals at the former San Francisco State University campus, Vallejo High School, the Allied Arts Guild in Menlo Park, the Biltmore Hotel in Santa Barbara, and the Hofsas House in Carmel.

Parker was probably recommended for the project by another Tower artist, Ralph Stackpole, one of his teachers at the California School of Fine Arts. Despite Parker's excellent work as a muralist, he was primarily a sculptor, having studied with Antoine Bourdelle in Paris. He was also a talented etcher and lithographer. Most of his work is now in private collections, but his wood carvings decorate one of the original lecture halls on the UCSF Parnassus Campus.

After their marriage in 1938, Maxine and Parker moved to Carmel and renewed their acquaintance with Colonel Mack. Having accumulated considerable wealth,



Maxine Albro  
Photo courtesy of the  
San Francisco History  
Center, San Francisco  
Public Library



Parker Hall.  
Photo courtesy of the  
family of Parker Hall  
and Maxine Laney

the Colonel purchased a thirty-acre tract on the outskirts of Monterey to develop a magnificent hacienda. A devout Catholic, he commissioned Maxine to paint a mural using ecclesiastical themes and commissioned Parker to carve limestone sculptures of St. Christopher and two angels. In 1949, Colonel Mack moved to Carmel and sold the estate to the Dominican Sisters for the campus of Santa Catalina School. Maxine's mural and Parker's sculptures remain on display there.

This spring the Cherry Foundation is presenting a special exhibit to celebrate the restoration of the Coit Tower murals and highlight Carmel's connection to the project. It will feature photographs of all twenty-five artists with brief texts about each one. It will also display the work of Maxine Albro and Parker Hall.

The opening reception will be at 5:00pm on Friday, April 17th, 2015. The exhibit will close on May 22nd.