



# GRACE HAMILTON:

## *HISTORY OF PAYNE COUNTY*

EDUCATORS RESOURCE



MUSEUM  
OF  
ART

720 South Husband Street, Stillwater, OK 74074  
405.744.2780 | [museum@okstate.edu](mailto:museum@okstate.edu) | [museum.okstate.edu](http://museum.okstate.edu)

## ARTWORK DETAILS

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### Reading an Object Label

Artist name, nationality, birth and death date (If the artist is deceased)	Grace Hamilton (American, 1894-1992)
Artwork title, year completed	<i>History of Payne County</i> , 1963
Materials used to create the work. Sometimes the size is included.	Tempera on canvas glued to plaster 90 x 204 inches
Credit line – many works in museums are gifts from donors or loans from other museums and patrons	Museum Purchase
Acquisition number – This helps museum staff keep track of the work. Usually, it is a number assigned by the museum. Knowing this number is helpful when asking the museum staff for more information about the work.	2010.017.001
Some labels provide the viewer with more context about the artwork. Curators usually write the text. They may include details from the artists' life and influences, or more information about the time in which it was created. Some curators may provide viewers with questions to consider, or a comparison to another work.	<p>POST OFFICE MURALS AS HISTORY?</p> <p>What do you make of optimistic messages of prosperity achieved through technology? Post office murals have been part of the civic landscape since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal art programs of the 1930s. Like these Depression-era murals, Grace L. Hamilton's <i>History of Payne County</i> celebrates an idealized story of American progress in which symbols of agriculture and industry play starring roles. Figuring prominently in her vignettes, locomotives, cotton gins, and oil rigs chart the region's rise from the days of Native American buffalo hunts and the Land Run. If the Depression-era murals were meant to inspire a citizenry beset by tumultuous economic times, postwar viewers of the early sixties might have experienced Hamilton's portrayal of Payne County as a vision fulfilled. How might a mural of Payne County look now? What kind of message would it convey?</p>

### About the artist

Hamilton was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on Feb 19, 1894. She graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1918 with a degree in Fine Arts and married Don Hamilton in 1920, also an artist. They moved to Stillwater in 1927. Don became head of the Dept. of Architecture. Grace received her Master's in English at OSU.

For the mural, she began researching Payne County's history, studying photographs. She thoroughly paid attention to every detail, down to the number of spokes on a wagon wheel. Approval took a full year. Hamilton had three months to finish the project. The majority of the mural was painted in her studio. She placed final touches on it after it was moved and hung at the Post Office mid-June 1963. Teresa Holder (art prof at OSU) gathered a great deal of research from Hamilton's daughter. Her research was compiled to a report which can be found at <https://osuma.wordpress.com/2011/01/24/designing-the-museum-the-postal-plaza-mural/>

### About the artwork

*History of Payne County* was the first mural to be approved by the Commission of Fine Arts (which had taken on the legacy of WPA public art projects after World War 2) outside of the Washington DC area. In Sept 1961, Ray Heath, The Stillwater Postmaster and Bob Donaldson (local builder and chairman of the City Planning Commission of the Chamber of Commerce) began searching for their artist. They wanted a mural depicting historical representation. The only stipulation was that it could not be abstract. Artists submitted portfolios and Grace Hamilton was selected from several competing artists. On Feb 20th, 1962, the Fine Arts Commission in Washington DC approved Hamilton's color sketch. The history is displayed in an S pattern across the canvas. A buffalo herd and Indian Village lead to the Santa Fe Train under which the land run is portrayed. Early Main Street is depicted along with Old Central and an old cotton mill.

During renovation of the Postal Plaza, Malinda Berry Fischer halted renovation to find out how best to protect the mural during that time. A conservator was brought in and found that removing it was impossible so they covered it to keep dust, paint and debris from collecting on the canvas.

### Curricular connections

Regional history, Elements and principles of art, Works Progress Administration (WPA), Narrative painting, Technology, Public art

## BOOKING A TOUR OR VISIT

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PK-12 tours are inquiry-based encouraging students of all abilities to engage with art and each other by looking deeply and thinking creatively and critically. Students make personal and curricular connections through discussion, writing, and hands-on activities. We welcome both public school groups and homeschoolers. Admission to the museum is always free. To book a tour, please visit <http://museum.okstate.edu/tours>.

For more information, to discuss programming, or to request a transportation or substitute teacher subsidy, please contact Cat de Araujo, Associate Curator of Education (PK-12), at (405)744-2777 or [catarin@okstate.edu](mailto:catarin@okstate.edu).

## ONLINE RESOURCES

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- **Designing the Museum: The Postal Plaza Mural**  
Exerpts from research compiled and presented by Teresa Holder.  
<https://osuma.wordpress.com/2011/01/24/designing-the-museum-the-postal-plaza-mural/>
- **The Works Progress Administration**  
An article explaining the WPA.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/dustbowl-wpa/>
- **Library of Congress**  
Other examples of WPA Murals  
<https://www.loc.gov/search?new=true&q=wpa%20murals>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND LESSON PLANS

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### Post Office Murals as History

What do you make of optimistic messages of prosperity achieved through technology?

Post office murals have been part of the civic landscape since Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal art programs of the 1930s. Like these Depression-era murals, Grace L. Hamilton's History of Payne County celebrates an idealized story of American progress in which symbols of agriculture and industry play starring roles. Figuring prominently in her vignettes, locomotives, cotton gins, and oil rigs chart the region's rise from the days of Native American buffalo hunts and the Land Run. If the Depression-era murals were meant to inspire a citizenry beset by tumultuous economic times, postwar viewers of the early

sixties might have experienced Hamilton's portrayal of Payne County as a vision fulfilled. How might a mural of Payne County look now? What kind of message would you convey?

What technological advancements do you see narrated in this mural?

If we could unroll this mural to show advancements made between the foregrounds (the front) up until today, what would the artist have depicted?

What if we kept unrolling it another 5 years? 10 years? 100 years? 1000 years? What might we see?

### Narrative art

What is a narrative? A narrative is a spoken or written account of connected events, a story. Artwork can be a visual narrative. What do you notice about the background (the top part of the painting that appears to happen farther back in space)? The middle ground (the center of the painting)? The foreground (the bottom section that appears to be in front)? How did the artist create the illusion of space in her painting? Do you recognize any of the buildings? What narrative is being told in Hamilton's mural?

If we could unroll this mural to show the time between the foreground and today, what would the artist have depicted?

What if we kept unrolling it another 5 years? 10 years? 100 years? 1000 years? What might we see? Draw or paint your idea of the future by creating a visual narrative. Your narrative may tell a story like Hamilton's that moves chronologically (by time) from background to foreground, or it may go left-to-right, or anyway you choose. Consider how you might use the elements and principles of art to layout your composition (the way you layout the parts of your painting to tell a story).

### Compare | Contrast | Create

Take a look at Grace Hamilton's mural. Now, look at Yatika Fields's mural, *Connecting Roads Past to Present*. Images of each are included in this packet. Both artists created works that they felt represented Payne County.

- What do you know about Payne County?
- What can you infer about the county's past based on Hamilton's mural?
- How does Fields' mural differ?
- Are there any similarities between the two murals?
- Why do think the murals are so different?

- Why do you think Fields' chose to create a more abstract work of art?
  - ABSTRACT: non-representational. Abstract art uses shape, color, and line to show an artist's *idea(s) about characteristics people/places/things might have* rather than specific details of people/places/things.

**ACTIVITY:** Now it's your turn to depict Payne County! Draw/paint/describe your idea of Payne County. Try creating a representational version *and* an abstract version. Does one tell you more about Payne County (or your ideas about Payne County) than the other?

If you have trouble creating an abstract work, consider the following questions:

- How does Payne County feel?
- What are the people like?
- What are the places like?
- What is it like during your favorite season?
- What do you like to do in Payne County?

Now, translate your thoughts to shapes, colors, and lines. What colors and shapes do you feel represent those feelings and thoughts? If you were to draw a line to represent those ideas and thoughts, what would it look like? Would it be short, long, thick, thin, bumpy, squiggly, sharp, soft, messy, clean, loose, tight, etc.?

### Works Project Administration | Public Art Makers

You are an artist that has just been invited to create a work of art that will inspire viewers to achieve specific goals as a community. What will you create?

Study the Works Project Administration. What challenges does society face today? What goals do your students think the community should focus on together to create a better society? Where will their artwork hang or be displayed (the library, the post office, in a school, on a sidewalk, in a park, on the side of a building, by the side of a road, in a capitol building, etc.)? How will the placement affect the audience viewing the artwork (on the side of a road viewers may only have a moment to view it, in a school it may not be seen by people without children or whose children don't attend that school. Are these important details to consider about your artwork?) Have students write a proposal for their artwork, including the intended location, the purpose for the artwork, the budget, time allotment, and a sketch of the work. Remember, works can be 2D, 3D, or even digital! Have students create mini-versions of their artwork.

Have the class vote on the work(s) they think best achieves their goal of inspiring change. Have the students create life-sized versions of the winners together and display them in the school or at the intended location.



## REFERENCE IMAGES

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Yatika Starr Fields (Cherokee, Creek, and Osage, b. 1980). *Connecting Roads from Past to Present*, 2013 Acrylic, spray paint, and gold leaf on canvas



Grace Hamilton (American, 1894-1992). *History of Payne County*, 1963. Tempera on canvas glued to plaster