

SCULPTURE

Above the main entrance to the tower is a cast concrete, high-relief plaque of the phoenix with outstretched wings, sculpted by Robert B. Howard. This mythical bird, reborn in fire, is a symbol of San Francisco, whose history is punctuated by many catastrophic blazes. In the center of the parking plaza stands a 12' bronze statue of Christopher Columbus by Vitorio Di Colvertaldo. It was given to the city by its Italian community in 1957.

SOCIAL REALISM AND CONTROVERSY

Controversy over the heavy social criticism present in almost all the murals delayed the official opening of the gallery from May until October of 1934. Social Realism was an artistic trend beginning in the 1930s with antecedents in the Ashcan School and the mural paintings of Diego Rivera. It was a style which combined genre painting of everyday life with biting sociological and political comment. Social Realism achieved its greatest flowering in federally-funded murals such as these, mandated to illustrate the times. These were liberal painters of protest fueled by the inequities and horrors of the Depression. Their large talents enabled them to express their concerns powerfully. In 1934 San Francisco suffered from major labor strikes; any social criticism was deemed offensive and inciting. Only one fresco was actually censored; everywhere remains both implicit (somber colors, brooding and angry faces, backbreaking toil) and explicit (headlines, book titles) objections to daily life.

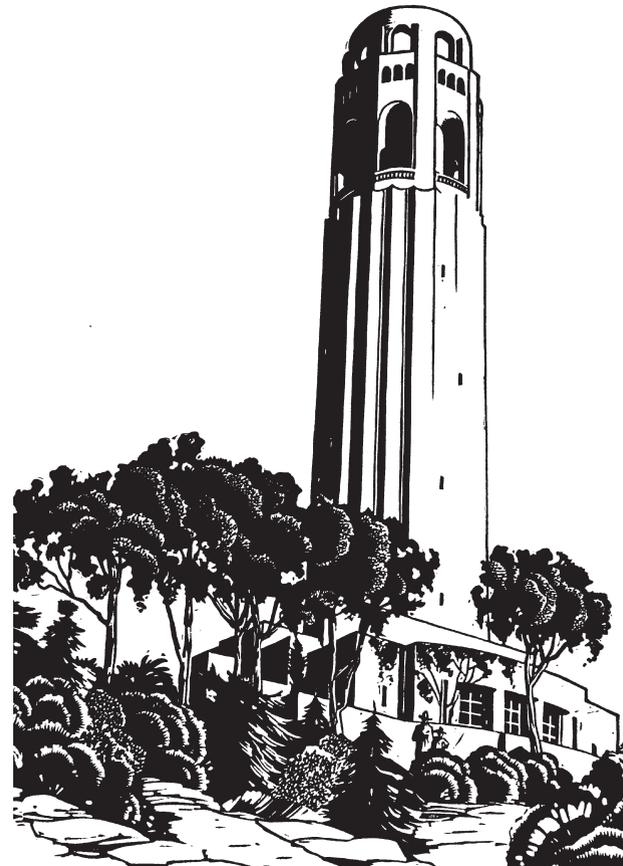
FRESCO TECHNIQUE

All the murals ringing the central section of the building are frescoes. This ancient technique of wall painting was revived during the Renaissance and largely abandoned in the 1600s in favor of more expedient methods. First, a master plasterer applies a thin coating of fresh (fresco, in Italian) plaster to the wall, but only as much as the artist can cover in one day, about two square feet. The artist then paints with a wet brush dabbed in dry pigments. The lime in the plaster binds the paint to the wall. Fresco painting presents several problems. It is slow, each stroke is final and colors cannot be blended as with oils. Yet the results create a monumental feeling of simple, bold forms, well-suited to the covering of large wall space. It is a great credit to these artists that so much detail could be included given the restraints of the medium.

THE STORY OF COIT TOWER

And Its Art

Frescoes depicting "Life in California...1934."
A legacy of 26 Artists of Social Realism and their Assistants.
A Public Works of Art Project



 A Partnership with San Francisco
Recreation & Parks Department 

COIT TOWER

Coit Tower, a fluted, reinforced concrete column, rises 212 feet above Telegraph Hill and offers magnificent views of the Bay Area from an observation gallery at its top. Its architect was Henry Howard, working for the firm of Arthur Brown, Jr., which created San Francisco's City Hall and Opera House. Contrary to popular belief, it was never intended to resemble a firehose nozzle. Howard's simple, vertical design was selected because it best created a monumental statement within the small site and small budget of \$125,000, and because it complemented the proportions of the hill. The Tower rests on a base originally intended to be a restaurant housing temporary exhibitions. To avoid looking topheavy, the shaft is 18" narrower in diameter at the top than at the bottom, a refinement which required shaving the wooden forms used for pouring the top concrete sections. The flutes give strength to the design and lead well into the series of arches at the top. The tower, with its symmetrical simplicity and sleek linearism, achieves a successful union of classicism and Art Deco. It was completed in 1933.

LILLIE HITCHCOCK COIT 1843-1929

Coit Tower was built solely as monument to the legacy of Lillie Hitchcock Coit who left a \$125,000 bequest to San Francisco to be spent "for the purpose of adding beauty to the city which I have always loved". Well ahead of her times, Lillie often dressed as a man to gamble in North Beach saloons, smoked cigars, publicly ice-skated in shortened skirts, and was even discovered by her husband on a men's camping trip. She spent several years wowing the courts of Europe after a deranged relative took a shot at her in a San Francisco hotel. Today she is best known for her lifelong passion for firefighting. After becoming a mascot to the Knickerbocker Hose Company #5 in 1863, she rarely missed a blaze. Coit Tower is the tangible result of her flamboyant love affair with the city.

PIONEER PARK

The green summit of Telegraph Hill is called Pioneer Park, so named for the group of public spirited citizens who bought the land and gave it to the city in 1876. Because of its commanding views, the hill housed a signal station in 1849 to relay news of ships entering the Bay to the business community along Montgomery Street, hence the name Telegraph Hill. San Francisco's contact with the world then was by sea, and all arrivals were important events. In the 1880s, the site briefly contained an observatory and elegant restaurant. The venture failed when attempts to bring customers to the top proved too costly and too dangerous.

THE MURALS

The murals represent the first major relief work commissioned by the U.S. Government Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). The idea to cover the bare walls of the tower with frescoed murals was implemented by Dr. Walter Heil, Director of the Legion of Honor Museum. He selected 26 artists and numerous assistants to complete the decorations, awarding the larger spaces to the better-known members of the group. Although paid only \$38 per week, the best of Bay Area artists were attracted to the project. Despite the many hands at work here, there is a unity of the whole owing to the common subject matter, scale, and the color pigments prepared on site. The stairway and second floor are available to the general public only with a docent-led guided tour. These tours are available for \$8, and are limited to 6 people at a time. City Guides also does two free tours a week, one on Wednesdays and one on Saturdays. The artists' work, which is the largest collection of PWAP art in the country, has been viewed by visitors since 1934. We hope to allow this collection to be admired for decades to come, and allow the close proximity, which makes this collection unique.

Please refrain from touching the art work!

The stairway and second floor murals are available for viewing only with a docent-led tour (fee \$5). The small spaces and proximity to these artworks require more stringent protective measures.

