Thanks to the efforts of concerned San Franciscans beginning in 1979, the Historic Murals of Rincon Center, along with the entire "Art Deco Moderne" post office lobby, were cleaned and restored as the entryway to the new retail, commercial, and residential complex.
(from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor)
**Rincon Annex Mural (1941 - 48)** The restored WPA 29-panel mural showing the history of California was painted by Russian artist Anton Refregier. The murals were controversial with social conservatives, because of their portrayals of the waterfront strike and Sand Lot Riots (anti-Chinese uprisings). Ultimately, citizens and artists defeated critics who wanted the murals taken down.  


Photograph taken during a tour of the Rincon Center Postal Annex with OUSD TAH grant participants during their 2009 summer in-service institute. Here grade 11 history teachers from Oakland listen as speaker and guide Gray Brechin from the California Living New Deal project explains the history and symbolism depicted in the 29-panel WPA mural.
About the Rincon Annex WPA Mural:

Located near the Embarcadero at 101 Spear Street near Mission, the Rincon Annex Post Office was the last great WPA project. The original theme was to be a cycle of twenty-four murals showing San Francisco's history. Anton Refreigier, a Russian immigrant from Woodstock, New York, won the competition. He came to San Francisco and quickly familiarized himself with the history of the city. The Second World War broke out during the course of the project, and production was stopped on the mural, only to be completed after the war. The initial concept was to end the cycle with 1939 World's Fair on Treasure Island, but given recent events, Refreiger decided to extend the series to twenty-nine panels. He ended the project with the completion of the Golden Gate Bridge, the war, and finally with the creation of the United Nations in San Francisco.

The Rincon Annex murals are unusual for a public historical depiction. Instead of a procession of gloried triumphs, it represents a series of conflicts, including assaults on Chinese railroad laborers and the Pacific Maritime and General Strikes. The cycle ends somewhat hopefully with the formation of the United Nations, suggesting that the creation of this institution marked the end of these conflicts.

The Right attacked the cycle fiercely even as it was being completed. Refreigier was threatened by gangs, which began to harass him as he worked. Fearing for his safety, the artist refrained from working after sunset. In the early 50s, the mural went on trial before a congressional subcommittee to determine if the piece was communist. San Franciscans, including curators from all the major museums in the city defended the mural, and in the end, the trial, led in part by a young and ambitious Richard Nixon, did not succeed.

Where: 101 Spear Street, San Francisco, CA, 94105, USA
(Textt from www.kqed.org/arts/profile/index.jsp?essid=23737)
Rincon Center Postal Annex
WPA Mural

Photographs of the 29 individual panels depicting the history of San Francisco by artist Anton Refregier with annotations transcribed from wall plaques.

Panels extracted from photographs using Photoshop to show close-up & details of each panel.

Note: some distortion may occur as a result of this process.
Panel #1. A California Indian Creates. Indians have inhabited California for centuries. Some Experts believe they settled here as many as 30,000 years ago. Various archeological expeditions and digs have discovered prehistoric artifacts such as bones, shell mounds, burial areas and petroglyphs to support their theories. Approximately 105 distinct nations or tribes of Indians once existed in California. They spoke over 100 different dialects which were rooted in five basic languages. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #2. Indians by the Golden Gate. All early European explorers record meetings with the Indians. As many as 300,000 Indians may have populated the state in 1769, the year they first encountered European settlers. By 1870, due to general mistreatment, massacres, diseases, dispossession and other indignities, the population of California Indians shrank to about 58,000. Northern California tribes included the Modoc, Pomo, Wintun, Hupa, Yana, Yuki and Yurok. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Sir Francis Drake, an English navigator and privateer, set sail from Plymouth (England) in 1577 on a voyage around the world. According to accounts of that voyage, Drake landed in a California harbor in June of 1579. He stayed for 36 days during which time he had good relations with the Indians, repaired his ship and claimed the land for Queen Elizabeth of England, naming it Nova Albion. The precise location of Drake’s landing is not known. Various theories suggest it may have been Bolinas Bay, Drake’s Bay, the Marin side of San Francisco Bay, Bodega Bay or Point Reyes. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)

Note: The artist is depicting the British as bloodthirsty (blood on the end of the sword)
Panel #4. **Conquistadors discover the Pacific** Baja California was discovered by Europeans in 1533 by a man named Fortún Jiménez of the Cortés expedition. By 1540, Ulloa, another member of that expedition had explored the Sea of Cortés. Also in that year Hernando de Alarcón had sailed up the Colorado River and in 1541 Francisco de Bolaños explored both sides of the Baja Pennisula. The first European to explore Alta California, the land above the Baja Pennisula, was Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo who sailed to the Santa Barbara Islands in 1543.

*(text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)*
Panel #5. Monks Building a Mission
Mission San Francisco de Asis, named for the founder of the Franciscan order, Saint Francis of Assisi, is popularly known as Mission Dolores. That name comes from a stream named Arroyo de los Dolores originally on the property. That stream and its adjoining lake were filled in years ago. Mission Dolores the sixth of California’s 21 missions, was founded in 1776 by a missionary named Francisco Palou. The chapel that stands today was completed in 191 and restored in 1917 by architect Willis Polk. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #6. Preaching and Farming at Mission Dolores  The purpose of all California Missions was to Christianize the Indians. In addition to religion, the Indians learned farming, building, spinning and other basic skills. All instruction was given in Spanish. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)

(from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor) Originally the Catholic Church protested the large belly of a friar depicted in a Mission Dolores mural while the Indians appeared gaunt. In response to these objections, Refregier performed “artistic liposuction”.

Rincon Center Postal Annex WPA Murals – San Francisco, California

Photo tour from Grade 11 OUSD Teaching American History Grant
Photographs by L.C. Swanson
Panel #7. Fort Ross  Fort Ross was founded in 1812 by Ivan Alexander Kuskov, the governor of the Russian settlers in California. Inside its walls and blockhouses were the governor’s house and a chapel. About 50 other buildings were located outside the fort. John A. Sutter bought the property from the Russians in 1841. In 1906 the San Francisco Examiner acquired and donated it to the state of California. The original buildings which were destroyed by fire and earthquake have been completely reconstructed. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #8. Hardships on the Emigrant Trail The Emigrant Trail was a term used to describe various overland routes to California in the 1840’s and 1850’s. The subject of this panel is the trail through Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. Both Donner Summit and Donner Lake are named after the George and Jacob Donner brothers of Illinois. Their party of 87 settlers were forced to spend the winter of 1846 along the shore of Donner Lake after being trapped by heavy early November snows. Only 47 group members survived. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #9. An early newspaper office. The “California Star”, San Francisco’s first regular newspaper, was founded by Samuel Brannon. It began weekly publication on January 9, 1847. E.C. Kemble, who became the owner in 1848 also bought the competing paper and created the California Star & Californian. That paper was purchased by the Alta California in 1849. The Star was opposed to changing San Francisco’s original name, Yerba Buena, to San Francisco and vigorously attacked rival newspaper, Californian, for supporting the change. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #10. Raising the Bear Flag  The Bear Flag revolt established the Republic of California, one month before the United States won the territory in the Mexican War. John Charles Fremont was a prime force in instigating the revolt and William B. Ide became president of the short-lived republic. The original Bear Flag, designed by William C. Todd, flew over Sonoma for a brief time. The piece of white cloth seen lying on the ground was originally the Mexican flag. Because some people thought this was disrespectful Refregier painted it out. Its colors are still visible beneath the white overpaint. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)

(from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor) The Mexican ambassador protested the Mexican flag lying on the ground in "California Becomes a Republic." The flag was "whitewashed" by the painter, although close examination reveals the original flag's red and green stripes peeking through the attempted cover-up.
Panel #11. Finding Gold at Sutter’s Mill.
Sutter’s mill was a sawmill on the property of John Augustus Sutter. Located on a fork of the American River, the enterprise was financed by Sutter and constructed under the supervision of his partner in the venture, James Marshall. Marshall discovered gold at Sutter’s mill on January 24, 1848 and began the California Gold Rush. The nugget Marshall found is known as the Wimmer Nugget named after Marshall’s assistant, Peter L. Wimmer. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #12. Miners Panning Gold. The California Gold Rush began in earnest after Samuel Brannan, a Mormon immigrant and founder of San Francisco’s first newspaper, publicly displayed American River gold in San Francisco on May 12, 1848. President Polk’s official announcement in Washington on December 5, 1848 set off a major emigration to California. The Gold Rush reached its height in 1852 when nearly 100,000 settlers populated the mining area. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #13. Arrival by Ship. Emigrants to California arrived by ship as well as by land. The quickest route from the East Coast to the West was a combination of both. Travelers sailed down the Atlantic to Nicaragua or Panama, crossed overland and sailed up the Pacific to California. Others sailed the entire way via Cape Horn. Many of the faster clipper ships made the voyage around the Horn in under 100 days. This panel depicts the first Caucasian women to arrive in San Francisco (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #14. Torchlight Procession  The title of this panel should actually be PICKETING FOR THE EIGHT HOUR DAY. In 1867, a labor organization known as the Mechanics’ State Council initiated the eight hour day and was opposed by a group of ship owners known as the Ten Hour League. Laborers demonstrated and ultimately prevailed. Refrigier had originally included picket signs saying “8 Hour Day”. They had to be painted out, however, because the authorities felt the panel was too prolabor and leftist in tone. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)

(from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor) If you look closely, you’ll see the sign once extended much lower. It advocated for “Eight Hour day” - even in the 1940’s this was too "Controversial" and Refrigier had to edit it out. The "Torchlight Procession" mural was originally titled "Union Wins 8 Hour Day." However, the suggestion of a union triumph was too controversial for Refregier’s overseers in Washington. He retitled it "Importation of Coolie Labor," but the local Chamber of Commerce and the employers’ association protested. As "Torchlight Procession," all references to Chinese laborers and union victories were eliminated.
Panel #15. Pioneers receiving mail. Early California settlers received mail from the East primarily by ship. Pacific Mail Steamship Company was founded in 1848 and operated steamers from Panama to the Columbia River. Cornelius Vanderbilt founded a competing line in 1851. By 1859 Pacific Mail had agreed to share its business with Vanderbilt controlling the Atlantic shipping and Pacific Mail controlling the Pacific. The railroads gradually took over more and more delivery through the 1860’s, especially after completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. This panel depicts California’s first Post Office. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #16. Building the Railroad (1)  

Theodore D. Judah, chief engineer and founder of the Central Pacific Railroad Company, obtained congressional funding for a rail crossing of the Sierra. Construction from Sacramento began January 8, 1863 and ended at May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah with the driving of the last spike. Approximately 10,000 Chinese were hired as laborers. They worked under adverse conditions for low wages. The construction company was highly profitable for all investors. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #16. **Building the Railroad (2)**  (from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor) In the "Transcontinental Railroad" mural, a majority of the workers appear to be Chinese, suggesting that they were largely responsible for building the railroad, a fact which most historians agree with today.
Panel #17. Vigilante Justice  Vigilance committees formed during the 1850’s in San Francisco to counteract excessive criminality and a weak city government. These committees handed down verdicts on their own terms. Vigilante justice was also popular in mining towns. This panel depicts vigilante actions in 1856 that resulted from the murder of newspaper editor James King of William by county supervisor James P. Casey. Casey was convicted and hanged at the same moment King of William was being buried.  (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #18. Riot Scene, Civil War Day  During the Civil War, San Franciscans split their allegiances between pro slavery Senator William M. Quin and Union support, Senator David C. Broderick. This controversy over slavery led to violence, feuds, and shootings, but no major clashes. Sentiment went towards the Union after Lincoln was elected. California’s predominantly Yankee population went on to support the Northern economy with products such as gold, wool and wheat. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #19. Beating the Chinese. After completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese people flocked to San Francisco. They worked harder and for less money than other laborers and soon held half the city’s factory jobs. Many people strongly opposed this competition and during the 1870’s beat and killed Chinese while destroying their property. The Chinese man in the foreground of this panel is about to have his pigtail cut off. Frank Roney, quoted at the base of this panel was a San Francisco labor leader 1881 – 1886 who opposed this mistreatment. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)

Because of the competition with American labor, anti-Chinese agitation on the Pacific coast intensified during the 1870s, among the most notable events being the "Sandlot Riots" in July 1877 in San Francisco, the city having the largest concentration of Chinese. Throughout the 1870s the most outspoken opponents of unlimited Chinese immigration were labor spokesmen, primarily for economic but also for racial reasons. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1876 that the federal government had responsibility for immigration regulation, western leaders notably Denis Kearny, the demogogic leader of the new California Workingmen’s Party that thrived briefly on the basis of its single issue: "The Chinese must go!" urged Congress to bar Chinese and invoked boycotts, claiming that the Chinese immigrants undercut the American wage structure. In the mural "Sand Lot Riots," a reference to Irish agitator Dennis Kearney and his "Sand-Lotters," Kearney's cohorts are shown assaulting Chinese men. It was felt that this not only highlighted an unpleasant episode in San Francisco history, but inflamed racism. Refregier eliminated the Irish connection by renaming it simply "Beating the Chinese." (from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor)
Panel #20. San Francisco as a cultural center  The famous San Franciscans pictured in this panel are, from left to right, across Lotta Crabtree, writer Frank Norris, horticulturist Luther Burbank, writers Robert Louis Stevenson, Merk Train, Bret Harte, publisher and writer Hubert Howe and writer Jack London. On the far-right is a scene of ghost-like WPA artists painting a mural, a commentary on the federal art programs which had ceased to exist earlier in the 1940’s. The broadside pictured in the upper center relates to the 1863 racy melodrama, Mazeppa, a play in which actress Adah Issacs Menkin appeared seemingly nude (actually in flesh-colored tights) while on horseback. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #20 (2). Detail from the Rincon Center mural, panel “San Francisco as a cultural center”.
(from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor) Literary and stage figure depicted on this panel include: Frank Norris, Luther Burbank, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Hubert Howe, and Jack London. "Cultural Life in San Francisco" originally showed books by controversial authors C.E.S. Wood and Mike Quin; they were painted out.
Panel #20 (2). Detail from the Rincon Center mural showing ghost-like WPA artists referring to the Federal Art Project which had already been canceled when this mural was painted.
Panel #21. Earthquake and fire of 1906. At 5:13 AM on April 18, 1906 a two minute earthquake racked the city of San Francisco. Although the Richter scale had not been invented, experts believe the initial jolt measured a hefty 8.3. The earthquake was responsible for about 20 percent of the total destruction of $400,000,000. Fires caused the rest of the damage and raged out of control for three days due to ruptured water mains. By April 21, over 28,000 buildings, a third of San Francisco, had been destroyed. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #21 (2). Detail from the Rincon Center mural, panel “Earthquake and fire of 1906”
Immediately after the quake, the national guard and army troops under the command of General Frederick Funston helped San Francisco police and firemen maintain order in the city. In addition, the soldiers prevented looting, helped with temporary housing, food distribution, communications and sanitation. Soup kitchens and tent cities in the local parks were the first signs of reconstruction. Clearing the rubble and rebuilding the city took years. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #22 (2). Detail from the Rincon Center mural, panel “Reconstruction after the fire”
Panel #23. The Mooney Case  On 22 July 1916 a bomb killed ten and wounded forty during a Preparedness Day parade in San Francisco. Thomas J. Mooney and Warren K. Billings, labor leaders who had been accused of unlawful possession of explosives in 1913, were among those charged. Mooney was sentenced to death, and Billings received a life sentence. Some evidence was so questionable that even the presiding judge became convinced the trial had been unfair. In 1918, at President Woodrow Wilson's request, Gov. William Stephens of California commuted Mooney's sentence to life imprisonment. Governor after governor received petitions for pardon until 1939, when Gov. Culbert L. Olson pardoned Mooney and released Billings. (from The Mooney Case, Dictionary of American History, 2003)
Panel #24. The Waterfront 1934 This controversial panel depicts events surrounding the San Francisco dock strike of 1934. On the left a shakedown operator demands bribes in exchange for longshoremen jobs. The center shows labor organizer Harry Bridges addressing dockworkers. The right third refers to what is known as “Bloody Thursday, July 5, 1934, when employers battle strikers to open the docks. Two longshoremen died and many on both sides were injured. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)

(from “Historic Murals of Rincon Center” by Rob Spoor) The VFW and even some labor organizations were incensed that labor organizer and alleged Communist Harry Bridges appeared to be rallying workers, including one with a VFW insignia on his hat, in the mural "Maritime and General Strike," and pointed out several inaccuracies in the three historical events depicted. The longshore workers union was especially sensitive to the association with 1930s-era Communism, from which they’d distanced themselves by the late 1940s. In response to their objections, Refregier painted out the VFW symbol.
Of the 27 panels covering the walls of Rincon, the most widely reproduced (via silkscreen) is the scene “San Francisco ’34 Waterfront Strike,” which takes on the 82-day strike that crippled the shipping industry all along the West Coast. Workers were striking against low wages caused by corruption and graft, and before the outrage and rioting died down, three men were killed, out of the 31 who were shot by police and the dozens who were beaten and assaulted with gas.

Refregier did not paint violence or defeat in his mural, but instead focused on the solidarity of the union workers. The work is divided into three major sections, which create boundaries between the scenes and denote the passage of time. The composition of the panel also gives the work a look reminiscent of a triptych or altar piece. Perhaps it is these themes, of union workers displacing religion, that flamed the anti-Communist criticism of the work after it was completed.

The left side of the panel depicts a crowd of workers reaching out to the empty hand of a maritime boss, shown as stone-faced and expressionless in his black suit. The workers’ faces are not seen, only their hats and hands. A black wall separates this crowd from the next, another band of union members all dressed in white now, rallying to the cries of one of their leaders. An image of a hand dropping something into another hand is suspended along the brick wall, representing the corruption that plagued the docks and fueled the white-clad union worker’s speech to the crowd beneath him.

The figure in the middle is pointing at the corrupt boss, and also functions as the next dividing element.

The third section of the painting depicts a collage-type assembly of objects representing the strike, the workers’ unity, and their subsequent triumph. An image of a black man and a white man walking together in front of an American flag demonstrates the union workers’ purely democratic ideals of equality and personal freedom. Images of bread, a police club, and a striker’s picket all stand in for the tremendous chaos and violence of the strike, when violence reigned and many went hungry due to the halt of transportation and virtually all activity in the city.
Panel #25. Building the Golden Gate Bridge. Construction of the Golden Gate Bridge was begun in 1933 and completed in 1937. At that time, the 4,200 foot span was the longest in the world. The towers are 746 feet high, ship clearance underneath the roadway is 220 feet. The chief engineer, Joseph Strauss designed and built over 400 bridges during his lifetime. The Golden Gate Bridge is considered his masterpiece. (text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)
Panel #26. **Shipyards during the war.** With the onset of World War II, shipbuilding, a major California industry during World War I, became important once again. By 1943 the shipyards employed over 282,000 workers, up from 4000 in 1939. Henry J. Kaiser was the most important of the World War II shipbuilders. His assembly line operations produced a Liberty ship in 25 days and a freighter every 10 hours. The two workers pictured in the lower left corner of the panel are women. *(text from a plaque on the wall of Rincon Mural Postal Annex)*
27. Franklin D. Roosevelt -- "The Four Freedoms"
27. Signing the U.N. Charter