

Hidden Treasures

By Bille Hougart © 2013

Next time you plan to visit the Nation's Capital, be sure to set aside at least half a day to visit some of the visual and historic treats in the Stewart L. Udall building of the U.S. Department of the Interior (USDI). Of course you should see the US Capitol, The White House, the monuments on the Mall, and the National Museum of the American Indian. But awaiting you at the Department of the Interior (USDI), are hidden treasures -- historical feasts for the eye, the brain and the soul.



Fig. 1. Stewart Lee Udall Department of the Interior Building.

The USDI cornerstone was laid in 1936 by President Franklin Roosevelt, witnessed by Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and by a delegation of Hopi who sang as part of the ceremonies. Ickes was instrumental in planning the building's design and its decorations, and he was committed to having a building filled with light, open spaces and art work by Native American artists. His vision remains for the rest of us to enjoy. The walls in the spacious hallways, the cafeteria, the employees lounge and the Indian Craft Shop are decorated with Indian art.

Having a department to handle America's internal resources was debated for years, but not until 1849 did Congress take action. That's when they passed legislation that created USDI. Until 1917, the USDI's headquarters was across town in the old Patent Office Building, now home to the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (another place you should visit). Who knew that USDI, now guardian of many of our precious natural resources, once was responsible for administering programs regarding patents, the census, military pensions and labor? Over the years those functions were spun off to other parts of the US government,

and today USDI's agencies concentrate mostly on managing and protecting the health of our public lands, and its parks, refuges, fish, wildlife, and mineral resources. USDI also has a major responsibility for issues and concerns important to Indian tribes and Alaska Native entities. The Department is home to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Indian Education, and the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. The Board, in the office of the Secretary of the Interior, was created under the New Deal in 1936 as part of a bold move to support and protect the economic sustainability of authentic Native American arts and crafts. The Indian Craft Shop was created in 1938 to showcase those arts and crafts to the public.



Fig. 2. "Construction of a Dam," by William Gropper. Oil on Canvas, 1939

The two Bureaus are headed by an Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, under whose leadership they administer a host of programs and services in education, social and economic support and infrastructure assistance that benefit over 1.9 million American Indian and Alaska Natives and their trust interests. If you take the guided Murals Tour you'll at some point pause to look at the collection of artifacts and the magnificent collection of Native American flags flanking the entrance hall to the Assistant Secretary's offices. The murals in USDI's main building represent a period in American history when art flourished under federal patronage. Created during the Great Depression, the Department of the Interior's murals are products of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. New Deal programs gave much hope to a country suffering under the Great Depression. The New Deal artists who created the murals represent some of the finest American painters of the 1930s. The Department of the Interior is camera-friendly, so go head and capture those moments



Fig. 3. "An Incident in Contemporary American Life," by Mitchell Jamieson.

The Museum Murals Tour lasts for about an hour. You will be escorted by a Museum curator through the old hallways of the building pausing to view, and hear the stories behind, over fifty murals by great painters including Maynard Dixon, Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache), Gifford Beal, and John Steuart Curry. You will also see a collage of the work of renowned photographer Ansel Adams. Between “mural stops,” don’t forget to enjoy the wonderful architecture within the building, including the broad marble stairways and the tile adornments.



Fig. 4. “Ceremonial Dance,” by Stephen Mopope (Kiowa). Oil on plaster, 1939.

Although the Interior Museum is temporarily closed to the public, the Museum organizes speaker or presentation programs on a variety of topics. The topics are diverse indeed, as titles of recent programs indicate: “*Sharing More than a Border: The U.S. and Mexico Working Together on the Colorado River*,” “*Planting for Pollinators: Welcoming Hummingbirds, Bees, and Butterflies to Your Home Garden*,” and “*The Department of the Interior In the Age of the Civil War*,” and “*Monumental Task: Repairing Earthquake Damage to the Washington Monument*.” Speaker programs are usually held in the Rachel Carson Room on Wednesdays, 1:15 PM – 2:15 PM. After your Murals Tour or Museum speaker program is over, you should visit the Indian Craft Shop. On your way to the Shop, you might pop into the cafeteria for some refreshments. While there, you will see two very large (50 feet) long murals. Both were painted in 1939 – *Harvest Dance*, by James Auchiah (Kiowa) and *Ceremonial Dance*, by Stephen Mopope (Kiowa).



Figs. 5 & 6. Interior rooms of the Indian Craft Shop in the 1950s.



Fig. 7. Gerald Nailor (Navajo) creating his mural “Deer Stalking” inside the Indian Craft Shop, circa 1938.

The Indian Craft Shop was established inside the USDI in 1938 to showcase authentic Native American art and has operated continuously ever since. 2013 marks the 75th anniversary of dedicated service to thousands of Native American artists across the country. Secretary Ickes announced the shop’s opening on September 2, 1938, and when you enter today it’s as if you’re magically transported back to 1938.



Fig. 8. Interior of the front show room of the Indian Craft Shop, 2013.

Great pains have been taken to preserve its original appearance. The architectural features combine the best of Southwestern “mission style” with the utility of a trading post. The walls are painted with magnificent murals, Allan Houser’s *Buffalo Hunt* and *Breaking Camp* and Ger-

ald Nailor's *Deer Stalking*. Those murals are highlighted by the shop's original Spanish colonial-mission style tin and wrought iron sconces.



Fig. 9. Indian Craft Shop Director Susan Pourian and shop patron Mitchell Bush.

The shop serves Native American artists by artfully displaying and selling their handcrafted works. The display cabinets, tables and walls are stocked with contemporary jewelry, basketry, pottery, fabrics, textiles and other craft products. There is also a nice selection of books and magazines, all relating to Indian art, craft and history. It's difficult to guess how many thousands of pieces of Native American art have traveled through the Shop over the past 75 years. Before making your final decisions about purchases, mull it over in the adjacent sculpture garden. The American Indian Sculpture Garden opened in 2002 and features large and small handcrafted sculpture in a serene setting. Your final, *final* purchase decisions will be tough, because the shop and garden inventories represent the best in contemporary Native American art and craft available on the East coast.



Fig. 10. Sculpture Garden at the Indian Craft Shop.



Fig. 11. Reading room, US Department of the Interior Library

On the same floor as the Indian Craft Shop, just down the hallway in room 1151, is the Department of the Interior Library. The USDI library is home to a massive, researchable collection of nearly 1 million books, papers and ephemera. This national reservoir of information holds scientific, legal and academic records covering all aspects of protecting America's natural resources and heritage, and honoring our cultures and tribal communities. It is open to researchers and the walk-in public. The Interior Library was created in 1948 from the collections of smaller, Departmental bureau and agency libraries. The furniture in the main reading room is period (or earlier) and invites you to have a seat, look around, and peruse that special reference book you always hoped to find. And don't miss the display cases commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Indian Craft Shop.



Fig. 12. Reference stacks; US Department of the Interior Library.

There is a great deal of professional pride that is apparent among and between these wonderful institutions...and the people that work there are friendly, helpful and genuinely glad to see you. Visitors cannot help but come home with a renewed sense of pride. So, when you leave the Department and come down the grand outside stairs after visiting the Library, turn around, take a picture of those wonderful bronze entrance doors, and tell your friends back home about the many treasures hidden behind them!

The U.S. Department of the Interior The Stewart L. Udall building is at 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240. You will need a photo ID for entry

The Museum Murals Tour is offered Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:00 PM. Tour groups are limited to 20 visitors and a reservation is required. For groups over six, custom tours can be scheduled from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM Monday to Friday. Please call at least two weeks before your visit. For information about Museum Programs or schedule a Museum Murals Tour, contact Diana Ziegler (202) 208-4743. www.doi.gov/interiormuseum

The USDI Library is open M – F, 7:45 AM - 5:00 PM (except federal government holidays). The Library's website is: www.doi.gov/library. Telephone: (202) 208-5815, or e-mail at: library@ios.doi.gov

The Indian Craft Shop is open: M – F, 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM. Third Saturday each month, 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM. Telephone: (202) 208-4056, or email at: indiancraftshop@guestservices.com. The shop's website is: www.indiancraftshop.com

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Fig. 1. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior Museum

Figs. 2-4. Courtesy of the Fine Arts Program, U.S. General Services Administration

Figs. 5-10. Courtesy of the Indian Craft Shop

Figs. 11 & 12. Courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior Library

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