For more than forty years *Glen Canyon Dam*, an oil-on-canvas painting by Norman Rockwell, ornamented the Arizona dam’s visitor center. Completed late in 1969, more than four feet high by six feet wide, the painting proves unusual among Rockwell’s works, most of which strove to be easy to read. But this picture tells no clear and urgent tale. A family of three Navajos, a cowering hound, and a horse all goggle at the dam from atop a slickrock knoll (fig. 1). In 2015, the U.S. government transferred the painting to the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, alleging fears of damage from the Arizona sun. My stories here explore the life of the painting and the program that commissioned it.
Decades of dam building had soured the public and invigorated a wave of conservation crusaders. The Sierra Club routed the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (or BuRec) plans in 1968 for dams at Marble and Bridge Canyons, dams that would have made the Grand Canyon a reservoir. (That park now draws some five million visitors a year.) In 1969 BuRec commissioned Rockwell as part of a program meant to renovate the agency’s reputation. The program was a novel attempt to green-wash operations and improve public opinion on the eve of major environmental reforms. In 1970, the first Earth Day came to be commemorated. By 1973—the same year the collection of BuRec-commissioned paintings was touring galleries around the nation—Congress had enacted the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System; the National Environmental Policy Act; the Environmental Protection Agency; and the Clean Air, the Clean Water, and the Endangered Species Acts.

Bud Rusho, a Utah-based PR specialist for BuRec, gave an interview in 1995 that recalled the genesis of the art program. “The whole scheme was the dream child of John DeWitt, then working as a public relations specialist for BuRec in Washington, D.C.” Readers might stumble like I did over the phrase “dream child.” It can refer to an idea that is stillborn, immature, foolish, or trivial. In that quaint phrase, Rusho encapsulated his eventual attitude toward both the art program and his colleague John DeWitt.

DeWitt and Rusho had a falling out in 1969 that says much about the agency and the men who ran it. Friends since 1963, they toured Cataract and Glen Canyons before the latter’s dam came online and flooded both. Those BuRec staffers evolved into unequal partners when DeWitt initiated the visiting artists program in Washington, D.C., and began to take the lead. In 1969, DeWitt summoned photographer and writer Rusho to Page, Arizona, to fetch a car for the Rockwells, chauffeur Norman and his wife Molly, and take photos for the BuRec annals. Molly was also taking photos, dozens of studies of human and mechanical subjects Rockwell would use back in the studio. A side trip brought the four of them to Rainbow Bridge, the signature arch of the canyon. Rusho “asked Norman if he would pose as if sketching so that I could photograph him, supposedly in action.” Rockwell agreed. Instead of pretending to sketch, “We somehow found an 8” x 10” piece of pink construction paper, and Norman quickly drew an astoundingly accurate sketch of Rainbow Bridge, signed it and handed it to me. I thought ‘Wow, what a souvenir!’”

That gift sketch and its upshot proved memorable enough that Rusho told the story twice, once in his 1995 interview and again in an undated written statement, attached to his oral history as an appendix. (Both were published in 2008.) “As we
were preparing to retire,” he recalled, “John DeWitt told me, rather forcefully, ‘All art objects produced by artists while being conducted by the Bureau of Reclamation Art Program are the property of the program itself. Please give me the sketch of Rainbow Bridge made by Norman Rockwell.’” One can only imagine Rusho’s face when DeWitt pulled rank on him that way. “I thought about telling DeWitt to jump in the lake, preferably from a high cliff, but as I was there at his invitation I meekly handed over the sketch. Of course the sketch was never seen again; if it still exists it probably resides in the late John DeWitt’s private property collection.”

In that interview—conducted decades after the awkward exchange over the Rockwell sketch, a sketch freely given then abruptly seized—Rusho alluded to revelations that had flooded forth about DeWitt’s abuse of the commissioned artwork. (I share those revelations in greater detail below.) If Rusho was bitter, his bitterness had an institutional basis. Rusho and others at the agency found themselves working under a cloud of organizational shame that first shadowed DeWitt and then followed him into a compulsory retirement in 1977. A dozen years after that, in 1990, national newspapers carried news of a scandal: nearly half of the artworks from the collection, including the storied sketch of Rainbow Bridge, had gone missing. Knowing his boss was up to something fishy, Rusho’s memories about the sketch likely transcend conjecture, peevishness, or spite.

The 1.4 linear feet of the John DeWitt Papers held at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art demonstrate how generous a budget DeWitt and his “dream child” enjoyed. Five years ago, I visited the archives and spent two days buried in those papers. There I learned the Smithsonian had tighter ties to the BuRec than I ever knew. The institution cosponsored the agency’s 1973 touring exhibition of the art BuRec had commissioned. As late as 2010, the reputations of the institutions were still entangled over BuRec’s contemporary art program. In memo after memo documented in those archives, agency officials endured John DeWitt’s verbal purring that they need only keep the faith and the ambitious artworks would assuage the public’s jaded view of BuRec.

The public had grown jaded because Reclamation dams were throttling wild water. Its high dams were snuffing fish, drowning canyons, and erasing Native artifacts. The Bureau of Reclamation as an agency set out to “reclaim” lands that Western aridity made impractical to farm or ranch, never mind the millennia of indigenous habitation that preceded white farmers and ranchers. Decades after their campaign of damming major Western rivers, BuRec’s efforts to reclaim the West often sound like so much entitlement. They imply that Euro-Americans enjoyed
a birthright to seize land from birds, fish, humans, and other mammals—seizures that were part of a larger pattern. As previously mentioned, by the late 1960s, the Sierra Club had stopped construction of a number of dams, and environmentalists, particularly concerned about the runs of endangered fish, struck out at BuRec, affiliated corporations, and sibling organizations like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Through direct action and the promotion of legislation, they pushed to safeguard at-risk ecosystems. Enter John DeWitt.

John DeWitt’s ability to recruit Norman Rockwell for his arts project was a coup. In doing so, Rockwell agreed to tackle the matter of whether a dam could be a work of art, also whether he as a painter could successfully address the environmental issues vexing the nation and the world. That same year, Ohio’s Cuyahoga River caught fire for the thirteenth time. The coffee-table books by the Sierra Club and others—of wide-angle landscapes placed at risk by governments and profit-driven corporations—had certainly entered Rockwell’s vision, if not his consciousness and conscience. A painter whose aesthetic shared a lot with photographers, he had to portray the grand dam that would eventually lock up 266 square miles of water. That reservoir came to be named Lake Powell, after John Wesley Powell, the one-armed Civil War veteran who floated the river on wooden boats in 1869. Edward Abbey bluntly dubbed the reservoir Lake Dominy, after the BuRec commissioner.

Commissioner Floyd Dominy, legendary for his hard-nosed approach to dam-construction projects, was in the words of environmental writer Marc Reisner “loved by some, feared by many, respected by all.” His tenure as commissioner lasted ten years, from 1959 to 1969, and he cast a long shadow. When political winds began to corrode his dams, Dominy champed a cigar and jutted his jaw, or so John McPhee drew him in 1971 in his nonfiction book Encounters with the Archdruid. There, Dominy rafts the Colorado River and swaps philosophies with Sierra Club chief David Brower. Brower, who led battles against the dams that would have blighted the Grand Canyon, was the leader of the “archdruids,” the kooks who “worship trees and sacrifice human beings to those trees,” in mining engineer Charles Fraser’s memorable assessment, which gave McPhee the title for his book. Without say-so from Floyd Dominy, the greenwashing arts project would have stalled.

In an undated letter to the first director of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, John DeWitt proposed a ploy to gain Dominy’s sanction for the
project: arrange a “lunch to include a liquid offering in the form of a martini” to lubricate the commissioner. The DeWitt Papers do not reveal if the martini luncheon ever took place, but there is no doubt DeWitt got a green light for his project and began to commission the artists to paint the dams. Dominy might readily have assented to the greenwashing if he sensed his own career as dam-builder extraordinaire in any danger of decease. The same year that Norman Rockwell agreed to his commission, Commissioner Dominy let go of his.

The forty enlisted painters faced titanic tasks. Mitchell Jamieson needed to concoct an object of sublimity from what was then the world’s largest quantity of concrete, the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington State. Norman Rockwell had to dress up the dam the ecouteurs in the 1975 Edward Abbey novel The Monkey Wrench Gang would hope to blow to bits. Advantages for the commissioned artists nonetheless were many. There were junkets to be had—the “paid vacations” as Rusko named them—including helicopter tours. There was the $800 for each finished painting. There was the exposure if one’s work were chosen for the National Gallery of Art premiere, or later included in the touring exhibition to leading museums around the nation. Also, and more dodgy as a motive, artists of the era could enjoy liberal tax deductions when they donated their paintings to the government.

Norman Rockwell needed no exposure. His work for Saturday Evening Post and Look magazines made him the most recognizable painter of his time. His signature style divided critics then as it does now. Most agreed he was a fine illustrator but hardly an artist. The clever DeWitt probably reasoned that Rockwell’s popular appeal could neutralize the infamy of Glen Canyon Dam. Their pairing would be a grudge match to gauge if environmentalists could pump up sentiment in the populace as deftly as the august Norman Rockwell could. His sometimes saccharine taste in subject matter was changing, however. His desire to comment, and to take advantage of the growing taste for social change, plausibly caused him to drop his Saturday Evening Post gig and go to work for the hipper, edgier Look in 1964. Already by that time in his late career, at Look Rockwell had seen fit to take on the charged topic of civil rights in paintings such as The Problem We All Live With (1963, but published in 1964), Southern Justice (1965), and New Kids in the Neighborhood (1967).

What sentiment did Rockwell hope to impart with his Glen Canyon Dam? Parallels to Edward S. Curtis’s work are inescapable. Curtis’s 1904 photo of Navajos, The Vanishing Race—Navaho, from his first of twenty volumes on North American
Indians, bears striking similarities to Rockwell’s piece done six decades later (fig. 2). Not only did both men in their pictures depict Navajo people, both depicted them turned away, as if in resignation or grief. In succeeding years Curtis would come in for a ration of censure for his Navajo photograph and others. It’s a hell of a way, critics still say, to foreordain the Native Americans to extinction by identifying them as vanishing. The subtext of the photo says they ought to slip quietly into history the way the dinosaurs had done. Historian James Wilson wrote, “Vanishing is a kind of innate quality, as in vanishing cream, something you do rather than something that is done to you.” If Rockwell, like Curtis, was depicting his subjects as doomed, voluntarily to vanish, then modernity in the shape of the dam was a crippling force.

More simply, Rockwell might have been availing himself of tropes that had become familiar to the American gaze. The Last of the Race (1847), by Tompkins Harrison Matteson, also depicts an Indian family group, including a dog, looking down from atop a precipice. The shared elevation suggests a moral order that has
become irrelevant. In its subject’s vantage point, too, the Rockwell piece bears comparison to John Mix Stanley’s Oregon City on the Willamette River (ca. 1850), in which an Indian couple gazes at a broad valley that has sprouted Anglo homes. When James Earle Fraser first sculpted The End of the Trail at the turn of the twentieth century, he depicted an Indian warrior slumped over his horse; his lance, when viewed from the right side, appears to be skewering him. Fraser made a number of versions of The End of the Trail, including a monumental eighteen-foot plaster for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, but today the image has gone commercially viral, embedded on dishes, belt buckles, bronze sculptures, radios, lamps, dream catchers, American flags, earrings, and even a plastic simulacrum of a cow skull. By positioning his Indian family the way he did, Norman Rockwell was mining a tradition.

The open-ended composition of Glen Canyon Dam interests more viewers and commentators each year, and Rockwell himself held it in high regard. “This painting,” he wrote to DeWitt, “I feel can be one of my very best.” What a surprising assessment of a painting that is all drama and no narrative—a piece far out of character for him. Late in 2013, his Saying Grace, of a rural family praying over a meal at a crowded urban diner, fetched $46 million at Sotheby’s American art auction. That piece, by contrast with Glen Canyon Dam, leaves little to the imagination. But his Navajo people etched on an Arizona landscape present the viewer with a cultural conundrum. Are they pleased or are they sorry to confront that hunk of American technology and ingenuity that is looming before them? It differs hugely from his signature covers for Saturday Evening Post; those depict Middle Americans naked to the viewer in aw-shucks humility. On the other hand, his picture of the dam refuses to disclose what emotions stir below the surface.

Questions about Rockwell’s animals compound the conundrum of his intentions. A horse, dog, and two birds outnumber the humans. He shrunk the dam into the lower left side of the painting, and the horse itself looms larger than the structure. The horse in Rockwell’s canvas suggests, moreover, that the people drove no car to the dam site, that they exist in a pretechnological state, and that they had come some distance. Whether they traveled to the dam or found it obstructing their historical progress is a key question. The dog appears forlorn at best, whipped at worst—cringing in the grip of vertigo or ancestral subservience to humankind.

The painting’s wild animals, an eagle and a hawk, compete in the wild for prey and nesting sites. The red-tailed hawk is a common raptor in the U.S., while the eagle is a bald eagle, symbol of the federal United States, the species Audubon
knew as “white-headed eagle” when he painted its likeness. Rockwell’s pairing of the two birds could intimate harmony, contradicting their behavior in the wild, or conflict, for hawks haze eagles and chase them away. Bald eagles favor fish as their chief prey, and dams commonly bring about ecological disaster for wild fish. The forced pairing of the birds could also, or instead, represent the forcibly conjoined white and red races, an aftermath of the dam that altered Navajo lands.

Rusho repeated an exchange with Rockwell that bears on the dog. The painter, Rusho said, “told us that he used certain tried and true strategies to make his paintings work. One was that ‘If the painting doesn’t seem to work, I add a small dog, and if necessary, a dog with a bandaged foot.’ We all had a good laugh. Yet I don’t think Rockwell was kidding; I remembered that he really had put bandaged dogs in his paintings!” Rockwell was confessing he appealed to pity and compassion in his work. Small dogs pluck at viewers’ heartstrings and injured dogs pluck heartstrings twice as hard. Bandaged dogs are abundant, even redundant, in Rockwell’s work. Witness A Good Scout (1925), where a Boy Scout is bandaging a puppy’s paw, while the mama dog looks on. See A Friend in Need (1947), where a Cub Scout holds a beagle while a Boy Scout wraps its hurt foot. In place of a hurt foot, the dog in Glen Canyon Dam assumes a beaten or servile bearing. It displays a wound to its inner being rather than to the skin or flesh. His imposition of a dog on the Navajo family that modeled for him suggests he hoped to evoke similar emotions, but just what emotions remains open for interpretation.

DeWitt and Rusho gave differing accounts of the Navajo family Rockwell centered on the canvas. The men agreed on one thing: Rockwell balked when he saw the dam’s edifice. In Rusho’s interview, he remembered the painter said he could not paint a “mechanical” object like the dam alone—though he did submit to posing before it (fig. 3). For his painting, he needed people. We also know the Indian family was John Lane’s. Lane, with his wife, son, daughter, and horse, formed the ensemble, and stood for many photographs, taken by Molly. The family’s clothing stayed much the same in the finished frame, but the daughter vanished and the dog appeared. The son, standing to the left in the photographs, has shifted right, underneath the curve of the horse’s neck, creating a tighter grouping.

How did the Lanes arrive at this photo shoot? DeWitt’s account of the search for Indians to fill out the canvas credits the painter himself with finding John Lane. “Rockwell then looked out at the streets of Page, Ariz., from our restaurant booth, searching for an idea that wasn’t long in coming. The idea took the form of a passing Navajo Indian, one of the traditional ‘longhairs,’ his tightly bound pigtail down
the back of his colorful, if quite seedy, costume.” DeWitt’s words, written in a 1970 article, betray his ethnocentricity and, when compared to Rusho’s telling of the story, call into question the truth of his account. He felt the need to apologize for the Indian’s presence—for his hair, his grooming and his “costume.” (Later, Rusho recounted DeWitt’s harsh evaluation of Rockwell’s Glen Canyon Dam, paraphrasing his boss’s assessment: “No, it’s not a great painting. It’s an illustrator’s view of the dam, with an attempt to humanize it by including the Navajo family.” DeWitt cracked a sneer, as elites still often do today when they look on Rockwell’s work.)

By contrast, Rusho swore it was not a restaurant booth at all, but a car trip to the country that turned up the human subjects. “So I took Rockwell and Molly and we drove out of Page, and I got to a hogan, just an ordinary hogan, and I went in and I tried to talk to this Navajo.” (At which point in the interview Rusho and BuRec historian Brit Storey shared a laugh about the ignorance of English that the Navajos feigned when they chose not to communicate.) Rusho said he finally got his message across to the Navajo man and lined up the John Lane family as Rockwell’s models. The resulting painting was one of very few in the three hundred-plus pieces of the BuRec project to prominently feature people. With Rockwell’s fame he could call the shots—and get away with a lot. The source photos show the
Lane family standing in a muddy field, while in the painting they are placed on the cliff’s edge. Did Rockwell superimpose the people without sufficiently integrating them in the painting? If so, then the dislocated overlay might explain some of the ambiguity that saturates the canvas.

Floyd Dominy claimed his own credit for Rockwell’s decision to integrate the Navajos. Dominy said he flew to Arizona from Washington, D.C., expressly to greet Rockwell. In his 1996 oral history, he remembers, “After he looked at the dam and the surroundings, he said to me, he says, ‘Commissioner,’ he said, ‘I don’t paint objects. I paint people. I’m miscast on this assignment,’ he said. So that’s when I told him, I said, ‘Well, paint people. Paint them in front of the dam. Pose them in such a way that you get the dam in the picture. That’s all I want.’” In his interview, Dominy not only claimed credit for the notion of posing Indians before the dam, he also claimed not to be able to recall DeWitt’s name, perhaps to purchase distance from the scandal that had erupted six years before when much of the BuRec-commissioned art was reported missing. All three interviewees position the Navajos as little more than artifice for Rockwell, an afterthought to meet his need to populate his pictures. But maybe the bureaucrats were wrong and Rockwell prized his piece for the way it furthered a pictorial tradition. Maybe Rockwell was inserting a sly message.

A curious word in Floyd Dominy’s interview is “assignment.” Like a jobber working piecemeal, the Rockwell of Dominy’s recollection is an inferior being, a species of subaltern mustered by some imperium to pay due tribute. But the Navajos are the true subalterns. In the picture they rely on the tongues of the ruling classes for articulation. The boy’s clenched hands become the sole syntax in a depiction giving the people no personal utterance, no emotional rejoinder. In Rusho’s account of the Navajo in the hogan, the Navajo held out, he played dumb, until his tympanic membranes registered Norman Rockwell’s magic name, and then he brightened, he complied—and he spoke to the visitors in English from then on.

John DeWitt, when he was not feting artists in the Arizona canyonlands, was milking his BuRec status for every drop it would yield. He applied his savoir faire as a public relations specialist to bolster his agency and career. His work for BuRec, he explained to a reporter, was “a one-man project thatputs him in constant contact with other artists.” He carved little birds from wood. His wife painted in oils. Artists among artists, they added much to D.C.’s polish. “They love their Capitol Hill row house,” a reporter explained in a 1972 McCall’s profile, “a soft-hued brick that seems to
watch the sun all day through the iron eyelashes on its south-facing windows, far too much to leave it.” Leave it they would five years later, though, when DeWitt lost his job.

DeWitt’s trajectory with the Interior gained height and poise. He became known for directing the Bureau of Reclamation art collection. He enjoyed his flash and sinecure, corresponding with luminaries, collecting art and port wines. He gained the trust of Floyd Dominy’s successor, Ellis Armstrong. His fine arts program, which engaged forty artists and flourished for five years, laid the groundwork for him to spearhead a bicentennial display, *America 1976*. Federal public art once again came to serve patriotic and public relations functions.

Only eight months into the bicentennial, though, DeWitt was looking for work. In an August 4, 1976, letter to Lamar Dodd, chair of art at the University of Georgia and a donor of art to the BuRec collection, DeWitt lobbied Dodd to see if he, as a fellow Georgian, could secure DeWitt work if Jimmy Carter were to win the White House. DeWitt was nursing a new “dream child,” a fresh-faced scheme: a collection of art on endangered species. The Endangered Species Act had been signed into law only three years before, and the nation was, DeWitt believed, primed for his reinvention.

By this time he was sixty-six years old. His endangered species balloon was the last of many he would loft to try to keep his job and Interior public art alive. He had beaten his brains and stretched his imagination. A writer of radio soaps as a young man, a carver of “herons, terns, pelicans,” and more, he had admired artists and married one, Miriam Hapgood. Laboring to find a way to gain support for the touring exhibit of the BuRec art collection, DeWitt had written five years earlier, in 1971: “There is a good possibility that an inflatable museum can be made available for housing our travelling exhibitions.” The satiric possibilities of this image are boundless. In that 1971 memo, DeWitt strove to convince his superiors he could inflate an edifice and mount art on its walls. He struggled, in Shakespearean terms, to give “to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.” As if addressing wide-eyed children, DeWitt wrote, “This revolutionary and eye-catching museum would be certain to attract widespread public attention.”

The Smithsonian, maybe not coincidentally, floated an identical notion in 2009, as if following DeWitt’s lead. The new director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Richard Koshalek, proposed a fifteen-story balloon to distend from the inner courtyard of the Hirshhorn twice a year. The hot helium of PR would engorge it. “Today, though, the project is dead,” the *New York Times* reported
in 2013, “Mr. Koshalek has resigned, and several members of the deeply divided board of trustees have left, including the chairwoman who, on her way out, offered a blistering critique of the museum and its parent body, the Smithsonian.” As DeWitt had done in the course of his project, a curator of the visual arts once again had embarrassed his colleagues and the institution of public art. What’s more, the relationship of the Smithsonian and the Hirshhorn bears more than an analogous comparison to the Interior and BuRec, for the Smithsonian cosponsored the BuRec’s 1973 touring exhibition.

DeWitt’s career ended pending a federal investigation. In a 1977 letter, he called himself “a somewhat involuntary retiree.” Detractors claimed that he had stolen government art, fabricated travel vouchers, and possessed unauthorized government records. One of the most damning sets of claims came from John Arthur, director of the gallery at Boston University, who went straight to the top when he wrote House Speaker Tip O’Neill on June 3, 1977, a letter that railed against DeWitt’s cavalier conduct vis-à-vis the artworks he curated. “I was involved with the exhibit as curator for almost three years,” Arthur wrote, “and was continually shocked and dismayed at the lack of professionalism and wasteful spending on the part of Interior’s Visual Arts Director (now retired).” Arthur pointed to cigarette burns on paintings, to DeWitt’s “self-serving” behavior, to dishonest shenanigans “to pay for DeWitt’s trips,” to missing works by Richard Diebenkorn, to the withdrawal by Vincent Arcilesi of his Grand Canyon painting, and much more. Arthur ended with a weary sigh. “On Interior’s side, the lack of interest in the exhibit and shoddy handling of the details tend to substantiate one’s worst fears about the Federal government.” I found no records that show how and when the ax fell, or who swung it. In September of 1977 DeWitt made a Freedom of Information Act request. The sixteen-page, single-spaced report, a copy of which is filed with the John DeWitt Papers in the Archives of American Art, acquitted him, although the exoneration came too late.

The missing BuRec art still was surfacing in 2010. Five pieces by Richard Diebenkorn, judged as “vibrant, even brilliant,” had gone astray for thirty-seven years, until they turned up at the Hirshhorn Museum, sans explanation. “Despite the mini-discovery,” art critic Tyler Green noted with a verbal wink, “the museum has not publicized the installations.” Among the hundreds of BuRec artworks gone missing—borrowed by bureaucrats, locked in attics, lost in warehouses, or stolen outright—the Norman Rockwell painting is as rare as hen’s teeth, for it remained exactly where it was intended to be until 2015, on display and in public hands,
outside Page, Arizona, in the visitor center of the dam it depicts. In that year it was repatriated to the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, for curatorial reasons.

A dozen years after Norman Rockwell finished his canvas, a fissure appeared on the dam. It was in fact a three-hundred-foot sheet of black plastic that activists unfurled down its concrete face. That plastic sheet, both a wish fulfillment and a tacit threat, counterfeited a crack in the concrete. The media event took place March 21, 1981, and the activists—those saboteurs, vandals, taggers, or artists—never got busted. In their action—eight years after BuRec concluded its program to commission visual artists to greenwash its dams—antidam activists co-opted the visual arts to voice their smoldering hostility that BuRec had plugged up wild rivers. Just imagine, standing at the visitor center, staring at Rockwell’s vision of Glen Canyon Dam from a vantage not unlike John Lane’s, while out the window another artist’s vision of the dam unfurls.

This history of public art in America is diverse and complex. The stories that orbit around this lately relocated Norman Rockwell painting demonstrate how tricky it can be to commission art. In good faith, the painter did his job. In bad faith, government officials saw the larger project through. The management of the Bureau of Reclamation art collection embarrassed bureaucrats and miffed taxpayers already distrustful about the agency’s oversight of natural resources. Meanwhile, the valorized dams have grown vulnerable to decommissioning. Their concrete is breaking down under the ravages of time, fish populations dwindle more every year, and ongoing public skepticism is demanding dam removal at many sites. The enduring art stirred by those dams might outlive the dams themselves in the end.