

The Death of Travis: In Print and Mural, a Scene of Patriotic Sacrifice

by John Faubion

A print of a once-prominently displayed mural depicts a storied moment in a legendary battle for Texas independence. The mural, titled: *"The Death of Travis,"* was installed in a bank building in San Antonio in 1967. The work of renowned artist Millard Sheets, it portrays the moment that Lt. Colonel William B. Travis was shot by Mexican forces during the 1836 siege of the Alamo. The print, given to bank customers, is a 22.5" x 17" offset lithographic copy of the mural.

Sheets (1907-1989), was a well-established artist when he was commissioned to produce the Travis mural. He had been head of the art department at Scripps College in Claremont, California; had served as a wartime artist and correspondent for Life Magazine during WWII; had been director of the new Los Angeles County Art Institute, and was fully immersed in numerous projects awarded to his firm: Millard Sheets Designs.

Sheets' strong belief that art should be incorporated into the design of a building from the outset, rather than being tacked-on later, was a driving force in the 1953 founding of his firm. It led to great success. Adam Arenson told me that, over the years, "dozens of artists, architects, and others ..." worked there. Arenson is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Urban Studies Program at Manhattan College in Riverdale, New York, and author of the recent book: *Banking on Beauty: Millard Sheets and Midcentury Commercial Architecture in California*. In it, he explores the fortuitous support Sheets received from financier Howard F. Ahmanson, whose Home Savings and Loan Association became a nation-



Millard Sheets, original design for
"The Death of Travis," watercolor on velum drafting paper, 1967.
Courtesy of Tony Sheets.

al banking giant. In 1954, Ahmanson commissioned Sheets to design his Beverly Hills, California, bank branch. Its success, and the expansion of Ahmanson's banking empire, earned Sheets commissions to design the art and architecture for scores of his subsequent bank buildings.

Like his other Ahmanson commissions, Sheets was given wide latitude to design the San Antonio bank building, and its artwork, to best suit its specific location. The San Antonio branch would be known as the Travis Savings and Loan; was less than a mile from the historic Alamo building; and less than one-half mile from Travis Park. To Sheets, it must have begged for a mural of the epic battle featuring one of its most heroic figures. And, like everything else in Texas, it would need to be big (the mural has been touted as the biggest Alamo painting in existence). So, Sheets designed the building to accommodate a mural that was 32 feet long x 20 feet tall. It was mount-

ed on a wall that curved slightly around the viewers to pull them into the scene and give them a sense that they were actual witnesses to history.

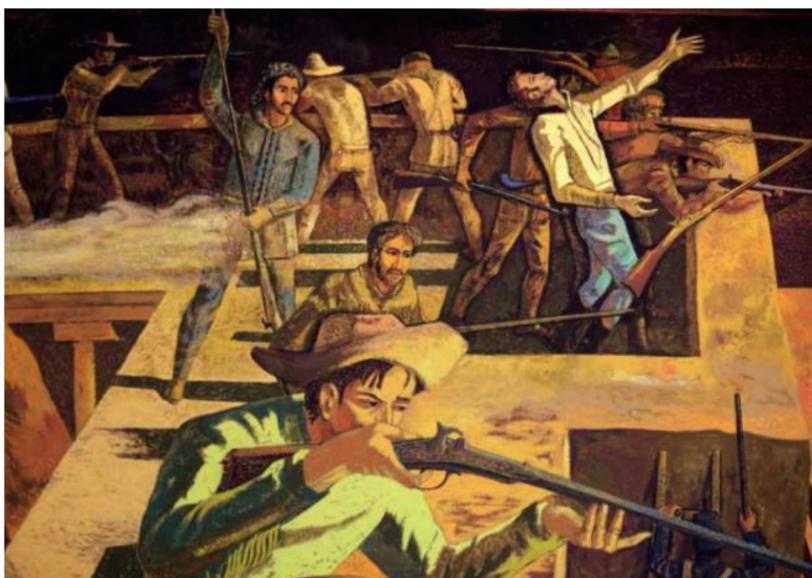
What exactly did they see?

Bank patrons, and others with an appreciation for art and history, stood at the base of the mural and were transported back in time to early Sunday morning, March 6, 1836. Mexico had only recently become a new nation, having won its independence from Spain in 1821. American colonists had been allowed to settle in its northern territory of Texas. But when General Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794-1876), seized control in 1833, he sought to expel all foreigners. His early attempts at pushing them out of the area in and around the former Spanish mission, known as the Alamo, had been an embarrassment. Now he was back with a vengeance.

Within the walls of the mission were perhaps fewer than 200 men who sought independence for Texas. Among them were Tennessee congressman David Crockett; volunteer Colonel James Bowie who was commander of a small group of volunteers; and Lt. Colonel William B. Travis who held a commission in the regular army and was, at the time of the final assault, commander of all the defenders of the Alamo.

It was the thirteenth day of Santa Anna's siege. By some accounts, he had amassed as many as 6000 troops. He had bombarded the adobe structure with artillery and rifle-fire for days. Travis and his men had repulsed his first charge, and his second. And now, mural viewers could see that, on Santa Anna's final

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Detail, Millard Sheets, *"The Death of Travis,"* William Travis, upper right corner, falls back and drops his rifle after being shot.



Tony Sheets admires his father's mural: *"The Death of Travis,"* at the former Travis Savings and Loan building in San Antonio, Texas.