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Dust Buster: Library mural getting a good cleaning from friends in high places

By Dana Herra - Staff Writer

DeKALB - Bit by bit, the decades of dirt are coming off a Depression-era mural in the DeKalb Public Library.

The mural was painted by Chicago artist Gustaf Dalstrom in 1934 as part of the Public Works of Art Project, one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's initiatives to put Americans back to work. The mural is historically important as one of the few PWAP artworks that is still unaltered and intact, but the unvarnished oil-pastel painting is darkened with 72 years of grime.

The 6.5-by-20-foot canvas stretches from the top of the fireplace in the library's main room to the ceiling. It depicts seven scenes of early America, including a sailor, a carpenter, an Indian and a family in Pilgrim dress.

Chicago Conservation Center restorer Margaret Nowosielska mounted a scaffold Monday with an assistant to begin the delicate task of removing the dirt without disturbing the paint.

"(Restoring paintings) is like medicine, where you have your patients," she said. "You have to take an individual approach to each object."

Reference Librarian Dee Coover said the library considered restoring the mural earlier, but could never afford the \$10,000-plus price tag. Last year, graduate students in a grant-writing class at Northern Illinois University wrote a grant proposal for the project, and in May, the DeKalb County Community Foundation awarded the library a \$5,000 grant for the restoration. The Katz Family Foundation matched the grant in June.

"It's really thrilling," Coover said. "Last Friday two assistants came and put up scaffolding, and I



Chicago Conservation Center restorer Margaret Nowosielska (left) and her assistant clean the mural at the DeKalb Public Library on Wednesday. The mural was painted by Chicago artist Gustaf Dalstrom in 1934. Chronicle photos HOLLY LUNDH

thought, 'Oh my, this is really going to happen.' It's so exciting."

Nowosielska said the Dalstrom painting is not really damaged, just dirty. The top of the painting was dirtier than the bottom, and a shadowy line could be seen across the work separating the part that had been cleaned from the part that hadn't been yet.

Nowosielska remarked on Dalstrom's mastery of his materials, but said his choices to paint on a rough canvas and not to use a finishing coat of varnish pose particular challenges in the restoration. The rough canvas leaves large gaps between the threads that conceal dirt, and the lack of varnish makes cleaning the paint a delicate task.

"Varnish is a protective layer," she said. "It is always better to use varnish, because it is much easier to clean (than exposed paint)."

As the cleaning progresses, Nowosielska said, she and her assistant also have been repairing some small patches where the paint has come away, leaving either white spots that show the preparation layer the artist painted on the canvas, or dark spots where the preparation is missing and the canvas itself is exposed.

"We use glue and some filler, most of the time gypsum," Nowosielska said. After applying the base with a small spatula, she is ready to retouch the areas with color, she said.

"Mostly we use watercolor, because it's easy to take off," she explained. "Everything you do has to be reversible."

The challenge in retouching is exactly matching the color of the pastels Dalstrom used in the original work.

"We can retouch only what is missing, not paint over the original," Nowosielska said. "For conservation, you have to have patience, and you can't be an artist."

Nowosielska said she expects to finish the restoration this week. It was originally thought to be a two-week project for a single conservator, but with the help of her assistant, she is hoping to cut that time in half.

"I have to finish by Friday," she said. "I have so many projects to do."

Coover estimated the cost of the restoration at \$10,000. The original bill for the painting, including the cost of the canvas, was \$33.25 in 1934.

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