



Chicago's Depression-Era Murals Restored

By Barbara Keer

Chicagoans have a very special opportunity on June 29th when the work in progress on the significant mural, Allegorical Scene, will be unveiled at Pulaski Park Field House. The Chicago Park District is collaborating with the Chicago Conservation Center in a project known as the Mural Preservation Effort, focused on restoring murals in field houses across the city.



Pulaski Park Field House Murals - Photo Judith Bromley

The first phase was completed in November 2005 restoring 35 murals in six parks. The second phase is expected to be completed in early 2007. The conservation of each mural is documented in a complete report accompanied by photographs taken before, during and after conservation treatment.

According to Megan Ann Jones, Vice President of Client Services for the Chicago Conservation Center, there has been tremendous support from all areas including private donors and foundations such as, the Terra Foundation for American Art, the Dreihaus Foundation, LaSalle Bank, the Alphawood Foundation and many more. She added, "We

live in a city with more public murals than any other in America because Chicago was at the forefront in supporting mural arts in the early part of the 20th Century”.



Sherman Mural

Chicago Park District historian, Julia Bachrach, helped identify murals from 1916 to 1941 requiring restoration. The 58 murals were chosen for their need for conservation and their historical significance to both Chicago and nation history.



Restoring the Mural

Michael Fus, preservation architect for this project, answered various questions about the murals to help viewers gain a more complete understanding of their significance.

Q. As an architect, what is your role in the restoration of the murals?

A. I am the project manager for the Mural Preservation Project. Responsibilities included providing assistance in establishing the prioritization of the murals to be treated, coordination of the project schedule, reviewing and approving the proposed treatment of each mural, issuing the "notice to proceed" to the conservation firm, periodic review of the conservation progress, and confirmation that all expectations of the project are satisfactorily met and complete at the end of the project.

Q. How do you happen to be working on this project?

A. As Preservation Architect for the Chicago Park District for the past ten years, I have been involved in historic preservation projects of the park district's buildings and public sculpture collection, and am a graduate of the Historic Preservation Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This combination of training and experience is appropriate for managing the Mural Preservation Project.



Sherman Park Field House Murals

Q. How would you compare this kind of work to other work you do?

A. To the credit of the conservation firm, Chicago Conservation Center, there have been very few surprises that have been encountered after work on the murals has begun, which is contrary to less-predictable ways that myriads of building materials perform over long periods of time and varying types of environmental exposure. I

Think there may also be a different type of public appreciation in general towards murals, whereas sculptures and buildings are subject to much greater physical interaction with people and natural forces, such the vast fluctuations of extreme weather in our climate.

Q. What is the most unusual or interesting experience you've had during this project?

A. Just being involved in the project and witnessing the gradual transformation of dull, darkened surfaces restored to their original appearance with forgotten features, colors, and text that had been hidden in plain sight for generations is extremely rewarding and exciting. It is unusual and rare to see this beautiful change occur in a very methodical and painstaking manner without the small armies of craftsmen and trades necessary for similar transformation of a building or sculpture.

Q. Is there anything further you wish to share with readers or anything that could help them better appreciate viewing the murals?

A. In many ways these murals are like the carvings that adorn medieval European churches, which sought to explain religious history in visual form. Many of the murals in the Chicago Park District provide visual expression of American history and that of the Midwest to largely immigrant populations for whom the parks were built.

I would recommend that anyone interested in public murals read Mary Lackritz Gray's *A Guide to Chicago's Murals*, which is loaded with full-color illustrations and fascinating facts covering nearly two hundred Chicago murals, and Heather Becker's *Art for the People* which provides in-depth coverage of over four hundred murals in Chicago Public Schools. Certainly the June 29, 2006 event at the Pulaski Park Field House will be a unique opportunity to learn all about the work in progress and view the dramatic impact of this important preservation work.



Sherman mural

The Public is invited to celebrate this project Thursday, June 29th at Pulaski Park Field House, 1419 W. Blackhawk St., at 6:00 p.m. Official representatives from the City of Chicago, Chicago Park District and the Chicago Conservation Center are scheduled to make a presentation and unveil Allegorical Scene.

www.chicagoparkdistrict.com

Photos by Brooke Collins

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