

## 1930s school murals rise from the ruins

The victim of a leaky roof, artwork is back to its original splendor

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Time erodes. Paint wears thin. And sometimes rainwater seeps through a roof so long that plaster buckles and crashes to the floor.

When that happened at Evanston's Oakton Elementary School several years ago, there was no money to repair the decades-old murals painted by unknown artists. Huge chunks of the paintings that told the story of Charlemagne, the medieval king who conquered Rome, had flaked away, exposing the brick underneath.

When art restoration expert Margaret Nowosielska walked into the school auditorium to view the destruction six months ago, what was left was grimy and crumbling. Dark watermarks stained Roland and the other stockinged knights in armor. The murals' bright colors had faded.

"I almost fainted," Nowosielska said, recounting the day she surveyed the damage. "The shape of the murals was so terrible it was almost scary."

Today, the knights carry their shields with coats of arms past castles in the Italian countryside exactly as they had when artists painted them in the 1930s. The colors are vivid. A casual visitor to the auditorium would never know that much of the prized mural had slid to the floor.

The restoration is a tale of perseverance, foresight, and use of meticulous techniques that began more than a decade ago when rumors that the murals were fading reached the Chicago Conservation Center, an organization dedicated to preserving art. On March 23, Evanston-Skokie School District 65, where Oakton is located, will unveil the restored murals during a 6 p.m. ceremony that will include state representatives and Evanston's mayor.

The effort began in 1995, when members of the conservation center visited the auditorium and discovered peeling plaster and other damage caused by water and time. By 1998 they had raised enough money to restore two of eight portraits of knights that flank two large scenery murals on either side of the auditorium.

While they were restoring the portraits, they took steps that, unknown to them at the time,

ultimately would save the larger scenery murals. Using thin paper, the conservationists meticulously traced the scenes depicting knights carrying a wounded or sleeping comrade in one mural and a white stag that appeared to the weary warriors in the other.

Years went by until one morning Oakton Principal Q.T. Carter walked into the auditorium to find chunks of painted plaster, propelled by years of water damage, on the floor. There was brick where knights had once been.

But because of the tracings, the conservationists could replicate the lost art.

"If we had not had those tracings, the murals would have been incredibly difficult to restore," said Heather Becker, the center's chief executive officer. "Thank God we thought to do it when we did."

Armed with the tracings, the conservationists hoped to restore the paintings. But they faced another challenge: money. Initial estimates to restore the large murals and other damaged portraits and panels--26 in all--came to \$130,000. And that didn't include fixing the leaky roof.

They turned to Illinois Rep. Julie Hamos (D-Evanston), who promised to earmark state funds for the restoration. For its part, the conservation center reduced the cost estimate for restoration to \$91,000, plus \$7,800 to replaster the walls, absorbing much of the expense internally in an effort to get funding, Becker said.

The state released \$100,000 to cover the costs, according to a legislative aide in Hamos' office.

In September, plasterers fixed the walls, and Nowosielska started restoring the lost sections. She covered the fresh plaster with the tracings, using a pizza-cutter-like instrument made of a roller and tiny pins to duplicate the lines of the original paintings. She worked in watercolor first, then acrylic, matching the colors using photographs.

Salt residue from the water had corrupted much of the old paint, so she had to remove much of the old plaster. In most places she injected glue under old paint to secure the pigment. Using sponges and scalpels, she cleaned grime from the parts of the painting that could be saved.

Cleaning 1 square foot can take hours. But by early this week, she had repainted and retouched all of the damaged murals. Only the trim around the stage remained to be painted.

"It was very difficult but I am pleased with the result," Nowosielska said, surveying her work. "The original and the reconstructed--you can't tell which part is which."

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