



Chicago Conservation Center -- offering tours, conserving murals, restoring flood-damaged artwork

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[The Chicago Conservation Center](#) has been offering art conservation services since 1983; it was founded by Heather Becker. I found out about the Chicago Conservation Center after purchasing a copy of *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive and WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943*, which was written by Becker. *Art for the People* is a great book, and I've used it in several classes that I've taught.

Recently I spoke with Heather Becker about the tours they offer, aspects of CCC's conservation project with murals in Chicago Public Schools, and their upcoming projects.

DG: *What can a group expect if they come to The Center?*

HB: Visitors to The Center will experience a unique insight into the field of conservation. Our lab, the largest of its kind in the country, brings together conservators with diverse areas of expertise from around the world. Tour groups walk away with a real sense of the marriage of art and science that goes on in our facility through demonstrations and introductory lectures, as well as the passion exhibited by The Center's staff.

DG: *What is one thing that you recall hearing from a tour/member of a group regarding something that someone didn't know about conservation?*

HB: People are generally most surprised by the emphasis on reversibility of techniques used in conservation and the stringent professional standards and ethics of the field.

DG: *It has been eight years since the publication of "Art for the People," and the mural conservation project for the Chicago Public Schools started 16 years ago. Reflecting on that project, what would you say is one important thing about that project that you still think about?*

HB: One aspect of that project that I still think about is the way we were able to reintroduce the people to a prized and highly unusual collection of public art that is wholly unique to Chicago. Our ability to raise awareness amongst the public helped enable important new classroom curricula that feature the murals in Chicago Public Schools.

DG: *Many of the WPA-Era murals in the CPS depicted circumstances that were affecting Americans during the Great Depression, including themes pertaining to harsh realities in people's lives, as well as people's hopes for a better society and promises of technological innovations. Many people have been comparing the current recession to the Great Depression, although people have characterized the economy as being in recession, rather than being in a depression. How would you say that some of the themes in the WPA-Era murals speak to the world we live in today?*

HB: While many of the murals in the Chicago Public Schools depict events and issues specific to their historical context, the themes of community, hope, resilience, and a uniquely American spirit of innovation that fill these WPA murals continue to resonate deeply with America today.

DG: *What can a mural teach us, in terms of how themes and visual compositions are presented, in ways that might not be addressed in an essay or by way of some other method? For instance, in "Art for the People," Dorothy Williams wrote, "knowing there was a federal Art Project mural hidden under paint in the foyer of Lucy Flower Career Academy High School, I felt Flower students, staff, and community were being deprived of viewing a great work of art. I also felt the restoration of the mural would enhance our appreciation of art and our American history, even if some of the scenes were controversial. The mural was all but forgotten until 1985, when I decided to try and get the mural restored." Can you comment on the conservation of that mural—as it pertains to why it was important to conserve it, although, as Williams writes, "some of the scenes were controversial"?*

HB: The fresco *Outstanding American Women* at Lucy Flower is one of the most important historical treatments The Center has

completed. Painted by the talented American artist, Edward Millman from 1938-1940, it is one of a few true frescoes (water-based paint applied to wet plaster) created in the public schools. From a conservation standpoint, the painting's condition, having been concealed behind several layers of oil and calcimine paints since 1941, presented an arduous and experimental challenge for The Center. The controversy that met the painting upon its initial completion arose from the social imagery that depicts diverse and influential women leaders from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who worked to improve their communities and woman's place in American society. The social and confrontational content was central to its initial censure and is essential to the fresco's value to the Chicago community and American history. Coupled with the significance of the work as an exemplar of the American social realism style and for its celebration of great American women, the fresco is an important chronicle of the social, political, and aesthetic transformations that gained momentum at mid-century.

DG: *The murals by the great artists Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros had a big influence on the WPA-era murals in the Chicago Public Schools. In "Mural Art and the Midwestern Myth," Mitchell Siporin writes, "Contemporary artists everywhere have witnessed the amazing spectacle of the modern renaissance of mural painting in Mexico, and they have been deeply moved by its profound artistry and meaning. Though the lessons of our Mexican teachers, we have been made aware of the scope and fullness of the 'soul' of our environment." What are your thoughts regarding Siporin's statement, as it pertains to the WPA-Era murals in the Chicago Public Schools and Fieldhouses?*

HB: I think Siporin's statement encapsulates the importance of social relevance in art made for the public at that time. Depictions of the everyday lives of Americans bolstered the sense of community and collective voice of the people shaken by the Great Depression. Themes in the WPA murals of Chicago explore the social realities, dreams, and histories of the American people in a clear visual language that incorporated key approaches to content and style from the Mexican muralists.

DG: *In "Art for the People," you write that many of the artists "worked and installed their imagery in schools under the supervision of students and teachers; in this way the artists met their audiences. The same connection has taken place during the recent preservation process some seventy years later." can you mention one example of how CPS students and teachers were involved with the preservation of those murals, during that project?*

HB: Interactions between conservators, artists, teachers, and students have been a mainstay of the preservation process, occurring at mural unveilings, on public tours, through lectures, and in poetry, plays, and new classroom curricula inspired by the murals and their preservation.

DG: *Can you mention one highlight of CCC's project to preserve the murals in the Chicago Park District's Fieldhouses: How would you say those murals relate to the ones in Chicago Public Schools?*

HB: The mural legacy of Chicago is just as rich in our Fieldhouses. The greatest highlight of our involvement with preserving these murals was the honor of receiving an award from the City of Chicago presented by Mayor Daley for work on the Pulaski Park Fieldhouse, which brought important attention to the exceptional collection of historic murals in Chicago Park community spaces and the educational and aesthetic value of these works of art to the public.

DG: *Recently there has been a lot of public debate regarding how "big" government should be, and what really happens with tax money. In "Art for the People," Studs Terkel writes, "the Murals in Chicago Public Schools should remind students that the government can do things. We don't have to depend on private charities or private companies for the arts. It is something that enriched us all. It is just as important as a post office or matters of health because the arts enrich our lives if performed or created well. Young people must remember having artists at work is terribly important." Could you comment on Terkel's statement?*

HB: It is apparent that cultural development is enriched by the presence of artists as interpreters of society's past, present, and future. It is essential that we are always mindful of the indispensable contributions the arts make to individual and social well being. As our country recovers economically from the current recession, restoring public funding for the arts is as important as Terkel suggests.

DG: *What is one project that The Center is working on now?*

HB: Currently, The Center's continuing work on the fine museum collections which came to us from the Iowa floods of 2008 has been a most rewarding conservation process for our entire team. Throughout the restoration project, our team has drawn on The Center's extensive prior experience with the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina in our careful treatment and restoration of these collections.

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Dr. Margaret Nowosielska, Chief Mural Conservator, looking at a mural at a Chicago Public School.

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