



Forgotten Treasure

Once-hidden mural restored to 1941 beauty // By Tuan Vo

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The restored mural greets visitors to the Marshall Wing entrance to Main State.

Visitors entering the northeast corner of the Harry S Truman Building's Marshall Wing walk under a 12-by-50-foot mural, "Defense of Human Freedoms," that's almost 70 years old and is now being restored.

The mural was created in 1941 by Kindred McLeary shortly after the construction of the building, which was to house the War Department. The General Services Administration had budgeted \$11,000 for the mural, and McLeary was chosen in a competition. In 1947, the Department of State, under Secretary of State George C. Marshall, took over the building.

By 1954, the mural had a new name, "America the Mighty." Because of its powerful military images, however, the mural was no longer deemed appropriate and was covered by plywood for the next 23 years.

Four Freedoms

McLeary's design was selected in part because it represented the famous "four freedoms" that President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined as fundamental principles for a peaceful and democratic world in a 1941 address to Congress: freedom of speech, freedom from want, freedom of worship, freedom from fear. In 2007, Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom John V.

Hanford referred to the mural's importance, saying that in the face of great national challenges and threats, "the heart of our foreign policy encompasses the protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms."

The mural has many fascinating details. Its center, showing energetic rallies and vigorous speakers, reflects the openness of American society and its respect for individual freedoms and rights. The mural's far right, where a group of people gathers in front of a drug store, emphasizes free enterprise, the backbone of the American economy. In contrast, the open society is surrounded by the powerful armed forces defending the nation. Many of the soldiers wear gas masks, reflecting the fear of chemical warfare, which killed and injured many in the First World War.

The mural was painted with water-based paint on dry plaster in the crosshatching style, which originated in the Middle Ages and was popular for Italian church paintings during the Renaissance. More recently, the style can be found in cartoon drawings. Close up, the artist's original pencil outline of the mural is clearly visible after seven decades.

McLeary, born in Texas in 1901, also painted murals in Pittsburgh and New York City, and taught architecture at Carnegie Tech until his death in 1949, when he fell from the roof of his studio.



Maura Duffy, paintings conservator with Olin Conservation, touches up the mural.

Repairing Damage

Olin Conservation, Inc., which is undertaking the conservation of the mural with funding from the General Services Administration, said that building structure fatigue and fluctuations in humidity and temperature had caused cracks in several places, and the plywood covering placed over the mural in 1954 left holes in its surface. When the painting was uncovered and restored in 1977, further damage was caused by the restoration artists, who used oil paint over the original water-based paint. Over time, incorrect light fixtures may have faded the mural.

Restoration work is a delicate and detailed process. First, the conservator examines the mural with enhanced lighting, including ultraviolet lights, and magnification. Small and discrete solvent tests determine the solubility of the original paint and surface, which helps identify the cleaning methods to use.

Repairing and filling up cracks is a major undertaking. First, the crack is cleaned, and then an acrylic resin is carefully injected using syringes and pipettes. To repair the damage from the use of oil-based paint, Olin Conservation removed the old paint and then touched up the area with an “inpainting” technique. Synthetic resin paint made especially for art restoration was used since it doesn’t bond to or damage the original painting and can be removed later if needed.

Restoration requires concentration and skill. As one conservator said, “It’s so peaceful doing this work; you think of nothing else.”

Restoration of this mural, and of another on the HST Building’s fifth floor, is being facilitated by the Office of Real Property Management and conducted by GSA’s Art in Architecture Program. The program has for more than 30 years commissioned American artists to create art for federal buildings, including 350 works in GSA’s National Capital Region. ■

This close-up shows the crosshatching lines and the artist’s original pencil outline, invisible to viewers on the ground.



The author is an architect with the Office of Real Property Management.