



Conservation of Iowa Supreme Court Murals

Art Conservation by:

M. Randall Ash & Associates

Denver, Colorado

History of the Murals

- ☛ In 1880's, when the State of Iowa was building the new Capitol, August Knorr, a Des Moines decorator, was given charge of all the decorative paintings and sculptures for the new building.
- ☛ The paintings Knorr designed for the ceiling of the Supreme Court Room, consisted of four large panels and six small medallions.

History of the Murals

- ☛ The designs were sent to Berlin, Germany to be painted on canvas by artist Fritz Melzer, one of the most well-known decorative painters of the era. The cost of the paintings was \$949.76.
- ☛ The murals were installed in 1886 on the ceiling of the Supreme Court Chamber in the new Iowa State Capitol



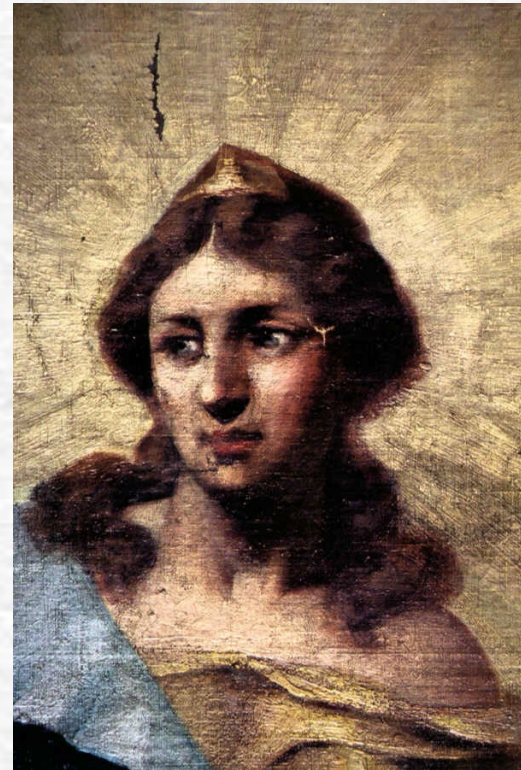
History of the Murals

- The paintings remained on the ceiling of the Supreme Court until 1904 when the building was partly burned.
- The paintings, damaged by smoke and water, were removed and preserved in the vaults of the Clerk of the Supreme Court.



History of the Murals

- ☛ The murals remained in storage until 1907 when they were installed in the State Historical Building Library.
- ☛ The paintings were on display in the old State Historical Building until they were removed in 2000 for conservation



History of the Murals

- In 2003, the murals were re-installation in the new Judicial Branch Building.



The Murals

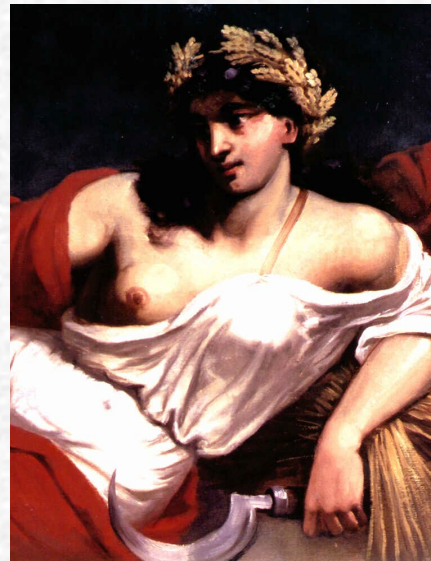
The Iowa Supreme Court murals consist of four large-sized canvases and six small oval canvases or medallions, all painted in the style of Greek mythology.

- Columbia
- Justice And Peace
- Justice
- Ceres
- Cherub With Wheat
- Cherub Shearing Sheep
- Cherub With Plow
- Cherub Making Beehive
- Cherub With Hammer and Scythe
- Cherub Harvesting Potatoes

The Large Murals

There are four large murals, with Columbia, the largest painting, measuring approximately 13 feet in length by 7 feet in height. All the murals are painted in a Greek allegorical style, using classically draped figures to represent abstract qualities such as Justice, Rebellion, and Peace, which was the fashion of the day in the late 1880's. The theme throughout the paintings is based on Agriculture, celebrating Iowa's greatness as a farming State.

Ceres,
Goddess of
Agriculture



Columbia

The largest mural shows Columbia sitting on her throne above a large globe. To Columbia's left is Justice, paying homage along with patrons of the States, bringing with them little children, which represent the territories. To her right is Iowa, holding a club and coat of arms, ready to defend Columbia (the Union). In front of the throne is chiseled in everlasting rock, the memorable date 1776, the foundation of the Republic. The American Eagle is proudly holding in his beak the historical emblem *E. Pluribus Unum*.



Justice And Peace

In the next mural, Justice and Peace are seated together in a throne on top of clouds. Justice holds a scale in one hand and a sword in her other hand, poised to strike. Peace looks on serenely, as a partially robed man, whose face is said to resemble President Ulysses S. Grant puts down a one-man Roman rebellion.



Justice

In the third large mural, Justice is seated on her throne, holding a scale in one hand and a sword in the other. To her left stands Columbia, who holds a shield decorated in stars and stripes, ready to defend Justice's decisions. To the right of Justice, stands a woman who is rejoicing because the decision was in her favor, while the seated figure to her left is grieving because the decision was against her. The other seated figure is a mother explaining the laws to her son.



Ceres

Ceres, the Goddess of Agriculture is the fourth mural, and the principal painting around which the six smaller medallions were grouped. Ceres is shown reclining with a sickle in her hand. Two cherubic- looking children, tutelary deities or guardian spirits, are at the left and behind Ceres; one is carrying a scythe and the other is binding grain.



The Small Murals

There are six small oval murals (medallions). Each contain a cherubic-looking child called a *genius* (a tutelary deity or guardian spirit). Each genius is engaged in an agricultural task. The six ovals were originally located around the Ceres mural.



**Cherub With
Wheat**



Cherub Shearing Sheep

Cherub With Plow





Cherub Making Beehive

**Cherub With Hammer &
Scythe**





Cherub Harvesting Potatoes

Conservation of the Murals

The History

- ☛ In 2000, the Supreme Court retained M. Randall (Randy) Ash, an art conservator from Denver, Colorado (and a former Iowan) to remove the murals, clean, stabilize, and prepare them for installation in the new State Judicial Building.



Removing murals from wall.

Conservation of the Murals

The History

- Ash and an assistant worked intensely for one week in mid-December of 2000 to carefully remove the murals from the walls. The murals were mounted directly on the wall with a simple adhesive, probably similar to wallpaper paste, according to Ash. Because the adhesive had deteriorated, Ash was able to pull the murals off the wall using a spatula and artist's knife.



Removing adhesive from
back of murals.

Conservation of the Murals

The History

- Ash attributed the dark appearance of the murals to smoke damage from the 1904 fire. Cuts and tears in the murals, which likely occurred when they were removed during that time, were temporarily secured by Ash. The paintings were then wrapped for shipment to her conservation lab in Denver.



Preparing murals to be shipped to Denver.

Conservation of the Murals

The Procedure

M. Randall Ash & Associates

Randy Ash provided the technical and management expertise for the conservation and restoration of the murals. This procedure included the following steps:

- Examination & Condition Reports
- Phase I - Removal of Murals
- Phase II - Treatment of Murals
- Phase III - Final Treatment & Reinstallation

Conservation Procedure

Examination & Condition Reports

This procedure determined the following original conditions prior to treatment:

- Paintings are oil on linen, basket weave canvas
- Murals were not cleaned after the 1904 fire
- Original grime and smoke layers compounded by years of exposure
- Paintings were mounted directly to wall with adhesive
- Backgrounds of small oval paintings expanded and overpainted
- Obvious water damage
- Scattered areas of abrasion
- Folds in canvas from 1904 removal, storage and 1907 re-installation

Conservation Procedure

Phase I - Removal of Murals

This procedure involved the following steps:

- Photography of murals prior and during removal
- Canvases removed from walls using spatula and artist's knives
- Cuts and tears in murals stabilized
- Murals rolled and wrapped for shipment to Denver laboratory

Conservation Procedure

Phase II - Treatment

This procedure involved the following steps:

- Murals photographed before, during, and after treatment
- Layers of accumulated dirt and grime removed
- Varnish and over paint removed or reduced from surfaces
- Reverse cleaned and infused with appropriate adhesive
- 8 of 10 paintings attached to specially designed panels
- Varnish applied to surface of paintings
- Areas of loss retouched to match original paint
- Final protective varnish applied
- All murals shipped to Des Moines

Conservation Procedures

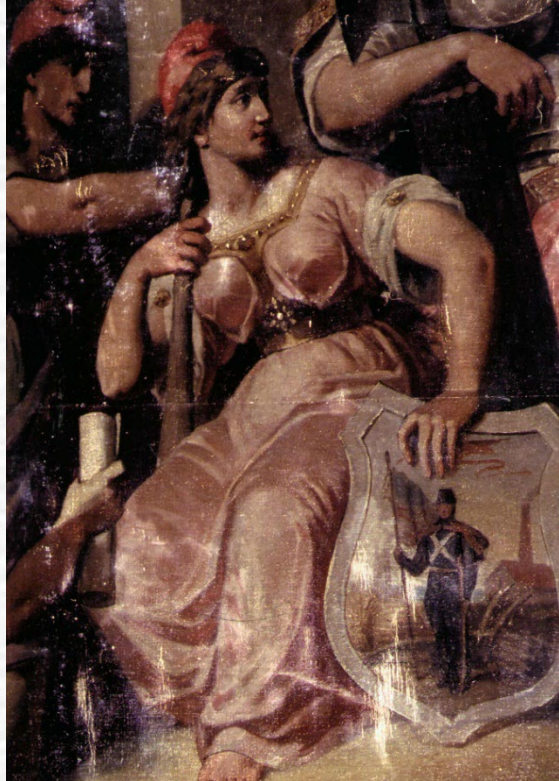
Cleaning



Justice mural during cleaning

Conservation Procedures

Inpainting



Detail of Iowa from Columbia
mural before inpainting



Detail of Iowa from Columbia
mural after inpainting

Conservation Procedure

Phase III - Final Treatment & Installation

This procedure, completed on-site in Des Moines, involved the following steps:

- Mounting of the two largest paintings on special panels
- Final inpainting and treatment of these paintings
- All paintings installed into new frames

Conservation Procedures

Mounting Murals



Mounting murals on special
panels

Conservation Procedures

Inpainting - Onsite



Final inpainting on-site

Conservation Procedures

Framing Murals



Readying murals for framing

Conservation Procedures

Framed Murals



Ceres, Goddess of Agriculture

Conservation Procedures

Framed Murals



Cherub Harvesting Potatoes

Mural Project Milestones

Conceptual design developed for murals by August Knorr	1880's
Designs painted by Fritz Melzer in Berlin, Germany	1885 - 1886
Murals installed in newly built Iowa State Capitol	1886
Capitol partly burned, paintings damaged and placed in storage	1904
Murals reinstalled in the State Historical Building Library	1907
Initial examination of murals by Randy Ash (November)	1999
Murals removed in preparation for conservation (December)	2000
Conservation work on murals	2001 - 2003
Reinstallation of murals in new Judicial Building	2003 (March)
Official opening of State Judicial Building	2003 (May)