



Polishing Gems

Playhouse Square Center and local conservators return James Daugherty's State Theatre murals to their original splendor.

BY MICHAEL VON GLAHN

As a new season opens at Playhouse Square Center, theatergoers passing through the State Theatre lobby are in for a dose of wonder as they see old friends as if for the first time.

The 1920 murals by modernist painter James Daugherty (1887-1974) have been restored to their original vibrant glamour through a Save America's Treasures public/private challenge grant, the generosity of a bevy of foundations and the painstaking work of the skilled experts of Cleveland's Intermuseum Conservation Association.

Daugherty's mural project, titled "Four Continents," was divided into "The Spirit of Fantasy — Asia," "The Spirit of Pageantry — Africa," "The Spirit of Drama — Europe" and "The Spirit of Cinema — America."

"These fabulous murals helped save the theaters of Playhouse Square," John Hemsath, PSC's director of theater operations, stated in a release marking completion of the restoration. The appearance of "The Spirit of Cinema — America" in a *Life* magazine article helped spur interest in preserving the theaters from demolition in the 1970s.

"The Daugherty murals are four of the most important American modernist murals done in the 1920s," says ICA executive director Albert Albano. "And, lo and behold, they're in Cleveland, which is really cool."

ICA is a not-for-profit, founded 51 years ago in Oberlin, that renders conservation and preservation services to more than 30 member institutions, as well as individual collectors. It is headquartered on Detroit Avenue at West 29th in Ohio City. Fittingly, the yellow-brick structure was once a showroom for Vitrolite, a colored structural glass popular during the art deco period. Its three stories and almost 18,000



A before (right) and after (left) look at a section of
"The Spirit of Pageantry — Africa"
"They almost jump at you," ICA conservator Per Knutås
says of artist James Daugherty's original colors,
now freed from layers of old, dulling varnish.



square feet now house a photography studio for documenting items brought in, a lead-lined room where artworks can be X-rayed, a 16-zone HVAC system and a climate-controlled secure storage area with metal mesh in the walls to prevent break-ins.

Albano refers to ICA's services as "virtually one-stop shopping" for those in need of conservation and preservation for artwork.

"We have arguably the largest and most versatile conservation facility in the whole region," he says. "I don't even know if I'd say arguably ... in terms of the range of our capability."

His staff of 19 — including interns who are part of undergraduate, graduate and postgrad programs — are all from museum backgrounds, not commercial, and all hold graduate degrees in conservation specialties.

On one work space in the clinically white main conservation studio rests "The Flight to Industry," a 1937 mural that once framed a doorway in the lobby of the old Bedford post office. The oil-on-canvas painting was rolled up and put in storage when the building closed in 1996, until a member of Doty & Miller Architects, whose offices now occupy the space, learned of its existence. The firm negotiated with the federal government — the mural's owner — and the painting was given to ICA earlier this year for restoration (it was reinstalled in Doty & Miller's offices in August).

Across the room, a Civil War standard

once carried by the 36th Regiment of Ohio Volunteers is covered with tissue to protect the battle honors painted onto the much-deteriorated silk. The regiment's two shredded flags belong to a collector, who has turned them over to ICA, where conservators are working a miracle on the relics that arrived "in a million pieces," according to one staffer.

Other tables hold Japanese painted screens and broken Inuit carvings. A 6-foot-tall paper Statue of Liberty stands alongside a doorway.

"We get everything from medieval to done yesterday," says Swedish-born Per Knutås, examining a painting test on the earlobe of an early 19th-century portrait of a Kentucky Whig politician.

Knutås was a principal conservator on the Daugherty murals. Employing solvents and gels, dabbing carefully with cotton swabs and soft brushes, ICA staffers labored for almost a year in the theater's lobby.

"We found three layers of coatings," Knutås reports. "One was an aldehyde; that was the toughest one. That was the worst discolored. After removing that was a slightly gray layer that came off with the same solvents. And then you were down to the paint layer."

Gradually, Daugherty's original colors emerged from under the dulling layers of old varnish. They seemed to jump from the walls when Knutås came down off the scaffolding to look at more than just the tiny section he was working on. Cleaning tests had indicated the colors would be



"It was a very slow procedure," ICA conservator Per Knutås says of the State Theatre mural project. He estimates that he was able to work on no more than a 3 foot-by-3 foot area of a given painting each day. Here, ICA staffers labor to restore "The Spirit of Fantasy — Asia."



"The Spirit of Fantasy — Asia"



"The Spirit of Cinema — America"

vibrant, but the conservators were still dazzled by their brilliance.

The fresh protective coating they applied won't discolor, will be easily removable if the need arises, and should last 100 years, according to Knutås.

"The [restoration] field has gotten very sophisticated," Albano notes. "We're not Mr. and Mrs. Fixit." He adds, "Some of the most challenging conservation campaigns are often ... undoing some very misguided, perhaps in some cases well-intentioned ... restoration efforts on behalf of some frame-shop restorer types."

He likens making preservation and restoration assessments to performing triage in a M*A*S*H unit: "You can't save 'em all," he says.

The topic is a hot button for Albano, who observes that a fair number of the works to come through ICA's studios may possess more cultural or social significance than aesthetic value.

He says, "The more people begin to appreciate ... the value of cultural material on all levels, and the depth and richness it gives to their lives on all levels — not just the temples of art, as it were — the more they begin to understand why it's important not only to preserve these things, but to preserve them correctly."

Albano cites ICA's work in the State Theatre lobby as a perfect example of that.

"Daugherty was a significant early American modernist," he says. "Probably most important was that he was key in translating early modernist color theory into a representational style, which as he perceived — and rightly so — would be far more accessible to a much broader audience than pure abstraction, which is what he was doing early on."

Daugherty was always about color as an artist. Interviewed at the February 1921 opening of Loew's State Theatre, he noted the influence of his work painting camouflage on ships during World War I. (Unlike the blotchy natural tones we associate with camouflage today, warships of the time were painted in "dazzle" schemes of sharply contrasting colors in zigzagging geometric shapes to break up their silhouette, making it difficult for an enemy to identify the ship type or even what direction it was sailing.)

"All he did then was take the sort of compositional aspect of that [camouflage], but now translated to color," explains Albano.

"You've gotta look at the snake!" he declares. Winding down a tree trunk on the far left of the "Africa" mural, the python is decked in blocks of colors: brown, tan, blue, black, white, peach. "If you were to put on the grays and the kind of drab greens, it could be a little torpedo boat or something," Albano enthuses. "It's really cool."

Daugherty completed his first major mural commission in a frenzy of activity.

"He finished the four murals in like [two] weeks on each mural," observes Knutås, "which was amazingly fast."

A Daugherty family friend once watched the artist making sketches for the murals — drawing with one hand at the same time he painted already sketched figures with the other. At the reception celebrating completion of the restoration in late April, Daugherty's son, Charles, described his father as a workaholic.

"Astounding," Albano says of Daugherty's speed. "But they're incredibly confident. Not only do the murals represent a tremendous confidence in terms of Daugherty's sense of boldness in using his [camouflage] background in a way that was rather risky, ... but it was almost equally brave and showed the confidence of the whole State Theatre to actually commit to doing that [restoration] project, which was a major undertaking both for us and, of course, for the State Theatre itself and for Playhouse Square at large."

Now, all of Northeast Ohio can gaze on the result of that bold willingness to take a chance. ■



As shown in the color patterns on the snake in James Daugherty's "Africa" mural, the artist was influenced by his work painting camouflage on World War I warships.



"The Spirit of Drama — Europe"