

Distant memory leads to old mural

By Gerry Smith
Tribune staff reporter

July 6, 2007

As a child in the 1950s, Richard Grunt would accompany his mother to the Melrose Park post office, where she bought stamps and he fixed his gaze on a 4-by-8-foot mural adorning the wall.

He didn't know it at the time, but the fresco was the result of a national effort to promote art during a desperate era in American history.

In the 1970s, when the post office underwent extensive remodeling and reopened as the Melrose Park Library, the painting was believed to have been destroyed.

But Grunt's memory of the mural survived.

And his curiosity drove him to investigate the name of the artist, Edwin Boyd Johnson, and to contact the library, which acquired photos of the fresco from the National Archives in Washington.

Fidencio Marbella, a library researcher, started poking around with a flashlight above what is now the library circulation desk.

What he discovered in the ceiling tiles a month ago was more than just a snapshot from another man's childhood memory. He found two pieces of plaster left over from a fresco that was created 70 years ago. It was one of about 100 works in various mediums commissioned in Illinois post offices from 1936 to 1947 under a New Deal program instituted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to help unemployed artists.

The Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration created more than 5,000 jobs for artists who produced more than 225,000 artworks in public buildings across the country, according to a Web site maintained by Nancy Lorange, treasurer of the Midwest chapter of the National New Deal Preservation Association.

Lorange's site lists the varying mediums used in the artwork, including an aluminum relief sculpture, "Mercury," in the then-Kedzie-Grace Branch of the post office; a carved limestone relief, "The Message," in Evanston; and a wood relief, "The Letter," in Homewood.

But the significance of some frescoes has been lost on developers who have knocked them down or painted them over, said Margaret Nowosielska, who restores murals for the Chicago Conservation Center.

The Melrose Park mural, like many Americans who struggled through the Great Depression, is in dire condition. Only two pieces of plaster, about 3 feet in diameter, remain from the 1937 work, titled "Air Mail," depicting a shirtless man floating above rooftops, passing a letter to a bird with an airplane in the background.

"Two or three feet of the bottom has been chopped off," perhaps to make room for the library's low ceiling, Marbella said. The center of the painting, comprising much of the original work, had also been destroyed.

"I just don't understand it," Marbella said. "They see this fresco hanging up there. And it looks pretty important. So they go and punch holes through it to run some ductwork? It made me want to cry when I saw it."

Melrose Park library employees said they are determined to preserve what's left of their recent discovery and are exploring ways to fund its restoration, such as applying for grants or soliciting donations.

Nowosielska said the library has two options: It can display the pieces separately or hire her to reconstruct the original mural by carefully peeling away the crumbling plaster, reapplying it on another wall and painting in the missing pieces, which can take about six weeks and cost as much as \$50,000.

"Obviously, being a library and being publicly funded, we don't have the money to do this on our own," said Margaret Flanagan, a reference librarian.

Meanwhile, the search has begun for another mural from the old post office thought to have been ruined. Grunt said he remembers another fresco of an occupational scene depicting a farmer, a businessman, a doctor, a nurse and a construction worker. One library employee who had done electrical work in the ceiling many years ago remembers seeing a mural with a turkey, Flanagan said.

As they probe behind walls and ceilings, library employees are asking anyone with information on the mural's description or location in the old post office to contact the reference desk at 708-343-3391, ext. 225.

Grunt, who now lives in Wood Dale, said the undiscovered mural may have been on a wall at the north end of the building, but after 50 years, his recollection "is a little fuzzy." Still, he said, turning up another historic artwork that once survived only in his mind would be like unearthing a buried treasure.

"It's like digging in your yard and finding a gold coin," Grunt said. "Maybe you should keep digging."

gfsmith@tribune.com

Copyright © 2007, [Chicago Tribune](#)