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Allegory restored

Pulaski Park's mysterious Progressive-Era mural gets a new life

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WEST TOWN

Just what allegorical tale the mural that arches gently above the small stage in the Pulaski Park field house auditorium is trying to tell is nearly as hard to discern as the figures crowning its now-dingy peak. Some of its half-naked subjects seem to be



Margaret Nowosielska spends mornings restoring Pulaski Park's allegorical mural, painted by students of the Art Institute in 1920.

Photo by Josh Hawkins



Art conservationist Margaret Nowosielska uses a scalpel to remove layers of varnish from Pulaski Park's mural.

straining to reach some higher destination, while others hold objects that must bear a yet-unclear symbolic significance: a handful of paintbrushes, a sphere, simple wooden poles.

But while the allegory remains a mystery, the work of art blanketing the stage's proscenium has been slowly coming into clearer focus over the last two months.

As part of an initiative started by the Chicago Conservation Center, Pulaski Park's Progressive-Era mural is currently undergoing a \$50,000 restoration. Begun nearly two months ago, the process has already revived one swath of the mural, which stands bright and crisp in contrast to its neighboring canvas, which is cast in shadow created by at least three layers of varnish.

The work of art itself bears no official title, and is now known as "allegorical mural," a reference to the style in which it was painted. What is known for certain about the work, says Park District Historian Julia Bachrach, is that it was painted in 1920 by students of the Art Institute, working under the tutelage of James J. Gilbert. It's possible, she says, that Gilbert designed the mural and had his students do the painting as part of an exercise.

Records that could decipher the mural's meaning aren't available, Bachrach says. One theory postulated by Mary Lackritz Gray, author of *A Guide to Chicago Murals*, suggests that it may be a tale of immigrants who find success through assimilation. Though that would be somewhat in keeping with the history of the Prairie-style field house—built at 1419 W. Blackhawk in 1914 to provide recreation and social services to nearby, mostly Polish, immigrants—Bachrach says that's just a guess.

"That might be an appropriate interpretation," she says. "People are clearly striving. But it could just be on the beauty of youth."

Although the mural's message is ambiguous, the process of restoring the work is already proceeding with methodical precision.

The work started off in better condition than some others the Conservation Center has handled, says the organization's vice president of client services, Megan Jones. After uncovering some worthy subjects at Lane Tech High School, the Conservation Center restored hundreds of murals at schools across the city, before turning its attention toward Park District field houses.

The Pulaski Park project is part of a larger initiative to restore 58 murals in 11 field houses across the city, says Jones. All told, the restoration will cost \$376,000—with \$188,000 raised by supporters, and the remainder coming from the Park District.

The structure of Pulaski's mural, which is painted on connected blocks of canvas, hasn't suffered much, having benefited from never facing outside elements, says Jones.

Margaret Nowosielska, a Conservation Center restorationist who spends mornings working on the mural, says the work has also avoided complications due to its location; at just more than 35 feet above ground level, it's well out of the reach of children and would-be graffiti artists.

"Each piece has its own experiences," Jones says. "The biggest issue here is varnish—and years and years of dirt and dust."

Nowosielska says a layer of varnish appears to have been applied to the mural near every time the walls of the auditorium were repainted. The last layer seems to match a polyurethane coating applied to the wood floor, she notes.

For the last two months, Nowosielska has been slowly removing the varnish, first by using a scalpel, and later with a chemical solvent. Each portion being restored calls for at least two passes.

Nowosielska says the process hasn't been a departure from techniques she's used on the many Work Projects Administration murals she's worked on across the city. Many of the Park District's murals were done during the 1930s, after several separate district branches consolidated. During that time, artist James McBurney led mural painting classes.

Nowosielska has been restoring murals for more than 30 years, and began learning the craft as a student in Poland. Work on the mural is expected to wrap up midsummer, says Jones, with an unveiling currently scheduled for 6 p.m. June 29.

Although she sees the mural nearly every day, Nowosielska also notes that she's unsure of its meaning. But, she adds that she's sure of how to bring it back to life.

"It's like a patient," she says of the mural. "Each object needs a different medicine."

From books to shots

These days Pulaski Park is host to nearly every recreational activity there is, from swimming to archery to sword fighting. But when it was built back in 1914, the field house had a mission beyond play, says Park District historian Julia Bachrach.

The field house, named for Polish revolutionary war hero Casimir Pulaski, was part of the settlement house movement made famous by Jane Addams. At one time, Pulaski Park, which was built in a neighborhood crowded with Polish immigrants, offered everything from a library to immunizations.

The park was designed by William Zimmerman, at the time the official architect for the state of Illinois. It was constructed during renowned landscape architect Jens Jensen's tenure as Park District superintendent, Bachrach adds.

"The Pulaski Park field house is a unique design," she says. "I've never seen anything quite like what he did here."

Bachrach also suggests that Zimmerman hadn't made a foray into Prairie-style architecture until he began working with Jensen. Though Zimmerman was the official state architect (a position no longer in existence), Bachrach says it wasn't likely required that Jensen hire Zimmerman.

"He may have been very open minded," says Bachrach of Zimmerman. "It would be nice to know about their relationship."

Zimmerman also designed Holstein Park and the Humboldt Park natatorium.