

Restoring a Restoration

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Did you know that the David Hicks Overmyer murals that grace the walls of the Historic Farrell Library at Kansas State University have been restored twice in just the past ten years? That may seem like a lot, but sometimes, necessity requires another paint job! Let me tell you the story. It starts with David Hicks Overmyer.

Overmyer was born in Topeka. An illustrator, artist and muralist, he created murals all over the state, including courthouses in Fort Scott and Norton, at Topeka High School, and in the State Capitol Building. He was trained in Chicago and New York. During his career he worked as an illustrator for both Boeing and McDonnell Douglas. He died in Topeka in 1973.

Among his mural paintings are four at K-State painted in 1934 as part of the federal government Public Works of Art Project. Each is 11 by 14 feet, painted directly on to plaster walls. Subjects represent the four major academic pursuits of the modern university. The Science and Industry mural shows a scientist (not mad!) with a test tube and two massive shirtless men—think Arnold Schwarzenegger—working gears and an anvil with steam rising around them. The Agriculture mural pictures two women and a man basking in the fruits of their labors around a cornucopia and livestock. There has been debate over the years about the number of toes on the man's foot (it is five, not six). The Arts mural, my favorite, represents a landscape personifying art, music, literature, drama, painting and architecture in classical fashion. Finally, the Home mural presents a family with a mother that looks like Snow White, seated near a spinning wheel. I'm always afraid she'll prick her finger! When first completed, they were the largest group of murals in Kansas.

Water and other issues had left the murals in need of special care several times in their history. The first 21st century renovation was launched in 2007 with the financial support from the Friends of the K-State Libraries and the services of Mary Schaefer, assistant painting conservator at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City.

Schaefer and her crew worked on the murals two weeks at a time for four years to complete the painstaking work by 2011. One of Schaefer's challenges was the previous restoration effort in 1996 that had used paint and techniques not quite right for the job. For example, the pumpkin in the agriculture mural was painted over to be a flat bright orange, not what Mary determined Overmyer had intended. Ironically, after the restoration was completed, Mary was quoted, "I hope that these murals won't have to be touched for another 30 or more years."

Alas, along came the Hale fire in 2018 which redamaged the murals and required, we hope, long-lasting restoration. This restoration, by Canning and Co., an architectural restoration business from Connecticut, brought in expertise in dealing with plaster. The plaster on which the murals were painted had absorbed a significant amount of water that took about 2 years to dry out. Over several weeks, led by conservator Rachel Gilberto, the beauty of the murals was restored. Along with a fresh coat of paint, new carpeting, and furniture, the Great Room that showcases the murals and the murals themselves are alive and well once again. Sometimes you just got to restore a restoration!

K-State's Hale Library will reopen in its entirety on January 25, 2021, so you are invited to visit the murals in person. You can also view them online at <https://www.lib.k-state.edu/great-room>.

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