

Conservation of a Series of Mural Cartoons: High Hopes on a Low Budget

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the challenges faced by a regional Canadian museum to undertake the conservation of a significant set of works in its collection. Resources for museum projects that exceed the limits of the budget and exhibition schedule are never easy to find. Such is the case for the conservation treatment of the New Brunswick Museum (NBM) Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital mural cartoons (1941–42) by Saint John New Brunswick *Book and Paper 20* artist Miller Gore Brittain (1912–1968). Miller Brittain is amongst Canada's most important twentieth century artists; the cartoons are the crowning achievement of his pre-war career.

Depicting the causes, effects, treatment, and cure of tuberculosis, Brittain's compositions are developed to varying degrees using layers of fabricated chalk and fixative. Each of the eleven cartoons measures approximately nine feet square and is made up of three nine-foot lengths of Kraft paper, joined with gummed brown-paper tape. Where the tape has failed or the paper is torn, the drawings have been previously and extensively "repaired" with masking tape. These are not uncommon condition problems in the field of paper conservation. However, the scale of a conservation project to address this damage is daunting. Not until 2006, when the cartoons were examined and their condition was assessed for the first time in over twenty years, was a treatment plan possible.

After a brief introduction to the NBM and to Miller Brittain and his work, this paper will describe the multi-phase conservation treatment plan for the cartoons. The first phase, the development of a treatment protocol, was completed in 2009 in the context of the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) Visiting Professionals program. The author will describe the research and development of the treatment protocol as well as plans for future phases of the project.

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