

Conservation in Action: Conservation of Mural Cartoons in the Public Eye

‘The high light (sic) of the Maritime Art Association convention in Fredericton was undoubtedly the session entitled “Art in Action”, at which an excited public comprising children and grown-ups of all ages had the opportunity of seeing brilliant craftsmen actually at work on their creations.

Miller Brittain was one of the New Brunswick artists featured in “Art in Action”; he worked on his cartoons for the Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital mural in a school gymnasium:

These panels [drawings] practically covered the wall, and—perched on a platform of boards supported by ladders—the figure of the artist could be seen above the heads of the crowd, at work on figures almost twice his own size! From time to time Brittain would stop and smilingly explain to the people below what he was doing, and then he would go back to work just as if he were alone in his own studio. —*Kathleen Shackleton, Maritime Art, Volume 2, No. 5. June-July 1942. p 153.*

Can conservators, performing conservation treatment in front of the public, recreate the popular enthusiasm and professional openness reflected in this quotation? Can we earn public and institutional support and funds by doing so? Can we achieve our treatment goals? The author hopes to contribute to the discussion of these questions.

The New Brunswick Museum (NBM) Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital mural cartoons (1941–42), by Saint John New Brunswick artist Miller Gore Brittain (1912–1968), comprise a series of eleven, 9' by 9' drawings. The cartoons are both the crowning achievement of Miller Brittain’s pre-war career and are among Canada’s most important twentieth century art works. The size and fragility of the cartoons have inhibited public and scholarly access.

As a follow-up to Conservation of a series of mural cartoons: high hopes on a low budget, presented to the AIC in Milwaukee in May 2010, this paper continues the story of how a regional Canadian museum has struggled, found

momentum and the means to complete an ambitious conservation treatment during a time of fiscal constraint:

- Funding for post-graduate internships provided enthusiastic and skilled conservators to assist treatment development and to complete the conservation treatment.
- The installation of the conservation treatment in an exhibition space helped to raise public awareness and maintain institutional commitment.
- Using a conservation treatment as an exhibition served to bring the discipline of conservation, and the cartoons themselves, to the attention of museum visitors and the media.
- The use of social media, and, scholarly and community partnerships, raised awareness of the conservation treatment and maximized the secondary benefits of the work being done.

This paper will briefly outline and contextualize the mural cartoon conservation project, and describe the methods and results of the NBM’s efforts to achieve public education, mentorship and fundraising goals. Final conclusions will explore the successes and shortcomings of the project.

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