

Worcester's splendid library blends the past and present

One of the remarkable things about Worcester's splendid new public library is that, in addition to featuring up-to-date technology, it has managed to preserve its links to the past.

The historic Nickelsen murals, the Al Banx Room, a set of door panels from 1964 and two weather-beaten stone owls that once adorned the entrance of the old Elm Street library are all part of history. This seamless mixture of the old and the new adds to the ambiance of the place.



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The large, three-piece mural on the wall is the work of Ralf E. Nickelsen, a German-born painter. He won his commission in 1938 through a competition of 47 New England artists as part of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Arts Project. Paul Morgan Jr. of Worcester was chairman of the committee in charge of the competition. The murals were

installed on Nov. 10, 1940, in the parcel post building at Franklin and Harding streets, where they remained for three decades. Mr. Nickelsen was paid \$2,400.

The murals would not be in the library today had it not been for the tireless efforts of Dr. Samuel Bachrach, a local physician, civic leader and former president of the library's board of directors. When he learned that the old post office building would be phased out by 1970, he decided to rescue the murals. As a friend, he enlisted my help as a gofer, and the two of us spent countless hours trying to thread our way through the bureaucracy. (I described the effort in detail in a *Telegram & Gazette* article on March 20, 1972.)

Dr. Bachrach was relentless. After securing the local postmaster's promise that the murals would be kept in Worcester once the parcel post building became obsolete, he went to the Worcester Art Museum for guidance and a cost estimate. Conservator Edmond de Beaumont specified the detailed method to remove the "medium rough canvas," and Leon Hovsepian, an instructor at the museum's art school, estimated the cost at \$2,500. Curator Louisa Dresser reported to Anthony J. Polito of the library board: "I was impressed with the monumental character of these murals, their merit as a work of art, and the desirability of their preservation. I strongly feel they represent a phase in the history of Worcester that should not be allowed to disappear completely from the scene."

Next, Dr. Bachrach turned to the Worcester Heritage Society and Worcester Historical Society. The replies were polite but noncommittal. When he learned in November 1970 that the University of Massachusetts Medical School would be given the parcel post building as a storage facility, Dr. Bachrach visited Dr. Lamar Soutter, the school's first dean, to plead his case. But, to his horror, the murals disappeared, and no one at the post office knew where they went. Someone suggested we contact Albert A. Gammal, New England director of the General Services Administration. It took Mr. Gammal only a few days to learn that the murals were in the New York workshop of restorer Hiram Hoelzer.

But could Worcester get them back? More investigation ensued, until Karel Yasko, special assistant to the GSA commissioner, notified Dr. Bachrach that Worcester indeed could have the murals — under certain conditions. Federal policy would allow the artwork, by then the property of the Smithsonian Institute, to be relocated in a public building under safe and proper conditions. The library would qualify as

a logical site.

The Friends of the Worcester Public Library paid \$1,200 for transportation and rehangings of the murals, now on permanent loan from the Smithsonian. Dr. Bachrach's next mission — the long-forgotten Mr. Nickelsen, who was alive and well in Massachusetts. A rededication ceremony, attended by the artist, was held on March 20, 1972, the same year Worcester celebrated its 250th anniversary.

The central panel with an agricultural theme measures 33 feet long and 8 feet high. The two side panels are 18 feet long. One is 8 feet high and the other 8 feet 4 inches. This is how the artist described his theme: "For the center panel I chose a scene showing the rolling country around Worcester. The season is autumn, and the place a small farm in the area. The two end panels picture men and women of present-day Worcester. The men are building a road, and the women read the mail and converse. The important part played by communication in our daily lives is the theme stressed in these panels."

The display suffered slight water damage during the library's recent expansion. "You wouldn't even notice unless you knew where it is," Penelope Johnson, head librarian, said. "The paintings are insured, and we'll have a local restorer repair the damage."

The beautiful, copper-plated front doors were designed to be the principal feature of the Salem Street library building completed in 1964. Created by graphic designer Leslie Segal of New York, the weight of the heavy copper panels could not be supported to allow the endless automatic door opening and closing. They were removed and kept in storage until transformed into displayable art in 1990. Today the eight large panels serve as stunning wall decoration inside the main hall.

The two 36-inch charcoal-colored owls once adorned the doorway of the old library at 12 Elm St. They were sitting there for 73 years, braving the elements, until they were moved to the Salem Street location in 1964, where they were perched high on an inside wall. Their occupancy was renewed when the restructured and enlarged library reopened last fall. The library held a "Name an Owl" contest in 1980. As the result, the owls are called "Who" and "Whom."

I was president of the Friends of the Worcester Public Library in the early 1970s when it occurred to us to create a lasting and practical memorial to Al Banx, the legendary cartoonist of the Telegram & Gazette, who died in 1967. The one-time Marine, who worked for the newspaper for 40 years, was a beloved Worcester institution. His many cartoon characters and lively anecdotes are parts of the city's history. With support from the newspaper, the library converted a small meeting room on the second floor, decorated with Al's portrait and many of his cartoons. It was dedicated on April 28, 1974, with former City Manager Francis J. McGrath cutting the ribbon.

To my delight, Ms. Johnson preserved the Al Banx Room in the new library. It was relocated to the first-floor entrance hall. Larger than the previous room, it prominently displays Al's portrait. "It has been a popular conference room for smaller gatherings," Ms. Johnson said. "Once we have sorted out the large volume of his drawings, donated by the newspaper, we'll have a rotating collection of his work." As one of the dwindling few who still remember Al Banx, I can hardly wait.

Robert Z. Nemeth's column appears regularly in the Sunday Telegram.