

Bloom Township High School Frescoes Restored



This restored fresco, one of those that had been damaged by graffiti, depicts job possibilities in agriculture.

Restoration of six brightly painted murals that flank the entrance of Bloom Township High School in Chicago Heights was completed last year, and the results are splendid. In 1987, evidence of fifty years of dust, pollution, and vandalism was erased from the Depression-era murals, which were the work of fresco painter Edgar Britton. Bloom Township alumni, faculty members, and students generously contributed to the restoration, which was undertaken with the assistance of a \$4,400 Illinois Heritage Grant from the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

Shortly after Bloom Township High School opened its doors in 1934, the Works Progress Administration commissioned Edgar Britton to paint the Bloom frescoes. Britton took just two years to complete the frescoes. The Works Progress Administration, a federal work-relief program instituted by the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression, used the skills of artists and artisans, as well as manual laborers, for public projects. The Illinois branch of the Federal Art Project—the arts division of the WPA—was one of the country's most successful and prolific.

One of the Illinois project's more notable artists was Edgar Britton. A Nebraska native, Britton studied in Iowa with Grant Wood, painter of the classic *American Gothic*. Britton also completed murals at post offices in Decatur, Moline, and Waterloo, a seven-panel work entitled *Epochs in the History of Mankind* at Lane Technical High School in Chicago, and a mural at the Department of Interior Building at Washington, D.C.

Britton was influenced by Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco. Rivera revived the use of fresco—a technique of painting in wet plaster that was popular in Renaissance Europe—to create heroic public murals for the Mexican government.

The theme depicted in the Bloom murals was *work*, a topic of great interest during the Depression when unchecked unemployment threatened the future of the nation. Each mural depicts a different occupation students might hope to practice—farming, medicine, industry, construction, art, and aviation. Students attending Bloom in 1934 served as Britton's models.

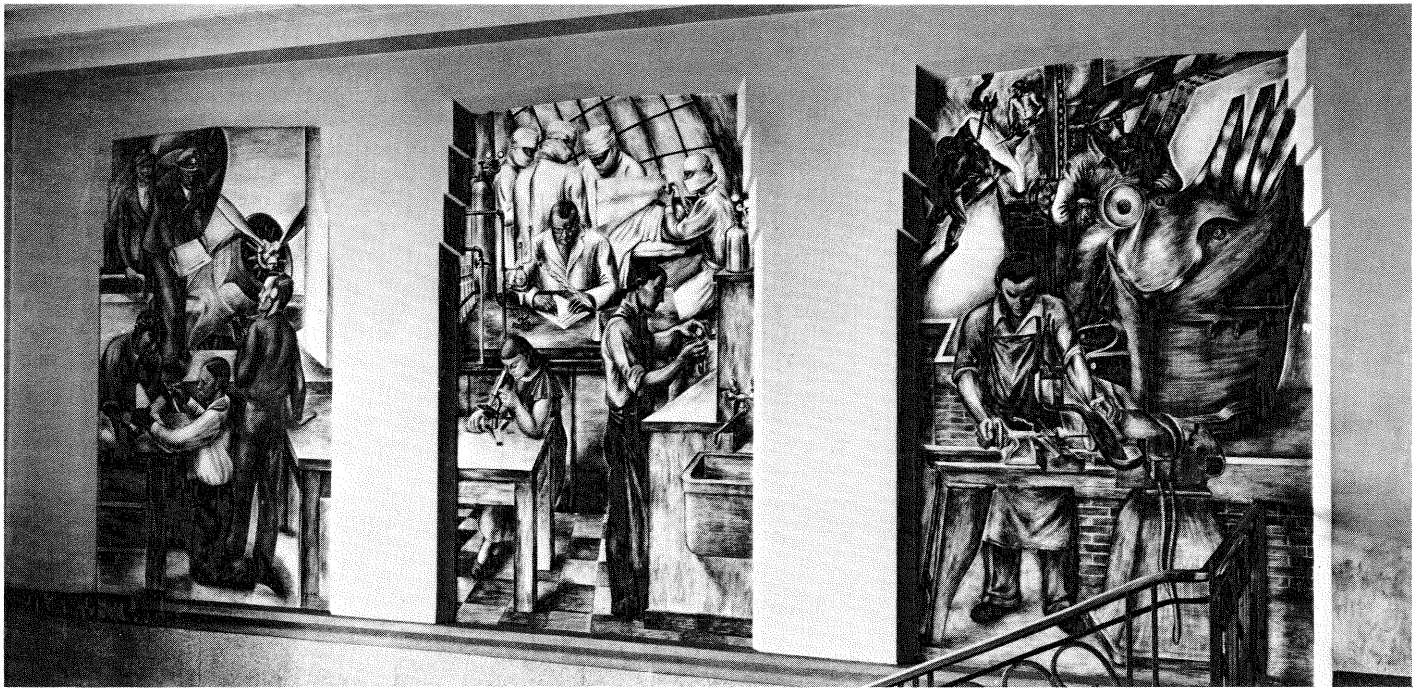
Britton planned his work carefully because five layers of color had to be applied within a six- to eight-hour period. The artist elected to sleep at the high school and eat in the cafeteria while work progressed on the six- by ten-foot murals. The painstaking technique of fresco painting required Britton first to prepare the walls with five separate coats of lime plaster of varying mixtures. For the final layer, color was thinned with water and applied to the wet plaster to bind it permanently to the surface. As it hardened, the lime in the fifth layer formed a thin, glass-like substance over the colors, a process that fixed them permanently.

After the art deco Bloom Township High School was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in June 1982, Principal James Steckel organized a committee to oversee the restoration of the six Edgar Britton Frescoes. Former Bloom teachers John Foster and Barton Herr formed the Historic Place Committee to manage the fundraising campaign for the preservation of the murals. Two outstanding artist-conservators, Mrs. Portia Paradise of Madison, Wisconsin, and Mme. Franciszka Hourriere of Paris, France, were hired to repair and clean the frescoes. Paradise has helped the Art Institute of Chicago prepare the Alexander the Great exhibit, a display of relics from Pompeii, the Vatican art collection exhibit, and a show of Greek pottery art. She has also worked on the restoration of frescoes in the Basilica in Assisi, Italy.

Hourriere, a restoration expert at the Louvre in Paris, was recommended for the Bloom job by her friend, Paradise. The colleagues met more than a decade ago in Italy, where they worked

Two artist conservators worked carefully to fill in defaced and damaged areas of the frescoes.





On one side of the main entrance to the high school three frescos depict careers in aviation, medicine, and industry.

together on the restoration of a Roman fresco at an archaeological site. Hourriere is currently restoring the ceiling in a seventeenth-century building that now serves as a high school. During the 1600s it was a Benedictine monastery.

Paradise and Hourriere repaired the frescoes in June 1987. They worked together to remove an accumulated layer of dirt from the surface. Next, they filled in the scratches with plaster. Finally, they retouched the surface using a special technique to apply water color with small brushes. The expert team carefully left the protective patina layer that formed over the past 50 years while they restored the original brilliance and quality of Edgar Britton's work.

Response to the fundraising campaign for the restoration was overwhelming. Contributions from former and present teachers, board members, administrators, and students raised enough to pay for the restoration. Additional funds were used to install a decorative railing to protect the murals. Restoration of Bloom Township High School's murals symbolically binds the past to the present, the old to the new. The future of the school's frescoes is—quite literally—"brighter" following their recent refurbishing.

David Newton
Staff Writer

To the opposite side of the main entrance, the murals portray futures in agriculture, art, and construction.

