

Mural is revealed: one cotton swab at a time

CLEVELAND (AP) — Inch by inch, using paint brushes and cotton swabs, workers are removing decades-old dingy lacquer to reveal the miraculous color of historical murals covering the walls of the State Theatre's grand lobby.

The four murals, painted in the 1920s, are believed to be the only remaining in-place originals by American painter James Daugherty, considered an important 20th century modernist.

The restoration work is slow-going — the room is the size of a football field — but the payoff is a riot of color that has been lurking for years under a coffee-colored coating that makes the paintings beneath look fossilized.

Collectively called *The Four Continents*, the murals depict drama and pageantry in Europe, Asia, Africa and America. America is a montage of Hollywood images of the early 20th century, including a race car and starlet, while Asia's wall is dominated by a samurai warrior slaying a dragon.

Andrea Chevalier and three colleagues with the Intermuseum Conservation Association began by daubing away the brownish goop from the top corner of *The Spirit of Drama — Europe*. Chevalier said it appears the paintings were coated twice with lacquer that was intended to preserve them, once in the 1980s and once

decades earlier. But the lacquer has aged and turned brown, dimming the paintings dramatically.

Wendy Partridge, another conservator on the project, said she is undaunted by the prospect of daubing solvents with hand-held cotton swabs over the four murals, each 10ft high and 50ft long.

"Once we see even a strip of this cleaned, the before and after will be so dramatic, it will keep us going," she said.

As Partridge and Chevalier began their work, it seemed they were peeling back a rusted screen, allowing a clear view of the bright landscape beyond.

William Agee, professor of Art History at Hunter College in New York City, calls the State Theatre murals "absolutely unique."

"They're really among the most important murals done in America in the 1920s," he said. Daugherty's use of bright color was extraordinary for the time, and he later became an important figure in American modernist painting.

Daugherty painted in a richly layered, almost three-dimensional style, which grew out of his work for the military painting camouflage on war ships.

Born in Asheville, N.C., in 1889,

Daugherty grew up in rural Ohio and Indiana before his family permanently relocated to Washington, D.C. He died in 1974.

The Playhouse Square Center, which runs the State and four other historic theaters on the same block, has received a \$100,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Park Service to restore the murals.

The project will cost more than \$200,000 and take six months or more to complete, said Playhouse Square spokeswoman Christine Panozzo. The restoration also is being funded through other grants and private donations.

Albert Albano, executive director of the Intermuseum Conservation Association, says his team is developing a special solvent gel that will loosen the lacquer for easy removal without damaging the paint underneath. They will then apply a new protective coating that is known to be chemically stable but is easily removable if a next generation of conservators decides it has to come off.

Daugherty's murals "were a precursor to the WPA murals of the 1930s," said Agee, referring to murals in post offices and other public places commissioned by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration.

But most of the pre-WPA murals have been destroyed or simply lost, Agee said.

A few of Daugherty's have been saved and moved to private collections.

"Daugherty in the 1930s had turned to illustrating children's books, so his art was kind of forgotten," Agee said.

But Daugherty is now seen as an important influence on American modernist painters. The Spanierman Gallery in New York recently featured a show of Daugherty's abstract paintings from the 1950s and '60s.

"He was a very important artist, one of the first American abstract color painters," said Ralph Sessions, Spanierman Gallery's director of drawings.

The State Theatre murals were commissioned by Marcus Lowe in 1920. A 1970 *Life Magazine* cover featured one of the murals and helped preservationists raise enough money to save the theater from the wrecking ball.