Paper: Los Angeles Times (CA)
Title: A Library's Overdue Return: Forty years after being removed from Santa Monica's old library,a series of 1930s murals is on view again in the new one.
Date: December 16, 2005

The nation was mired in the Depression when a Los Angeles artist put brush to plywood in 1935 and created a series of fanciful murals for the Santa Monica Public Library.

Painted in rainbow hues, and strongly influenced by mythology, Asian themes and the Southern California landscape, Stanton Macdonald-Wright's panels depicted two streams of humankind's development -- one technological, spotlighting achievements in science and engineering, and the other imaginative, underscoring religion, art and literature.

When the library moved in the mid-1960s and the old building was slated for demolition, the 39 panels appeared destined for the dustbin, until a few Santa Monicans pleaded successfully for their rescue. The murals were hastily pried off walls and shipped to a Smithsonian Institution warehouse in Washington, D.C. There, they languished unseen for four decades.

Now, the murals are back home.

Conservators in Culver City are painstakingly cleaning and repairing the panels and installing them one by one in the city's new and contemporary $57.7-million main public library, scheduled to open in January.

Admirers of Macdonald-Wright, a modernist pioneer who died in Pacific Palisades in 1973, hope that the remounting of his ambitious murals -- titled "Technical and Imaginative Pursuits of Early Man" -- will help resurrect his reputation while reminding those who see them of a once popular art form.

For many Santa Monicans, the murals' return represents a dream come true. "It places them back in the context from which they came," said Roger Genser, a former city arts commissioner who 20 years ago joined the fight to bring the murals back.

The murals are, indeed, back in the context from which they came, if that means a municipal library. But the milieu has radically changed. The new library, designed by the award-winning Santa Monica architecture firm of Moore Ruble Yudell, is distinctly different from the Spanish-style building that previously housed these New Deal artworks. Whereas Macdonald-Wright designed the murals to fit in spaces narrow and wide, and around windows, doorways and arches, they are now being mounted on expanses of neutrally painted walls that emphasize their odd shapes.

"In the original library, they were sequential around a symmetrical room," said Clay Holden, a project designer with Moore Ruble Yudell. "We weren't going to

be able to replicate the entire sequence."

Instead, designers worked to keep individual scenes together but mixed them up around the building. As a result, the opportunity to track Macdonald-Wright's vision of man's sweeping progress from the Stone Age to the modern age is, unfortunately, lost. To compensate, the library plans to label the panels and to offer educational tours and brochures to explain the murals' original scope and Macdonald-Wright's importance.

"He was one of the earliest abstractionists in California and had an international reputation when he did the murals," said Ilene Susan Fort, a mural expert who is serving as a consultant on the project. "He helped establish the importance of mural painting in California. The murals were highly praised at the time and encouraged more federally sponsored projects throughout the state."

The series was the first federally sponsored mural project in Southern California. It arose under the Public Works of Art Project, a forerunner of the Works Progress Administration. Macdonald-Wright proposed the project and labored on it for 18 months, receiving no pay.

The panels contained 160 figures, including 46 portraits, covering about 2,000 square feet of wall. Macdonald-Wright painted a broad array of individuals, including Edgar Allan Poe, Lao Tzu (the great Taoist thinker), Buddha and Michael Faraday, the discoverer of electromagnetic induction. For fun, he included a portrait of his father, his friend Thomas Hart Benton and his chow chow dogs.

As the artist saw it, imagination and technical progress ultimately coalesced to create a new form of expression, the motion picture, and one of the final panels features Santa Monica-born starlet Gloria Stuart (who decades later would portray the elderly Rose in the 1997 film "Titanic") at the center of a busy stage set, with the Santa Monica Bay as a dazzling backdrop. Until recently, the moving-picture panel had been on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but it is now being conserved for installation at the library.

Strictly speaking, Macdonald-Wright's prime had probably passed by the time he embarked on this project. Born in 1890, he moved with his family at age 10 to California, where his father became manager of the Hotel Arcadia, a fine seashore hotel in Santa Monica. As a young man, he pursued his career in Paris and co-founded an abstractionist movement called Synchromism, known for its bright color palette. By 1929, "he was a well-known cultural celebrity in the Southland," wrote Will South, a Macdonald-Wright expert. Macdonald-Wright took over the Art Students League and became a popular professor at UCLA.

In 2001, LACMA mounted a retrospective of his work called "Color, Myth and Music: Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Synchromism." In his review, Times art critic Christopher Knight wrote that "it simply isn't possible to understand 20th century art in L.A. without understanding Macdonald-Wright's work and career."

The murals posed an intriguing design problem for the new library's architects.

City Council members and other officials had alerted the designers early on that they wanted the murals to be displayed in the library, assuming the Smithsonian could be persuaded to return them. Still, design had proceeded for some time before the architects knew for certain that the murals would be available.

"I would stop short of saying we designed the entire second floor to fit the murals," said John Ruble, a founding partner in the architecture firm. "We certainly did not do that. But all of us seeing them installed are very happy. They add interest and for the most part enrich those upper-floor spaces."

Installation of the murals, many of them massive, has been a challenge for Duane Chartier and Susanne Friend, owners of ConservArt Associates, the conservators. To get the large pieces to the second floor, Chartier made a series of five ramps. He mounts the panels on rolling carts and then gets help from several assistants to roll them up the ramps. Once on the second floor, they must maneuver carefully around exit signs, seismic wire and lighting fixtures. They use a system of pulleys to raise the pieces to their locations high up on the walls.

In some locations, including the library's second-floor "computer commons," mural viewers will have plenty of room to step back to take in a series of panels dealing with Western and Eastern religious and intellectual thought (although low-hanging lights interfere with the sightlines). But a series of panels dealing with electricity is set in a tight corner where a bookcase is a mere 7 feet away.

It is unclear what Macdonald-Wright, a man with a big ego, would have thought of the new layout. An oral history taken in 1964, however, makes clear that he was proud of the careful measurements he made to make the panels work in the Depression-era library.

"When I got through ... and they put them up, I only had a disparity of three-eighths of an inch on the largest wall," he said, "which I considered a marvelous job especially for me, because I am a first-class dope when it comes to anything pertaining to mathematics."

Author: Martha Groves
Section: California
Page: B-1