

UAlbany's Murals: Heroic Moments from the Past

By ROBERTA ARMSTRONG

Photos by Gary Gold

Judy Koblintz Madnick, who attended both the Milne School and the University at Albany, has a special appreciation for the Lithgow murals in what was once the Milne School library on UAlbany's Downtown Campus.

"They provided a quiet, aesthetic atmosphere for studying in what might otherwise have been just a roomful of books," said Madnick, B.S.'65, M.S.'66, now retired and living in Albany. "I spent a total of 11 years on the Downtown Campus, and I have many happy memories. I especially remember the beautiful Lithgow murals in the Milne library."

The Milne School building, the former high school where UAlbany students carried out their practice teaching, is now the home of the nationally ranked Nelson A. Rockefeller School of Public Affairs and Policy. And the second-floor Milne library is now a special events room named in honor of the late Milne School principal Theodore H. Fossieck.

The 14 murals, however, remain. Painted and installed from 1932 to 1944 by the popular Albany artist David Lithgow, they offer tableaus of keynote events in the region's history, from a panel depicting "the Mahikan Indian People" to one offering a view of the Albany skyline and the Alfred E. Smith Building.

But time has taken its toll on the



Above: Barbara Via is head of the Dewey Library, home of the Hawley windows and the Van Ingen murals, background. **Right:** Gabriel Smolarz carries out research amid the splendor of the Van Ingen murals.

murals, which Lithgow painted on canvas and then mounted directly on the walls, each with its own unique decorative border. Seven have cracks, including one depicting the Albany Normal School building at the corner of Lake and Howard streets. Others are faded or darkened with grime, with brittle, peeling paint.

Now, as part of the \$500 million Campaign for the University at Albany, UAlbany plans soon to restore the Lithgow murals with the support of its alumni, many of whom graduated from the University when it was the New York State College for Teachers. The Downtown Campus Campaign Committee is charged with

raising \$10 million toward renovating the six century-old buildings that were the original home of the College for Teachers. Of that total, \$100,000 is earmarked for the Lithgow murals. The Committee, chaired by Eunice Baird Whittlesey, B.A.'44, includes Madnick and 10 other alumni volunteers. A dedicated group of Milne School alumni, led by Wesley P. Moody, M.P.A.'73 and Milne School Class of 1952, has already contributed enough funds to restore one of the murals. That work will serve as a prototype for completion of the project.

Madnick attended the Milne School from grades seven through 12, then spent another five

The Van Ingen Murals



years on the Downtown Campus as a UAlbany student earning both her bachelor's and master's degrees. She majored in math education. Madnick remembers study halls in the library, but didn't realize the significance of the murals until the room was refurbished and dedicated in honor of Fossieck in May of 1995. "We realized then that they needed restoration," she said.

Jerry Parker, an assistant provost for Academic Affairs, and Marijo Dougherty, the recently retired director of the University at Albany Art Museum, have both championed the restoration of the Lithgow murals since 1980.

"I think they're going to be striking when they're restored. They're a valuable University asset that most people don't even know about," said Parker, an administrator on the Downtown Campus. "Basically, they've been in a non-climate-controlled setting for 65 or 70 years, and they just need attention."

Lithgow, a Scottish immigrant, was Albany's most sought-after early 20th-century mural painter. Besides the Milne High School library, he was commissioned to create murals for the State Bank of Albany, Proctor's Theatre in Troy, and the Cohoes Savings Bank. He painted murals for the New York State World's Fair in 1939 and 1940 and executed a number of portraits of prominent Albany citizens, including

William J. Milne, the former president of the State Normal College in Albany, and John M. Sayles, principal of the Milne School. It was Sayles who suggested the idea of the murals to the

Student Council in 1932, proposing that one panel be given each year by the graduating class.

Most of the funding for the murals came from events organized by the students, according to a history of the Milne School in the University's archives. Students raised money through after-school dances and sales of various articles, including "Milne feathers" — large red and white feathers with the word "Milne" on them — and burnished metal belt buckles emblazoned with a red and white "M." The mothers held card parties.

Norman Rice, director emeritus of the Albany Institute of History and Art, which owns many of Lithgow's works, said UAlbany's murals represent an era in the region's art history. "Lithgow was a great historical illustrator, and he did it in a very snappy and approachable way," said Rice. "He was imaginative. I wouldn't call them great works of art, but they're great works of illustration."



Another set of Downtown Campus murals, executed by artist William Brantley Van Ingen, will also be restored through the Campaign for the University at Albany. The 23 Van Ingen murals are found in Hawley Hall, now the elegant home of UAlbany's Governor Thomas E. Dewey Graduate Library. While Lithgow's style was precise and realistic, Van Ingen used a bold, impressionistic hand. His murals, huge oil paintings on canvas panels measuring four feet by 13 feet, serve as backdrops for Hawley's famed stained-glass windows.

Restored once, during the 1970s, the Van Ingen murals, also called the Hawley murals, are also suffering from moisture damage and dirt. Now that air conditioning has been installed in Hawley Hall, their repair and preservation is a high priority. In all, about \$500,000 in renovation and preservation work is planned for Hawley Hall under the Campaign for the Libraries, according to Meredith Butler, dean and director of Libraries.



Madnik in the Fossieck Reading Room, flanked by Lithgow murals



She said a portion of the money raised would be earmarked for repairs and upkeep for not only the murals, but also for Hawley's stained-glass windows, which must be restored periodically.

"The Hawley windows are probably the first thing that visitors notice when they visit us, and they're what most alumni remember," said Barbara Via, head of the Dewey Library. "But the murals are equally interesting, and they offer a rich setting for the windows."

Van Ingen designed, painted and installed Hawley's murals under a Depression-era grant from the federal government's Works Project Administration in 1937 and 1938. He painted the panels in oil on pre-primed canvas in his New York City studio, then rolled them up and brought them to Albany, where he glued them to the plaster walls with white lead putty. The panels cover 4,500 square feet. Van Ingen also painted murals for the Library of Congress and the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia.

Like the Lithgow murals, the Hawley murals reflect heroic moments in the history of the state and also college life. Perhaps the most interesting panels, at least to students and alumni, are two which illustrate the college campus and its students in one continuous image (See the front and back covers of this magazine.)

The inscription reads, "But the changes have been slow and reluctant, extorted by the Democracy of Commonsense, Gideon Hawley, 1812." (Hawley was New York State's first superintendent of public instruction, and instrumental in the founding of the Normal School, UAlbany's predecessor.) Van Ingen said that he took "considerable liberties" here, and showed students from various eras in the college's history. The panels include the figure of Minerva outside Hawley Hall, along with Hawley and Albany educators David Page, Horace Mann and Andrew Draper.

Two alumni who spent at least a few moments gazing at the murals in the Hawley Reading Room are Kenneth Doran, B.A.'39, and J. Paul

Ward, B.A.'53, M.A.'54, Ph.D.'71. Both are also members of the Downtown Campus Campaign Committee. "I did all my work there. I thought it was a charming atmosphere," said Doran. Ward concurs: "As an undergraduate and through my master's degree, I studied there. The ambiance was very pleasant, although it was easy to day-dream, staring at the murals, rather than thinking about the unification of Europe."

If the Campaign is successful, students will be admiring both sets of UAlbany's murals for generations to come.

For more information on ways you can help renew and preserve UAlbany's murals, please contact:

*Campaign for the
University at Albany
1400 Washington Ave.
UAB 209, Albany, NY 12222,
Phone: 518-437-4969
E-mail: Campaign@uamail.albany.edu
Web site: www.albany.edu/campaign*