

New Brunswick's Mural Legacy: A Roundtable Forum

“THE MOST EXCITING THING,” PEGI NICOL MACLEOD wrote from Fredericton to a friend at the National Gallery in Ottawa in 1941, was that she had been commissioned to paint “a mural.”¹ A year earlier, in an interview published in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Nicol MacLeod had called for a Canadian mural movement. What better way, she asked, could there be to memorialize Canada’s war effort?² It was not in Ottawa, however, but in Woodstock, New Brunswick, that Nicol MacLeod was given opportunity to execute a mural herself. Reflecting on the experience, Nicol MacLeod was still enthusiastic: “Every artist should get off a few murals in a life time . . . the material spaces in murals are as wide open as the mental.” For her labour Nicol MacLeod was paid in kind with homespun and tweed materials produced by the school’s students and she invited other artists to do likewise: “With such good painters in the Maritimes, not to say elsewhere in Canada, more schools might have murals. Work for the credit and let the cash go. The labor will be repaid.”³

In New Brunswick between the 1930s and the 1960s more schools did get murals, as did universities, hospitals, train stations, churches, and other buildings.⁴ These were murals of a kind that Marilyn McKay, in *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting, 1860s-1930s*, categorizes as “modern murals,” by which she means they were executed in modernist idioms and influenced by contemporary muralists in Mexico and the United States. McKay suggests that “modern” murals were rare in Canada: if this is generally true, New Brunswick must be regarded as an exception.⁵ On a per capita basis, but possibly even absolutely, artists worked on

- 1 Pegi Nicol MacLeod to H.O. McCurry, 1 August 1941, as reproduced in Joan Murray, *Daffodils in Winter: The Life and Letters of Pegi Nicol MacLeod* (Moonbeam, ON: Penumbra Press, 1984), 162 (emphasis in original).
- 2 “Murals Offer Opportunity to Record Canada at War: The Former Pegi Nicol, Visiting Here, Is Collecting Her Paintings for Toronto Exhibition Next January,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 August 1940.
- 3 Nicol MacLeod, “Adventure in Murals,” *Maritime Art* 2, no. 2 (1942): 38.
- 4 Among the *known* and notable “modern” murals to have been prepared/executed in New Brunswick are by Miller Brittain for the University of New Brunswick Lady Beaverbrook Gymnasium in Fredericton, for the Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital, for the Monastery of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, and for the Department of Veteran Affairs Hospital in Saint John; by Fred Ross three murals for the Saint John Vocational School (now Harbour View High), for Fredericton High School (now re-created in the Currie Center, University of New Brunswick), and in the Centennial Building, Fredericton; by Alex Colville for the Sackville train station and two murals on the campus of Mount Allison University; by Pegi Nicol MacLeod in the Carleton County Vocational School in Woodstock; by Violet Gillett a series of murals in Trinity United Church in Andover; by Jack Humphrey, Bruno Bobak, Tom Forestall, and Claude Roussel, one each in the Centennial Building; and by Elizabeth Sutherland and Fred Willar, one each in the Saint John Vocational. This, certainly, is an incomplete list.
- 5 Marilyn McKay, *A National Soul: Canadian Mural Painting, 1860s-1930s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 202-4. McKay is fundamentally correct about the rarity of “modern murals” in Canada *relative* to the United States and Mexico. Elsewhere I

more “modern” murals in New Brunswick than anywhere else in the country. Artists whom Nicol MacLeod would undoubtedly have included among the “good painters in the Maritimes” worked for months, and in some cases years, on mural projects. Not all followed Nicol MacLeod in letting the “cash go,” but until recently one might have asked with the retrospect of a half century – thinking of murals hidden in storage, of murals physically damaged, sometimes beyond repair; of a petition calling for the removal of a mural; of murals uncompleted, lost, or destroyed – how has their labour been repaid?⁶

The answer to this question may be changing. In recent years, both individuals and institutions have engaged in efforts to preserve, restore, contextualize, and, in the extraordinary case of Fred Ross’s war memorial mural, to re-create physically New Brunswick’s “modern” murals. These efforts prompted a 2012 symposium in Fredericton entitled “New Brunswick’s Mural Legacy: The State of the Art.” The symposium, sponsored by the international research project “The Decorated School Network,” was held in the Richard J. Currie Center on the Fredericton campus of the University of New Brunswick (UNB) in proximity to the new version of Ross’s mural, *The Destruction of War/Rebuilding the World Through Education* (Figure 1).⁷ After the original panels had been missing for almost 60 years, a team of New Brunswick artists, under the guidance of Ross, re-created the mural for this UNB venue in 2011.⁸ This seemed an ideal location to contemplate the relationship between Ross’s work and that of other muralists with whom he was a contemporary in the province. Participants delivered papers on murals in Fredericton, Saint John, and Sackville. Given the difficulties a number of these murals faced in being understood and valued in the decades following their creation, participants considered the ways in which they might be conserved, displayed, and interpreted in ways that make them relevant to present and future viewers. Revised versions of five of these presentations are published here.

have argued that the murals of this kind executed in Canada were significant to the cultural politics of the era and that their apparent rarity is in part due to physical and intellectual neglect in the intervening decades. As I put it: “The damage and outright destruction suffered by several of these murals in the intervening years does not suggest a lack of popular support at the time of their creation, but rather a decline in their value since.” See Kirk Niergarth, “Art, Education, and a ‘new world society’: Joseph McCulley’s Pickering College and Canadian Muralism,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 175.

6 Nicol MacLeod’s Woodstock mural spent decades rolled up in an attic and much of it was damaged or destroyed by water. Fred Ross’s first mural, *Annual School Picnic*, remains in storage, while his original memorial mural for Fredericton High School, as discussed in John Leroux’s contribution to this forum, has been lost and presumably destroyed. As Claire Titus and Peter Larocque’s contributions respectively explain below, Miller Brittain’s mural for the Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital was cancelled before it could be painted and his mural for the Department of Veterans’ Affairs Hospital has been controversial and prompted a petition to be circulated calling for its removal. Alex Colville’s first mural for the Sackville Railway Station, as discussed by Gemey Kelly in this forum, has also not survived.

7 More information on the Decorated School Network is available at <http://thedecoratedschool.blogspot.ca/>. A recent publication is Catherine Burke, Jeremy Howard, and Peter Cunningham, eds., *The Decorated School: Essays on the Visual Culture of Schooling* (London: Black Dog Press, 2013).

8 The story of this re-creation is well-told and beautifully illustrated in William Forrestall et al., *Redeemed: Restoring the Lost Fred Ross Mural* (Fredericton: UNB Art Centre, 2013).



Figure 1: Re-created version of Fred Ross, *Destruction of the World Through War and Rebuilding the World Through Education* (2011), in situ Currie Center, University of New Brunswick.

Source: John Ryan (photographer), 2011.

In “Revision and Recovery: Fred Ross’s Fredericton High School Memorial Murals,” historian and architect John Leroux explains the history of Ross’s *Destruction/Rebuilding*. This war memorial, commissioned in 1946, commemorated the war-dead of the province’s largest secondary school, Fredericton High. Ross, who went on to a very successful career as an easel painter, was then a recent high school graduate and an aspiring professional muralist. When unveiled with much solemn ceremony at a well-publicized event in 1948, the mural was expected to serve for all time as a reminder of the human costs of war.⁹ In fact it only lasted on the school’s auditorium walls for six years. It was removed when the building was being renovated in 1954, languished in storage for years, lost, found (in damaged condition), and then lost for what seems to have been the final time in the 1970s.

Leroux explains the circumstances that led to the re-creation of the mural in the Currie Center. These included the fact that Fred Ross,¹⁰ though an octogenarian, was

⁹ See Leroux’s contribution below, and, for a more extensive discussion, Forrestall et al., *Redeemed*.

¹⁰ Fred Ross died on 21 August 2014 as these pages were being prepared for publication. In light of this news, the efforts that led to the re-creation of Ross’s murals at the Currie Center seem especially timely.

still a working artist able to participate in the project; that the patron, the University of New Brunswick, was supportive; and, finally and very significantly, that a network of local artists, activists, and scholars had kept the memory of the mural (and its destruction) alive and helped push for this kind of restorative action. Contemplating the story of the re-created mural in relation and comparison to other murals in New Brunswick and elsewhere raises important questions. What makes a work of art in a public space meaningful? How can such meaning, or value, be sustained for users of the space over time? Which works, or kinds of works, get preserved (or in this case, re-created) and why?¹¹

In a discussion about these issues, one symposium participant noted that what the New Brunswick murals of this era shared in being designed for schools, universities, hospitals, and churches was an “institutional audience”; this meant that they were designed for spaces that people visited for purposes other than contemplating art. Such an insight suggests a possible reason why few of these murals have remained on the walls where they were originally installed. Renovations, for example, to an art gallery or a museum would be made with the preservation and display of works of art as a high priority; but this would not be and has not been the case for institutions such as hospitals or schools, which have different mandates and concerns to address. To preserve a mural requires various kinds of expertise. What environmental conditions (temperature, humidity, light) need to be controlled? What steps need to be taken to regularly maintain or, when damaged, restore a mural? What is the mural’s artistic and historic significance – in other words what makes it worth preserving – and how can this significance be communicated to viewers? The symposium brought together historians, curators, conservators, local artists, and heritage activists, and the papers published here reveal how it is truly a community effort to ensure that large-scale murals survive both materially (as physical objects) and symbolically (as meaningful works that are understood in historical context).

The survival of a mural in both senses of the term is addressed by Peter Laroque in “The Peripatetic Journey of Miller Brittain’s *The Place of Healing in the Transformation from War to Peace*.” Brittain’s mural, unveiled in 1954, was, like the Ross mural, a war memorial that depicted the horror of war and the promise of peace, with modern medicine depicted metaphorically to represent the healing that was required for the world to be transformed from the former to the latter state (see Figure 1 in Laroque’s forum contribution, p. 118). This narrative and metaphor were entirely appropriate to the mural’s original setting, a hospital for war veterans, but

11 These were questions addressed by two international presenters at the symposium whose papers are not published in this forum, but whose work provided a broader context for the consideration of New Brunswick murals. Catherine Burke’s presentation, “The Decorated School: An Interdisciplinary Research Network,” described some of the key recurrent ideas and themes relevant to art in UK schools both past and present, and called for continued international collaboration and research. Sylvia Rhor discussed the vast early 20th century mural collection in Chicago’s public schools and the recent efforts made to preserve and restore these works. In particular, Rhor focused on the circumstances surrounding the censorship of Edward Millman’s mural at Lucy Flower Technical High School (1941). The whitewash covering this mural has now been removed and Rhor insightfully analyzed why, in form and content, Millman’s depiction of significant historical women was deemed inappropriate to be seen by the female students in the vocational school.

as Larocque, curator at the New Brunswick Museum (NBM), explains, Brittain's mural, like Ross's, has had a troubled history. Brittain's mural was moved from its original setting to, first, a retirement home and, second, the Saint John Regional Hospital. There it attracted complaints from those who objected to what they perceived as disturbing subject matter. At one point, hospital employees circulated a petition calling for the mural's removal. Now the mural has potentially found a permanent home in the NBM and Larocque explains how the work connects in its theme and in some of its subject matter to other works in Brittain's oeuvre in the museum's collection – particularly to the enormous preparatory drawings (called, for murals, “cartoons”) that Brittain had created for a previous mural project at the Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital in the early 1940s. The museum, as Larocque suggests, may be an appropriate venue for learning about the mural, its history, and the context of its creation: this kind of appreciation, the petition would lead one to conclude, was more difficult to achieve in the lobby of a busy hospital.

While Brittain never had opportunity to realize his mural on the walls of the Tuberculosis Hospital, the drawings themselves are remarkable works of art. They have been called the most important social realist work ever produced in Canada,¹² but because the images are unwieldy and fragile they have only very rarely been seen by the public, art historians, or even NBM staff. Among those endeavouring to make these works more accessible is Claire Titus, the NBM's conservator, who describes the ongoing efforts in “Miller Brittain's Mural Cartoons for the Saint John Tuberculosis Hospital: From Creation to Conservation.” Titus explains how the 2006 experience of seeing the cartoons unrolled for the first time in more than 20 years provided a team at the NBM with both inspiration and sufficient resolve to see what has been a long and challenging conservation project through to completion. Two important aspects of this project stand out in Titus's paper. First, the willingness of the NBM team to collaborate with other institutions and to cast a wide net in its efforts to marshal the resources required for such a major undertaking is an example worth emulating. Second, Titus describes the remarkable way in which the conservation of the cartoons became, in themselves, a public exhibition. This effort to make open and accessible the processes in the museum that are ordinarily “behind the scenes” both provided educational opportunities and, undoubtedly, helped to increase public interest in and support for the project.

Alex Colville's murals in Sackville have also faced – and continue to face – challenges in ensuring their preservation, as Gemey Kelly, curator at the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison, explains in “Alex Colville's Trajectory as a Muralist.” The mural Colville executed as a student for the Sackville railway station has not survived (see Figure 3 in Kelly's forum contribution, p. 140) – but Mount Allison University has gone to considerable lengths to preserve the two murals Colville executed on campus. This has been difficult, Kelly explains, because *The History of Mount Allison* (1948) and *Athletes* (1960) (see figures 1 and 2 in Kelly's forum contribution, pp. 137, 140) are “in environments which have neither temperature nor humidity controls, and which, until recently, offered no security measures for the

12 Barry Lord, “Miller Brittain's Saint John Hospital Cartoons,” *artscanada* XXIV, no. 6&7 (June/July 1967): insert.

protection and well being” of the murals. Kelly describes the university as a “custodian” of these major works by an artist of considerable national and international significance: the responsibility for caring for the murals has become an institutional priority (see Kelly’s forum contribution, pp. 139, 142).

Kelly shows the connections between Colville’s murals and his intellectual and artistic trajectory in the post-war decades. Colville is a much-studied artist but, as Kelly notes, his efforts in mural painting have attracted little scholarly attention.¹³ This is a point worth considering in relation to other Canadian artists who created murals but who are much better known for their work as easel painters. I would speculate that there is a connection between this relative neglect and the economy of an art market in which murals are not ordinarily acquired by either collectors or galleries. The relationship between market and social value (and values) is a pertinent one in considering the history of “modern” mural painting: this was a form that for some in the Maritimes and elsewhere stood for a more democratic art and a more democratic culture.¹⁴ Is the idea that murals were an art of “the people” as opposed to an art for elites and connoisseurs a part of New Brunswick’s mural legacy?

Reflecting on this and other questions, Andrew Nurse of Mount Allison concludes this forum as he closed the symposium, drawing together ideas raised in the presented papers.¹⁵ Nurse, who has researched and written extensively on the relationship between art and society in Canada, highlights four key common themes: humanism (as the underlying philosophy motivating muralists in this period and as an idea of continued relevance in efforts to preserve the murals), interdisciplinarity as a profitable strategy for researching this kind of art, history as a process of forgetting as well as remembering, and the contextual and shifting meaning(s) of art in public spaces. Nurse also applauded the combination of international and local perspectives at the symposium. As he put it: “The story of New Brunswick’s muralists is a story of mobility and influences, of artistic ideals, styles, and perspectives that move across borders but are also, then, localized in place to create public artistic expressions” (see Nurse’s forum contribution, p. 143).

New Brunswick’s “modern” murals are, indeed, a legacy – one that was for many years almost forgotten. Preserving or in some cases restoring an artistic and intellectual inheritance of this kind has required (and does and will continue to require) substantial investments of time and money. What is the return on this investment? What is it worth to have the opportunity to consider, in retrospect, the vibrant and modern rural community that Pegi Nicol painted for the inspiration of Woodstock students in 1941 or to see and imagine the way Fred Ross and the

13 This relative silence may soon change, as Colville’s mural *Athletes* is currently included in a major retrospective exhibition curated by Andrew Hunter for the Art Gallery of Ontario.

14 See Kirk Niergarth, “‘Missionary for Culture’: Walter Abell, *Maritime Art*, and Cultural Democracy, 1928-1944,” *Acadiensis* XXXVI, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 3-28.

15 In addition to the contributions published here, Nurse’s reflections connect to Rhor and Burke’s presentations as well as to the paper I presented at the symposium; see Niergarth, “Memorial of War, Memorial of Hope: Contemplating the Creation, Destruction, and Re-Creation of Fred Ross’ Mural *The Destruction of War / Rebuilding the World Through Education*, 1948, 1954, and 2011,” *Labour/Le Travail* 72 (Fall 2013): 149-75.

students of FHS, or Miller Brittain and the DVA hospital residents, wanted the sacrifices of the Second World War to be remembered? What is it worth to contemplate how living in a city like Saint John in the 1930s led Miller Brittain to think about tuberculosis as a metaphor for a sick society that needed curing or to read Colville's *Athletes* as an expression of his existentialism? What is value of learning what these murals meant then and of considering what they mean now? At what cost do we hold on to these artifacts of memory and at what cost do we neglect them? The papers compiled here suggest that a community of scholars, professionals, and enthusiasts believe the price demanded of this legacy is well worth paying. Their efforts help ensure that present and future generations of New Brunswickers will be given opportunity to contemplate these murals anew, to glimpse in them visions of another time, and to consider what aspects of these visions remain relevant today and to tomorrow.

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