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K-State Keepsakes: The Great Room Murals

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BY:
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HEAD OF SPECIAL
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THE GREAT ROOM MURALS

The story of the Great Room murals in Historic Farrell Library is one of endurance and survival. Created in 1934 during the Great Depression, these works of art have made it through water and tar damage from multiple roof leaks, at least one faulty restoration, and—most recently—smoke and water damage from the May 2018 fire at Hale Library. With their return to the public eye this year, we can celebrate their symbolic resilience as a harbinger for facing our own recent challenges.

When the state architect drafted the original library blueprints in 1925, they included the space for these murals on plaster panels measuring about 11 feet wide by 16 feet high. From the building's opening in

1927 until the mural project in 1934, though, these panels remained bare. In the intervening years, the Great Depression gripped the nation in an economic disaster. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt responded with numerous federal New Deal programs. Two of those programs—the Public Works of Art Project and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration—paid the artists who created the murals.

The artists were Kansas natives David Hicks Overmyer and Byron B. Wolfe. Overmyer was nearly 45 years old at the time and was a commercial artist focusing on illustration and design while also specializing in murals, portraits and landscapes. He later created murals at the state capitol in

Topeka and became a widely known Kansas muralist. Wolfe was 30 years old and a commercial illustrator who worked under Overmyer's direction on this project. He later became a commercial art director, western artist and member of the Cowboy Artists of America.

Overmyer and Wolfe completed the mural project between March and September 1934 using scaffolding and materials supplied by K-State. Their process began with sketching a small version of the murals and seeking approval from K-State. Next, Overmyer used something like a magic lantern to project the sketch on the Great Room plaster panel. They created a charcoal outline of the mural and then applied fixatif so

the charcoal did not smudge. Using oil paints directly on the plaster, they painted in from the outlines with base tones and then added other hues. Finally, nearly a year after completing the murals, Overmyer returned to apply varnish that preserved the murals and brought out luster. It was reported that Overmyer often wore dark clothing and a yellow smock while painting, and that he had a "fitting moustache" for his artistic pursuits.

The subjects of the murals were designed to represent core

educational topics of land-grant colleges and universities: agriculture, arts, engineering and the home. Each mural included layers of understanding, leading a local newspaper to report in 1934 that "each day students spend much time in the room looking at the paintings, working out their meaning, and admiring the original work of the Kansas artists." The first mural created focused on the arts, followed by agriculture, the home, and engineering. When completed, they were the largest group of murals in Kansas.

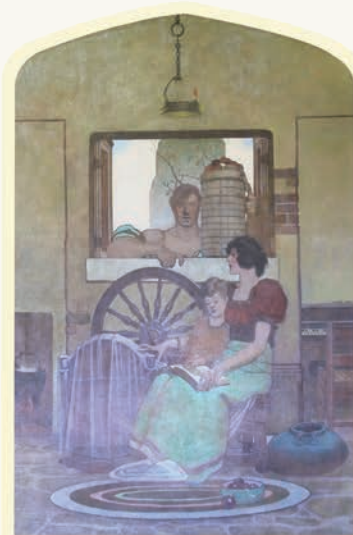
When President Francis David Farrell formally accepted the murals in October of 1934, Overmyer gave a lecture on the history of murals, as well as what influenced his creation of these murals. He said, "A mural painting should be complementary to architecture and should be a part of the walls and breathe the atmosphere of the room or building."



ARTS



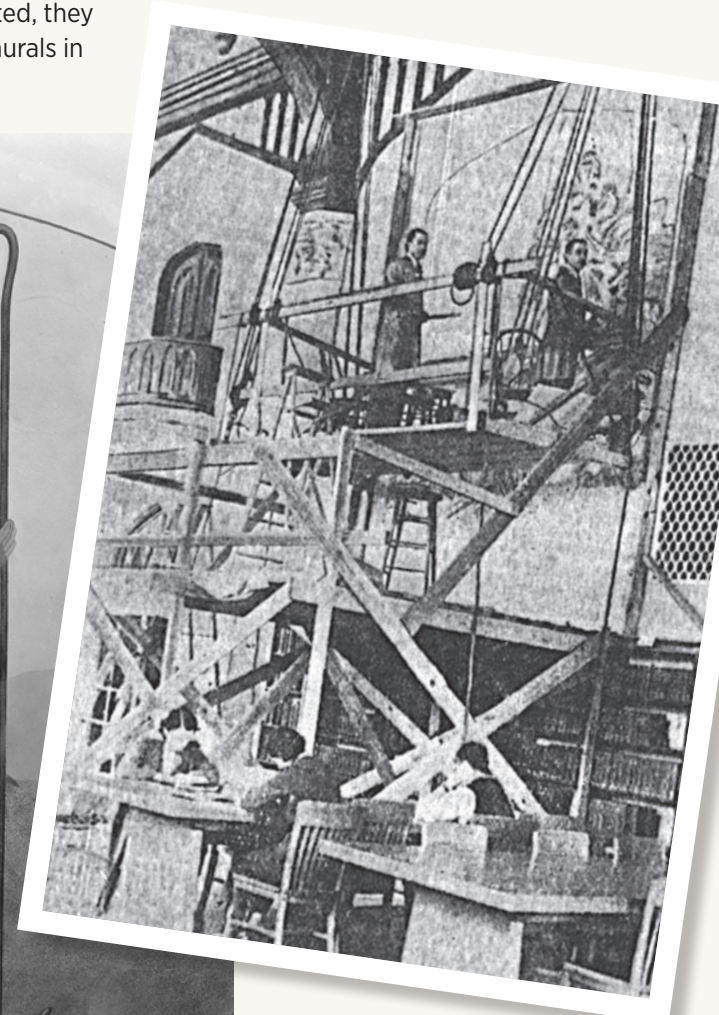
AGRICULTURE



HOME



ENGINEERING



Above: Overmyer (right) and Wolfe (left) using scaffolding and materials supplied by K-State.

Left: Overmyer standing in front of the agriculture mural, ca 1934.

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