

# INSIDE

SERVING CHICAGO'S NORTH SIDE NEIGHBORHOODS

## Lost Art Collection unveiled at Chicago Public Schools

By John Walker  
Special to Inside

Eight years ago Flora Doody, a Chicago Public School teacher, called the Chicago Conservation Center for help to restore a deteriorating mural on the wall of Lane Technical High School. When representatives from the Center saw the wall, they set in motion the largest public art preservation project in American history and saved some of the most beautiful, diverse and historically important murals in Chicago.

Scattered throughout 68 separate Chicago Public Schools, hidden for years beneath layers of paint and dirt, and neglected in storage rooms, hallways and basements, was one of the largest early-20th-century mural collections in the country. After years of interviewing school employees, testing walls for hidden works and searching the nooks and crannies throughout the city's public schools, 437 stunning murals were found. Nearly all are now restored.

The fascinating journey to uncover these gems and the grass-roots efforts to ensure their preservation are detailed in a new book, "Art for the People." The book, written by Heather Becker, captures in exquisite detail the beauty and elegance of these murals. The book also offers an insightful lesson in Chicago's art history, as it details the murals' origins and painters. Twenty-five essays by writers such as Studs Terkel, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt and Francis V. O'Connor delve in to the intricate process of finding the murals in the nooks and crannies of Chicago Public Schools, to the restoration of each mural and to the obstacles that were overcome in order to restore the vivid images back into the schools.

The murals and the book were both celebrated at a special unveiling Dec. 11 at Lane Technical High School, 2501 W. Addison St. Mayor Richard Daley joined author and vice president of the Chicago Conservation Center, Heather Becker, at a reception to celebrate the murals and the process that ensures their future.

The eight-year struggle to restore these murals was not without peril. "Art for the People" delves into the intricate process of finding the murals and the formidable obstacles to restoration. The historically important Edward Millman fresco at the Lucy Flower Career Academy High School, for example, was created with water-based paint but covered with two layers of oil-based paint and forgotten since 1941. Damage to other murals included water damage, tears, holes, graffiti and chips, each with their own distinct challenges.

"Art for the People" is filled with reproductions of the dramatic mural scenes painted by WPA-era artists such as William Edouard Scott and Lucile Ward. "The subject matter of the murals was carefully chosen to educate, inspire and edify students," writes Robert Eskridge of the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the book's contributors. Illustrations include scenes from prehistory, such as the birth of writing, historic events in Chicago, such as the Chicago Fire in 1871 and the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933, and national historic events, including Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and George Washington crossing the Delaware River. Other murals provide snapshots of life throughout the decades: from steel mills and factories, to farming life and dancing in the roaring 1920s.

The book and restoration project have also sparked a new educational program, "Chicago: The City in Art." In partnership with the Art Institute of Chicago's Museum Education Department, the Chicago Public Schools has created a comprehensive curriculum that teaches literature and history using the restored murals in the schools. One phone call almost a decade ago has reincarnated hundreds of years of forgotten history and has been compiled into documentation for years to come.

