

A Mural of Strength, but for Its Invisibility

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The metallic-looking mural of four chiseled men working on an oil rig is as striking for its location as for the quality of the art: it is affixed to the back wall of a dank, cluttered storage room under a school library in Soundview, the Bronx.

"For years, I've looked at that painting and wondered why nobody really wanted to restore it to the point of being viewable," said Tom Porton, coordinator of student activities for the James Monroe Campus, a collection of six high schools housed in a red-brick building on Boynton Avenue. Mr. Porton, who has taught at the school since 1970, believes that in 1934, the year the mural was painted, the room was a shop used for industrial arts classes, which would explain its presence.

According to Michele Cohen, director of the city's Public Art for Public Schools program, the artwork is one of 39 surviving murals in the city's public schools that were created under the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal program to put the unemployed, including artists, to work. Most W.P.A. murals, however, are in far more visible places, like auditoriums.

The painter of the Soundview mural, Domenico Mortellito, was born in Newark and produced art for the Newark subway system, the post office in Port Chester, N.Y., and the National Zoo in Washington, among other places, said his daughter, Adria Mortellito Peterson.

"It's part of the whole machine age, coming out of the Depression," said Ms. Peterson, an artist who lives in Oakland, Calif., in explaining the subject of the mural. "A lot of his imagery just celebrates human beings and what they were capable of."

Mr. Mortellito attended Pratt Institute in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, in the 1920's, often sketching train riders on his commuting from Newark. He later created works for the 1939 World's Fair, served as a graphic artist during World War II and eventually became head of the design team at DuPont, where he was probably the first person (and maybe the last) to create art out of Teflon. He died in 1994 at age 87.

The mural is to be restored by the Public Art for Public Schools program. Once the restoration is complete, Mr. Porton said, the school plans to move the mural to its main entrance. He has seen the loss of many of the school's treasures, from a bronze memorial to World War II veterans that was thrown away years ago to some student murals that were accidentally painted over last month.

"It's my job to keep tradition alive," Mr. Porton said. "So I'm protective of the few things we've got left."