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New Deal-Era Mural Reinstalled in Federal Courthouse After Absence of Over 30 Years

By Robert Greene

A New Deal-era mural was restored to downtown's federal district courthouse yesterday after an absence of more than 30 years.

Chief Judge Manuel Real of the U.S. District court for the Central District of California told the approximately 75 spectators gathered for the unveiling ceremony in the building's Spring Street foyer that "in the 27 years and four days since I ascended the bench here, I have been looking for this mural."

Real explained that he remembered the painting from 1950s when he first came to work at the courthouse.

The chief judge and former courthouse building manager Peter Watson then pulled a cord to remove the canvas covering the mural, and the public got its first view since the early 1960s of Lucian Labaudt's "Ranches, Spanish and American."

The mural, first installed a year after the building opened in 1938, depicts a map of Los Angeles County, showing the Spanish-and-Mexican-era ranchos. On the left the Americans with various bits of cargo offered in exchange for real estate.

The Mexican official and ranchers who sold the land, together with Native Americans, are shown on the right.

The Los Angeles Chapter of the federal Bar Association sponsored a reception following the unveiling.

John Sommer, the chapter's president, stressed the importance of the scene depicted in the mural - setting land titles - to local history.

"In 30 years people may not remember what the litigants here tried to accomplish, or who the judges were, or who the courthouse staff were," Sommer said.

"But they will see the mural and they will know this is a special place - that people decided important issues here."

When the courthouse, designed by architect Stanley Underwood, was opened, it included a post office. The crafted aluminum doors and brightly-colored terrazzo floors are typical of the art deco style popular during the Depression.

Building manager Dave Griffin explained that the post office was removed in the 1960s to accommodate more courtrooms.

Labaudt's mural - and three others, including two on the ceiling - were removed and put in storage in the basement during construction, Griffin said. He added that one is still in storage, one is undergoing restoration in Washington, D.C., and one has disappeared.

Griffin said the 8-foot-high, 14-foot-long mural had been extensively damaged over the years.

But real credited Watson with "taking on the GSA" - the general Services Administration - to get the mural restored and reinstalled.

The GSA's restoration work was coordinated by Donna Gaffney of Gaffney & Associates, corporate art consultants. Gaffney said much of the damage was repaired with the help of black-and-white photographs of the mural in its original location, a different part of the wall from where it is now displayed.

Gaffney pointed out that the restoration work was done by Nathan Zakheim, whose father, also an artist, was a good friend of Labaudt, and that he was thus familiar with the original artist's style.

Zakheim said his father's and Labaudt's work could be seen in Coit Tower in San Francisco.

The ceremony was notable not only for the reinstallation of the mural but also for the presence of photographers. Cameras, which are normally prohibited from the perimeter and interior of the federal courthouse, were allowed for the special occasion.