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Local Art Collector Saves Paintings from Legendary Restaurant

BY BENJAMIN STEVERMAN
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When Seymour H. Persky, now 80 years old, was a young lawyer, an older mentor took him to the legendary Riccardo's, a restaurant just north of the Chicago River at 437 N. Rush St.

Riccardo's was then, according to a book of the time, "the undisputed headquarters of Chicago's Left Bank," a hangout for artists and celebrities and a great place for Italian food.

Persky remembers being impressed by the seven huge paintings that hung in Riccardo's restaurant, each by a different well-known local artists and each depicting one of the "seven lively arts," drama, architecture, music, literature, sculpture, painting and dance.

Though the paintings hung together in the restaurant from 1947 to the 1970s, by the mid-1990s Riccardo's was closed and the paintings had been sold to various art patrons. A year and a half ago, Persky, an art lover, decided to track them down and try to reassemble them.

He succeeded, though, he said, "It took a certain amount of financial recklessness."

The large paintings, each 4 feet by 8 feet, are being restored at the Union League Club of Chicago.

Most of the reunited paintings required little restoration work, according to Elyse Klein, the club's painting conservator. "Considering where they were hanging, the paintings are in pretty good condition," she said.

Two of the paintings needed more attention, Klein said, mostly because they had small food splatters and a "really heavy nicotine build-up" from decades in the restaurant's smoky bar area. To demonstrate the grime, Klein has a large jar half-full of dirty brown wads of cotton that she has used to clean one of the paintings, one square inch at a time.

The paintings were commissioned by Ric Riccardo, the owner of Riccardo's, co-owner of Pizzeria Uno and a former artist with the Works Progress Administration. Riccardo painted one of the seven, and he asked six other friends, all also from the WPA, to paint one each.

Ivan Albright's depiction of the devil in his Drama (Mephistopheles) is one of the most striking paintings. Albright became famous when a Hollywood studio paid him \$75,000 for a portrait that appeared at the end of the 1945 movie The Picture of Dorian Gray.

Though the paintings themselves are a sight to see, for many their attraction is the connection to Riccardo's restaurant.

"A lot of people have nostalgia for the restaurant and remember seeing them there," Klein said.

Persky's paintings are on loan to the Union League Club for the next year and a half. All seven will be displayed, appropriately, in the club's bar area.

The club is not open to the public, but the club will schedule dates in the fall when the public can view the paintings.