

Paper: Chicago Tribune (IL)  
Title: Long-hidden murals returning to library: Sweeping Depression-era panels being restored in California after 4 decades in storage  
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The nation was mired in the Great Depression when a Los Angeles artist put brush to plywood in 1935 and created a series of fanciful murals for the Santa Monica Public Library.

Painted in rainbow hues and strongly influenced by mythology, Asian themes and the Southern California landscape, Stanton Macdonald-Wright's panels depicted two streams of humankind's development--one spotlighting achievements in science and engineering and the other underscoring religion, art and literature.

When the library moved in the mid-1960s and the old building was scheduled for demolition, the 39 panels appeared destined for the dustbin, until a few Santa Monicans pleaded for their rescue. The murals were hastily pried off walls and shipped to a Smithsonian Institution warehouse in Washington. There they languished unseen for four decades.

Now, the murals are back home.

Conservators in Culver City are painstakingly cleaning and repairing the panels and installing them one by one in the city's new \$57.7-million main public library, which is scheduled to open in January.

Admirers of Macdonald-Wright, a modernist pioneer who died in Pacific Palisades in 1973, hope that the remounting of his ambitious murals--titled "Technical and Imaginative Pursuits of Early Man"--will help resurrect his reputation while reminding those who see them of a once popular art form.

The series was the first federally sponsored mural project in Southern California. It arose under the Public Works of Art Project, a forerunner of the Works Progress Administration. Macdonald-Wright proposed the project and labored 18 months, receiving no pay.

The panels contained 160 figures, including 46 portraits, covering about 2,000 square feet of wall. Macdonald-Wright painted a broad array of people, including Edgar Allan Poe, Lao Tzu (the great Taoist thinker), Buddha and Michael Faraday, the discoverer of electromagnetic induction. For fun, he included a portrait of his father, his friend Thomas Hart Benton and his chow chow dogs.

As the artist saw it, imagination and technical progress ultimately coalesced to create a new form of expression, the motion picture. One of the final panels shows Santa Monica-born starlet Gloria Stuart (who decades later would portray the elderly Rose in the 1997 film "Titanic") at the center of a busy stage set, with Santa Monica Bay as a dazzling backdrop.

Until recently, the moving-picture panel had been on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, but it is now being conserved for installation at the library.

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