

Los Angeles Times

TLC for a Mural

After years of abuse, 'The History of Transportation,' a 240-foot-long treasure battered by weather, car accidents and graffiti, is getting a painstaking face-lift.

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DRESSED for action in a white T-shirt, denim overalls, safety goggles and a bright yellow rubber apron and boots, Philippe Soler grasps the nozzle of a high-pressure tank and aims it at a mess of graffiti. As he guides a spray of warm water up and down a 4-foot-by-8-foot panel, rivulets of thick latex paint wash away, revealing a softly colored, stony surface. Within a few minutes, a graceful composition of hard-edged shapes begins to appear.

"It's like a treasure hunt," says Andrea Morse, president and chief conservator of the Sculpture Conservation Studio in West Los Angeles. But there's no doubt about what lies under the garish paint. Soler is working on one of 60 panels that compose "The History of Transportation," a 240-foot-long mural made by the late Los Angeles artist Helen Lundeberg. The artwork, which ran along a busy thoroughfare bordering a park in Inglewood, is a pictorial panorama that begins with Native Americans on foot and ends with passengers boarding a DC-3 aircraft.

The enormous mural was born of Depression-era goodwill -- and built to last. Commissioned in 1939 by the Work Projects Administration's Federal Art Project, Lundeberg executed her design in petrachrome, a sturdy material that resembles terrazzo. In 1940 when the first panel was installed, The Times reported that the \$30,000 mural would "withstand the wear of the ages and should last as long as the remaining great monuments of antiquity."

But less than 50 years later "The History of Transportation" had nearly died of abuse. It had been hit on the front by speeding cars, smacked on the back by forklifts moving caskets at the adjacent Enderle Vault Co. and cracked along vertical lines by rebar pulling away from the concrete backing. Weather and pollution also had taken a toll, but the most intractable and unsightly problem was perpetrated by gang members who had buried Lundeberg's art in layer upon layer of graffiti, effectively turning the historic mural into a billboard for their violent subculture.

Lundeberg, who died in 1999 at 91, took all this in stride. But eventually, Inglewood did not. An effort to restore the mural languished for nearly a decade, but now a \$1-million conservation and relocation project is underway and expected to be complete this fall. Spearheaded by a citizens' group, supported by city officials and financed by state funds, the project will restore the mural and give it a place of honor at the new Grevillea Art Park, near Inglewood's City Hall, Central Library and High School.

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"This project is great for the community," says Kevin L. Hawkins, director of the city's department of parks, recreation and community services. "Everybody is on board for something that is not political, which is a victory in and of itself. The mural is a precious treasure that has spawned something incredible."

FORM AND CONTENT

The artist who created the object of all this excitement was born in Chicago in 1908 and moved to Southern California with her family when she was a child. She studied art at the Stickney Memorial Arts School in Pasadena and married her teacher, painter Lorser Feitelson. In 1934, they jointly founded a Modernist movement that advocated integrating form and content in a new aesthetic order, variously known as New Classicism, Subjective Classicism or Post-Surrealism. But they are best known for separate bodies of work: Feitelson's painting evolved into pure form and color; Lundeberg's explorations led to quiet, abstract mergers of landscape and still life.

Struggling to make a living during the Depression, Lundeberg landed commissions for several government-funded murals and executed them in keeping with the notion that public art should deliver a simple message in a representational style. One of about 200 artists who created WPA murals in California from 1935 to 1943, she was delighted to have a job -- even if it took her away from her independent work.

"Altogether, it was a great thing for most artists," Lundeberg told Eleanor Munro, author of the 1979 book "Originals: American Women Artists." "My being an artist had been a worrisome thing for my family. But the project saved the day."

In "The History of Transportation," her largest mural, she laid out a progression of life-size characters in a flat, poster-like style -- but only after doing considerable research on her subject. She first worked up a color sketch of the entire artwork, then enlarged the sketch to a full-scale cartoon, with colors coded by numbers, and traced it onto shellacked wood panels.

Next, the artist and her assistants outlined shapes of the composition with brass strips and covered them with plasticine to create temporary, nonstick borders between different colored sections. Then they filled in the spaces with a wet mixture of crushed rock aggregates embedded in tinted mortar. Known as petrachrome, it was developed for murals by artist Stanton Macdonald-Wright, who directed Southern California's WPA art projects.

When the petrachrome had hardened, the panels were turned over and embedded, face-down, in thick sheets of wet cement reinforced with metal mesh and rebar. After the two layers had bonded, the wood backing and metal strips were removed. Once the petrachrome was fully cured, a process that took about a month, the surfaces were polished and the panels were mounted on a concrete wall.

Completed in 1939 and dedicated the following year, the mural marked the Redondo Boulevard entrance to Centinela Park (now Edward Vincent Jr. Park), near Florence Avenue. The artwork was intended to be seen from the windows of cars and the Pacific Electric Street Railway.

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But the trolley stopped running in 1955 and, over time, what had been a fairly prominent location seemed relatively obscure. The mural wasn't forgotten, but shrubs eventually hid part of the artwork, and rain, sun and smog dimmed its colors. Then came wayward vehicles and gangs.

An effort to save the mural began in 1988 when a group of Inglewood residents, led by Virginia Robinson, formed the Historic Site Preservation Committee. Veterans of a successful drive to prevent Centinela Park from being turned into a golf course, they lobbied city leaders and eventually obtained \$10,000 in city funds for the mural, but that was only a fraction of what was needed to give the massive artwork a new life.

"We educated ourselves and got the word out, but we couldn't quite get enough muscle to raise funds," says Robinson, who retired and moved to New Mexico in the early 1990s but has returned to Southern California and now lives in Redondo Beach. Ill health has prevented her from joining the new group of mural supporters, but she has vivid memories of her days as a community activist. She and other members of the original committee met with Lundeberg and consulted with conservator Nathan Zakheim, who devised a conservation plan, but they couldn't afford to proceed.

"The city councilmen and the mayor didn't see the value in it, and grants weren't available the way they are now," she says.

Robinson's committee disbanded when she left Inglewood, but the idea of restoring the mural "has just been simmering all this time," she says.

Citizens' complaints about the graffiti turned up the heat, but the project didn't get fired up until November 2000, when Inglewood received \$50,000 from the Getty Grant Program's "Preserve L.A." initiative to plan the potential project. The Historic Site Preservation Committee was reestablished the following month, and in January 2001 the Parks and Recreation Commission held an open meeting for public input on possible relocation sites.

The project was finally on its way, but it was so complicated that it would take several years to complete. Andrea Morse and her partner, Rosa Lowinger, who founded the Sculpture Conservation Studio, did an extensive condition report, detailing damage on each of the mural's panels. After considering several sites for the mural, the city settled on a prime spot in downtown Inglewood. The city submitted its restoration and relocation plan to the Getty in June 2001.

As for the money, the state park bond act of 2000 provided \$1,091,000 in three grants. The largest sum, \$621,000, came from a provision for urban recreational and cultural centers; \$270,000 from funds for new parks; and \$200,000 from money designated for historic and archeological preservation projects.

Even as the mural was accepted on the California Register of Historical Resources and the effort to save the artwork gained force, the graffiti problem escalated. In summer 2001, "The History of Transportation" was covered with plywood to prevent further damage. Work on the mural work began last June, with Lesley Elwood of Elwood & Associates, a public art and cultural planning firm, as project manager.

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Before the artwork could be moved, conservators covered each panel with an adhesive tissue-like facing to hold loose pieces in place. They also picked up pieces that had already fallen off and labeled them for reattachment. Then each of the panels was put into a separate plywood crate and stored at a police department facility.

MOVING THE PANELS

With limited space at the bare-bones corner storefront occupied by the Sculpture Conservation Studio, conservators and technicians work on three or four panels at a time. Each panel weighs about 500 pounds, so moving them around is no easy matter. When a new crate arrives, a team dismantles it and hoists the panel onto an A-frame dolly, with the help of a hefty clamp and chain suspended from a gantry.

The protective tissue and latex graffiti are removed with water and gentle solvents while the panel leans against the A-frame. Then the panel is moved to a horizontal position and lowered onto a makeshift table, where conservators tackle more difficult tasks: removing tenacious, oil-based tagging, piecing together and reattaching fallen chunks, and patching missing parts. Another big challenge is to repair the backs of the panels, where rebar has pulled away from the cement. In those cases, conservators either acid-wash the old steel rods or replace them and fill in the cracks.

It's exacting but rewarding work, say Morse and her colleagues, who use plastic syringes to inject liquid mortar in cracks and tiny fiberglass brushes to remove flecks of paint without disfiguring the petrachrome.

Matching the colors can be tricky, Morse says, pointing out a tray of little round tinfoil containers of colored mortar. Still, completely disguising the repairs is not the goal. Like the original petrachrome, the patching material contains a little aggregate, Morse says, but the repairs are easy to detect by anyone who looks closely. It's an honest approach -- in accordance with current conservation practices -- that allows viewers to appreciate the art while learning about its troubled history.

Much work must be done before the mural is installed at its new home -- and covered with a protective coating that is expected to enhance the color and stave off a new round of damage. But many people involved with the project are already celebrating.

"When we finally started renovating something that people had passed by for years," Inglewood parks director Hawkins says, "we discovered its historical importance and found that there is a lot of interest. The project requires the cooperation of several city departments and we really got the community involved in an inter-generational project that includes seniors who knew Helen Lundeberg and youth who are working on an oral history program."

One of those youngsters, 11th-grader Fred Black, says he has learned a lot about the Great Depression from interviewing people who lived through it. He also has a new awareness of his hometown.

"I never knew Inglewood had a history," he says with a mixture of pride and embarrassment.

But perhaps no one is happier about the revival of "The History of Transportation" than Virginia Robinson, who took on the cause so long ago.

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"I'm just so thrilled," she says. "I don't have words for it."

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Los Angeles artist Helen Lundeberg created her massive mural, "The History of Transportation," in 1939-40 as a WPA Federal Art Project. Designed to run alongside a busy thoroughfare, the 240-foot-long panorama condenses many generations of transportation technology in a parade of people moving into the future. The mural, which was located on the edge of a park in Inglewood, is now being restored at a studio in West Los Angeles. It will eventually be installed at its new home near Inglewood City Hall.