

Historic mural restored at Second Presbyterian Church

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By Bob Chiarito | Special to the Sun-Times
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The recently restored “Tree of Life” mural, painted by Frederick Clay Bartlett in 1903, at Second Presbyterian Church.
Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

The theme of the New Year's Day service at Second Presbyterian Church was a call to parishioners about renewal in their lives. Titled "A New Heaven and a New Earth," it could have been about the historic church itself.

The church at 1936 S. Michigan Ave. — both a Chicago landmark and a national historic landmark — recently restored a mural considered a treasure among lovers of both art and history.

The church was designed by architect James Renwick and dates to 1874; the sanctuary dates to 1901 because it was rebuilt after being destroyed by a fire a year earlier. At the time, the Prairie District neighborhood was home to prominent Chicago industrialists and business people like the Fields, Kimballs, Pullmans, Armors and Swifts who expected nothing short of the finest.

The rebuilt sanctuary met their expectations with an edifice modeled after the English Gothic churches of the early 15th century and constructed with rusticated Illinois limestone. The facade had a massive wall with buttresses and pinnacles, relieved by Gothic-arched windows, horizontal bands and four large sculptured medallions symbolizing the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

As impressive as the building is, it's what's inside that makes it truly special.

The church sports seven large Tiffany stained-glass windows and the 40-by-30-foot "Tree of Life" mural high above the altar by renowned painter Frederic Clay Bartlett.

"It's one of Chicago's most amazing arts and crafts interiors," said Ward Miller, executive director of Preservation Chicago.

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The recently restored “Tree of Life” mural, painted by Frederick Clay Bartlett in 1903, at Second Presbyterian Church. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



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Ozzie Kinnard, a parishioner at Second Presbyterian Church for 32 years, reacts as she looks at the 1903 “Tree of Life” mural restored by Parma Conservation Ltd. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



Second Presbyterian Church parishioner Ozzie Kinnard (from left), Linda Miller, president of Friends of Historic Second Church, Elizabeth Kendall, director of Parma Conservation Ltd., and Peter M. Schoenmann, co-director and senior painting conservator of Parma Conservation Ltd. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



Linda Miller, president of Friends of Historic Second Church | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



Second Presbyterian Church, 1936 S. Michigan Ave. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



Peter M. Schoenmann, co-director and senior painting conservator of Parma Conservation Ltd. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



A restored stained-glass window at Second Presbyterian Church. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



Elizabeth Kendall, director of Parma Conservation Ltd. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



Restored Louis Comfort Tiffany stained-glass windows at Second Presbyterian Church. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



A restored Louis Comfort Tiffany stained glass window (right) and an unrestored window (left) are seen at Second Presbyterian Church. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times



A restored Louis Comfort Tiffany stained-glass window and a mural at Second Presbyterian Church. | Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

15 of 15

Two Tiffany windows were cleaned in October and there are plans to finish the rest over the next year, according to Linda Miller, president of Friends of Historic Second Church, a group dedicated to restoring Second Presbyterian Church.

The largest project was restoring the “Tree of Life” mural, which wrapped up in mid-December. Preservationists worked 10 weeks meticulously cleaning the mural, stripping layers of dirt and repainting to show it in its original splendor. The project cost about \$500,000 and was financed by donations and a \$256,364 Save America’s Treasure Grant received in 2021, Linda Miller said.

The mural restoration was done by Chicago-based Parma Conservation, run by the husband-and-wife team of Peter Schoenmann and Elizabeth Kendall.

Parma, which has restored Depression-era murals in Chicago Public Schools and post offices around the country, said the restoration of the Tree of Life mural was a challenge because of its age and frailty.

“It had over a century of dirty air on it, and we also found when we started cleaning that there was repainting and a heavy amber, varnish layer,” Schoenmann said. “So, all of that was removed to get to the original 1903 layer.”

The project was harder than it sounds.

Setting up the scaffolding took three weeks. It needed to stretch 65 feet high to enable conservators to reach the mural. And it had to contend with light fixtures, wood arches and a metal organ screen.

Then, Schoenmann and Kendall had to figure out what solvents would safely remove whatever wasn't original.

Miller said watching the Parma team reminded her of stories about the Sistine Chapel. “It was painstaking work that reminded me of Michelangelo, working millimeter by millimeter.”

Schoenmann said there were several “Christmas morning moments.”

“Discovering what's underneath all these layers of dirt and darkness is kind of like opening a present because you're revealing a prize. This was one of the most satisfying wow factors because the change between what it was and what it became was so dramatic,” he said.

Among the surprises were uncovering Italian gold leaf, finding out the sky in the mural was blue, not green as it appeared, and discovering vibrant yellow lemons on the trees.

“In our line of work, you never really know what you're going to uncover or reveal, so you have to proceed very slowly and cautiously until you understand all the layers that are there.”

Schoenmann said it was amazing to see how vibrant the mural was in 1903. “It almost looks like it was painted yesterday.”

Kendall called the result “amazing” after seeing the mural on Friday for the first time after the scaffolding was removed.

“You can see the lemons on the trees,” she said. “Wow.”