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## A REBIRTH OF PUBLIC ART

**Francis Davis Millet's "Mail Delivery" murals of the Cleveland Federal Building were rescued by the U.S. GSA Fine Arts Program in a recent restoration by McKay Lodge Fine Arts Conservation Laboratory, Inc. of Oberlin, Ohio.**

By Nicole V. Gagné

When the construction of Cleveland's Federal Building was completed in 1910, the Beaux Arts structure became the new home for the city's federal courts and customs collector. The building's pride, however, was its post office, the main post office for the city of Cleveland and a symbol of American progress and efficiency. Like all symbols, its symbolism had to be overt to make its meaning clear, and so the New York-based architect Arnold W. Brunner (designer of the building, under the direction of James Knox Taylor, the Supervising Architect of the Treasury), turned to the American artist Francis Davis Millet (1846-1912) for a series of murals that could inspire the public.

A respected figure, whose work can be found in the collections of the Tate Gallery in London and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Millet rose to the challenge. He painted 35 images depicting the various methods by which mail has been delivered throughout the world, from the American Pony Express to the camel riders of Arabia. Land, sea and air deliveries are all represented by Millet's "Mail Delivery" series, presenting a global embrace that celebrates the exchange of mail as a cornerstone of civilized life, regardless of race, nationality, religion or culture.



Built between 1903 and 1910, Cleveland's majestic Federal Building — renamed the Howard M. Metzenbaum U.S. Courthouse in 2002 — is a five-story granite-faced building in the Beaux Arts style, richly detailed with 42-ft.-tall Corinthian columns, elaborate window pediments and statuary by famed sculptor Daniel Chester French. *All photos: courtesy of the U.S. General Services Administration Fine Arts Collection.*





Above: At the McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory, conservator Stefan Dedeczek and assistant Dee Pipik attend to the restoration of Millet's mural of mail in the 19th-century America being delivered by stagecoach.

Left: The restored "Stage Coach Post, United States" mural offers a dramatic glimpse of the rigors of mail delivery on the American frontier.

The murals were completed in 1911 and fixed to the walls of the post master's office on the second floor: a grand, 950-sq. ft. corner-office space that unfortunately was not visited by the general public. There the murals remained, outlasting the Federal Building's post office itself, which was relocated to a larger space in 1934. The Collector of U.S. Customs, the office's new occupant, got to admire Millet's artistry until 1955; additional space had to be allotted to the federal courts, and the murals were taken down from the walls and stored away in the building. And largely forgotten.

### The Appropriate Context

The Federal Building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, but the rebirth of the "Mail Delivery" murals didn't begin until the 1980s, thanks to the intercession of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). One of the three central management agencies in the federal government, GSA provides managed space, supplies, services and solutions to enable federal employees to accomplish their tasks. Along with workspaces, security and equipment, GSA's responsibilities include the preservation of historic buildings and their government-commissioned works of art. The fine Arts Program of GSA sought to protect and care for the Millet murals until they could be restored and displayed once again.

In 1998 the Federal Building was renamed the Howard M. Metzenbaum U.S. Courthouse, and in 2002 a renovation began under the architectural firm of Westlake Reed Leskosky and Construction Manager Dick Corporation, both of Cleveland, OH. Costing some \$44.6 million and funded entirely by the federal government, the project tackled a range of needs throughout the building. Insufficient spaces were gutted and transformed into high-tech, 21st-century offices and courtrooms; circulation changes made

the building more functional; handicap accessibility was created; original plasterwork and lighting fixtures were replicated.

The moment had come for the restoration and reinstallation of the Millet murals. GSA Project Manager Pam Wilczynski insists, "Reinstalling the art became a major aim. Nothing we could do today could compare with this art and the story it conveys. The most appropriate place for them, despite the changes in the building's function, was there." Regional Historic Preservation Officer Regina Nally adds, "When the current restoration project began, many different options were discussed regarding the murals. But in the end, we knew they had to go back into the original building — which had been created with the cooperation of many different artisans. There are other storytelling murals also installed in the building, which helped maintain an appropriate context for the Millet murals."

### A Uniform Level

The experts of McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory, Inc. of Oberlin, OH, were brought in on the project to perform the painstaking restoration of the entire mural series. Robert Lodge comments, "These pictures have had a hard life. They had been coated with layers of linseed oil at varying times, which has caused the murals to darken. And because that work was done unevenly through the years, the murals are in varying states of clarity. In restoring them, we have to be careful to bring them to a uniform level, so that no one panel is brighter than the others. Fortunately, they'll be arranged with some space between them, which allows us some liberties in the range of the cleaning, as opposed to everything appearing exactly the same way."

However, the murals had suffered far worse damage than just injudicious applications of linseed oil: Their removal from the building's walls had resulted in areas of





Above: After in-painting, Millet's "Mail Transfer, North China" mural looks very much as it did when it was first hung in 1911.



Inset: The paint losses have been filled in on this Chinese-themed mural, but the painstaking job of in-painting the missing areas has yet to begin.



Lower right: Layers of linseed oil had been haphazardly applied to the murals throughout the years, presenting conservator Stefen Dedecek with the complex task of cleaning away the old oil films that had darkened the paintings.



Millet's "City Delivery, India," with its fleet-footed mail carriers, underscores the urgency of the global need for prompt and reliable postal service.

paint loss, due to the workers tugging at them when they were taken down. "They caused a shearing of the paint," Lodge explains, "and left what seemed like lightning bolts of white ground cutting through the murals. Easily 75% of the work we had to do on them was in-painting to replicate these missing sections." Hundreds of hours of work were required to properly in-paint the damaged murals.

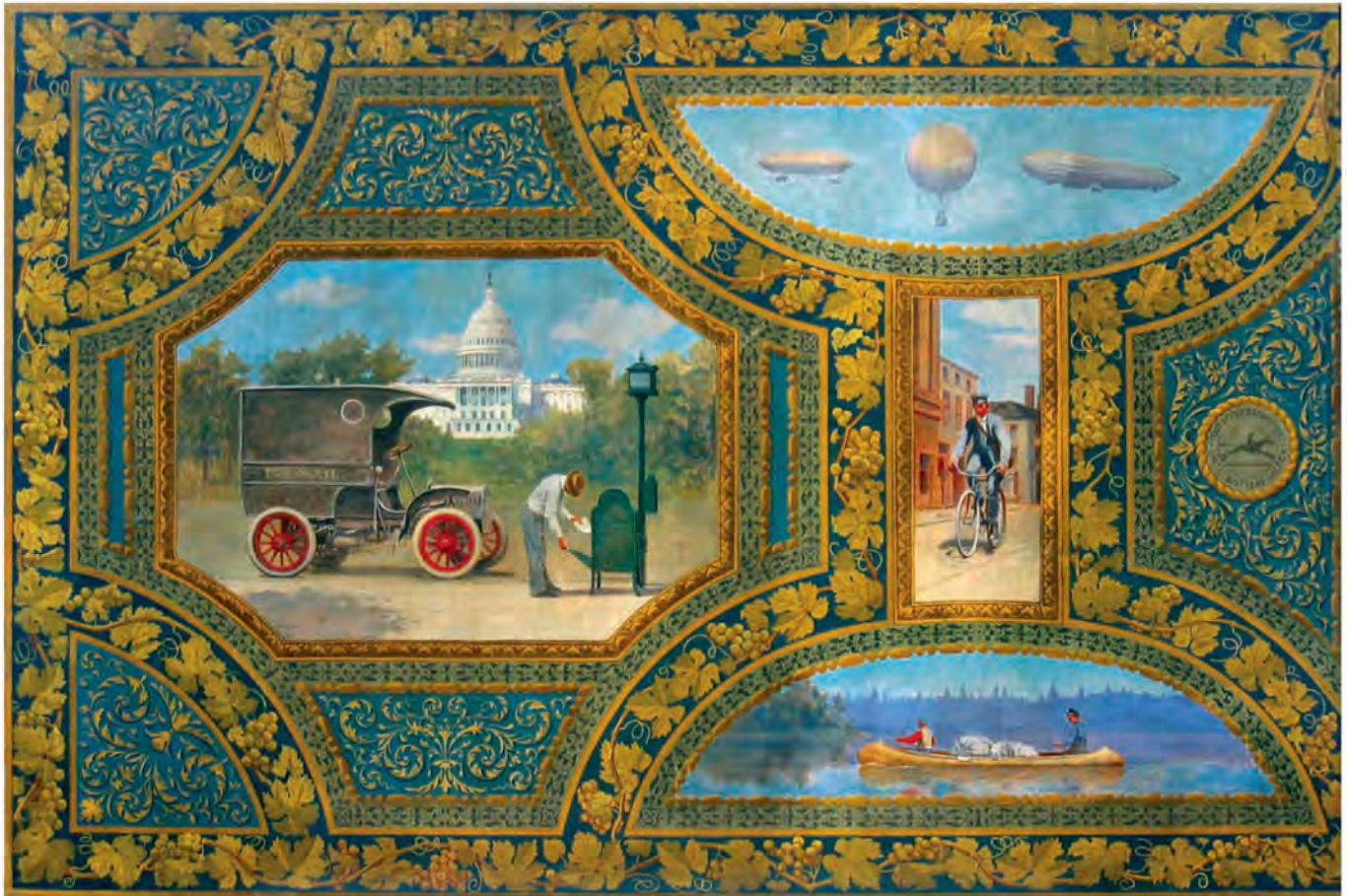
The restoration effort was further complicated by the method that had been originally used to affix the murals to the walls: "The murals had originally been attached using heavy layers of lead white, which is lead carbonate combined with linseed oil. This substance is sticky enough to adhere the canvas to the walls, and then becomes very hard. So, when the murals were removed, chunks of wall plaster and concrete block and lead-based adhesive were stuck to their backs — all which had to be removed or made smooth without damaging the paintings."

Lodge's firm is also responsible for the reinstallation of the restored murals, and has devised a reversible attachment system.

### On Public View

Millet's "Mail Delivery" murals will not only live again, but they will also be made directly available to the public; instead of being sequestered in a private office, the series is slated to occupy a public area on the first floor, inside the main entrance of the courthouse. Selecting a new location of adequate size and illumination took a great deal of ingenuity. Westlake Reed Leskosky, the GSA team, and





This multi-panel mural by Millet, entitled "Collection; Special Delivery, Washington, D.C.," is an iconic summation of the U.S. Postal Service, fulfilling its duties in the air (blimp, balloon and dirigible), on land (car and bicycle), and across the waters (canoe).

Robert Lodge spent months determining the ideal location for the murals. Paul E. Westlake, Jr., FAIA, the managing principal and lead designer of Westlake Reed Leskosky, has remarked on the "exhaustive technical analysis" of light levels and mural arrangement, which went into this decision-making. "The space that's been chosen, along with its lighting, palette of colors and materials, will present the murals to the best advantage while preserving the historic integrity of the courthouse," he assures.

June 2005 is the target date for the opening of the renovated courthouse and the unveiling of the restored murals. The public will then become more aware of the special debt it owes GSA's Fine Arts Program. In the words of the program's director, Alicia Weber, "The original works of art in the GSA's Fine Arts Collection represent the history, culture and ideals of our country."

By making these artworks available to the public in their original splendor, America's history, culture and ideals become not just the stuff of books and speeches, but realities that can uplift the spirit. The Howard W. Metzenbaum U.S. Courthouse and Francis Davis Millet's "Mail Delivery" murals will certainly prove to be an admirable source of inspiration for the public for decades to come. ♦