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Emerson 'history' a mystery

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STAFF WRITER | THE RECORD

EMERSON — There is a giant sea monster lurking in a shadowy corner in the basement of Borough Hall.

The 77-year-old painting — which shows the creature clutching a topless woman in one tentacle and a pitcher of beer in another — is one of several New Deal-era murals that adorn the basement's cinder block walls.

Their provenance remains something of a mystery to borough officials, who plan to consult with an art expert later this year as a first step toward ensuring their long-term preservation.

The prevailing belief is that the surreal, and somewhat risqué, murals were painted when Borough Hall was built as part of a Works Progress Administration project in 1939.

"I've never found anyone older than me — and I'm 87 — who knows much about them," Bill Wassmann, the chairman of Emerson's Historic Preservation Commission, said of the murals. "But these paintings are part of an important era of our country's history."

Borough Hall was built as a multipurpose building. It housed the Fire Department's headquarters and even a stage where the council chambers are now, Wassmann said.

It is less clear if the murals were commissioned under the Federal Art Project, a section of the WPA in which hundreds of artists were hired to create more than 100,000 paintings, including murals, across the country during the Great Depression. Much of the artwork produced under the program was in government buildings.

In Emerson, most of the New Deal-era murals are scattered throughout the seldom-used basement in a conference room, in a police radio equipment room, and in old jail cells now used to store evidence.

While the sea monster mural is perhaps the most striking, several others have tongue-in-cheek themes — and are not the usual decorative fare chosen for government buildings. Many are signed by someone named "Haring" and are dated as having been painted in 1939.

In the conference room, one mural depicts a police officer approaching an older man in a bowler hat surrounded by brightly colored, cartoonish elephants and other strange figures. The caption below the mural reads, "All right you guys, break it up!"

In a small room off the conference room, another mural shows a group of rowdy people — including one woman with an exposed breast — on a boardwalk as a flag with "Emerson" written on it flies in the background.

The murals on the walls of the old jail cells are the most thematically appropriate. These were the "drunk tanks," where people arrested for public intoxication or drunken driving could sober up under close supervision.



STAFF PHOTOS BY AMY NEWMAN

These Borough Hall paintings may have been done when the building was constructed in the 1930s.

"Don't mix alcohol and gas: modern conditions demand clear thinking," says the message accompanying one mural. "The world's meanest: the hit and run driver. Will your home be next?" asks another.

New Deal-era art programs were conceived to help lift artists out of poverty while serving the larger purpose of giving ordinary Americans wider access to art and culture. Diana L. Linden, an art historian and an expert on WPA murals, said that they tended to be painted in schools, community centers, jail, libraries and post offices.

While she wasn't familiar with Emerson's murals, she said it is uncommon for paintings commissioned under the Federal Art Project to depict nudity or other outlandish things — for instance, a sea monster hoisting aloft a nude woman and a frosty mug of beer.

"They tended to be very safe in terms of imagery with upbeat messages," Linden said. "Though they did tend to tailor the message to whatever building's function was. So imprisonment in a jail cell makes sense."

Despite what they may depict or whether they were definitively commissioned under the Federal Art Project, Linden said it is important to preserve any artwork from that period. Many New Deal-era paintings and other artwork were destroyed or lost in the 1950s, when Cold War fears led some people to conclude that they represented "communist propaganda."

"To get rid of murals like this, it goes against most preservation and historical rules," Linden said. "The New Deal was a unique moment, and in terms of artists it was the first time the government really made a stand, saying artists matter to society and gave them a role in society and helping to heal the effects of the Great Depression."

Borough Administrator Bob Hoffmann said that after Borough Hall flooded in June 2015, he became concerned that humidity was causing the murals to deteriorate. Several of the murals have begun to fade, and paint has started to chip around the edges.

Since then, Hoffmann said, the borough has fixed the flooding problem and the air conditioning system in the basement, making it "noticeably less humid."

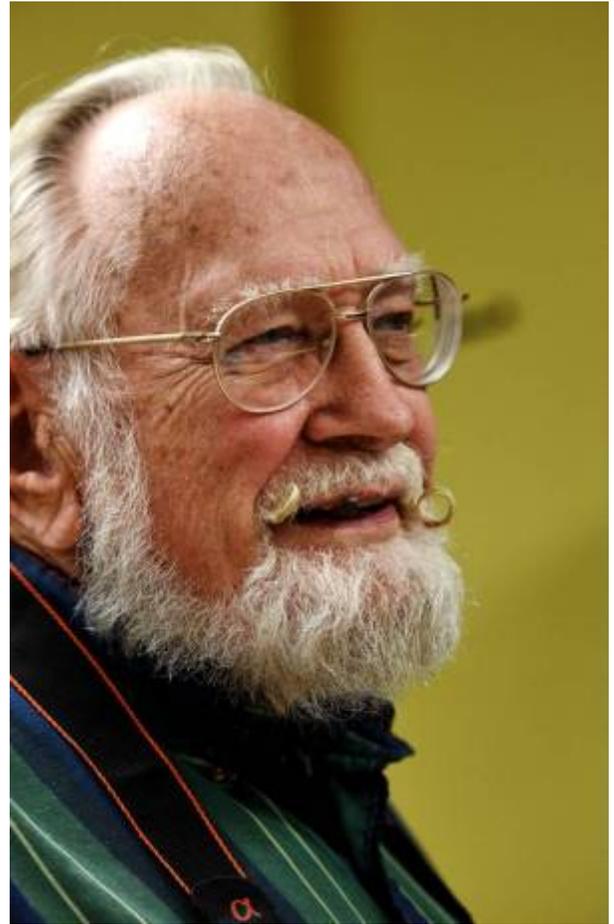
Later this year a professional specializing in art restoration will inspect the murals, Hoffmann said, and recommend techniques to preserve them.

Borough officials have begun discussing the possibility of renovating Borough Hall since the purchase earlier this year of two properties across the street from the municipal building. Regardless of what happens, if anything, Hoffmann said he is committed to making sure the murals are preserved.

"No matter what renovations happen or whatever happens here, we can preserve them," he said. "It's a piece of Emerson's history and U.S. history. We walk by history every day in Borough Hall."

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