

Restoration of historic John Biggers mural underway

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Art restorer Scott Haskins works on the mural titled "The Contribution of the Negro Woman in American Life and Education," Monday, Jan. 14, 2019, in Houston. The mural was created by Dr. John Biggers in 1953 and is located at the Blue Triangle Community Center. The mural was severely damaged by Hurricane Harvey.

Photo: Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Layer by layer, dot by dot, restoration work on a historic John Biggers mural in Third Ward is nearing completion as the community center that houses the artwork completes roof repairs.

The 1953 masterpiece, "Contribution of Negro Women to American Life and Education," suffered damage during Hurricane Harvey. Flood waters that seeped into the wall the mural is painted on caused the structure to swell and black mold grew into the paint.

Work on the mural had been put on hold until repairs to the Blue Triangle Multi-Cultural Association building's roof could be done. Charlotte Kelly Bryant, the association's founding president, said several Houstonians pitched in with donations after word got out that more funds were needed to get repairs underway. Initial donations came from the Houston Endowment, National Endowment for the Humanities, Texas Historical Commission, and the Kinder Foundation.

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"I'm relieved and feel blessed," Bryant said.

The community center's roof is expected to be fully repaired before the end of the month. Restoration and preservation work on the mural is slated for completion by the end of the week. It's being done by Scott Haskins, a California-based conservator of fine art.

Haskins came recommended by the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Bryant said. Having trained in Italy, and specializing in murals, Haskins previously took inventory of Biggers' works at Texas Southern University, where the prolific artist started an art program.

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Haskins' first conservator job called for restoring a 1365 mural in an Italian monastery. Yet he described Biggers' Third Ward piece as carrying a greater significance not just for him for the art world at large.

"He's telling stories," Haskins said of Biggers' work. "This isn't just a decoration."

When Haskins saw images of the initial damage the Third Ward mural sustained, he said he grew concerned about the painting's stability. The mold looked like it was "growling at you," he said, and the wall on which the mural was directly painted on had a spongy quality to it.

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After Harvey, staff from the Houston Museum of Fine Arts treated the painting, adding dehumidifiers to the room, partially covering the damaged roof overhead, filling in paint gaps with Japanese tissue paper. That temporary work succeeded in stabilizing the mural and the wall.

"The folks at the center did everything right," Haskins said.

Since the mural is composed of several layers of paint, Haskins is going through each layer, removing mold where he can and dotting in color-matched paint in areas where paint chips have popped off. The work requires a steady hand as some portions of the mural have colors so sensitive, they can disappear with human saliva, he said.

Once all gaps are filled and the mold is fully removed, Haskins plans to apply a protective varnish.

"We don't want to preserve this for the next five or 10 years," he said, "We want it to last for generations."

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