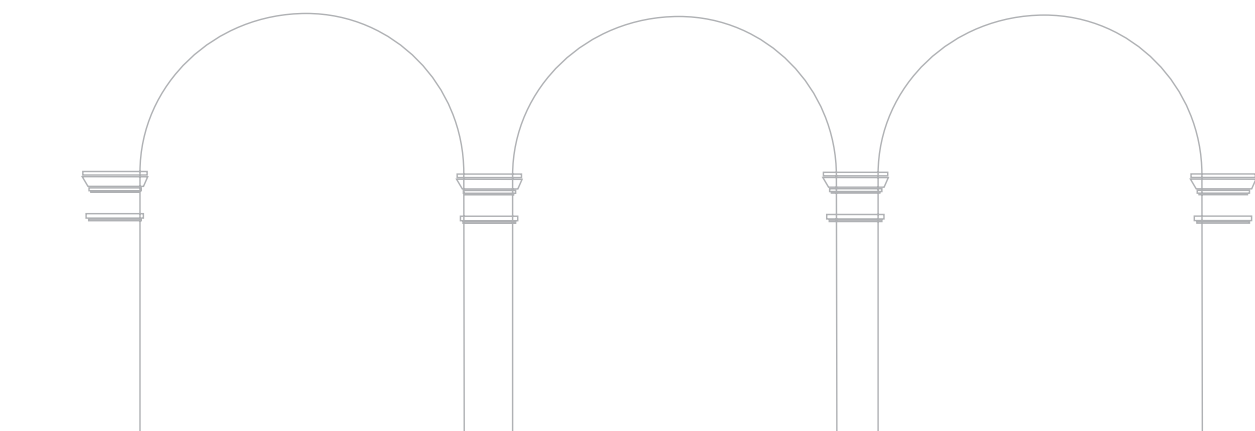




RESTORING

GRANDEUR



at the
★ ★ ★
Bama Theatre

by Bebe Barefoot Lloyd

Tuscaloosa's Bama Theatre is an architectural and cultural treasure,

as well as one of only a few “atmospheric” theatres still in existence. In the 1920s, when movie theatres were still called “palaces,” an atmospheric experience gave cinema fans the feeling of being outside, surrounded by beauty and luxuriating underneath a sparkling sky as they enjoyed a new art form. Creating these atmospheres was no small task, and talented artists worked with skilled architects to make it happen. The Bama’s designers commissioned Italian artist Navino Nataloni to create murals so that the theatre’s interior would replicate an Italianate courtyard, and patrons have enjoyed these surroundings since the late 1930s. Over nearly eight decades, though, what was less noticeable during dimly lit performances but glaringly apparent in the light of day was the gradual deterioration of these magnificent murals. A few years ago, the Arts Council of Tuscaloosa recognized that a facelift was in order.



Time has stopped in this photo taken from the corner of Greensboro Ave. and 6th St. in downtown Tuscaloosa, c. 1937-38. The construction of the new Bama Theatre/City Hall is underway, symbolizing a bright future for the growing city.

“I realized right away that the material I’d be working with was not the traditional materials I’d been trained to use, but I was confident I could do the restoration and still maintain the integrity.” - Ruth O’Connor

All artwork falls prey to decay, and restoration is an art form unto itself. The Council turned to Ruth O’Connor, an artist, teacher, and co-owner of O’Connor Art Studio. She spearheaded the impressive two-year project and did the actual mural restoration, now complete, but she insists that it was a team effort.

“This was my first historical restoration project,” says O’Connor. “I realized right away that the material I’d be working with was not the traditional materials I’d been trained to use, but I was confident I could do the restoration and still maintain the integrity.”

This meant learning as much as she could about the murals’ “canvas,” which consisted of panels made of a material then unknown to O’Connor—or to anyone else. Her initial considerations

had nothing to do with the murals. It was all about the panels. What were they made of? And, more importantly, what would mix with them?

O’Connor consulted several experts and brought people in to take a look. Her main contact was Louis Wagner, whose background included serving as Technical Director for the American Hardboard Association, and later as Executive Director of the North American Fiberboard Association.

“Louis helped me extensively in the beginning,” recalls O’Connor. “He helped me research the specific material. We worked on ideas for restoring it from an archival standpoint without losing its acoustic qualities. Without him, I would not have been able to start the project, and I would have been lost.”

Wagner first thought the panels were perforated hardboard, or what is popularly called pegboard. Closer examination revealed it to be perforated cellulosic fiberboard. According to Wagner, cellulosic fiberboard has been commercially available since 1914.

“One of its uses was for sound control in theaters, offices and residences,” he says. Wagner explains that fiberboard absorbs sound, which prevents echoes and other problems. “An acoustical engineer will use fiberboard to “tune” a theater or auditorium,” says Wagner. “That was done by the designer of the Bama Theatre.”

Once they determined the exact material used, the restoration team faced another dilemma, because some panel sections were so damaged that they could not be repaired. The

Artist Ruth O’Connor (top right) at work on the Bama murals with examples of the process.

problem: it has been decades since any manufacturer has made perforated fiberboard with the same perforation spacing and same size pieces as those in the Bama. Wagner told Ruth she had two choices. She could either buy new fiberboard, or she could take replacement pieces from “out-of-the-way” locations in the Bama. If she had chosen the first option, the material would have had to have been cut locally to size, and the holes drilled.

“That would be a lot of holes,” says Wagner. The second option seemed more practical and also made more sense from a historical perspective.

They pulled undamaged pieces from the theatre’s upstairs area to replace the damaged mural pieces. Less extensive damage on smaller sections of panels needed some kind of filler. This meant more research to determine the best material for that.

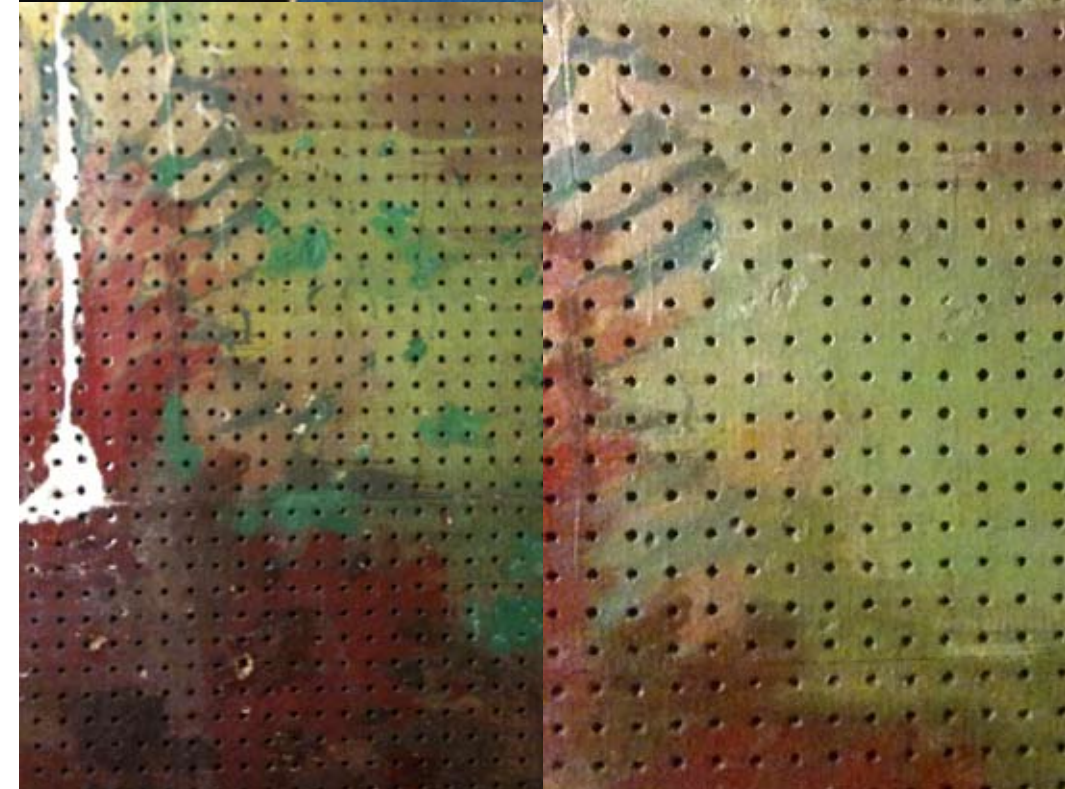
“I outsourced everything that wasn’t my expertise. This included filling in the smaller sections of damage and plaster work,” O’Connor says.

Because of acoustic considerations, the project was truly a marriage of art and science. Craig Brandt, an architect and musician, gave O’Connor excellent advice.

“Acoustics were a huge concern,” says O’Connor. “Craig was prime in this project, even though it took him only one visit and a few minutes of his time.”

Brandt gave guidance in several important areas of the project, and his dual expertise made his input indispensable.

“Craig is an incredible musician and can play the guitar like no one I’ve heard, all without formal training,” says O’Connor. “His love of music provided the perspective I needed to understand the special space at the theatre. It helped us restore the murals without sacrificing the acoustical qualities.”



With panel restoration complete, the painting could begin. O’Connor says that was the easy part. She tried to channel Nataloni, the original muralist, and asked herself “What did he do? What would he have done?”

“I especially tried to think about what he would have done and what tints and materials he would have used in his time,” she says.

Wagner notes that it is not

uncommon that an artist during that time would have used fiberboard as a substrate. “After the murals in the Bama Theatre, the next most famous example is Grant Wood’s American Gothic,” he says.

The restoration also revealed a surprise. The Arts Council thought this would be the first mural restoration, but O’Connor discovered evidence that some crude attempts had occurred



A view of a mural prior to restoration (top). Master carpenter Todd Peebles and master plasterer Nathan Goodson (left) completed restoration of details around the murals damaged by water. O'Connor utilized her extensive experience as an artist in color matching during the process (above).

during the 75 years since the theatre's construction.

"I fixed that, of course!" O'Connor laughs.

O'Connor's formal training more than qualified her to take on the task. She studied at the Maryland Institute College of Art, focusing on painting and drawing, which had also been her concentration as an undergraduate. She earned a Master's degree in "Art Teaching," and has been both a working artist and art instructor ever since.

O'Connor's husband, Caleb, created the murals that grace the Tuscaloosa Federal Courthouse, and that major project brought the couple to Tuscaloosa five years ago. Between 2001 and 2009, they lived in Italy, Hawaii, and Chicago. During those years, she recruited for the Maryland Institute, taught for an art center, and continued making her own art—all while having and raising two children. The O'Connors opened their Tuscaloosa studio in April 2013, and it continues to grow and add to Tuscaloosa's cultural fabric.

The Bama mural project's final phase, conservation, was especially important to O'Connor and that step is integral to any art restoration project. She knew they needed to go a step beyond the usual tactics used to protect art from normal decay, wear, and tear. Because the lower sections of the murals are accessible to anyone standing or sitting near them, measures had to be taken to also protect them from willful defacement. According to O'Connor, you could see a specific type of damage on mural sections that were reachable from theatre seats. It appeared that over the years, patrons had chipped away at the walls, probably not with malicious intent, but the results were the same had they been purposely vandalized.

To make sure this didn't happen again, they needed a literal shield, but one that would not detract from either aesthetics or acoustics. There were many solutions available, but most of them were not within budget. For this, they turned to one of Tuscaloosa's other



unsung treasures: Keith Elliott.

A self-taught artist who usually works with interior designers, architects, and contractors, Elliott had already worked with Caleb O'Connor on the final stages of the courthouse murals.

"I helped him wax those," he says. "It was a protective archival requirement."

Trained as an engineer, Elliott's extensive background in glass fabrication and art glass made him a natural choice for the conservation component. He works extensively with all surface elements used in interior design, including custom glass and wood panels. He calls himself a craftsman and says that he interprets other people's work.

"Ruth and I always try to find ways to work together," Elliott says, "so I was pleased to be involved in the Bama project."

The solution proved to be simple, but one that met conservation concerns as well as budgetary restrictions. Custom Plexiglas panels now protect

the restored murals. Elliott created a mock-up to make sure this was the way to go, and then they moved forward. If theatre-goers don't notice them, Elliott says that's a good thing because it means that he has done his job.

"I had to make it look like it isn't there. If you're looking for it, you'll see it, but otherwise, you don't notice," he says.

O'Connor is also pleased.

"Hopefully, thanks to Keith, the murals will outlast me," she says. While this was Ruth O'Connor's first art restoration project, it will certainly not be her last.

"I would do this again in a heartbeat," she says, "and I have done other restoration projects since taking this on."

She especially enjoyed the research process, and says that she learned so much that will make future projects a breeze.

Lately, O'Connor's focus has been on teaching, which she loves. She has started a new curriculum for the home-schooling community. She and Caleb

also offer classes at the studio.

"I run the business and teach," she says. "But I still feel that I'm living a creative life."

O'Connor is being modest. She not only lives a creative life, she also helps others realize their own creative potential, which in turn enriches the community's cultural texture. Through their studio, she and her husband are giving Tuscaloosa a much-needed, vibrant energy.

You might say it's restorative. ■

Freelance writer Bebe Barefoot Lloyd lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches in the Blount and New College programs at The University of Alabama.