

RESTORING THE KEY ROOM MURALS

AT ANDERSON HOUSE



AN APPEAL FOR YOUR SUPPORT
FROM THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI



The Key Room as it appeared in 1910, by renowned photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston.

“SELDOM HAS ONE SMALL ROOM
HAD COMPRESSED INTO IT SO FINE
AND COMPLETE A PRESENTATION
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William Walton, Harper's Monthly, April 1911

At the top of the Great Stairs of Anderson House is a formal reception room called the Key Room, after the Greek key motif on the floor, executed in Siena and white marble. It might more appropriately be known as the Mural Room, since its most spectacular feature is a beautiful series of wall and ceiling murals depicting themes associated with American history and the Society of the Cincinnati. The murals are the work of H. Siddons Mowbray, one of the most accomplished mural painters of his time. They were completed in 1909 and constitute one of the most important and valuable works of art owned by the Society of the Cincinnati.

The four wall murals memorialize the establishment of American independence, the settlement of the West, the preservation of the Union, and the victory of the United States over European colonialism. The themes that tie the four wall murals together are the triumph of liberty and devotion to the ideals of the Society of the Cincinnati, memorialized in the two large ceiling medallions, “Triumphant Republic” and the “The Genius of the Cincinnati.” The murals were immediately recognized as a masterpiece. Writing in Harper's Monthly in April 1911, critic William Walton commented: “Seldom has one small room had compressed into it so fine and complete a presentation of History by Art.”

The wall murals are now over one hundred years old and are in critical need of conservation and restoration. The Society needs your help to ensure they will be enjoyed by members and guests for centuries to come.



SYMBOLIZING THE SPIRIT OF THE CINCINNATI

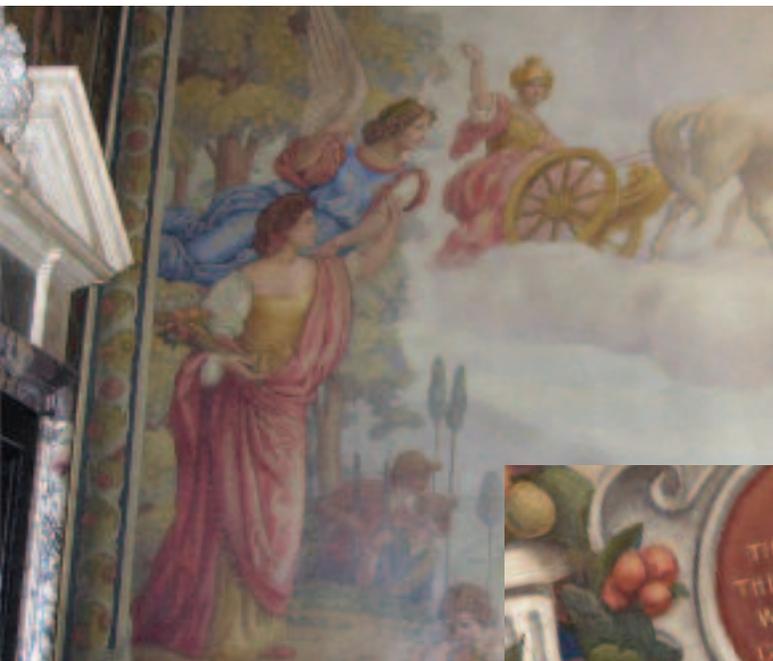
The murals symbolize and celebrate the spirit of the Society of the Cincinnati and its place in the history of our republic. Larz Anderson commissioned H. Siddons Mowbray (1858-1928) to paint the Key Room murals in early 1908. Mowbray was born in Alexandria, Egypt. He grew up in Massachusetts, trained in Europe, and settled in New York in 1886. His creativity, rich use of color, and talent in handling allegorical themes soon made him one of the most prominent mural painters of his time. Most of his murals were commissioned by clients in New York. His murals at the Morgan Library, the University Club, and the Hyde Park home of Frederick W. Vanderbilt are masterpieces—as are the Key Room murals at Anderson House, the only example of his work in the nation’s capital.

The north wall mural—the first and most important in the series—is titled “The Society of the Cincinnati Was Instituted in Peace after Revolution.” It depicts George Washington presenting a Society diploma to the marquis de Lafayette. Nathanael Greene, the comte de Rochambeau, and Lafayette’s aide, Richard Clough Anderson, watch from the left, while Baron von Steuben and Anthony Wayne watch from the right. Winged “Fame” flies in with laurel wreaths for the heroes of independence, while “Victory,” in a breastplate and helmet, watches from the right. The winged figure of “Peace”—Isabel Anderson was Mowbray’s model—floats above the scene. On either side are cherubs, holding panels bearing passages from the Immutable Principles.

To the left of this mural, the space between two windows is filled with a view of Cincinnati, Ohio, symbolizing westward expansion. It bears the legend “The City of Cincinnati Chose Its Name to Commemorate the Society of the Cincinnati.” The south wall mural, “The Order of the Loyal Legion Was Born out of Cruel Civil War,” commemorates the preservation of the republic and the triumph of liberty, drawing a parallel between the Society of the Cincinnati and the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. The final wall mural, “The Order of the Spanish-American War Records a Generous Fight for Freedom,” (below left)

depicts the bay at Santiago, Cuba, where the final victory of the war ended four hundred years of Spanish colonial dominion in the New World.

Larz Anderson described the ceiling murals as “an Apotheosis of the Spirit of the Cincinnati.” They feature large central medallions depicting allegorical figures of “Triumphant Republic” and “The Genius of the Cincinnati.” On the east and west ends of the ceiling are gilded panels with cherubs holding the sides of the Society of the Cincinnati insignia. In the corners are blue and white panels in high relief depicting the “Farmer Patriot,” the French Alliance, the American victory, and the exploration and settlement of the West.





In "The Society of the Cincinnati Was Instituted in Peace after Revolution," George Washington presents a Society diploma to Lafayette. The rich colors of the mural are obscured by decades of smoke and grime.



Smoke rises from Fort Sumter in this detail from "The Order of the Loyal Legion Was Born Out of Cruel Civil War" as allegorized figures representing War and the South look on.

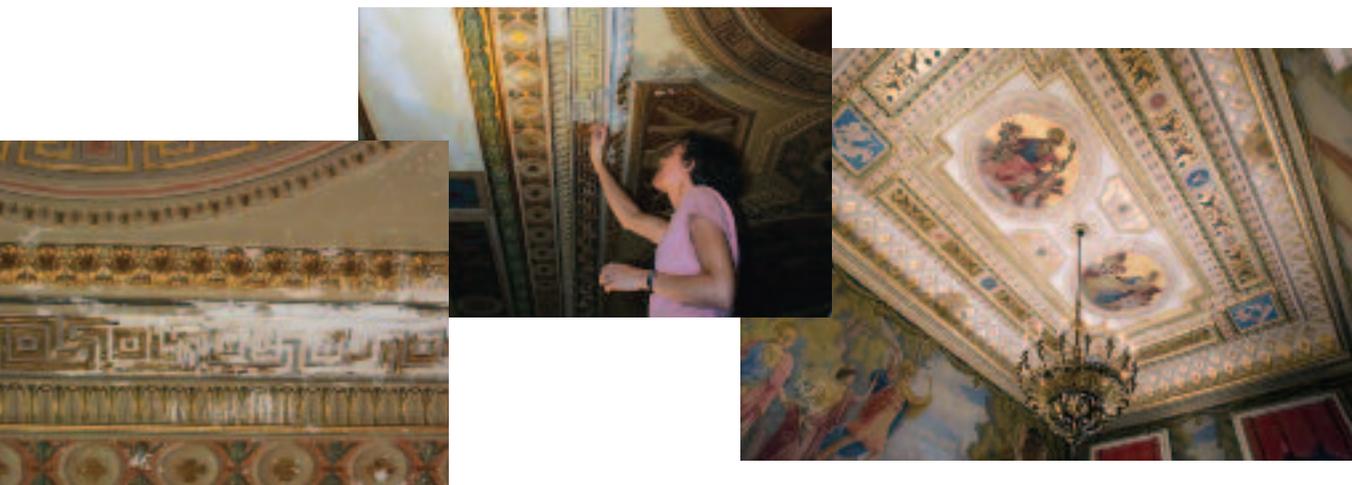
A MASTERPIECE AT RISK

In 2005 the Society assessed its art collection and identified the Key Room murals as endangered. They were covered with the accumulated grime of more than a century, along with decades of cigarette smoke obscuring the original bright colors. They had never been properly cleaned. A catastrophic water leak from the room above had severely damaged the ceiling murals. Not as visible, but more alarming, was the increasing instability of the canvas. The wall murals were executed on strips of canvas sixteen feet high and attached to the walls with a layer of glue. The glue was found to be decaying and the canvas was beginning to buckle and pull away from the walls, especially around the windows and doors.

The ceiling murals were the in the worst condition and were the first to be conserved and restored. In the fall of 2006 a group of perceptive and generous donors pledged the funds necessary to restore the ceiling murals, which had been badly damaged by a water leak in the 1990s. They were led by Thomas Stephen Kenan III (North Carolina Society), who provided a fifty percent challenge grant, matched collectively by George Sunderland Rich (Maryland Society), Charles Lilly Coltman III (Pennsylvania Society), Rufus Putnam Van Zandt (Massachusetts Society), George Miller Chester (Connecticut Society), a member who wishes to remain Anonymous and the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati. Through their generosity, the ceiling murals were conserved and restored in 2007.

To carry out the delicate work, the Society selected Olin Conservation of Great Falls, Virginia, a recognized leader in the conservation of painted surfaces. The firm has conserved the murals in the rotunda of the National Archives building in Washington and the massive cyclorama painting of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg National Military Park, among other high-profile projects.

Conservators worked six days a week for more than two months in early 2007 to restore the ceiling murals. They stabilized and consolidated flaking paint and gilt, removed previous overpainting, re-secured buckling canvas panels to the ceiling, filled in areas of lost gilt and paint, and cleaned the grime from the surface. One of the most dramatic improvements occurred in the northwest corner, where the prior water damage was most severe. To repair this area, the conservators removed the efflorescence on the surface and underneath the paint layer, stabilized and consolidated the crumbling and cracked plaster, and repaired lost paint and gilt. This painstaking work has returned the ceiling murals to their original brilliance.



PRESERVING A MASTERPIECE—WITH YOUR HELP

The walls didn't suffer catastrophic water damage like the ceiling, but their condition was—and remains—precarious. The successful conservation and restoration of the ceiling revealed the gleaming colors the artist intended us to enjoy, and made the dull and dirty walls much more apparent.

The Society's original plan was to appeal for support to conserve and restore the wall murals in the fall of 2008 and have Olin Conservation finish the work in the spring of 2009—the one hundredth anniversary of their completion. But with the economy sliding rapidly into the worst recession in a lifetime, the fall of 2008 was the wrong time to appeal for charitable support. We put the project on hold. Now, with the economy recovering and many more of us in a position to make charitable gifts, the time has arrived to complete the work we so ably started by reviving the beautiful ceiling murals.

The conservators are prepared to remove the accumulated grime, discoloration and previous unwise overpainting on the wall murals and to fill damaged areas in the paint. We have also asked them to take on the difficult work of reattaching the canvas panels to the wall where they have begun to pull apart, to mend tears and raised seams, and stabilize the canvas around the doors and windows, particularly where it is already loose. This is specialized work that requires considerable experience and expertise and a large investment in time. Olin Conservation estimates that the work will take their team four to five months of daily work to complete.

The total cost of this project is \$120,000, which we intend to fund entirely through gifts dedicated to this special purpose. With the support of our members and friends, we can complete this important project in the near future.

If you would like further information or would like to discuss this important project, please call Executive Director Jack Warren (202-785-2040 ext. 422) or Deputy Director & Curator Emily Schulz (202-785-2040 ext. 428).

