



Conserving WPA-Era Art at San Diego State University: The Removal, Restoration, and Re-Installation of D. Genevieve Burgeson Bredo's 1936 *NRA Packages*

Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz

Introduction

Almost as soon as the discovery of two WPA-era murals in the basement of Hardy Tower had been announced, the question arose concerning the best way to conserve the once-forgotten university treasures. Less than a month after the front page of the *San Diego Union-Tribune* declared: "Professor discovers 'soul of university': Murals celebrating workers found behind SDSU ceiling," the newspaper ran a follow-up article entitled "Works in progress," whose large-font header asked: "Can recently discovered murals at SDSU be restored? And at what cost?" (*San Diego Union Tribune* May 26, 2006; *San Diego Union Tribune* June 19, 2006). There was an obvious need to move the murals; they had been extensively and repeatedly damaged by the installation of various pipes and electrical conduits, they were endangered by a nearby set of pipes that had recently burst, and the 1957-59 re-model of the Hardy Tower basement had blocked any public viewing of the 72-year-old student masterpieces. However, the conservation process would be extremely difficult because the murals were painted directly on the load-bearing walls of the historic building, in an area of the campus that saw continual use by faculty, staff, and students.

This article details the six-month conservation process for the removal, restoration, and re-installation of one of these murals, D. Genevieve Burgeson Bredo's 1936 *NRA Packages*. Nathan Zakheim Associates performed the work for the university from May to October of 2007, using funds raised by Seth Mallios, Chair of the SDSU Department of Anthropology, and C. Vinita Dowell, Dean of the SDSU Library. Mallios and Dowell secured money for this endeavor through grants from the SDSU President's Leadership Fund and the Parker Foundation, and gifts from members of the Friends of the SDSU Library Board and other interested individuals in the community. Mallios and Dowell also oversaw a variety of concurrent research and public education projects related to the murals. The work presented here begins with recent findings from research regarding the personal history of the undergraduate student-artist who created the mural, and then details the steps that Nathan Zakheim Associates used to restore it. This article ends with a brief discussion on the significance and multi-leveled symbolism of the artwork.

D. Genevieve Burgeson Bredo

Contemporary volumes of *Del Sudoeste*, the San Diego State College yearbook, include information and photographs of the student muralist, D. Genevieve Burgeson. Bredo was her

DEL SUDOESTE 1935

KENDALL CARROL ARNETT
A. B. Junior High, P. E. Special
WILBUR ROSS AUSTIN
A. B. Junior High
GEORGE HUGH BACON, JR.
A. B. Elementary, Junior High

MARGARET HARRIETTA BAIR
A. B. Elementary
FREDERIC TYHURST BANKERD
A. B. Art Special
MILDRED BARNEY
A. B. Elementary, Music Special

EILEEN MABEL BEERS
A. B. Presecondary
R. EUGENIA BENSON
A. B. Elementary, Junior High
ELIZABETH GRESS BENTON
A. B. Presecondary

JOHN V. BENTON
A. B. Presecondary
RUTH G. BRADLEY
A. B. Presecondary
JOHN H. BRINEMAN
A. B. Presecondary

HELEN J. BRUNSON
A. B. Elementary, Junior High
WILLIAM CHARLES BUBY
A. B. Presecondary
D. GENEVIEVE BURGESSON
A. B. Art Special



Figure 5.1. Page 39 of the 1935 San Diego State College yearbook, *Del Sudoeste*, contained D. Genevieve Burgess's graduation photograph in the lower right corner and listed her degree and teaching specialization. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

DEL SUDOESTE 1935

Art Guild

Founded 1928



FACULTY

Ilse Hamann

MEMBERS

Frederic Bankerd
Betty Bell
Clara Marie Bollo
Frances Box
Albert Bradt
Genevieve Burgeson
S. B. Carlisle
Fred Chilcott
Ed Churchman
Elizabeth Cridge
Mary Crouch
Rosalie Dany
June Draper
Agnessmae E. Fleming
Phyllis Hale
Evelyn Henning
Lucille Johnson
Margaret Kimbrough
Sydna Kobusch
Winifred Lawford
Clare Lippincott
Ellamarie Packard
Margaret Peirce
Ruby Mae Peters
Carol Roberts
Helen H. Shreve
George Sorenson
Elinor Soule
Jack Stafford
Margaret Standish
Frances Thorkelson
Betty Weiskotten
Charlotte Wilson
Paul Wolff
George Worthington



Bankerd, Bell
Bollo, Box
Bradt, Burgeson, Cridge
Dany, Hale, Henning, Johnson
Kobusch, Lawford, Packard, Peirce
Peters, Roberts, Shreve, Sorenson, Soule
Stafford, Standish, Weiskotten, Wilson, Wolff, Worthington



One hundred forty-nine

Figure 5.2. The Art Guild photograph in the 1935 San Diego State College yearbook included an image on page 149 of D. Genevieve Burgeson; her picture is in the third row and second column from the left. Fellow student muralists Ellamarie Packard and George Sorenson are in the fifth row, second column from the left and sixth row, fourth column from the left respectively. Burgeson and Packard were life-long friends, building on a relationship that started at San Diego State College in the 1930s. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

married name; it post-dated her time at San Diego State. The first yearbook picture was Burgeson's graduation photograph from 1935, the caption listing her degree as "A.B." and her teaching emphasis as "Art Special" (Figure 5.1). The students in that particular section of the yearbook have their Bachelor's degree listed in conjunction with their teaching specialty or level. The 1935 volume also contains an image of Burgeson on the Art Guild page. Founded in 1928, the San Diego State College Art Guild included two other student muralists as well, Ellamarie Packard and George Sorenson (Figure 5.2). The 1936 yearbook contains an image of Burgeson with her mural, *Lumber Working* (Figure 5.3). Unlike the two recently discovered WPA-era murals—Burgeson's *NRA Packages* and Sorenson's *San Diego Industry*—Burgeson's *Lumber Working* and Packard's *Packing Oranges* and *Sailors Going to Hell* were obliterated during the 1957-59 Hardy Tower renovations (Mallios and Purvis 2006). The only images that remain of the three destroyed murals are snapshots that librarians Edward Hess and Gordon Samples took just prior to the renovation in addition to the 1936 yearbook photograph described here (see figure 5.3) (Mallios and Purvis 2006). *Del Sudoeste's* picture of Burgeson pointing to her *Lumber Working* mural is on the yearbook's art page. It includes the following description of San Diego State's Art department:

ART

In keeping with the tendency of the college to become more liberal in its academic program and with the change of status from a Teachers' College to a Regional State College, the Art department has been giving increased attention to the needs of special art students. Without neglecting the special experiences required by prospective art teachers, the department has nevertheless begun to incorporate material into its courses and to add new courses especially designed to develop the student interest in commercial and fine arts.

As a part of the material of the composition class the students who have studied problems in wall decoration and have actually carried out in true fresco large designs of the hallway of the department. The reproduction above [Burgeson's *Lumber Working*] is an example of some of the fresco work done by students in the class. They have also studied various techniques such as egg tempera and have made practical use of this knowledge.

There have been several new courses added to the department and there will be more to come. There is now an advanced course in design which stresses printing processes and advertising design. There was recently added a course in life drawing and a class in the appreciation of costume and home furnishings, which is just another step toward making art a part of our everyday living (p. 67).

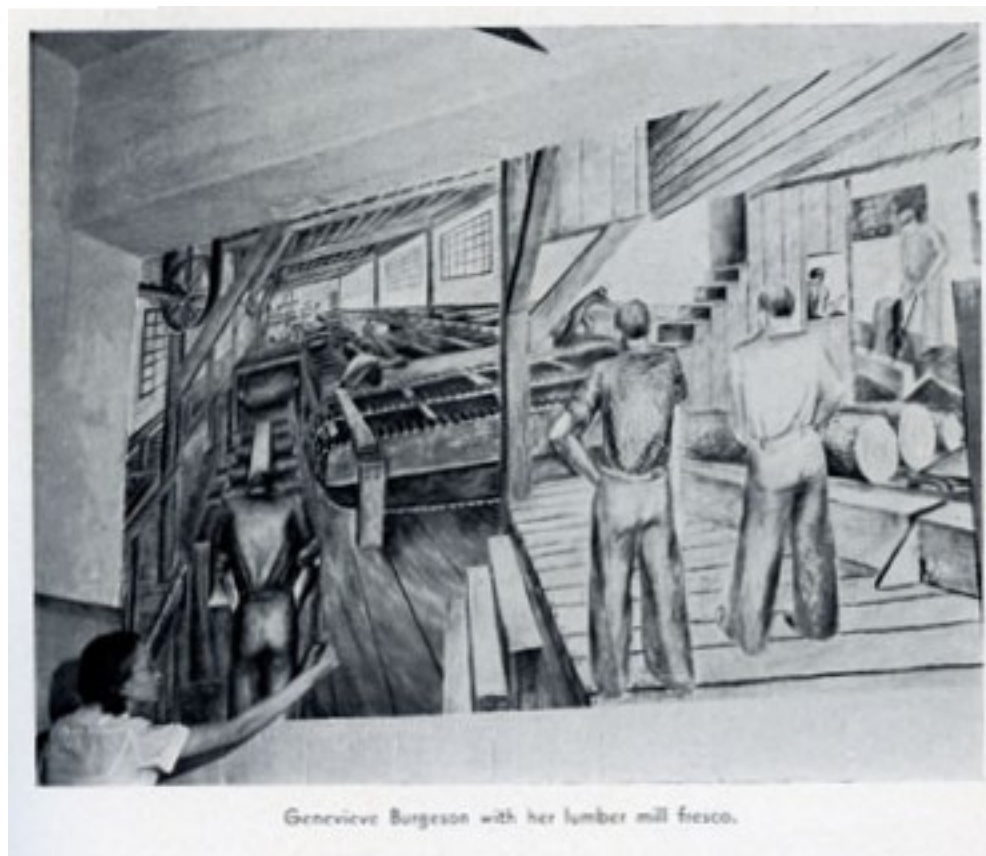


Figure 5.3. The 1936 *Del Sudoeste* included a picture of Genevieve Burgeson with her lumber-mill mural on a page (67) dedicated to the Art department. This mural was completely destroyed during the 1957-59 renovations of Hardy Memorial Tower. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

In discussing the 1935 college-wide transformation from Teachers' College to Regional State College, the yearbook noted that the San Diego State Art faculty had expanded the curriculum from teacher training to include instruction for art professionals. In addition, the yearbook's description of an "egg-tempera" technique referred to Sorenson's *San Diego Industry* mural. Egg tempera is an artistic technique that uses egg yolk to bind paint pigments. Artists make the paints by mixing paint pigment with water and egg yolk, and then apply the paint in layers. Whereas Burgeson's oil-based mural was painted directly onto the concrete, Sorenson's work incorporated several layers of paint and plaster—nearly half an inch thick—that coated the underlying wall.

Recent interviews with Eric Bredo, the son of D. Genevieve Burgeson Bredo, provided important background information regarding her life and legacy. D. Genevieve Burgeson was born on April 14, 1914, in Fort Dodge, Iowa. She was of Swedish descent; her father's family were Burgesons and her mother's kin were Magnussons. Genevieve's father was an electrical engineer and her mother was a cafeteria cook. She received dual Bachelor's degrees in Art and Education at San Diego State College in 1935, then earned a Master's degree at Columbia University's Teachers' College in 1942. Her extensive professional career included over three decades of teaching and administrative experience, instructing and coordinating a wide variety of arts and crafts courses at elementary schools, junior high schools, junior colleges, and

universities. She traveled extensively, emphasizing art and archaeology in her trips, and incorporating these global experiences into her teaching and artistic endeavors. Her son Eric (Figure 5.4), now a Professor at the University of Virginia, reflected fondly on their travels, noting, “One time, we took about two months to travel to Pakistan, staying or stopping in Japan for 11 days, Hong Kong, Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Ceylon, and India along the way. She orchestrated an education in Western Civilization for me on the way back, as we went from Beirut to Jerusalem to Egypt to Crete to Greece, Italy, Germany, Sweden, and England” (Eric Bredo, personal communication 2007).



Figure 5.4. Eric Bredo and his mother Genevieve Bredo at the archery range in Glen Echo Park, Maryland, circa 1951. Courtesy of Eric Bredo.

In addition to various family photographs, Eric Bredo forwarded his mother’s four-page resume from the 1970s to Mallios (Figure 5.5). It detailed Genevieve Bredo’s education, teaching experience, exhibited works, travels, private collection, and personal qualifications. The resume included her hand-written tabulations of graduate credits from various institutions in the upper left corner of the first page (see figure 5.5). The personal qualifications section presented Bredo’s interests in the first person. Her dedication to teaching was clear; she declared: “My first interest is in teaching” and “Perhaps the most important thing I can say is that I most thoroughly enjoy teaching.”

Graduate work

UC	4
TC	32
SDSC	34
SJSC	6
USC	4
ISU	2
NOTICE DAME	4
<u>TOTAL GRAD</u>	<u>86</u>

PERSONAL RESUME

D. Genevieve Bredo
13220 Page Mill Road
Los Altos Hills, Ca. 94022
Telephone: 415-948-0867

Areas of Interest

Interested in Design and its application (Crafts, etc.), Drawing, Printmaking, Appreciation and Art History.

Education

9/31 to 6/35 San Diego State College, Art and Education majors.
B.A. degree (about 88 units past B.A.)

Summers 38, Teachers' College, Columbia University
40, 41, 42 Art major with some education. M.A. degree

9/35 to 6/68 Other graduate work, most of it in Art, at the following schools:
Art Center, Los Angeles
University of Southern California
Iowa State University
American University, Washington, D. C.
University of California, Berkeley
San Jose State College
College of Notre Dame, Belmont, California

Teaching Experience

7/36 to 12/41 Elementary and Junior High Art in California
(Escondido and El Segundo)

1/42 to 6/43 Iowa State University, Applied Art Department,
Color and Design with some Interior Decoration
and House Planning

9/47 to 6/48 University of New Hampshire. In charge of all
crafts except ceramics

Figure 5.5a. D. Genevieve's personal resume from the 1970s. Courtesy of Eric Bredo.

Teaching Experience (continued)

- 9/51 to 6/52 Western Jr. High Art, greater Washington, D. C.
but in Montgomery County, Maryland
- 3 9/53 to 6/56 Coordinator of Art for Sunnyvale School District
7 10/57 to 6/64 Supervised 18 schools
- 9/65 to 6/67 West Valley Evening College, Campbell, California
Crafts
- 9/67 to 6/70 De Anza Evening College, Cupertino, California
Drawing and Design, both lab. and lecture
(Foothill College District)

Work Exhibited

San Diego Fine Arts Gallery; painting, award on lithograph.
Los Angeles County Museum Annual Show; painting.
P. W. A. Gallery, Oklahoma City; lithograph.
A. C. A. Gallery, New York City; lithograph.
College of Notre Dame; drawings and stitcheries.
Triton Gallery, Santa Clara, California; stitcheries, award on construction.
Foothill College; stitchery.
Stitchery work in a national traveling show.

Travels

U. S. A. Been in all states except Alaska.
Canada Lived in Ottawa and also traveled in western areas.
Asia Lived in Lahore, West Pakistan and Dacca, East Pakistan.
Spent several months in India, mainly New Delhi. Toured
to other areas of sub-continent to see temples and archae-
ology digs (Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Java, Bali).
Africa Know only Egypt; Cairo, Luxor and Karnak areas.
Middle East Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Istanbul.
Central and South America
Europe All over, but not behind the Iron Curtain.

Total of three trips around the world and five times in Europe. Emphasis
was always upon Art and Archaeology. For example, from 9/64 to 7/65 I
followed the development of Byzantine Art through the Renaissance. (Istanbul,
Ravenna, Venice to Sienna, Florence and Rome.)

Figure 5.5b. D. Genevieve's personal resume from the 1970s. Courtesy of Eric Bredo.

The conservation process

Mallios met with different conservators to discuss the restoration of the Bredo mural. Although they all marveled at the mural and its re-discovery, only one was willing to bid on the project due

to the difficulty in removing oil paint from a poured concrete wall. There are established techniques for removing plaster frescoes from concrete surfaces. However, there was little consensus and much anxiety on the way to remove Bredo's oil-based mural. After multiple meetings, discussions, and deliberations, Mallios and Dowell accepted a bid on March 7, 2007 from Nathan Zakheim Associates, a company that specializes in fine arts conservation.

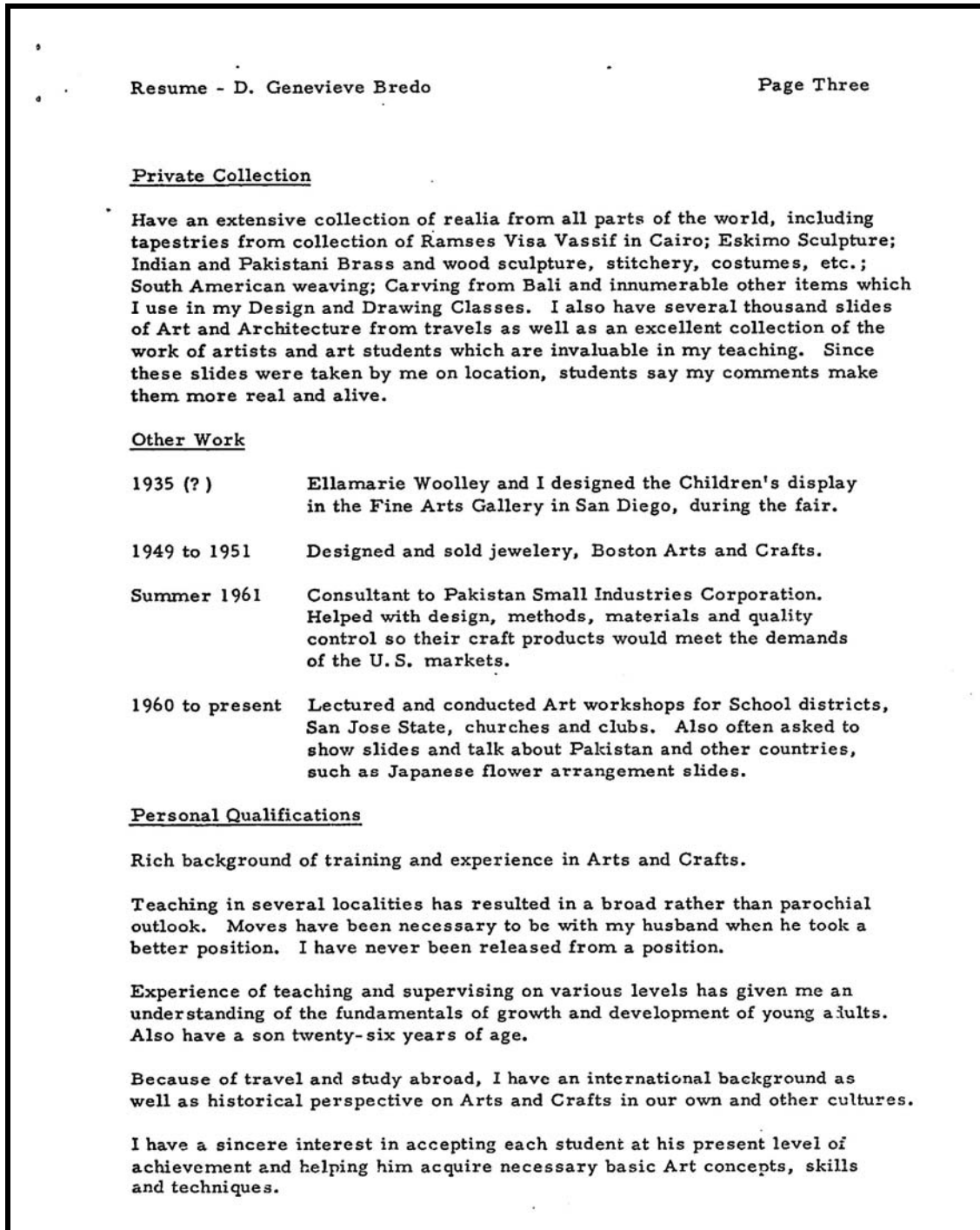


Figure 5.5c. D. Genevieve's personal resume from the 1970s. Courtesy of Eric Bredo.

Nathan Zakheim is the son of famed WPA artist Bernard Zakheim. The elder Zakheim produced some of the country's most well-known Depression-Era murals painted in San Francisco's Coit Tower during the 1930s. Much of the Zakheim family, including Nathan's seven children, has

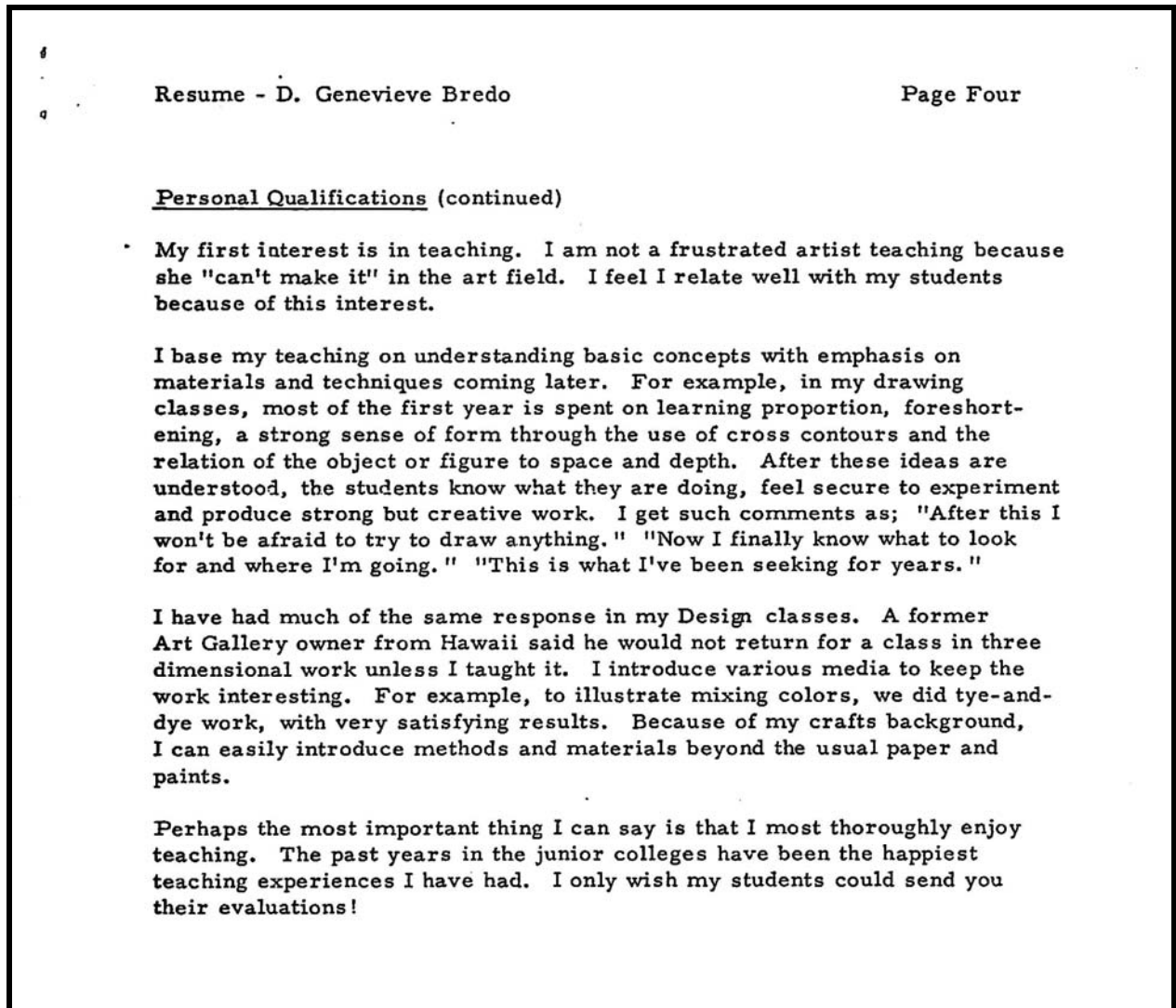


Figure 5.5d. D. Genevieve's personal resume from the 1970s. Courtesy of Eric Bredo.

been active in art conservation. With his strong personal and familial connection to the art of the Works Progress Administration, Nathan Zakheim conserved two local Alfredo Ramos Martinez WPA-era murals in 2005. Martinez, a renowned Mexican artist and teacher, painted five murals in 1938 for Albert Bram's La Avenida Café at 1333 Orange Avenue in Coronado. Nathan Zakheim removed, restored, and re-installed *La Canasta de Flores* and *El Dia del Mercado*, both of which are now on permanent display in the Coronado Public Library.

The conservation process that Nathan Zakheim Associates (NZA) proposed for the Bredo mural was innovative. They recommended employing a technique known as the "Strappo" method.

Strappo—derived from the Old Italian word “strappata,” which means to stretch tight—involved affixing a fabric to the front of the mural with an adhesive and then pulling the paint off the wall with the fabric. It is a delicate process that is often used on plaster murals. Since glue contracts as it dries, this natural shrinkage causes cleavage between the finer layers of the plaster and the fabric. In optimal cases, the strappo process causes the plaster to separate itself gently from the wall.

However, it is worth re-emphasizing that the Bredo mural was *not* made of plaster; it was oil-based paint on concrete. Thus, NZA proposed that the delicate nature of the traditional strappo process be augmented to include power tools. NZA suggested the use of air hammers and chisels to send vibrations through the wall to help facilitate the separation of the paint from the wall and ensure that it adhered to the fabric. Just as the term strappo—or “strappado”—also refers to a form of medieval torture in which the victim is attached to a rope, dropped, and painfully jerked before reaching the ground, the version of strappo that NZA considered was much more abrupt and coarse. However, it was the best option for removing the mural before it endured additional damage.

NZA began the conservation process in May of 2007, just after the end of the spring semester. At the start of this project, the painted portion of the wall was 8.0 feet off the ground, slightly above the suspended ceiling in the basement of Hardy Tower (Figure 5.6). It was located on the load-bearing wall in front of the stairwell that is adjacent to two offices (HT 39 and 40) and a conference room (HT 38) (Figure 5.7). The right edge of the Bredo mural forms a right angle with the left edge of the Sorenson mural. Members from SDSU’s Physical Plant disengaged, cut, and removed various live wires and pipes that intersected the mural before NZA started their work.



Figure 5.6. A view of the Burgeson mural from above the lowered ceiling. Courtesy of Laura Embry, Union-Tribune.

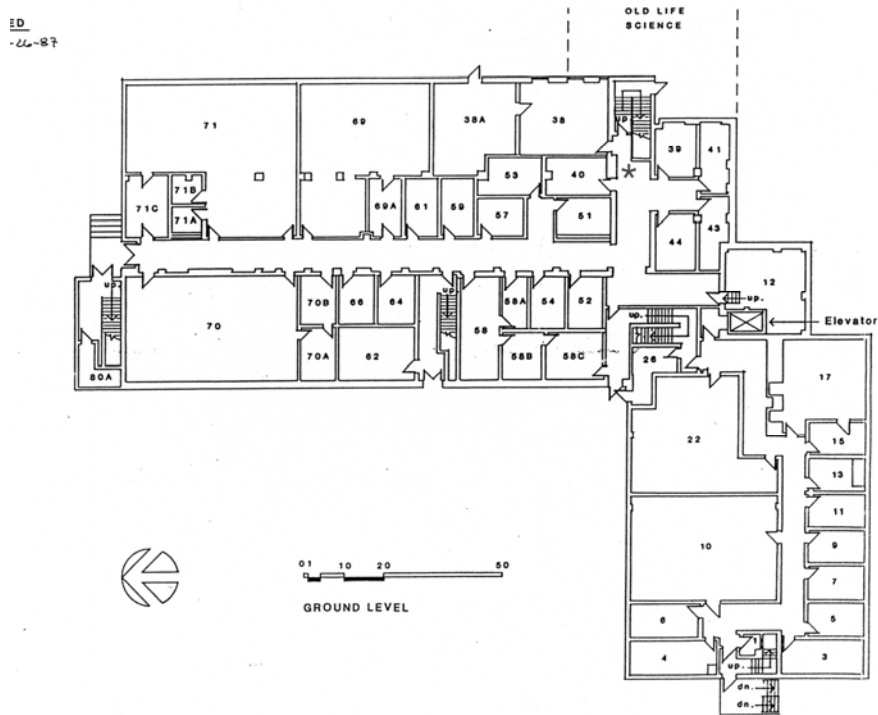


Figure 5.7. An architectural map of the basement of Hardy Tower. A large asterisk denotes the location of the mural; it is next to office 39 and 40. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

NZA’s first step was to remove additional pipes and electrical components that impeded their work space (Figure 5.8). Using crowbars, hammers, and chisels, they exposed additional mural portions that were hidden (Figure 5.9). In locating the existing edges of the mural, it became clear that the bottom 2-3 feet had been entirely destroyed during the 1957-59 building renovation. As the final preparatory step, NZA undertook a thorough cleaning of the mural surface (Figure 5.10).



Figure 5.8. Nathan Zakheim cuts part of the lowered ceiling frame in order to gain access to the base of the mural. Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.

Prior to the application of the consolidant on the face of the mural, NZA constructed a ventilation system with an exhaust fan to carry the fumes out of the building (Figures 5.11-5.12). Veronica Hoban, an SDSU environmental specialist, approved the ventilation system and monitored the corridor on a daily basis once the consolidation process began. NZA applied liberal amounts of acryloid B-72 to the surface of the mural. Acryloid B-72 is a resin that resists discoloration, has low reactivity with sensitive pigments, does not change solubility over the years, and can be easily and safely removed (Figure 5.13). It took many weeks for the resin to dry, even aided by heat lamps and fans.



*Figure 5.9. Nathan Zakheim and Amadea Cagle expose the base of the mural.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



*Figure 5.10. Zakheim and Cagle clean the surface of the mural.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*

NZA next sprayed a Scotch adhesive to the sealed mural (Figure 5.14). This adhesive enabled them to face the mural with a non-woven fabric (Figure 5.15 and Figure 5.16). The fabric was then covered entirely with electrical tape (Figure 5.17). At this point in the conservation process, the concrete wall had five layers affixed to it: 1) Bredo's original oil painting, 2) the sealant (acryloid B-72), 3) the Scotch adhesive, 4) the non-woven fabric, and 5) the electrical tape. Each of these subsequent layers (2-5) would be essential in binding and protecting the oil paint that lay at the surface of the concrete wall during the strappo process.



*Figure 5.11. Zakheim constructs a wooden frame around the mural area.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



*Figure 5.12. The finished ventilation system.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*

NZA used air hammers to vibrate the paint layer from the wall. The shock waves passed through the protective layers and caused the uppermost layer of concrete to fracture just behind the mural (Figure 5.18). Simultaneously, NZA chipped away at the top edge of the mural with a chisel to guide the fissures in the brittle concrete (Figure 5.19). Slowly but surely, the combination of air-hammering and chiseling peeled the mural off the wall from top to bottom. Horizontal passes were made with the air hammers to enable the mural to be rolled off of the wall in an even manner. Ultimately, the mural was rolled up in a tube, carried out the door, and driven to the NZA studio in Los Angeles for conservation (Figures 5.20-5.22).



*Figure 5.13. Zakheim consolidates the mural with resin.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



*Figure 5.14. Zakheim applies Scotch adhesive to the mural.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*

Once in the studio, NZA unrolled the chunky wall peeling, which consisted of a half-inch layer of concrete, the oil-painted mural, the sealant, the adhesive, the fabric, and the electrical tape (Figure 5.23). They consolidated the back and removed the fabric, adhesive, and sealant from the front (Figure 5.24). The paint layer was mounted onto a new, non-woven, fabric support. At this point, NZA re-touched the paint (Figure 5.25) and recreated the bottom areas that had been destroyed during the 1957-59 building renovations. Lastly, they adhered the finished mural to a prepared aluminum honeycomb panel for transport back to San Diego and its final mounting (Figure 5.26).



*Figure 5.15. Zakheim begins to face the mural with fabric.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



*Figure 5.16. The fabric facing is completed.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*

The NZA restoration was so thorough that the conserved mural simply appeared to be a mounted painting. As a result, Mallios and Dowell met with experts from the SDSU Carpenter Shop on how best to frame *NRA Packages* in a way that would enable the public to appreciate the fact that Bredo's mural was initially part of the wall in the Hardy Tower basement. The end result was a design that placed the conserved mural in the center of a faux-cement backing that was intentionally cracked at the edges to emphasize the origin of the piece.



*Figure 5.17. The fabric is sealed with black electrical tape.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



*Figure 5.18. Zakheim uses an air hammer to send vibrations through the mural and into the concrete wall.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*

Conclusion

Social Realism, the artistic celebration of working people as the heart of the nation and the key to resuscitating a floundering economy, is a common theme in WPA-era murals. The symbolism in Burgeson's *NRA Packages* is expressed in multiple levels. Not only is the mural a piece of WPA-era art, but the workers portrayed in the image are unloading boxes that are part of the National Recovery Administration, a federal relief program whose motto was "We do our part." Simply put, the mural is WPA-era art that also showcases an additional New Deal program in action. Furthermore, the emphasis on labor and the importance of each individual worker is



*Figure 5.19. A chisel is used to peel the back of the mural down the wall after the air hammers have started the fissuring process.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



*Figure 5.20. The mural is peeled off the wall.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*

embodied throughout the restoration of the Burgeson mural. It was workers from SDSU's Physical Plant who discovered the art while replacing the lowered ceiling tiles in the Hardy Tower basement. The conservation "strappo" process required power tools, long hours, and extensive physical exertion. And finally, the restoration project depended on the labor and support of hundreds of individuals. The list of people who helped save this mural is long. In addition to Nathan Zakheim Associates and the generous groups that funded the project, there were numerous hard-working individuals at SDSU, especially those in the library, Physical



*Figure 5.21. The mural is placed in fabric for protection.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



*Figure 5.22. The mural is rolled up and carried out the door.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Donna Byczkiewicz.*



Figure 5.23. The mural is rolled out at the NZA conservation studio. Courtesy of Seth Mallios.

Plant, Foundation, the President's Office, SDSU Bridges, the College of Arts and Letters, and the Department of Anthropology who made this restoration a success. All of these people can take great pride in the conservation of Burgeson's *NRA Packages* and aptly proclaim, "We do our part." The restored mural is a rare snapshot from the San Diego State College's earliest days



*Figure 5.24. The fabric, adhesive, and sealant are removed from the mural.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Denise Carroll.*



*Figure 5.25. Touch-up work begins on the surface of the mural.
Courtesy of Seth Mallios and Denise Carroll.*

at Montezuma Mesa; but it also transcends time, highlighting the creative brilliance of student work, the spirit of labor, and the importance of teamwork in cherishing and preserving the legacy of the past. The people's art is now open for public viewing in the main library.



Figure 5.26. Zakheim's completed mural restoration. Courtesy of Seth Mallios.



Figure 5.27. The finished mural is now mounted in a faux-cement backing next to the main library's reference desk. Courtesy of Roberta Niederjohn, SDSU Library & Information Access.

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San Diego Union Tribune

May 26, 2006 Professor discovers 'soul of university.' Lisa Petrillo, A1, A14.

June 19, 2006 Works in progress. Lisa Petrillo, B1, B8.