**NARRATIVE OF THE PERSHING MURAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROJECT**

**By**

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    In 2021, when we realized there was no plan in place to save the Pershing Mural's planned demolition along with the rest of the Auditorium (located on Centennial Mall just a few blocks from the Nebraska State Capitol), I, along with Major General (ret.) Roger P. Lempke and Tim R. Kenny, former Director or NIFA, all volunteers, formed the Pershing Mural Historic Preservation Committee to raise the funds necessary to save, find a new location, restore, transport, reinstall and provide a fund for the Pershing Mural's future maintenance.  From the very beginning, the Project has taken on a life of its own - truly a 'grassroots' fundraising effort, supported by Nebraskans statewide, as well as those who have moved to other states and countries!

     In 4 short, intense months, we were able to raise $850,000 and safely removed the Pershing Mural - an iconic work of Nebraska art - from the front of Pershing Auditorium, meeting the City of Lincoln's September 1, 2022, deadline.

     We then initiated the challenging process to find the most appropriate new home for the Mural's installation.  After almost a year exploring a number of possible locations, a member of the Wyuka Board of Trustees reached out to me and inquired if we had ever thought of installing the Pershing Mural within Historic Wyuka Park. The rest is history as we began working closely together with Wyuka's Trustees, developed a plan and, as a result, the installation of the Pershing Mural's retaining wall was initiated with a 'Groundbreaking Ceremony' on August 1, 2024.

     To date, we have raised $4.1 million in our Herculean fundraising campaign to the restore the Mural's 763,000 1" x 1" square ceramic tiles, cover the cost of its installation and provide funds for future maintenance and estimate $350,000 remaining to fully fund the Project.  We met and were able to hurdle every challenge - from the very beginning - including naysayers who thought it unimaginable to safely remove the 140' x 38' Mural from the front of Pershing Auditorium!

     This Historic Preservation effort is indeed a testament to the vision and incredible generosity of so many Nebraskans with a similar mindset.  Saving the Pershing Mural certainly illustrates the inspiring words of Margaret Mead about collective impact, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

     Slowly but surely, we have accomplished what many thought impossible.  It is truly an exciting time for our State to see what can be accomplished when Nebraskans  stand together.  In doing so, we have endorsed the value of safeguarding Nebraska's cultural heritage and acknowledged the importance of historic preservation.

**OVERVIEW - Pershing Mural Historic Preservation Effort**

      In the early 1950's, Nebraska Artists, Leonard Thiessen and Bill Hammon [both represented in the collection of MONA (Museum of Nebraska Art), Kearney, Nebraska], were commissioned  by the architects, to create a mosaic for the western facade of the Auditorium, located in Lincoln on Centennial Mall and within close proximity to the Nebraska State Capitol.  The Artists were directed to design a composition incorporating the various events which would take place within Pershing Auditorium.  When installed, the Pershing Mural was, and continues to be recognized, as the largest ceramic mosaic of its kind in the Western Hemisphere.

**NOTE**:  At the time Pershing Auditorium opened its doors in 1957, it was the only event center in Lincoln.  For that reason, the subject matter within its Mural's composition includes sports (basketball, ice hockey, boxing, wrestling and ice skating), circus characters, the rodeo, ballet, musicians, ball room dancers, a veterans’ parade, politicians and a political rally, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, and opera (Cio-Cio-San from Puccini’s “Madama Butterfly” and Canio the clown from Leoncavallo’s “Pagliacci”).

          In 2021, it became apparent that there was no plan in place to save the iconic Mural when the City of Lincoln decided to demolish Pershing Auditorium.  At that time, a small grassroots group of 3 dedicated volunteers (the Pershing Mural Historic Committee) came together and were able to do the impossible.  Rallying Nebraskans statewide, along with those who no longer were residents, they were able to raise the funds necessary, $850,000 in four short months, to safely remove the Pershing Mural, meeting the City’s deadline of August 1, 2022, with 2 ½ weeks to spare.

      The restoration of each of the Mural’s 763,000 1” x 1” square ceramic tiles has recently been completed, a massive project in itself, due to the Mural’s exposure to harsh Nebraska weather for seven decades.  Ultimately, and when reinstalled, the five-story framework will make the 140’ x 38’, 110-ton Mural the largest free-standing ceramic tile mosaic in the western hemisphere and the largest Mural of its kind ever relocated in the world.  The installation will bring the Mural closer to eye-level, affording educators and their students, art enthusiasts, and historians the opportunity to examine it up close and from a distance.

      In taking in the majesty and grandeur of the Mural, all will be invited to interpret the 38 figures in a variety of combinations represented in the Mural’s composition, as well as the abstract patterns and lines which are thought to mimic the highways, rivers and historic trails of Nebraska.  Like all art, the Pershing Mural conjures a variety of ideas, feelings, and opinions…it reflects who we are, what we were, and where we came from, all at the same time.  It was worth saving and it is worth being reestablished in a second home to live on for generations to come.

In the words of Karissa Johnson, Curato of MONA, “At once, both illustrative of life during a specific time and place and informed by some of the leading muralists of the 20th century, the Pershing Mural is a multi-dimensional representation of Nebraska’s history, culture, and art.  Cities develop their character and build their future on respect for their past.  Murals and other forms of public art are critical to documenting history and enhancing community pride.”

      The Pershing Mural, along with Wyuka Park (Wyuka Cemetery and Park, established in 1869 by the Nebraska State Legislature, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places), will become a destination and gathering place for Nebraskans and our visitors to enjoy a myriad of activities within a beautiful green landscape.  In addition to being prized in and of itself, the Mural will serve as an ideal backdrop and inspiration for poetry readings, plays, storytelling, and jazz on the green.  Its stage will be made available for small musicals, theatrical and dance performances, and celebrations; the Mural will also stimulate appreciation for the arts, history, and culture of Nebraska and provides a beautiful outdoor classroom setting.

**3-D TACTILE MODEL OF THE PERSHING MURAL**

            As a result of the Committee's wish to make the Pershing Mural available to all individuals, they worked together with John Olson, Co-Founder, 3D PhotoWorks, Chatham, NY.  Olson developed the concept, process and technology to create 3-D tactile models of 2-D images in partnership with the National Federation of the Blind.

           The creation of an ADA compliant, 3-D Tactile Model of the Pershing Mural was funded by the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired and installed in May 2025, within the Nebraska History Museum.  This state-of-the-art component of the Project recognizes the importance of making all art and learning opportunities available to the visually impaired.  According to the National Federation of the Blind in 2016, 39,700 Nebraskans have a visual disability.  The National Endowment for the Arts has said, “Not every mind or body will experience Art the same way.  But every mind and body are entitled to the experience.”   The Tactile within the Nebraska History Museum allows access of an iconic work of Nebraska art to the blind and visually impaired, rather than just providing words describing it.  Being able to tactilely explore the Mural has brought new meaning and appreciation of all the Mural has to offer.

**General Details related to 3-D Tactile Models/Specific Details related to the 3-D Tactile Model of the Pershing Mural**

    The 3-D portable Model of the Pershing Mural was made of a durable 18 pd., high density urethane.  It weighs approximately 150 pounds and measures 120" x 36".

Because of the Pershing Mural's substantial size, the 3-D Model has a slightly diagonal, 22-degree upward slant to accommodate Museum patrons of all ages and heights. The Model's control panel offers Braille and bilingual (English/Spanish) auditory prompts, accessible by pushing buttons on the control panel or by touching proximity sensors that are embedded throughout the Mural's composition.

    Six headphones and one headphone jack are provided for the Model's audio component, which will provide the appropriate sound effects within its narrative that explains/describes the Mural's composition and its characters and their activities, including:  Cio-Cio San from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* & Canio the Clown from Ruggero Leoncavallo's, *Pagliacci*, three Musicians (harpist, clarinetist, bassist), Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet balcony scene, six individuals in a vertical formation (2 demonstrators, 2 debaters and 2 miliary figures).  The Tactile Committee was responsible for the script and individuals at 3D PhotoWorks edited the script and proposed changes.

If the Model needs repairs or maintenance, 3DPhotoWorks will service it at no costs for 12 months following installation.  When the Model was delivered,                        3-3D PhotoWorks trained Staff to trouble shoot issues that may arise.

In the words of Barbara Loos (3-D Tactile Model Committee Member and Past President of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska),

 "I have both heard and appreciated descriptions of various aspects of the Pershing Mural.  While those who can spark interest in learning more, they only flow one way— from outside e in.  Experiencing it in 3-D form will allow me to interact with it — giving me direct access to what it has to say to me personally through my fingers, which is the way I look at the world.  My perspective can then include what it evokes from within—something visual art can’t convey.

   The 3-D Tactile Model will afford not only me, but also everyone else who approaches it, a rich, multimodal experience.  Think of it, perhaps, as the difference between looking at a picture of an animal and touching its coat.

    The most succinct way I know to express what having this 3-D model of the Pershing Mural means to me is to borrow a quote from someone involved in building One World Trade Center or Freedom Tower on the site of the former Twin Towers.  When expressing his perspective on the unfolding of the creation, he said, “If a pictures' worth a thousand words, a model is worth a million.”

**The 'Benefits' of the 3-D Tactile Model of the Pershing Mural according to Quentin Fortney, Exhibits Technician at the Nebraska History Museum**

 "The statewide movement to save the Pershing Mural is an example of historic preservation in action and aligns with the Nebraska State Historical Society's Mission - To collect, preserve and open to all the histories we share.  The installation of the 3D Tactile of the Pershing Mural is a way to distinguish the Museum as we look to continue to grow our exhibits, fostering creativity for all and to better tell the stories of all Nebraskans.  "

**Accessibility**:The Tactile expands accessibility and access for visually impaired visitors to the Nebraska History Museum.  It offers a tactile experience and allows them to experience the artwork through touch and engage in a deeper level of understanding.

**Diversity/Inclusion**:  The Tactile incorporates Braille and bilingual (English and Spanish) audio elements that reflect the Nebraska State Historical Society's commitment to prioritize diversity.  It also expands the Museum's ability to reach more members of our community, including bilingual and blind individuals.

**AN ADDITIONAL ELEMENT OF THE PERSHING MURAL PROJECT - THE CREATION OF AN ACADEMIC CURRICULUM FOCUSING ON THE PERSHING MURAL**

Recognizing the impact the Pershing Mural can make as an educational tool and catalyst for learning, academic curricula (16 Lesson Plans) focusing on the Mosaic have been developed and supported by Humanities Nebraska in the areas of art, history, architecture, language arts, history, and historic preservation.  These lesson plans and accompanying teaching materials will provide opportunities for deeper contextual contemplation and appreciation of the Mural’s realistic, abstract, and symbolic composition, as students relate to how its study impacts them on a personal and cultural level.

The ADA accessible Curriculum is available, for downloading purposes, for Nebraska teachers, students, and homeschooling families to use in their studies, at no cost, and is posted on the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation website for downloading purposes.

**SUMMARY**

The Pershing Mural within Historic Wyuka Park will become a historic Nebraska Landmark.  Those who generously participated in this historic preservation effort have invested in what makes Nebraska unique – our history, culture, heritage, and sense of community.

“As a conservation photographer, I’ve learned rare things don’t often get a second chance.  From virgin prairies to old-growth forests and all the species in between, it takes just one wrong move to erase things forever.  This is what drives extinctions and how the world loses its heritage…at first glance and from afar, the Pershing Mural, "Nebraska’s Picasso” looks like an abstract painting.  Get closer though, and you’ll see it's a detailed depiction of what we humans were up to in the late 1950’s.  Clearly this is from another time and no ordinary historic artifact.  She is grand…She’s irreplaceable…She’s valuable.” –Joel Sartore, Conservationist and National Geographic Photographer