CANNING
DECORATIVE BUILDING ARTS

Historic Mural Maintenance: 6 Steps for Preserving History

Historic murals are not merely painted surfaces; they are vibrant mosaics of memory, culture, and artistic legacy. Maintaining historic artwork is an endeavor that requires

of the owners.

If your historic mural needs to be repaired or restored, bringing in conservators to assess the work and its environment, including temperature, humidity, and sunlight, would be necessary before regular ongoing maintenance begins.

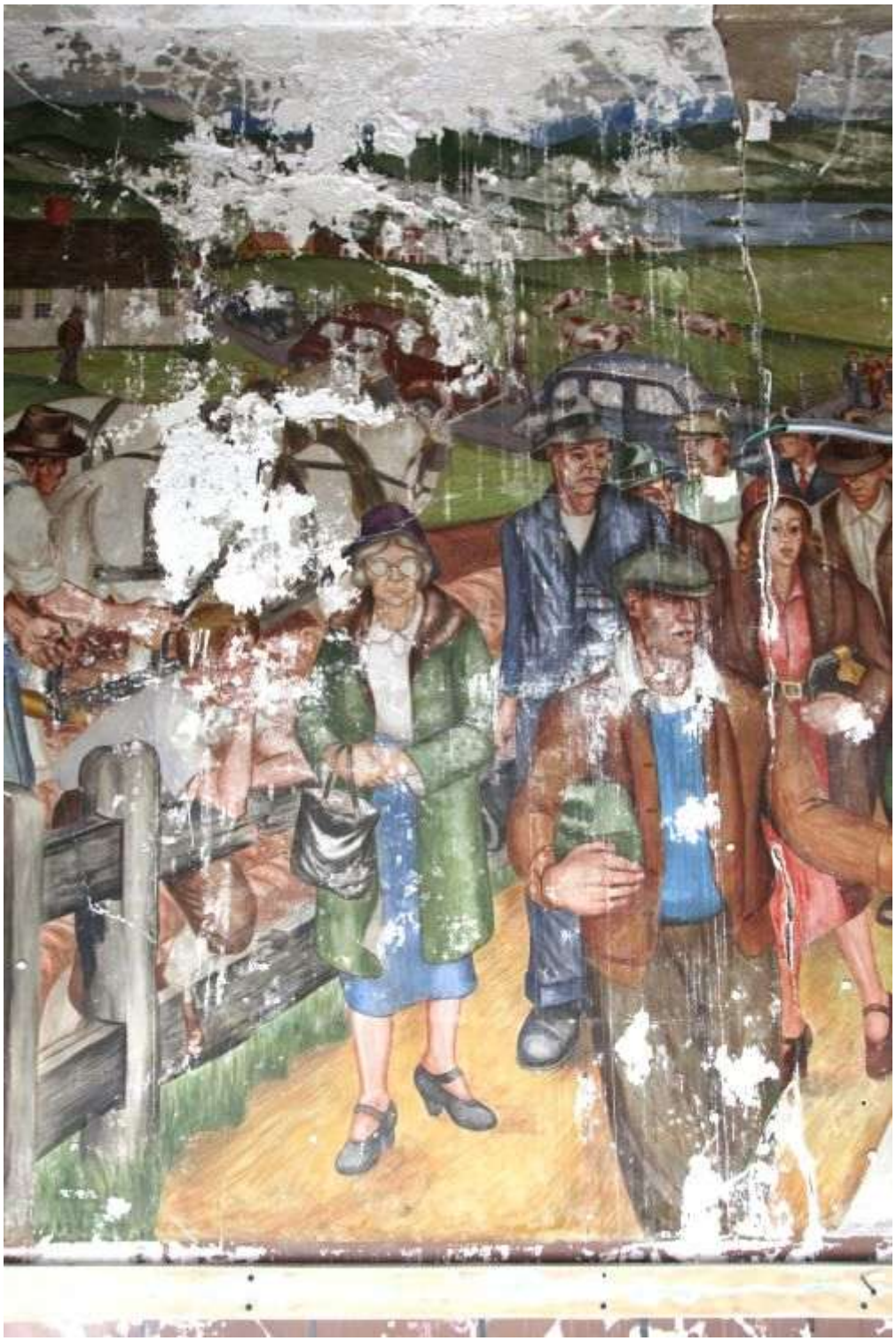


Before and after of one of the two wall-sized WPA murals at the University of New Hampshire, **we conserved and stabilized**

Once you get to the point of setting up a maintenance program (after restoration, conservation, initial assessment, etc.), to ensure that it remains stable and vibrant over time, a structured, ongoing maintenance approach is essential. This includes routine checks on conditions, regular monitoring with a set schedule, photographic documentation of any areas of concern, and strategic planning during building renovations or major changes. Here's how owners can support the long-term preservation of their murals through consistent and mindful care.

1) Implement Routine Condition Checks

Regular visual inspections are essential in mural preservation. It's recommended for someone to be designated to conduct a minimum of annual or semi-annual visual inspections, to ensure any potential damage or deterioration is detected early. Depending on the location and conditions, more frequent examinations may be ideal. This includes



Close-up of one of the mural's conditions at the University of New Hampshire in Hamilton Smith Hall.

2) Establish a Monitoring Schedule with Photo Documentation

Routine monitoring is only effective when it's methodical. A maintenance plan should include a set schedule for photographic documentation, at least once or twice a year, to establish a visual timeline of the mural's condition. Photos should be high-quality, taken in consistent lighting, and from fixed vantage points. This creates a reliable record that makes subtle changes easier to detect over time. Areas of concern, such as previous cracks or repaired sections, should be photographed more frequently to track stability or progression of issues. The best method to keep photographic documentation organized is to put all the images in a labeled archive with dates and any notes on environmental conditions (e.g., humidity, temperature, or building activity). Along with photographs, other documentation, such as tracking sheets, should be created and maintained during any scheduled monitoring. The tracking sheets can include information like the date, who did the inspection, key notes, reference to photos, highlighting changes noted from last time, if anything will be done to address concerns, etc. This archive is invaluable when consulting with conservators about new issues or planning future restoration work.

3) Keep Detailed Records of Changes and Interventions

Along with keeping a record of the mural's changes, every adaptation to the mural's surrounding environment should be documented, even updates like installing new lighting or HVAC systems nearby. Any direct interventions to the mural, including surface cleanings, patch repairs, or sealing treatments, must also be recorded with dates, materials used, and contractors involved.

These records help build a comprehensive preservation history, which is essential for long-term care and any future restoration specialists. Knowing what materials have already been introduced can prevent chemical incompatibilities, missteps, and save time and money when it comes to future restoration or repair work.

Another component of the mural's environment to keep in mind is general building renovations. Murals are highly vulnerable during building renovations, especially if construction work happens in or near the artwork. Dust, vibrations, changes in humidity, and accidental physical impact can all damage sensitive surfaces.

If a renovation project is planned, it's critical to include mural protection in the project scope from the beginning. The designated caretakers should work closely with conservation professionals to conduct a pre-renovation condition assessment, install protective coverings or barriers, monitor environmental changes throughout construction, and limit access and exposure as much as possible. If necessary, the temporary removal of the mural(s) should also be considered during the renovation.



Murals at Hale Library**, Kansas State University being protected during onsite construction**

Planning can make all the difference between preserving a mural intact and risking irreversible damage. We strongly recommend reaching out to specialists early in the renovation design phase to include an appropriate plan to care for and protect the murals.

5) Maintain Environmental Stability

Maintaining a stable environment that holds a historic mural is always encouraged and highly recommended. Many historic murals are executed on plaster or canvas, all of which

The caretakers should ensure that HVAC systems maintain consistent humidity and temperature levels (typically 40-60% humidity and 65-70°F with minimal fluctuation), there is no active water infiltration in the building, direct sunlight or UV exposure is limited, and airflow is sufficient to prevent condensation. Environmental monitoring tools such as data loggers and moisture meters can help track conditions over time without damaging the artwork.

6) Ongoing Conservation

While caretakers play a key role in day-to-day care, preventive conservation is best achieved with the support of professionals. A maintenance plan should include periodic professional assessments, ideally every three to five years, by a qualified conservator. These visits may include a detailed condition report, minor touch-ups or stabilization work, recommendations for further conservation or environmental improvements, etc.

This partnership helps identify and address small problems before they become major issues, often saving time and cost in the long term.

CANNING
DECORATIVE BUILDING ARTS



Close-up of a solvent test being performed during mural conservation for the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception

July 8, 2026

Historic murals are more than decoration; they are irreplaceable reflections of a building's history and cultural identity. Their preservation is not a one-time project but an ongoing responsibility. Through routine inspections, careful documentation, environmental monitoring, and proactive planning, those involved in the mural maintenance can be vital stewards of these works of art.

At Canning, we believe that collaboration is the key to preserving historic murals for generations to come. Whether you need assistance developing a maintenance strategy,



Basilica of the Immaculate Conception

John Canning & Co. provided conservation services of 8 lunettes and 14 Stations of the Cross. Each piece of artwork was assessed to determine the conservation treatment prior to conservation.

Related Articles



4 Steps for Cleaning Historic Murals





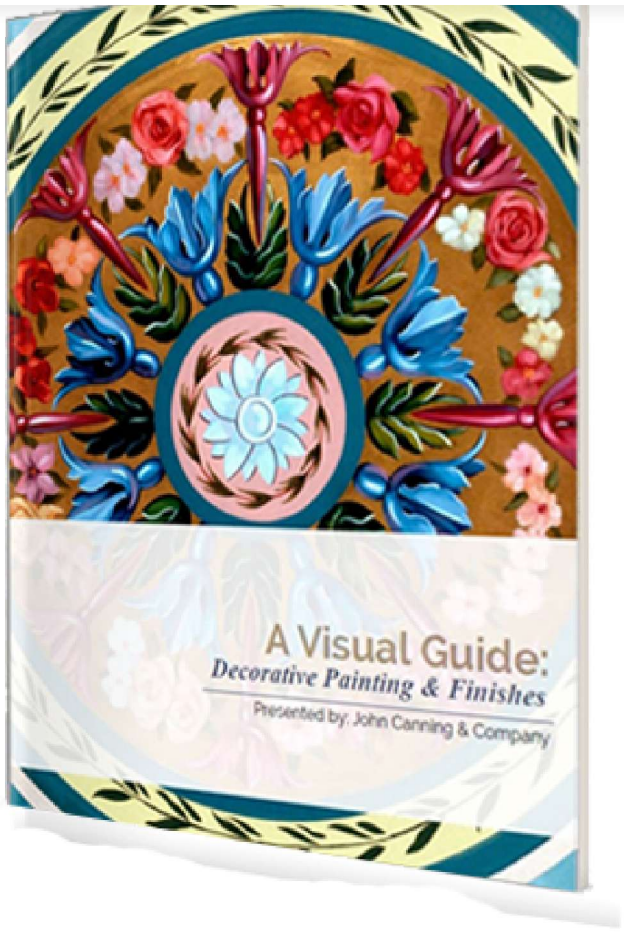
6 Steps for Cleaning Historic Fine Artwork



6 Types of Art Damage



7 Art Storage Considerations



John Canning & Co. Resources

As a conservation studio and restoration contractor, our team of highly skilled craftsmen, artisans, and conservators are experienced in the use of traditional methods and materials. We understand the importance in sharing our expertise and knowledge in our field.

Check Out Our Visual Guide

Follow Us

John Canning & Co., Ltd.
150 Commerce Court
Cheshire, CT 06410
info@johncanningco.com
203-272-9868

©2026 John Canning & Co., Ltd. All rights reserved