

Courthouse murals put local history on display

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DANIELSON -- Mark Strathy knew little about the area in Connecticut affectionately called the Quiet Corner. The rural section of the state definitely couldn't be mistaken for Strathy's hometown of Seattle or for Brooklyn, N.Y., where he now lives.

The 51-year-old artist, however, needed to become familiar with this rural area and its history to help him with what would be his biggest project.

Strathy was commissioned to paint murals for the new courthouse in Danielson. Strathy, who teaches art at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, studied the history of northeastern Connecticut and drove around the area for a few months before working on the four colorful 3-by-12-foot murals that are displayed in the courthouse.

"I feel like I'm an expert on the northeast corner of Connecticut," Strathy, who spent two years working on the allegories, said. "I did a lot of research on it. It's a beautiful part of the state."

The Superior Court building opened in 1999 and the murals were installed last year. Howard Emond Jr., who was the trial court administrator for the Windham Judicial District at the time of the installation, worked with Christopher Burke, who was the deputy chief clerk, and Judge Francis Foley in exhibiting artwork in the courthouse.

"Most new state buildings have budgets for art," Emond said. "We were looking for murals that would tie in local history. We wanted a connection to local history. Judge Foley thought this region was rich in history."

Through his oil-painted allegories, Strathy depicted parts of that rich history. Two of the murals, "An Allegory of Colonial Life" and "An Allegory of Connecticut's Textile Industry," are displayed in the first floor courtroom. "An Allegory of Prudence Crandall" hangs in the second floor courtroom.

Then there is "An Allegory of Israel Putnam," which is displayed in the narrow third floor hallway. Putnam was a general during the American Revolution and is credited with saying "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes" at the Battle of Bunker

Hill. In his painting, Strathy used snakes to represent the British forces. An especially menacing-looking serpent wears a powdered wig represents the bureaucratic side of the British colonial presence, according to Strathy.

Some court officials didn't feel the mural was a good fit for a courtroom. Burke said some officials decided to keep it separate from the other paintings.

"They took exception to the snakes in the mural," Strathy said. "That painting should be in the courtroom. The snakes weren't meant to be salacious. They're being used as a metaphor for the American Revolutionary War."

Strathy used less-controversial metaphors in his other murals. In "An Allegory of Prudence Crandall," Strathy shows Crandall reading to children under a tree while town elders attempt to stop her. Strathy painted large green bells to represent freedom bells to be installed in the school. He also added a large Gothic cathedral representing the European religious dogma.

Emond and Burke said they have heard few comments about the paintings from people who have sat in the courtrooms or walked the third floor.

"It's better than having a blank wall," Burke said. "If just one or two people become inspired by them, that's great."

Perhaps, they'll become inspired by the history and quaintness of the area as Strathy did.

"I love the rolling farmland and how every small town has a historic town square and town green," Strathy said. "I grew to love the area."

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