

Remarks by Fred Ross for Mural Celebration June 27

As a young art student at Saint John Vocational School, I was approached by the Fredericton High School Alumni to create a mural dedicated to the school's boys who had made the ultimate sacrifice during World War II.

I did this work as a very young, ambitious and inexperienced artist. I didn't stop to worry about the problems of undertaking such a large scale work. I am grateful now that I seized the energy of youth and was not held back by self doubt.

I also had great early mentors. Kay Smith and Ted Campbell fuelled my imagination and helped me hone my technical skills. I came from a working class family but never doubted my dreams to be an artist and create on a world stage.

My main concern for this mural was working out an idea that would be worthy of the sacrifice made by so many young people of my generation. It was to consist of two panels, 20ft high and 10ft wide, totally 20ft by 20ft. One would depict war and the other peace. My wish was to show that war brings a legacy of horrors while peace brings calm, prosperity, progress.

Using over 50 figures on the panels, I contrasted a world dominated by man's inhumanity to man with the promise of

progress in a world dedicated to peace, culture and education. To unify the work, the panels were joined by an ominous mushroom cloud signifying the threat of extinction that loomed over our generation with the reality of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For my generation, human extinction was much on our minds. We were very aware of the fragility of human life and the threat that a madman could blow up the world in a twinkling.

The next stage was a number of small drawings, then scale drawings to clarify my ideas. Students at Vocational School were my models. They were chosen because they represented our generation. The work is not a series of individual portraits but rather images of youth. As you will see, on one side, young soldiers live in destruction and despair, on the other, they live in the pursuit of scientific, athletic and creativity.

The buildings are not actual locations. They too reflect the central theme of the work. The crumbling masonry represents war's waste throughout the centuries. All ancient wars as well as our modern ones result in the waste of young life and promise. The sleek modern structure you will see on the right panel is a nod to Frank Lloyd Wright , modern architect of progress and light.

I avoided any overt religious imagery in this work. It is a work that contrasts destruction and construction. It presents mankind in two

different life's experiences. I wanted to show that life can be wonderful but it is precarious. My generation was greatly affected by the war and aware that introspection and determination are necessary to escape disaster.

The mural was installed and dedicated in Fredericton High School in 1948. Through my teachers Ted Campbell and Kay Smith, I knew of the important mural work being done in Mexico. With the \$700 I earned with this commission, I went to Mexico and was fortunate to meet the great muralist Diego Rivera.

The original mural was in place for a number of years but due to changes and lack of interest, the mural was removed, put in storage and, over time, lost.

Let's move to the present. A few months ago, I was approached by a well known Fredericton artist, William Forrestall, with the idea to recreate the mural to be placed in the new Richard J. Currie Center at UNB Fredericton. The thought of my work hanging in this beautiful building was too much to resist.

After considering the possible problems, I decided to take part in the new project. Fortunately for us, the original full scale drawings still exist in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. We were able to obtain digital images of these.

With great support from Dr. Currie and UNB we started the recreation. After overcoming many problems, we transferred the large mural drawings on the new panels and started to paint. The work was completed just a few days ago.

I have been fortunate to have had a great team of brilliant and talented young artists: Fred Willar, who is only slightly younger than I am, was my student at Saint John Vocational High and a fine mural artist in his own right. Amy Ash is a fine arts graduate from Mount Allison University, whose work is currently exhibited at the Ingrid Mueller Gallery in downtown Fredericton. Sara Griffin, who served as studio manager for this project, is a graduate of the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design and teaches at the Saint John Arts Centre.

Fred, Amy and Sara, please stand up and take a bow!

I also had a great deal of help and encouragement from John Leroux, Glenn Priestley, Cathy Ross, Susan Montague and many others at UNB. I am thankful for their contributions.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the many generous donors who have supported this project, especially the Sheila Hugh Mackay Foundation. Sheila was a true art patron who believed in the importance of art in the preservation of society. It

is a great thrill to me that work I did as a young man still has resonance today.