Remarks Dr. Richard Currie

Fred Ross' interest in mural painting was stimulated by his experience as a student at the Saint John Vocational School in the mid-1940s, the guidance and support of his teacher Ted Campbell, and by the example of nationally recognized Saint John artists Jack Humphrey and Miller Brittain. By 1948, *Canadian Art* magazine stated that Saint John was a city "which, size for size, probably contains more serious artists than any other in Canada."

Following the success of Ross' 1946 mural *Annual School Picnic* at the Saint John Vocational School, the nationally circulated *Montreal Standard* profiled "Freddie Ross, untrained 18-year-old" in a multi-page feature that reproduced photographs of the mural and the remarkable cartoon drawings. Having read the article, members of Fredericton High School's student council commissioned and paid Ross $700 to tackle a huge mural undertaking: a World War II memorial for fallen students. This would occupy him full-time from 1946 to 1948.

Ross here begins his life-long exploration of humanistic issues through the use of distinct polar opposites of the human condition; in this case, peace and war. With great fanfare and speeches, Ross' pendant murals, *The Destruction of War* and *Rebuilding the World Through Education*, were unveiled to an admiring audience on "Empire Day", May 21, 1948.

The composition was originally conceived in two small sketches which were then squared off to prepare full-size drawings called "cartoons". These were mainly drawn from live models in Ted Campbell's studio on Prince William Street in Saint John. Once completed, the back of the cartoons were rubbed with chalk to be transferred to 4 foot by 10 foot masonite panels prepared with a gesso ground.

Surrounded by fearful and fighting individuals and screaming victims of war, *The Destruction of War*'s central figure is a young 'universal' soldier, with no distinguishing marks, equipment or insignia to identify him as either Allied or German. Ross wanted not to stress a specific religion, race, or nation, but rather "the idea of the brotherhood of man breaking down all national barriers."

Rebuilding the World Through Education establishes a positive panorama of school, sports and social activities. A confident and centrally placed male and female couple stand beside Ross's self-portrait at the center left adjusting his bow tie. He implies an awareness of history but also confidence in his generation's ability to take society in a better direction – a direction that is now under a nuclear threat as demonstrated by the atomic mushroom cloud atop both panels.

The hybrid of foundations in both panels include examples from the Renaissance and the American Depression-era WPA murals, but they are most concretely expressed in the example of the early 20th century Mexican muralists, specifically Diego Rivera. While mural painting has a long history in Canada, first as church decoration and subsequently in public buildings, Canadian examples during the early to mid-20th century with a socially conscious theme are rare, making these murals quite exceptional in our nation's cultural history.

The original murals were dismantled in the mid-1950s and no longer exist. Ross' original cartoons, however, did survive and are now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. These were used in 2011 as the templates for Ross, who supervised a team of artists in the creation of the new mural, displayed here in its original full-scale grandeur.

The re-creation of these Fred Ross murals is a rare opportunity to further our understanding of a vital period in Canadian art. It greatly enriches UNB and New Brunswick by allowing one of the most significant examples of a socially conscious mural ever painted in Canada to be given life once again. Lastly, it honours Fred Ross, a deeply dedicated and nationally renowned artist whose career began in and around the creation of this mural 65 years ago. It is a poetic instance of a lifetime's work coming full circle.