

LAKE COUNTY NEWS-SUN

Restoration of Lake Forest Library murals complete; 'We rediscovered several unique features ... that had been obscured over the passage of time'



Friends of the Lake Forest Library board member Jan Gibson stands under a depiction of the writer Virgil at the Lake Forest Library by Russian artist Nicolai Remisoff. Gibson noted Remisoff drew a self-portrait in a light blue robe to the right of Virgil. (Daniel I. Dorfman/Pioneer Press)



By **DANIEL I. DORFMAN** | Pioneer Press

PUBLISHED: May 28, 2024 at 12:13 PM CDT | UPDATED: May 28, 2024 at 12:14 PM CDT

There is new life for a distinctive part of the Lake Forest Library with the restoration of eight murals dominating the building's rotunda.

Last month, crews finished a months-long refurbishment of the murals painted by Russian-born artist Nicolai Remisoff. Dedicated in 1932, the paintings are depictions of poets and prose writers, including Homer, Virgil, Cicero, Aristotle and Socrates.

"They are the great thinkers of the world from the antiquity," noted Friends of the Lake Forest Library board member Jan Gibson.

Remisoff's murals were installed shortly after the library's opening in 1931. However, when cracks in the building's dome appeared, the murals suffered water damage.

In 2023, a repair to the dome was completed and library officials then moved to breathe fresh life into the murals. In December, board members approved a contract to repair the paintings using funds donated by the Friends of the Lake Forest Library.

Crews cleaned, repainted, varnished and sealed the eight murals over several months, exciting the staff and patrons.

"After the restoration, we rediscovered several unique features in these murals that had been obscured over the passage of time," Library executive director Ishwar Laxminarayan wrote in an e-mail. "The Lake Forest Library is a beloved community institution and visitors now experience a greater sense of awe and grandeur as they gaze up at the famous Greek and Roman authors and poets who are depicted in these restored murals.

"We are the cornerstone of literacy in our community and believe that these restored murals will continue to inspire generations of avid readers to pursue a lifelong love for reading and learning," he said.

Upon the completion of the project, Gibson offered a fresh look at the life of Remisoff.

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, his art career started as a political cartoonist.

"He was a master at drawing faces," Gibson said.

He and his wife fled Russia after the start of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, with initial stops in Paris and then New York, before arriving in Chicago in 1925.

He taught for a short time at the Art Institute, but his true love was in design, Gibson noted. In one prominent example, he was the project manager for the Sears pavilion displayed at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago.

While teaching at the Art Institute of Chicago, Remisoff became friends with Lake Forest Library board president Alfred E. Hamill, who eventually invited him to stay at his home.

"People were enamored with Russians at the time," Gibson said. "They knew his talent."

Remisoff painted a series of murals at the Hamill house and shortly after the library opened in 1931, he was commissioned to do another set of paintings in the rotunda.

Gibson marveled that Remisoff completed the work over several months without assistance.

"He was very good at what he did," she said.

Remisoff dedicated the eight main panels that are in the classical Greek style featuring colorful, rounded faces. Gibson added the depictions are of poets and prose writers of the antiquity, because of their importance in history and literature, with Homer being the most important.

"All of the other poets treated Homer as their mentor, and he inspired them to write," she said.

A few years after the completion of the murals, Remisoff moved to Hollywood, working in design in both movies and television before his death in 1975.

His imprint on Lake Forest continues, and is now refreshed with the murals getting their first major restoration in almost 30 years.

“The library building and the murals are a treasure of a gift bestowed upon Lake Forest and its citizens,” Friends president Liz Jacob wrote. “The Friends, as community members and stewards who support and advocate for the library and its mission, take pride in having a share in ownership of this treasure.

“We take pride in maintaining and restoring the murals for future generations to cherish,” she said.

2024 > May > 28