



This fresco is high above the bench in Courtroom B at Philadelphia Family Court at 1801 Vine St. Photo by Jeff Lyons

Where Have You Been Stuyvesant Van Veen?

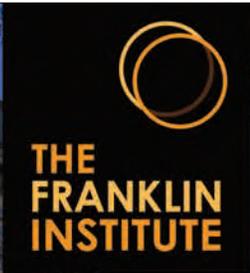
BY RICHARD G. FREEMAN

Looking through an old journal recently I came across some notes I had made while sitting in Courtroom B of the Family Court building at 1801 Vine St. waiting for a case of mine to gestate slowly from a position on the daily list to real trial. It seems my faculties, unmoored after an hour or two of empty anticipation, had wandered to consider the details of the faded mural spread out over the judge’s bench. To the uninitiated the following notes I jotted down will read like a message from the lunatic fringe. But the cognescenti will recognize the subject matter:

“(L. to R.) Adult male drifter in homburg – corner lounging kid smoking while leaning against a fireplug – four Dead End kids engaged in a crap game – half-eaten apple competing in the gutter with discarded newspaper – headline on paper “I.D. KILLER IN..” – tenement – lamp post – delivery truck unloading – two men fighting – three steelworkers fixing girders – farmer baling sheaves of hay – carved heads of Jefferson-Lincoln-Franklin – floating in the ether like the Wizard of Oz underneath a mantle supported by an Ionic column – a male figure (teacher?) points out the floating heads to a dreamy-eyed African-American youth – a female figure at a desk – a medical doctor of old with the reflecting mirror above his eye and stethoscope aided by a nurse examining the bare torso of a white boy – three boys, one African-American, mount steps – the African-American boy has his hands out in front of him – they seem to be appealing to the dominant figure in the scene – a white-haired Asian-American judge,

his black robe filling the right panel of the scene.”

What I recorded were the salient, striking features of an untitled fresco, a summary of the details of urban life and progress – or the lack thereof – by the artist Stuyvesant Van Veen. It is one of 37 murals installed as frescoes throughout the 250,000-square-foot building by the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal administration of President Franklin Roosevelt. These murals, distributed throughout the building, depict idealistic scenes that today evoke nothing but cognitive dissonance when reflected against the subject matter paraded beneath them – pioneer settlers in the Old West, Revolutionary War figures, mariners and tradesmen building commerce.¹ They stem from an era when Social Realism dominated artistic expression. Artists, many supported by the WPA, strove to justify their vocation by depicting New Deal goals and values in expressionistic form. Perhaps the single work that emerged from that period that endures is the exquisite and unique volume “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” which coupled Walker Evans’ stark photos of Midwestern farm families, many dispossessed by dust storms and foreclosure, with James Agee’s passionate prose. The cryptic panel in Courtroom B has no apparent title, but hopeful titles abound among the other works spread throughout the building, such as the painting in the East Conference Room by the famed Benton Spruance showing a



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MEET AT A SMARTER LEVEL



“Those frescoes are part of that building and city law requires that they be preserved in place.”

family, a policeman on horseback, cars in traffic and a man and wife and called “The Strength of Democracy Abides with the Family.”

Van Veen (1926-1988) was an American muralist and realist painter and illustrator whose works proliferate in public spaces throughout the Northeast. He contributed drawings to left-wing publications such as “Dissent” and “New Masses.” His most celebrated work was a mural honoring the Brooklyn Dodgers that reportedly can still be viewed in the Ebbetts Field Apartments in Brooklyn – the housing project erected over the land once occupied by the stadium where Jackie Robinson starred. The Dodgers long ago left Brooklyn. Van Veen’s work seems to be fated to be left behind wherever you find it.

Sometime this past spring, as the legal world awaited the opening of the new Family Court building – the aquamarine cube rising at 15th and Arch streets – I thought of the frescoes. What would happen to them once the Family Court building – currently known as the Judge Nicholas Cipriani Family Court Building – turned over to a new and different use?

Constructed in 1941 the Family Court and its older twin, the Free Library Building at 20th and the Parkway (b.1927) – were designed as carbon copies of the Ritz Hotel on the Place de la Concorde in Paris. Visually augmented by the Fountain at Logan Circle – the buildings serve as models in a picture-postcard scene. So readers, art lovers and tourists alike should be relieved to learn that the city does not plan to tear them down and put up a parking lot. Worse. While the Free Library will be spared – indeed, expanded with a planned but long-delayed rear addition – the Family Court building is to metamorphose incongruously into a hotel. Which brings me back to the frescoes. When I learned of these development plans I wondered how and when the frescoes, starkly out of place in the contemplated

French-owned luxury hotel, would be removed and relocated to the new courthouse building. The answer: never.

According to prevailing reports the plan is to install a luxury hotel in the Judge Nicholas Cipriani Building (who knows: if developers play their cards right it could be another of the worldwide “Cipriani” chain, unfortunately no relation to the late jurist). This raises the question just what role the social realist frescoes would play in the décor of a luxury hotel. Or, to put the question in the sharpest light, how can Van Veen’s crap-shooting street thugs and urchins complement one’s enjoyment of a Mojito in the cocktail lounge?

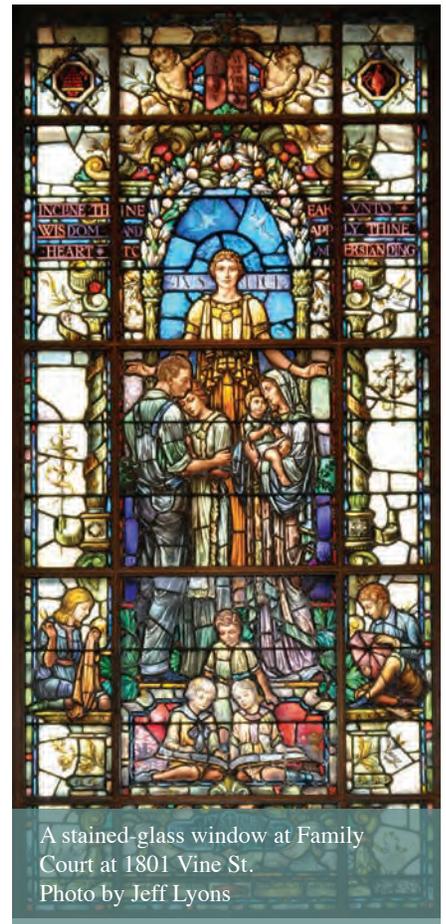
For an answer I turned to Inga Saffron, the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Saffron has been a steady chronicler of the birth pangs of the new Family Court building. In addition to highlighting some eyebrow-raising hijinks among the individuals who laid the groundwork for its construction (since alleviated), Saffron has pointed out that the construction budget ran dry before money could be allocated for public art that would complement the building’s design, interior and – one would hope – purpose.

So I wrote Saffron suggesting that since we put a man on the moon we could remove the Family Court frescoes and reinstall them inside the new building where they would once again radiate their inspirational images among the erring and accused and deprived.

Saffron, a known strict preservationist, replied: “Those frescoes are part of that building and city law requires that they be preserved in place.” She added: “Our society should be able to produce something specific to this building.”

I expostulated: “But don’t you agree it is ludicrous to try to integrate into the wallpaper of a luxury hotel frescoes depicting society’s efforts to cultivate its youth? Doesn’t make sense to me.”

In further communications Saffron



A stained-glass window at Family Court at 1801 Vine St.
Photo by Jeff Lyons

has stood her ground. She, of course, is technically correct about the local law governing historic preservation. It would be very difficult – probably requiring a court order – to export the frescoes to the place where they belong. In the meantime the art of a hopeful and idealistic era sits in place awaiting new pairs of eyes and new states of mind. ■

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¹A 68-page “National Register of Historic Places Designation Form” submitted to the U.S. Department of the Interior on August 27, 2013 by John Milner Architects on behalf of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission identifies and details the abundance of art in the building, including a spectacular 6’ x 15’ elaborate stained glass panel in the elevator corridor designed by the Nicholas D’Ascenzo Studios of Philadelphia; the studio’s work also appears in the Folger Library in Washington, D.C. The full report is available at <http://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/places/pdfs/14000097.pdf>