



Editor **Kristin Bull**: Are you a Facebook fan? Search "Rochester Patch" and click "like" to keep up with the news about your towns. Follow us on Twitter @RochesterPatch.

[Home](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Places](#)
[Marketplace](#)
[Q&A](#)
[Volunteer](#)
[Elections](#)


[Arts, Schools](#)
[Print](#)
[Email](#)

Community Celebrates Restoration of Depression-Era Mural

The late Marvin Beerbohm's daughter was present for the unveiling of his restored 1938 mural, which hangs in the old Rochester High School.

By [Tiffany Dziurman Stozicki](#) | [Email the author](#) | January 15, 2011

[Recommend](#)

22 people recommend this. Be the first of your friends.

[16 Comments](#)

Have you seen the mural? [Tell us in the comments.](#)



Interested in a follow-up to this article?

Keep me posted!

Dozens of art enthusiasts, community leaders and volunteers gathered Friday night in the Harrison Room of the Rochester Community School's Administration Center for the unveiling of Marvin Beerbohm's restored 1938 mural, "Industrial Environment of Rochester High School."

Sounds of 1930s music filled the room as guests, anticipating the mural presentation, enjoyed tasting dozens of wines selected by Cose di Lusso and hors d'oeuvres from local food markets.

The event was sponsored by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, the Rochester Historical Commission and Rochester Community Schools. The artist's daughter, Cynthia Beerbohm Maguire of Pentwater, was the evening's guest of honor.

Rochester's most significant painting

Standing near a table filled with tools and materials used to move and clean the painting, LaVere Webster, a historical society member and accomplished art conservator who oversaw the mural's restoration, told the audience what works of art such as the mural mean to him.

"We need more random acts of culture," he said. "A day without art is an empty soul."

Webster explained how he and a team of volunteers worked for two years to move, clean and reattach the mural to a new canvas.

"What is the mural's value?" asked Webster. "Priceless."

In a news release about the event, Webster called the mural Rochester's most significant painting.

Maguire, who was born in 1940 and was unaware of the mural's existence until she was contacted by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society last October, said she was thrilled to learn about the mural and the restoration effort.

"Art was my father's life," Maguire told the crowd as she shared stories of her father's life and career.

She explained that her late mother, Regina, once a Ford Motor Co. employee, served as her father's research assistant and learned about the significant people and places Beerbohm eventually painted into his murals.

"I feel both of their presences here tonight," Maguire said, "and they are smiling."

Maguire, who attended the unveiling with her husband, David, and her daughter, Holly Selden, thanked everyone who supported the mural's restoration, saying that it "will illuminate Rochester's rich past."

The mural comes home

The 23-foot-long by 57-inch-high mural was reinstalled on the balcony in the Harrison Room – a room that had been a gymnasium when the Administration Center building was the first Rochester High School.

Originally, the mural hung over the central stairwell in the former high school. A 1961 renovation project covered it, leaving the painting hidden for decades. In the early 1990s, during another round of renovations, work crews uncovered the mural – in pieces.

"The construction crew pulled off wall board and found pieces of the mural on the back of the board," Rod Wilson, president of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, which spearheaded the restoration project, told Rochester Patch last October. "Those pieces were put away for safekeeping for nearly 20 years."

In 2007, Wilson's wife, Susan, and a Rochester High School graduate who remembered the mural, asked her husband to take a look at it.

That one simple request turned into a two-year restoration effort backed by financial and in-kind donations from the historical society, the Rochester Historical Commission, Rochester Community Schools, National City Bank (now PNC) and local builders E. Gilbert & Sons Inc. The historical society estimates the project cost at more than \$50,000.

Under Webster's direction, the mural was painstakingly cut away from thick plaster (breaking five chain saws in the process) and put back together to be cleaned and restored. Large portions of the mural were missing. One piece was recovered, but two large sections have yet to be found.

To fill in the gaps, the historical society reprinted a photo of the mural found at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.

The missing sections were reprinted to the exact measurements of the mural and in sepia tone so they were distinguishable from the rest of the painting. The historical society hopes to locate the missing segments.

Marvin Beerbohm's legacy

In the early 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt launched the Works Progress Administration as part of his New Deal initiatives to put people, including artists, to work during the Great Depression. Beerbohm, a Detroit artist, accepted commissions from the federal government to create murals in public spaces, such as schools and libraries, throughout the United States.

Beerbohm painted the Rochester High School mural in 1938 and incorporated themes important to Rochester and the high school at the time.

Among the painting's subjects are the Ferry-Morse Seed Farm that once covered hundreds of acres along Rochester Road; the Parke-Davis Biological Farms, which produced vaccines, antitoxins and medicines; school Superintendent Abram L. Craft, who managed the school district from 1898 until 1908; and images of students conducting classroom work.

In June 1938, the *Rochester Clarion* reported: "School authorities agree that artist Marvin Beerbohm has handled his subject in a masterly way and regard the mural as a distinct cultural addition to the school. Teachers and pupils unite in praising the work, and in the last few days many townspeople have made special trips of inspection on the strength of their children's recommendation."

When asked about her father's life as an artist, Maguire explained that he struggled for a time when murals and his style of painting went out of vogue in the 1950s.

"He floundered for a while to find a style that was commercial and could sell," she said.

Maguire explained that during World War II, Beerbohm illustrated tank manuals. In the 1950s, he taught art classes on Saturdays to junior high and high school students at the Detroit Institute of Arts and to members of the YWCA in the 1960s.

Maguire first saw the mural on a visit to Rochester last December.

"I touched the painting, and it was like touching my father's hand," she said.

About the mural's unveiling, Debra Hartman, director of community relations for Rochester Community Schools, said, "The Rochester-Avon Historical Society just presented a wonderful gift to the community. Without their passion and dedication, the project, I'm sure, wouldn't have happened."

With the restoration project now complete, Wilson gazed at the mural and reflected on the accomplishment.

"What a great gift the historical society has given back to the community," he said. "This is what a historical society should be doing."

A free community open house to view the mural will be held from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Jan. 23 at the administration building.