

FRESCO

Love of Italy draws artist to local museum

On a family trip to Italy when she was only about 7 years old, Baton Rouge native Elise Grenier saw artistic masterpieces that set her life's direction. Grenier was taken with the historic frescos that are abundant in Italy, particularly those found at the Church of St. Marks in Florence. Grenier had drawn and painted from an early age, but this exposure to some of the greatest Italian arts and artists was something that would influence her beyond measure.

She now works as a conservator of artworks with a special focus on frescos, which are large-scale art much like murals but distinguished by the fact that the paint is applied while the plaster is still wet.

Though approximately 90 percent of her work is done in Italy, Grenier, recently honored with the 2011 Preservation Award given by the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, counts herself fortunate that she gets to do at least one project a year in the United States. One client she treasures greatly is restoration work at the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum. She first worked on the stunning fresco on the front façade of the museum in 2001 and has done further work since May.

As with all her projects in the United States, her father, professor Charles Grenier, professor emeritus at LSU, works as her assistant while she is here.

While at LSU, she earned a double major in fine arts and art history with a minor in Italian. In addition, she earned a master's degree in art history in 1987.

Grenier moved to Italy almost 28 years ago and now resides in the Tuscan town of Vinci (the birthplace of Leonardo da Vinci), about 45 minutes from Florence.

While in Italy, she has pursued degrees related to restoration and conservation work. She earned diplomas from L'Universita Internazionale dell'Arte e Restauro in Florence, Italy; the Associazione Intercomunale Fiorentina, Regione Toscana, Florence (post-graduate studies in restoration); and L'Istituto per L'Arte e Restauro, Palazzo Spinelli (art conservation).

The fresco adorning the front of the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum was completed by noted muralist Conrad Albrizio in 1938 as a project of the Public Works Administration under President Franklin Roosevelt.

"This is an absolutely magnificent and unique true fresco," said the museum's curator/archivist Nita Cole.

"It is an integral part of the museum, an introduction to what the museum represents in its interior displays."

Albrizio, a native of New York City, was commissioned by Gov. Huey Long to do the murals at the state capitol in Baton Rouge.

In the early 20th century, large-scale narrative frescos with a populist agenda were back in favor. The Albrizio work on the front of the museum is just such a work illustrating the agricultural focus of the state in such areas as sugar cane, lumber, cotton, and oil and gas.

The fresco cycle, representing North and South Louisiana and their respective industries during the 1930s, comprises four panels located outdoors in the covered entrance portico, facing north with a total decorated surface of approximately 28 square meters.

"The mural was documented by Albrizio as a true fresco," Grenier said. "The technique was rare in the United States, and the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum work would have been one of the earliest outdoor frescos in the country at the time of its completion.

"Chemical analysis confirmed that the surface is composed of the classical mixture of slaked lime and sand and traces of indelible 'spolvero' drawing and numerous 'giornate' are clearly visible, all of which are characteristic of the true fresco medium," she said. "My job as a conservator is to be true to the original art work, not to impose my own artistic agenda."

The restoration of this great fresco is in keeping with the belief of museum Executive Director Wayne Waddell that "the museum may have been asleep for awhile, but it is living again."

For some earlier generations, the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum was their Sci-Port, an exciting and educational experience that celebrated the great state of Louisiana and all its commerce and history.

From her early inspiration, Grenier has built an impressive career in the preservation and conservation of timeless artwork both at the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum and throughout her adopted homeland of Italy.

— Karl Hasten



With her father, Charles Grenier, at her side, Elise Grenier, a conservator of artworks, works to restore the fresco that adorns the front of the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum.

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'the cynic'

Teacher's doing a good job. She asked her class, "What are nitrates, and everyone knew it's when you pay for something at night."

Girlie talk: "She was considering a breast reduction 'til I told her two was the normal number."

Real headline: "Smokers Asked to Keep Butts Off the Beach."

How many liberals does it take to screw in a light bulb? Five. One to screw it in and four to screw it up.

Overheard: "All us fat guys like the balanced diet of a big cookie in each hand."

Girlie talk: "The only reason my husband came home half drunk was because he ran out of money."

An old one: What's the difference between G.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Jane Fonda? Jane went to Vietnam!

The doctor got lost on a ski trip and stamped "Help" in the snow. He's still lost though because no one could read his writing.

The boss gave his new secretary a mini-skirt with her salary on her first payday. The next month he raised it.

Chuck Fellers