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From prairie to swamp scenes, Lafayette's city hall is being transformed by famed muralist Robert Dafford

BRUSH WORK

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Advocate staff photo by LESLIE WESTBROOK -- Muralist Robert Dafford works on a painted faux-awning facing the employee parking lot of Lafayette City Hall Thursday, June 2, 2016, in Lafayette, La. Dafford has begun the process of painting several murals on the outer walls of city hall that include scenes of cane and rice fields, cypress swamps, oak trees and people to represent the culture and history of the Acadiana area.

Internationally renowned muralist Robert Dafford is slowly transforming the walls of Lafayette City Hall into a mélange of swooping oak trees, surreal swamps and sentimental scenes from the past.

Dafford, whose work graces downtown Lafayette with such murals as "Escape from the Postcards" on Marley's Sports Bar, "Ex-Garage" on Jefferson Towers and "Stereo Prairie" on the Children's Museum, has turned his brush to the old Sears department store on University Avenue that now houses the main offices of city-parish government.

"Let's face it, the (building) was designed and built as a Sears clothing store. It doesn't have a whole lot of character, and it certainly doesn't feel like anything particularly special," said Acadiana Center for the Arts Executive Director Gerd Wuestemann, a member of Dafford's advisory panel for the project. The project, Wuestemann said, will turn a "fairly generic City Hall into something that really says, 'We are Lafayette, Louisiana.' "

The building's exterior will be painted red to imitate the nearby St. John Cathedral as well as the brick buildings on the University of Louisiana at Lafayette campus.

Dafford also included a series of arches as a nod to the Spanish-inspired architecture found around the city.

Along with arches and arboreal displays, the building's exterior has been groomed for cracks and leaks.

The project has a \$175,000 budget, which Dafford said is being used to cover the cost of supplies, facilities and the price for several local artists to contribute.

Dafford said the funds are being spent entirely in Lafayette.

Since he started the project, Dafford has embellished the St. Landry Street side of the building with arches and a large oak tree towering behind a painted pathway, representing an oak torn down years ago to make way for the Sears parking lot.

A statue in the building's atrium was made from the old tree.

"One of the most precious features of where we live is the oaks," Dafford said.

On the Azalea Street side, Dafford has begun work on a 150-foot-long mural of rice fields, cattle and south Louisiana prairie scenes.

The painting, Dafford said, will "look 15 miles deep."

The faux field will give the narrow street — and nearby residents — something to look at other than a white brick wall.

On the Lafayette Utilities System drive-up service side along St. Landry Street will be a depiction of Petit Manchac, a trading post that predates Lafayette and Vermilionville. Dafford said the painting's proximity to the street — as well as the smaller building size — will allow passers-by a more intimate viewing experience.

"That painting will represent who we are," Dafford said. "We're Spanish; we're French; we're African; we're Indian; and we're German, too."

The University Avenue side of the building will offer depictions of nearby Lake Martin, cypress forests and cypress swamps.

The back of the building will sport green awnings with decorative lettering as well as the city-parish government logo.

“The back end of the building just has mechanical (and) electrical stuff strapped and folded over it. It’s really ugly,” Dafford said. “I’m taking advantage of some of the lines of the machinery to create a row of awnings dropping from the shadows, and there will be some large windows. It’s already transformed the building from an industrial back end.”

Wuestemann said the vivid imagery and esoteric designs will make the building — and the history depicted on its surface — less “placard” and “obvious.”

“It’s pretty easy to say, ‘You know, it needs to speak of our community, so let’s put an alligator here and a crawfish here and some accordions there,’ ” Wuestemann said. “That’s perfectly fine. There’s nothing wrong with it. But I think real artists are able to give that sense of place but transcend the mundane. He managed to clearly say, ‘This is us. This is where we live.’ ”

Joining Wuestemann on the advisory council are Allen Bacque, a retired architect who helped with the renovation of City Hall; Philip Gould, a local photographer; Phil Lank, a local entrepreneur, former City Council member and founding member of Festival International de Louisiane; and Billy Ware, with the band Beausoleil.

Wuestemann said most of the issues addressed during advisory meetings were logistical and pragmatic rather than design changes.

“We saw the piece evolve, but I think the concept was already so well-formed that we didn’t have a whole lot of work together,” he said.

Although the Cajun and Creole connections will be brushed along all sides of the building, Dafford said, the key connector is how the paintings are framed.

“You can’t see any two of these walls at the same time,” Dafford said.

“Each one has a slightly different architectural framework to contain it.”

Dafford began on the mural project in April, and he expects to continue working for several months.

“It’s been exciting to watch it all sort of unfold to see the visuals unveiled and revealed through time,” said city-parish spokeswoman Cydra Wingerter.

“He’s offered a lot of insight and history not just to the physical building. He’s decided to display Lafayette cultural history as well.”

Since beginning his career in 1970, Dafford has created more than 400 public works around the U.S. and Europe.

He is responsible for the clarinet mural on the Holiday Inn Downtown in New Orleans, the “Baton Rouge Blues Harp” on the Belle of Baton Rouge Casino and murals along floodwalls in Ohio, Kentucky and Mississippi.

“Horizon,” Dafford’s series of flying violin murals in places with historical connections with Lafayette, can be seen in Suresnes, France; Sainte-Florinne, France; Jodoigne, Belgium; Ottawa, Canada; and Lafayette.

The first violin was painted in Lafayette in 1988 to coincide with Festival International de Louisiane.

MORE INFORMATION



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