



Masury Estate Ballroom
Interior Mural Assessment & Documentation

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INTRODUCTION

John Canning & Co. (JCC) was retained by Holiday Beach Property Owners Association to assess and document the ceiling mural in the Masury Estate Ballroom, located at 67 Old Neck Road South in Center Moriches, New York. The purpose of this assessment is to assist the Holiday Beach Property Owners Association with their consideration of the conservation of this mural, as well as appropriate conservation treatments. This report will also document the existing conditions of the mural, failures, previous interventions, etc. and will also provide a narrative history of the Masury Estate, documenting the mural at this particular point in time. JCC services included:

- Onsite detailed visual inspection and documentation of the mural to include extent of damage, paint loss and/or delamination, previous interventions, etc.
- Onsite visual survey and in-situ test methods of the plaster substrate to document the stability of the substrate and failures
- Photo documentation using high resolution images
- Written finishes assessment with recommendations for stabilization, conservation, and/or restoration

Rachel Gilberti, Lead Conservator, and Dona Yu, Fine Arts Conservator, were onsite on September 14-15, 2021 to review the ceiling mural visually, sound the mural, and photo document the space. Dona Yu also authored this report. The following report summarizes the conditions of the mural as well as provides recommendations for stabilization, conservation, and/or restoration.

As with any intervention, repairs and restoration are based on the diagnosis and identification of the cause and nature of the problem. The importance of this onsite investigation and assessment was to document the failures in context and identify their causes in order to provide sound recommendations for treatment. In addition to documenting failures, this investigation will serve as a record of the building and historic fabric at this point in time, providing a valuable reference in the future.

KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

1. CONSERVATION: the maintenance and preservation of works of art and their protection from future damage and deterioration.
2. CONSOLIDATION: addition of an adhesive or consolidant to friable powdery original material such as water damaged plaster or rotten wood.
3. DRIP MARKS: typically brown or dark colored, sometimes caused by moisture, other times caused by paint drips.
4. EFFLORESCENCE: crystalline or powdery deposits of salt, due to migration of a salt to the surface of a porous material, where it forms a coating.
5. FLAKING PAINT: when paint chips off or flakes, and becomes loose.
6. GROUND LOSS: an area where there is no paint on the primer or background surface.
7. HAIRLINE CRACKS: small thin cracks in substrate, that have not yet opened up. Hairline cracks typically do not affect the structural integrity of the substrate.
8. OVERPAINT: later paint layers added in the hopes to improve or update an old image.
9. PAINT LOSS: an area where there is no paint.
10. PLASTER DELAMINATION: process where new coat or topcoat of plaster has separated from the old layer beneath. Typically, results in areas of plaster loss, which indicates a bonding failure.
11. PREVIOUS REPAIRS: past intervention to fix/mend that is visible.
12. RESTORATION: the repair or renovation of artwork that has already sustained decay and/or damage, in order to preserve the artists original intent.
13. SOUNDING: evaluating the density of the material by using a tuning fork of sorts placed against the material. As consistent tone indicates a “sound” substrate.
14. TENTING PAINT: loose/lifting paint that forms a point or a “tent” in the surface.

BRIEF HISTORY

In 1898, the Masury Estate was built by the waterfront in the Shingle style and was designed by architect William Lambert, of New York City. The Ballroom was constructed on the north side of the mansion at the same time. The interior of the Ballroom is decorated with high quality ornamentation and workmanship. The oval-domed painted ceiling mural, intricate railed mezzanine, and classical fireplace all remain a high level of architectural integrity, to this day. The ceiling mural is said to have been painted by a group of Italians because of the influx of Italian immigrants during this time period, but when this report was written, no documentation to verify this was found.

The house has been affected by natural elements as well as changes in ownership over the years. For instance, much of the main property, stables, and carriage house were damaged or destroyed by a hurricane in 1938 or a fire in 1904.¹ The Ballroom area that was battered by the hurricane was repaired. The house was lived in until 1932 when Grace Masury, the owner, died. The estate was then turned over to the Masury heirs, but was neglected until 1954 when Walter C. Hewitt purchased the property. In 1957, the Holiday Beach Property Owners Association bought it from Hewitt. Since then, members of the Association have cared for and managed the home. According to the client, when the roof was repaired in 1973, the mural also underwent treatment.

The Masury Estate was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. For more information on the history of the Masury family and building, see Appendix B: National Register of Historic Places, Inventory – Nomination Form.



Figure 1. Historic photograph of the Ballroom, date unknown (Photo courtesy of the Holiday Beach Property Owners Association)

TIMELINE

1898	Masury Estate was built
1904	Fire engulfs the stable and carriage house on the Estate

¹ Field, Van and Mary. *The Illustrated History of the Moriches Bay Area*. (Yaphank, NY: Searles Graphics, 1989, 2003), 197. "Moriches has \$75,000 Fire," *The East Hampton Star*, Dec. 9, 1904.

1932	Grace Masury dies, ownership is turned over to the Masury heirs
1938	Hurricane destroys the main portion of the estate but leaves the Ballroom fairly intact
1954	Walter C. Hewitt purchases the property after about 20 years of neglect
1957	Holiday Beach Property Owners Association buys the Estate from Hewitt
1973	New roof is installed directly over original cedar roof; the mural undergoes repair and treatment
1986	Masury Estate is added to the National Register of Historic Places

METHODOLOGY

JCC visited the site on September 14-15, 2021. A visual and hands-on survey was carried out and photographs were taken using a Canon EOS Rebel XS Digital-SLR camera and Apple iPhone 11. Lightweight aluminum rolling scaffolding was installed by JCC in order to access the mural. The mural was examined from the scaffold by eye and hand. Field measurements were taken using a standard 100' tape measure. Architectural drawings and ceiling plans were not included. A photograph of the mural was annotated using Bluebeam software.

EXISTING CONDITIONS + ANALYSIS

The dimensions of the oval-shaped mural are approximately 41' x 17'. It was painted with oil paint on plaster substrate. The artist and year completed are unknown as the mural does not display a signature or year and no further documentation was found. It is likely that it was painted at the same time the house was constructed in 1898.

PLASTER SUBSTRATE

Overall, the plaster substrate is in fair-to-poor condition. About one-third of the ceiling, from the center of the mural moving westward, is sagging (fig. 2). There is a network of cracks and many right-angle cracks running all over the mural, ranging in width from hairline to 1/8" (fig. 3). This indicates that the plaster keys in the wood lath may have deteriorated, or the furring that runs perpendicular to the lath may be compromised. However, the cause of the cracks can only be confirmed after access to and examination of the structural support for the ceiling. Several areas of the mural sound hollow and exhibit movement. Some newer cracks appear to have formed mainly in the northwest corner and north side. Additionally, there is an almost rectangular panel that is delaminated on the north side, right above the recessed lighting (fig. 4).



Figure 2. Overall image of the ceiling sagging, looking west (Photo by JCC, Sept. 2021)



Figure 3. Overall image of the map cracking as well as stains appearing like drip marks (Photo by JCC, Sept. 2021)



Figure 4. An almost rectangular panel of delaminating plaster, denoted by the blue box (Photo by JCC, Sept. 2021)

A previous intervention took place in the 1970s, but there is no documentation of who did the repairs or what was used. Holes were drilled throughout the entire surface of the mural, approximately every 2"-6", and appear to have been injected with an unknown consolidant. There is staining at or near the drill holes, appearing like drip marks (and can be seen in fig. 3); about 50% of these drill holes exhibit dark staining. The staining indicates that the consolidant pulled dirt/soil from behind the mural onto the visible painted surface through capillary action. The drill holes and cracks were previously repaired with what appears to be joint compound or a spackle-like material. Some of the material in the repaired holes are damp and soft to the touch.

PAINT LAYER

Overall, the paint is in fair-to-poor condition. There is a thin layer of a chalky white deposit, or efflorescence, throughout the entire surface of the mural. A test of brushing water on the surface shows what the original color of the background should be (fig. 5). Paint loss and tenting and flaking paint can be seen where there is major efflorescence on the northern half of the mural

(figs. 6&7). There is minor biological growth on the northeast quadrant of the mural (fig. 8) and on a couple other localized areas. Biological debris is also visible throughout the surface of the mural. The original paint layer is fairly intact and there does not appear to be any overpaint.



Figure 5. The highlighted area shows where water was brushed on the surface to show what the original color should look like (Photo by JCC, Sept. 2021)



Figures 6 and 7. Detail of paint loss, tenting and flaking paint (Photos by JCC, Sept. 2021)



Figure 8. Detail of mold on the surface (Photo by JCC, Sept. 2021)

It should be noted that the Ballroom was not always climate controlled. According to the client, there was a period of time, about eight years in the 2010s, where the windows to the Ballroom were opened daily and the salt air from the adjacent creek and bay was allowed to permeate the space. Salt is corrosive and hygroscopic—it will dry out the paint and plaster substrate—thereby accelerating deterioration of the mural.

RECOMMENDATIONS

John Canning & Co., Ltd. recommends the below treatment for the conservation of the existing ceiling mural. The primary concern is the stability of the plaster substrate. These recommendations are limited to the areas reviewed as part of this assessment. Proper review and testing of any other areas should be done, prior to executing the treatment outlined below.

1. The back/support of the ceiling mural must be accessed and assessed to determine the cause of the sag and cracks in the mural. If it is determined to be a structural issue, then this must be treated first, prior to any work on the face of the mural. Depending on the diagnosis, a separate contractor may be needed to perform the necessary repairs and stabilization.
2. The areas of existing mold will require separate treatment: First, the cause of the mold will need to be determined. Less invasive methods can be used, e.g. a borescope, to access and view the back of the mural. From there, the appropriate treatment can commence. Generally, mold can be eliminated with alcohol and/or heat.
3. The Ballroom needs climate control and environmental monitoring. Keep the temperature steady at 68°F-72°F and the relative humidity at 45%-55%. Regular or daily monitoring with a hygrometer is recommended.

Conservation of the Mural – Treatment Plan

Following any structural repairs, JCC will perform treatment of the mural.

- Clean, consolidate, and re-saturate the paint layer. The thin, efflorescence layer on the paint surface will be re-constituted and the mural stabilized before the following treatment can take place.

- Remove degraded or failing material from the drill holes and cracks; inject with plaster consolidant, if needed.
- Infill areas of loss and inpaint with conservation-grade (reversible) materials
- Apply protective coating

For future recommendations of the Ballroom decoration, JCC recommends reinstating the harp pattern on the balcony walls, above the wainscot. This pattern can be seen in the historic photograph of the Ballroom and while onsite, a ghosting of the pattern can be seen through the current paint scheme (fig. 9).



Figure 9. A ghosting of the harp pattern on the balcony walls, denoted by the blue circle (Photo by JCC, Sept. 2021)

APPENDIX A: Conditions Assessment Annotated Photograph

