

## **Colo. Supreme Court Leaves di Benedetto Mural Hanging**

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LAW WEEK PHOTO BY JAMIE COTTEN

Attorneys David Rigsby, left, and Jennifer Schlatter peer down from late artist Angelo di Benedetto's mural, which, as of now, has no permanent home when the Colorado Judicial Building demolition begins May 3.

By Matt Masich, LAW WEEK COLORADO

DENVER — The crowning work of one of Colorado's most important artists hides in plain sight in the heart of downtown Denver.

Motorists on 14th Avenue might miss it as they drive by, but pedestrians strolling in Civic Center Park sometimes take a detour to get a better view of the enormous mural that sprawls across the ceiling of the open-air first floor of the Colorado Judicial Building.

On any given day, a handful of curious passersby walk beneath the mural, gazing up at the dozens of historical figures that float on the mural's vivid orange and yellow background. They pick out the more familiar faces — there's Abraham Lincoln, there's Martin Luther King — and then move on.

But to some people in Colorado's arts community and legal profession, "Justice through the Ages" by late Central City artist Angelo di Benedetto is more than an interesting adornment on an otherwise gray government building; to them, it is a treasure.

"Angelo di Benedetto was a giant in Colorado art, and his mural at the court building is definitely one of the finest works of public art in the state," said Michael Paglia, longtime Westword art critic and author of several books on Colorado artists.

"Angelo di Benedetto was probably among the best, or the best, figure painter in Colorado," said Hugh Grant, director of the Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative arts. "We have quite a number of his paintings, and we have many, many figure drawings by him, some of which are just breathtaking."

Di Benedetto was "Mr. Art" in Colorado during the mid-20th century, said Steve Savageau, who owns an art gallery in Denver. "The mural was his masterpiece," Savageau said.

The mural, also known as "Lawgivers," will be on public view for just a few more months. The judicial building, the mural's home for more than three decades, will be torn down this summer to make way for a new courts complex. The mural's 74 panels are to be removed from their spot overlooking the skylight of the Supreme Court Law Library and be put in storage — artistic limbo.

It's unknown when, where and in what form they will next be displayed. "All options are open" for the mural's future, said Bill Mosher of Trammell Crow Co., which is managing construction of the new building.

These options include displaying the mural's panels separately rather than as a whole mural.

"My obligation at this point in time is to document and secure and store these [panels] so that we leave the options open for their future disposition, whether it's in the new building or somewhere else," Mosher said.

Lawyers 'looking skyward'

Attorney David Rigsby of Denver wants to make sure the mural is prominently displayed when the Supreme Court moves in 2013 to its new home in the Ralph L. Carr Judicial Complex, which is being designed by Denver's Fentress Architects and will be built on the block now occupied by the judicial building and Colorado History Museum.

Rigsby is enlisting others to join him in encouraging the judicial branch to find a place for the mural inside the Carr complex, or failing that, to help find another suitable place for it. Joining him in the effort is Jennifer Schlatter, an intellectual property attorney with Allen & Vellone who has experience representing artists.

"My hope is not so much to apply legal analysis or legal pressure," Rigsby said, "but to get some people involved who know their way around the system, to apply some knowhow into roping in people who care about the mural to do the right thing."

Rigsby, general counsel with Lincoln Trust Co., has art and the law flowing through his veins. His father, also named David Rigsby, was an artist who founded the Evergreen Arts Center; his mother, Linda Palmieri, was a Jefferson County judge. He also has a personal connection to di Benedetto and the mural. Rigsby and his family were friends and neighbors of di Benedetto's in Central City during the time he began work on the mural in 1976.

"Angelo didn't paint the mural to be shown in a museum or gallery setting, but to be experienced in a public space where he knew people would be in deep contemplation," Rigsby said.

"Lawyers rehearsing their oral arguments one last time while they paced beneath the building, law students cramming for the bar in the library, petitioners nearing the end of a long road — for over 30 years people have been looking skyward to calm their nerves, muster their strength, or catch their breath, and Angelo knew their gaze would be met with this."



PHOTO COURTESY OF PHYLLIS MONTROSE  
Angelo di Benedetto spent a year and a half painting the mural.

The artist

Though di Benedetto died in 1992, he has still has many friends and admirers who share Rigsby's enthusiasm. Diminutive in physical stature, di Benedetto was a larger-than-life figure in Central City and the Denver art world.

Born in 1913 to Italian immigrant parents in Paterson, N.J., di Benedetto got his art degree from the Cooper Union School of Art in New York City and afterward trained at the School of the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. He joined the U.S. Army Air Corps (later the U.S. Air Force) before World War II, and served during that conflict in Haiti and Africa — an experience that spurred a lifelong abhorrence of war.

While in Africa, he met and befriended Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. This was just one of the many luminaries

with whom di Benedetto rubbed elbows: He chatted about reincarnation with Albert Einstein at Princeton, served as foreman on one of Diego Rivera's murals in Mexico City, and used his own living room to host a performance by experimental composer John Cage.

Di Benedetto's last stop in the Air Force was at Denver's Buckley Field in 1946. He stayed in Colorado the rest of his life, heading to the mountains to transform a rundown Central City warehouse into a giant art studio. He was well-loved in his adopted hometown — "you walked down the street with him and everybody knew him," Rigsby said — and was active in the community. He served as police magistrate in the 1950s and twice ran for mayor.

Di Benedetto was a prolific artist and teacher. He was highly regarded for his abstract paintings, figure drawings, sculpture and ceramics, which were exhibited in museums across the country. A number of his works are now on display at the Kirkland Museum's downtown gallery and exhibition at the Arvada Center. His art was reproduced in two Life features, Newsweek, The New Yorker and National Geographic.

Di Benedetto was a strong proponent of public art. In 1968, he organized a group of nine artists to create sculptures for Denver's Burns Park at Colorado Boulevard and Alameda Parkway, some of which are still standing. Former Gov. John Love appointed him to the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities and gave him an award for his contributions to the art and artists of Colorado.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PHYLLIS MONTROSE  
Angelo di Benedetto was aided in the painting by chief assistant Phyllis Montrose and four others.

The mural — then

The mural at the judicial building was by far the largest work di Benedetto painted in his long career. At 20 feet by 150 feet, it was called at its debut "the largest figurative mural in America."

It was paid for with a \$100,000 gift to the judicial branch from retired Denver attorney Otto Friedrichs and his wife, Helen. The Supreme Court justices in 1976 selected di Benedetto from a field of 22 candidates to paint the mural for the judicial building then under construction.

The justices originally asked for a mural depicting the history of law in Colorado; di Benedetto persuaded them to expand the mural's focus to include the great lawgivers from across the world. The artist and justices pitched ideas back and forth before settling on around 60 people — from ancient Babylonian King Hammurabi to former U.S. Chief Justice Earl Warren — to enshrine in the painting. Di Benedetto placed "the spirit of the law" at the center of the mural: a bright geometric design that radiated warm color across the figures.

It took di Benedetto and five assistants 17½ months to paint the mural onto panels at his Central City studio. "Justice through the Ages" was dedicated amid fanfare on Columbus Day 1978.

"The mural is an idealistic concept of people of all races who have contributed to the growth and development of

human rights and justice,” read the program at the dedication ceremony. “It is the hope of the artist that this painting will endure and give knowledge and pride to all races for their similar desires for justice and peace.”

Colorado artist Phyllis Montrose was di Benedetto’s chief assistant for the mural. Montrose, a surrealist painter whose works are displayed near di Benedetto’s in the Kirkland Museum, met him as a teenager in the 1940s when he was her teacher. In 1977-78, she drove from Denver to Central City to spend three days a week working on the mural.

It was a labor of love, Montrose said earlier this month. She was paid “\$25 a day and lunch” consisting of “weak soup and a thin slice of rye bread.” At night she slept in a sleeping bag on the studio floor.

Di Benedetto drafted each figure and painted the faces, while Montrose and the assistants painted the flowing robes and other details. She remembers painting the curls of Hammurabi’s beard and spending days painting all the feet. The mural was “painted a quarter at a time,” she said, “and one-quarter of the mural filled up all the vertical space in the studio.”

The working conditions could be grueling.

“I developed a stooped squat [painting] all those draperies — up, down, up, down. It was wonderful for my legs,” she said.

Sometimes the justices would drop by to inspect their progress.

“They kept coming up in groups of three or four. Angelo was so funny. He said, ‘Michelangelo had the Pope, and I have the Supreme Court,’” Montrose said.

Di Benedetto’s dog would also prowl the studio.

“There I would be lying under the scaffolding in wads of dust and dog hair, with a large red setter who had gas. I’m painting feet, the dog is gassing me and the justices are hounding Angelo,” she remembered with a laugh. The work was arduous, but Montrose said she was very pleased with the finished mural.

“If it ever got the public attention it deserves, it’s very important. It raises the masses; it honors them. It has heroes from all races in it,” she said. “I think it’s uplifting for downtrodden people to see themselves given dignity and honored.”



LAW WEEK PHOTO BY JAMIE COTTEN

Supreme Court library assistant Ginger Bilthuis sits in the library beneath the mural. The library closes April 5 and will reopen in smaller quarters in The Denver Post building on April 19. “I love this place. I’m a little bit sad, but you have to let go of the old horse and buggy.”

The mural — now

While di Benedetto hoped his mural would endure to inspire Coloradans, it is attached to a judicial building that Gov. Bill Ritter has called “outdated and obsolete from the day [it] opened.” The state historical society will help the judicial branch preserve the mural while the building is demolished, Mosher said.

“They are helping us with the archival process and the documentation and photography” of the mural panels, he said, but the historical society has declined an offer to acquire the mural.

The judicial branch will put the mural into storage while it works out a plan for its future display. The conceptual designs for the exterior of the new Carr judicial complex don’t include a place for the mural. Interior design of the Carr complex has not begun, Mosher said, leaving open the possibility it will be incorporated there. As the interior design comes together over the next six months, the branch will decide whether there’s a place for it inside the courts building.

But the size of the mural presents challenges. It’s 50 yards long in two parallel lines of 37 panels each, as it’s currently displayed, and would be 100 yards long if the 74 panels were laid out in one line.

“Currently there’s not a single space where the entire mural could be displayed as it is today,” said Fred Schultz of Trammell Crow, who works with Mosher in planning the Carr complex. “We don’t have anything that big or that long, so they would be somehow dispersed throughout the facility if we can find places for it. The best thing would be to find a benefactor or a destination that this thing could be set up in the way it’s intended now, but we haven’t found a home for it.”

Montrose agrees it would be best to display the mural as originally intended. Separating the panels would be a “terrible idea,” she said.

“You can’t break up a cohesive work,” Montrose said. “That would make it into a historical artifact.” Savageau, who bought most of di Benedetto’s estate, elaborated on that idea.

“Breaking them down into panels — this is not an Enstrom candy. This has a unified structure,” Savageau said. “The whole idea was the spirit of the law in the center of the painting and then the relationship of the spirit of the law to the various adherents to it.”

If the mural can’t be displayed in its entirety at the Carr complex, those who knew di Benedetto said, the next best thing would be to move the whole mural to another place where law touches people’s lives, like a courthouse, law library or law school in Colorado. But to the mural’s fans, that is a fallback.

“I think the approach that best recognizes the historic importance of the mural to Colorado and the law would be to find a way to incorporate the mural into the Ralph Carr justice center,” Rigsby said.