

July 28, 2002

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: HARLEM

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: HARLEM; A Negligee for Murals In a Harlem Courthouse

By ROBERT PLOTKIN

In 1936, when the country was in the grip of the Depression and artists were focusing on socially conscious themes, a pair of murals commissioned by the federal Works Progress Administration were installed in a turn-of-the-century Victorian Gothic courthouse on 121st Street in Harlem. The murals, by David Karfunkle, depicted images of conquistadors and slavery, and included two exposed breasts.

But in late May, when the building was reopened after a \$2.8 million renovation as the Harlem Community Justice Center, visitors were greeted not by the Depression-era artwork but by a pair of large tan drapes running the length of the courtroom and bolted in place, top and bottom.

The draperies, which were installed late last year, were ordered put up by the State Office of Court Administration. The decision to cover the murals was made after meetings with community representatives who found the images offensive, especially since the court, one of the city's new community courts, has a juvenile division that handles cases involving young people.

The situation was first noted by Michael Henry Adams, a historian of Harlem and its architecture. The decision has been criticized by art historians and preservationists, who argue that a thin-skinned and increasingly puritanical public misunderstands the murals' history and significance.

The installation of the curtain and the reaction to it recalled an episode in January in Washington, when the Department of Justice was widely attacked for spending \$8,650 on a curtain to cover the partly nude statue "Spirit of Justice"; Attorney General John Ashcroft had said he was uncomfortable with the nudity.

"Does anyone really want to be the John Ashcroft of Harlem?" asked Tom Thurston, a historian and project director for the New Deal Network, an institute at Columbia University.

One of the murals in Harlem, titled "Exploitation of Labor," depicts light- and dark-skinned workers building temples; in one corner, a woman with a bare breast pleads on behalf of a man whose hands are bound. The other mural, "Hoarding of Wealth," shows a conquistador cupping the planet Earth in his hand while noblemen offer models of castles and ships; the scene includes a fair-skinned woman draped in peach fabric that leaves one breast exposed.

"The murals were covered because there are naked women depicted in the mural and there are youth in the court," said David Brookstaver, the spokesman for the State Office of Court Administration. "In addition to the naked women, it depicts slavery."

"The size, scale and placement in a public space implies that the images are representing the institution," said Michele Cohen, program director for public art for public schools for the city's Board of Education. "So institutions become very nervous about the murals."

At the moment, there is no meeting ground between defenders and detractors.

"If you want the mural, it looks like you support racism and nudity," said Joe Zayas, clerk to Justice Rolando T. Acosta, who presides over the courthouse. "And if you are against the mural, then it looks like you don't value art and the First Amendment." ROBERT PLOTKIN

Photo: No peeking. At a community courthouse, curtains hide Depression-era murals that contain images of slavery and a few bare female breasts. (Robert Plotkin)