

CONSERVATION PROBLEMS WITHIN THE ONTARIO LEGISLATIVE BUILDING

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This article is based on a paper to be delivered at the 8th International Congress of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works which will be in Vienna from September 7 - 13, 1980. The topic of this year's congress is "Conservation Within Historic Buildings".

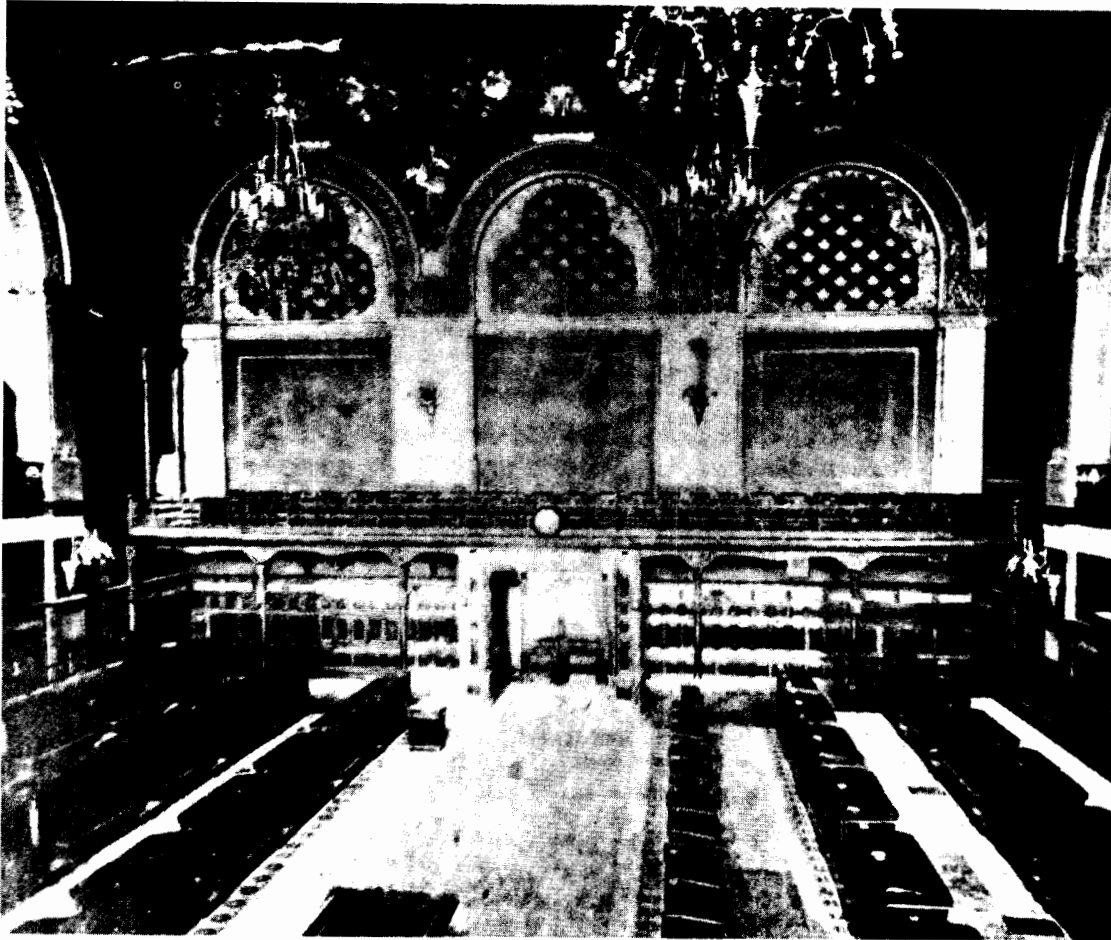
The Ontario Legislative Building, a typical "Romanesque" imposing structure, sits firmly planted in a park setting in downtown Toronto. It was opened in 1893 and covers the site of the Old King's College which was built just 50 years before and which was removed to make room for the new Parliament Building. No better site could have been chosen for a public building of such importance, nor could there have been a more appropriate name given to the site which is generally referred to as "Queen's Park". Today, as in the past, it is the thriving centre of political life in Ontario, also maintaining the cultural and loyalist activities inherited by this province.

As such it has become a historic shrine housing furnishings, works of art, murals, and important records relating to the history of Upper Canada (renamed Ontario in 1867). To preserve that tradition, the building is open to the public and visited by tens of thousands annually. Until recently, little was known about the history of construction, the functioning of the building, or its extensive art programmes which were formed to glorify Ontario's

heritage and seat of power. However, a desire for the building's revitalization led the Ontario Government to commission Eric Arthur, noted Canadian architectural historian, to write a book *From Front Street to Queen's Park: the story of Ontario's Parliament Buildings* which is sold commercially and also used as a gift to visiting dignitaries.

When dealing with government-owned buildings with "National Treasure" status or those declared an Historic Site, which still have to perform their original function, the scholar, architect, engineer or conservator is often faced with logistical problems merely because he is not dealing with one client or a group but with an anonymous body consisting of bureaucrats, administrators and politicians. The Legislative Building is such a case. The building in its present role as office building and tourist attraction poses many interesting conservation problems.

The sizeable art collection which is arranged along the corridors consists of historic political portraits, statues, landscape and *genre* works. These might be loosely classified as "moveable materials". It also houses parliamentary furnishings and fittings



Original painted mural decorations (1893) on north wall, above Speaker's Gallery, Legislative Chamber. Note the highly decorated coved area above personifications of figures of "Wisdom" (left) and "Power" (right). The south wall, behind the dais, originally had painted figures of "Moderation" and "Justice". These are the traditional four virtues of Good Government. The walls were overpainted in 1912 with a plain color.

kept for traditional reasons within this conservationally unsatisfactory building. This situation applies also to the "immoveable materials", i.e. the Legislative Chamber and its components

The Chamber was once decorated with an elaborate allegorical iconography on the subject of Government. The decorations were one of the finest examples of Victorian murals to have been produced in Canada. However, their life span was brief because acoustical problems arose soon after the Chamber was opened. In 1912 the Chamber had to be overpainted and the ceiling boarded over with panels. In 1979, two of the sound-absorbing panels on the ceiling

were removed by the Canadian Conservation Institute and some of the original designs were brought to light after being hidden for nearly 70 years.

The fact that Queen's Park remains in daily use contributes significantly to problems of conservation. For instance, the House must be in recess before work in the Chamber can be undertaken. The conservator had therefore to seize an opportunity to commence exploratory work. The chance came when a scaffold was erected in order to facilitate repainting of the Chamber. Other favourable situations have been exploited in the interest of conserving the art works housed in the building.

THE ART COLLECTION

In 1978, the Ministry of Government Services began cataloguing canvasses and sculptures which were around the building. Research in the Provincial Archives revealed there was once a vast art collection carefully built up and selected to reflect Ontario's political and cultural greatness. In the search for these lost art works, during which attics, storage rooms, and office cupboards were ransacked, it was discovered that hundreds of these works had indeed survived, albeit in unbelievably dismal condition. They had probably been put away because of their appearance or simply because of changing taste. A small sum was allocated to clean and restore paintings and sculptures. Along with the first exposure of a new shining portrait of a Premier, resulting in excellent TV and news coverage, came additional funds. Those responsible for the conservation project were given a free hand to re-establish the once important art collection along the public corridors of the building.

The builders had every intention of instilling the idea that the Ontario Legislature was to be the seat of power and a monument to the democratic parliamentary system. They commissioned large paintings and statues. These recently restored moveable materials hang within an area considered conservationally unsafe because of their subject-related content and historical importance, however, they ought to remain *in situ* on permanent public display. Although the highest precautions are taken, including the hiring of guards, weekly inspections and cursory condition reports, the paintings still run the risk of theft or damage as well as less than ideal environmental conditions. Little control can be maintained over relative humidity and heating facilities, and, in winter the temperature can range from 75°F in various parts of the building, thus causing condensation in the cooler areas.

Attempts are being made to air-condition the entire building, but this remedy is unlikely to be completed in under ten years. To counteract these drawbacks one tries to relocate the art works away from radiators, and in winter to move them temporarily into offices in other, more moderate areas. Lighting is poor, and it is difficult to exhibit paintings satisfactorily. Little can be rectified because of the random placement of powerlines when the system was changed over from gas lighting to electricity.

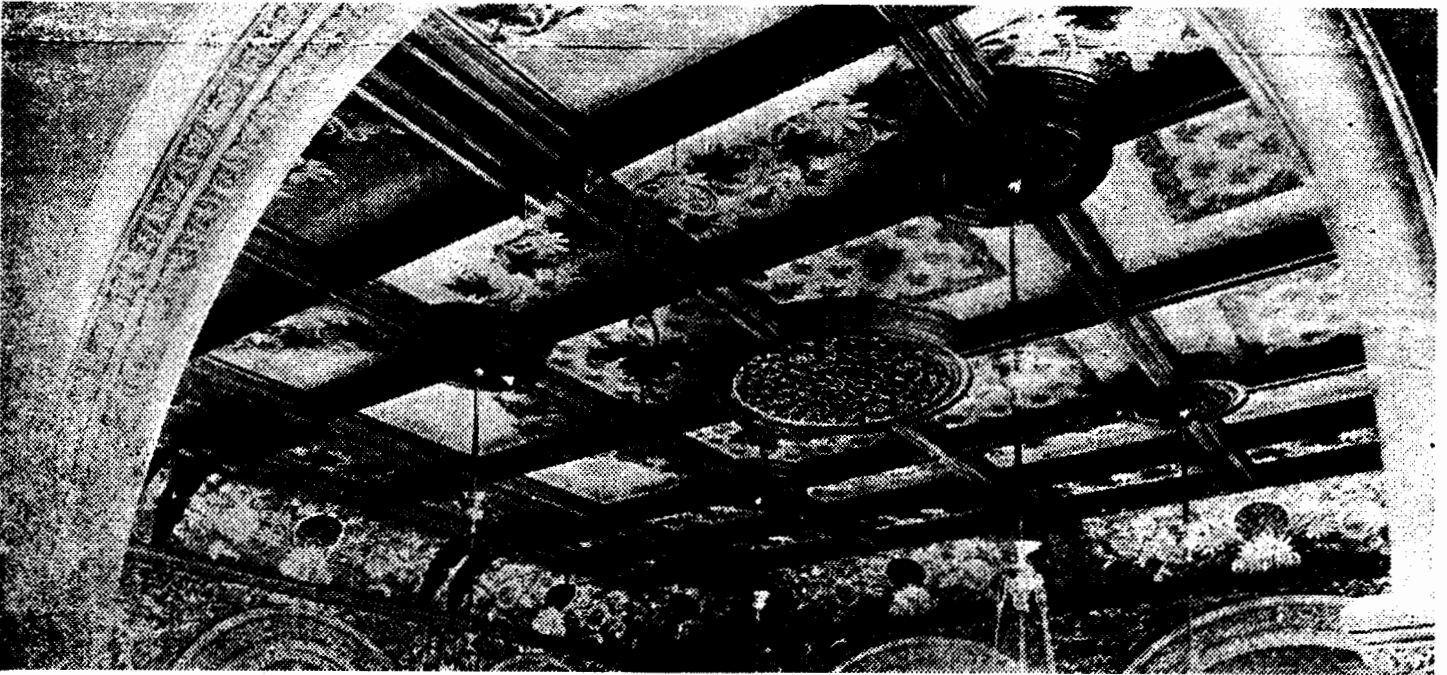
Art works are not displayed near direct sunlight, and works on paper are confined to very dark areas, if at all possible. Because of the poor prevailing conditions in the building, the more fragile examples of the excellent collection of nineteenth century watercolours cannot be displayed at this time. Instead, for conservational and aesthetic reasons, they are hung in the Speaker's Apartment, which is a self-contained residence within the building for the Speaker and his family. As much as possible storage of art works is discouraged due to the lack of an environmentally controlled storage area.

Although divider bins have been constructed in the storage area, art works still run the risk of damage because other departments, due to lack of space, insist on storing old files, furniture, and large architectural models in the room, which at times resembles a "junk shop". Little can be done at this point to alleviate the situation. The art works therefore run less risk hanging on walls than in crowded storage facilities.

THE LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

In the Legislative Chamber there was a deliberate iconographic scheme carried from the exterior to the interior quarters and culminating in a magnificent decorative ensemble. Portraits of famous Ontarians are chiselled into the east and west façade of the Chamber; personifications of the Arts and Sciences form a frieze above the south main entrance and flank a giant carved rendition of the great Seal of the Province. The finest woods were used on the interior and lavishly carved in Art Nouveau style. The then most up-to-date heating, lighting and fire prevention facilities were installed. Whether because of lack of funds or of sentimental attachments to tradition, certain parliamentary apparatus was brought up from the old Parliament Buildings and disposed in the new Chamber: for example, the Speaker's Chair, the Table of the House and the Table Calendar. These were found to have been in use by the first Parliament of Ontario after Confederation in 1867. They have now been documented for the future.

The importance the Chamber had to its builders cannot be overstressed. It was so placed as to jut out boldly in the front of the building, with three huge arched windows high above the Speaker's dais. The approach to it up the grand staircase



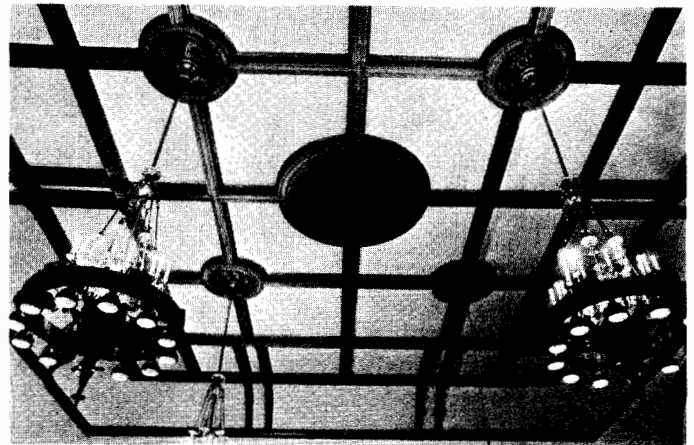
Original painted ceiling decoration (1893), Legislative Chamber.

Ceiling of Legislative Chamber (1979) showing acoustic panels placed over original decorations in 1912.

can be favourably compared to a typical Baroque interior, with its fundamental concept of the psychological effect of progression from one imposing space to another.

The room measures roughly 27 x 22 meters with a ceiling height of nearly 20 metres. All around is a 3-meter mahogany wainscoting complemented by abundant wood and plaster decoration. Throughout the Chamber are scattered carved mottoes, fantastic creatures and foliage ornamentation.

This Chamber represents the spiritual core and jewel of Queen's Park. Rare and faded contemporary photographs show that the ceiling decoration had a specific Canadian Government or at least a Province of Ontario iconography. Documentary sources do not specifically outline the figurative imagery but refer to a mass of colour with the maple leaf predominating among the designs. The present ceiling, in its overpainted state is only a ghost of its past splendour. It, was originally painted in cool green and rich tones of purple, the autumnal tints of golden maple leaves being wrought into scroll ornaments. These tones, together with the warm, strong colours of heavy-mahogany-stained wood beams, formed



a strong and effective combination yet avoided the heavy and monotonous effect of simple decorated panels. The coat of arms of the Province in heraldic colouring was prominent: a beautiful Celtic scroll entwined with a maple branch and leaves, harmonizing with the overall tenor of the Chamber and avoiding the weight of solid colours.

The whole design is most happily adapted to the deep wood-beam panelling, the lines of which break into it at all points but are so conceived as to show a careful following of each panel. Perhaps the most effective portion of the ceiling decoration is to be found in the 3-meter deep cove which is filled with a delicately drawn Romanesque

ornamentation, broken at intervals by medallions in deep tones of purple.

The walls as such do not appear to be prominent in size because space is taken up by the recessed galleries on the east and west sides. The Speaker's Gallery on the north is formed by three round-headed arches which are echoed in the Press Gallery above and behind the dais. Descriptions in tenders from 1892 call for allegorical subjects on both walls: "Moderation" on the south wall above the Speaker's throne, the principle figure holding a curbed bridle and the supporting cherub holding a code of laws. On the north wall above the desks of the Members are the subjects of "Power", a virile figure carrying a sword and oak branch, and "Wisdom" with open book and lamps of knowledge.

The panelling in the Chamber is made of Canadian sycamore with the inner panels in solid mahogany. One of the leading features of the Chamber is the dais, also made from mahogany and richly decorated with a finely sculptured coat of arms and floral motifs, harmonizing with and complementing the original design of the walls and ceiling which are now overpainted in cool tones.

ACOUSTICAL PROBLEMS

When the Chamber was opened in 1893 acoustical problems were soon encountered in 1895, the arches of the public gallery and the Speaker's and Reporters' galleries were draped with suitable hangings. This move was only partially successful and it appeared that more drapery would be needed to cover the large windows on the south side. This action must have cut down the influx of direct daylight by a considerable amount. However, the problem of acoustics was still not completely solved. In 1893, the Reporters' Gallery behind the Speaker's dais was lowered one meter to aid the press in hearing the debates of the Members.

In 1907 alterations were made to the platforms, and the desks and seats were rearranged in order to bring the furthest Members four meters closer to the Speaker. This arrangement of the Chamber seating was to remain in effect until 1930 when the seats were rearranged in a horseshoe shape around the Speaker's throne. They were later replaced in the traditional arrangement of the Government to the Speaker's right and the Opposition benches to his left.

With the acoustical problem still existing in the winter of 1912, the Department of Public Works was forced to employ a Toronto interior design company to install acoustical boarding over the ceiling and cove of the Chamber, thus hiding the whole ceiling. The false ceiling was redecorated in a style similar to but less elaborate than the original. The walls, however, were completely overpainted in a light colour. It is understood that this drastic overpaint campaign was prompted by the dark appearance of the murals since the south windows were draped in 1895. It was not until 1952 that the discolored walls and ceiling required a fresh coat of paint. This was followed by a third application in 1974.

The Chamber as it appears today has been transformed into a rational and restrained assembly hall, devoid of artistic creations, though fully functional. Moreover, its remnants of decoration, such as the dais, plaster reliefs, wood carvings, and textile hangings, no longer relate to the original architectural concept. They appear as isolated objects, though in the best sense of traditional craftsmanship.

INITIAL CONSERVATION PRODEDURES

In 1979 it was decided to repaint the Chamber, and for the first time a conservator was able to have a close look at the most inaccessible areas of the walls and ceiling. The Canadian Conservation Institute was requested to analyze methods of fabrication of the murals, to take paint samples, and to advise on possible future restoration methods and techniques. Dozens of paint samples were taken from strategically important areas using old photographs for guidance. These samples were examined with a stereo microscope and diagrams were made to show the sequence of paint layers, special attention being given to the uppermost layers. In most samples there were distinct layers confirming the previous three overpaint campaigns. These tones ranged from pale yellow to white and beige. Areas of inconsistent appearance in the upper layers suggested that sanding had taken place at some locations to provide better "tooth" for the following paint layer. The presence of various colours in the lower paint layers indicated the existence of the rich scheme outlined earlier.

Initial cleaning tests on the walls and cove were done mechanically using a scalpel and low magnification. This procedure, though time

consuming, proved quite successful. A chemical solution consisting of mineral spirit and alcohol, supported by mechanical cleaning, was more efficient. It is anticipated that a commercially available paint stripper can eventually be used after testing to establish exact timing procedures.

In order to uncover the original ceiling decoration, two 3 x 4 meter acoustical panels were removed. The panels consisted of a canvas which was painted white. Behind them were found approximately 10 layers of felt forming a cushion 20 cm thick, rigidly nailed to the original ceiling board. Apart from numerous nail-holes, the paintings are in sound condition and, since they have been protected throughout the past seven decades, they appear today in their original freshness.

Complete restoration of the Chamber would be an enormous task and would have to be carried out in various stages over the years. The first stage would be the uncovering of the ceiling panels, including removal of all sound-absorbing material, surface cleaning of the painted design, filling of

nail-holes, and protective coating. It is anticipated that the whole project would require four to six restorers working over a period of five years during those periods when the Legislature is in recess.

CONCLUSION

Today, the enthusiasm for conservation at Queen's Park, despite the problems and evident physical drawbacks, has at last reached into the Chamber. There is a renewed interest in its original character and attempts are being made to correct a situation in which static or immovable works of art, though deemed of historic value, are obscured because the Chamber is a working environment. Clearly conservators will continue to be faced with the problems and constraints discussed in this paper. The conservator's mandate to record this case history has now been completed. Acoustic problems have been overcome thanks to modern technology. The hope remains that in the not-too-distant future this building and its magnificent chamber can be seen in their original splendour.



Original decorations as found in 1979 underneath acoustic panels.