

Teaching the Young to Fly
Mural design by Tom Torluemke
for the Gilbert Wilson Memorial Mural Project

Learning to Fly

Tom Torluemke is one of Northwest Indiana's most gifted artists, a prolific and passionate figure who is as dedicated to educating and inspiring others through art as he is to creating beautiful works in any medium that is appropriate to the notions or themes he wishes to convey. His major proposed mural, "Teaching The Young To Fly," would certainly be a fine addition to the city of Terre Haute. Torluemke's design is rich with references to history and key human concerns, woven together in a fanciful tableau that engages viewers' imaginations and lifts their spirits through their examination and interpretation of the many poetic juxtapositions and transformations that take place within the picture.

Torluemke's proposed mural centers around the representation and appreciation of three central figures. The bearded man, exotic in appearance due to his renaissance garb and long hair and beard, is Leonardo Da Vinci, an artist, thinker, and inventor whose ideas and creations have established him as a true genius and visionary in the history of art, science, and overall human endeavor. For Torluemke, Da Vinci stands as an embodiment of the mural's central theme: namely, the possibility of human beings progressing and evolving (during individual lifetimes and from generation to generation) toward a realization of their full potential through the conscientious balancing of intelligence and emotion. The artist stresses that children should be recognized as the glorious agents for this positive change. In Torluemke's view, Da Vinci presents a fine example of such a conscious blending of both halves of the brain. Witness, for instance, the apparatus (a depiction of Da Vinci's design for a flying machine) in the foreground of the composition on which two children play. On one hand, the device is logical and sensible in its arrangements of components and supports to enable man to achieve a form of motion necessary for flight. On the other hand, it is an elegant sculptural construction that is appealing on an artistic level. Perhaps the enduring respect many have for Da Vinci is in part due to his careful development of both aspects of his mind and character.

Such a notion of the heart and mind working in concert is further exemplified by the second figure in the mural. The African-American woman with a joyous smile on her face and an upraised hand that joins Da Vinci's in a gesture of inspiration and hope is Augusta Savage, a person perhaps not as well-known as Da Vinci to the average viewer but still powerful in her example of uniting intellectual and emotional states of mind. As a skilled sculptor during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, Savage was an active supporter of and advocate for artists, particularly black artists who continue even today to struggle for acknowledgment of their creative perspectives. Savage not only pursued with dedication her own vision, but also, in her understanding of art's essential ability to improve the human condition, worked hard to encourage and nurture others' attempts to investigate and cultivate that expressive dimension of themselves so important to complete self-fulfillment.

As a brief aside, one could notice that although Da Vinci and Savage belong to different time periods, separated by hundreds of years and united by the imaginative possibilities that exist only in the realm of artistic creativity, they are nevertheless commonly identified as "renaissance" figures (Da Vinci from the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and Savage from the Harlem Renaissance of the twentieth century). The word "renaissance" means rebirth, specifically a rebirth of the humanist focus that led ancient Greeks and Romans to produce cultural products simultaneously aesthetically beautiful and scientifically or intellectually satisfying and edifying. Da Vinci's and Savage's upraised hands seem to direct viewer attention to, on the left, a dissected hemisphere of a human brain (somewhat camouflaged by other background elements but still clear upon discovery) and, on the right, a heart that seems to grow

from or be transforming into a grove of strong oaks, the branches of which visually rhyme with myriad veins and arteries. The brain finds itself among elements that constitute a city, while the heart is steeped in the wildness of untamed nature. Torluecke's skillful placements remind one of historical discussions, periods, and movements that address or explore man's dual nature. For example, the neoclassicism or enlightenment of the eighteenth century arose from and concentrated on the intellect primarily, while the romanticism of the nineteenth century (often seen as a reaction to neoclassical thinking) focused on the wildness of the imagination and subconscious, for which nature imagery provided a perfect metaphor. In Torluecke's composition, the brain and heart are closely placed and of nearly equal size, celebrated by those individuals in the foreground whose lives provide testimony to an achievement of balance.

The third portrait figure in the design stands between the over-sized symbolic brain and heart. He is George Washington Carver, an agricultural scientist who devoted his energies to caring for the soil, growing peanuts and inventing products made from them, and cultivating good relationships between black and white people. While Carver's work lay primarily in scientific and practical realms, his efforts indicate that he saw the earth as more than a tool for his agricultural goals. The planet is both a home, blind to the arbitrary divisions and prejudices that seem to preoccupy so many of its inhabitants, and an organism, alive and needing respect and care. In Torluecke's mural design, Carver looks pensively into the distance, letting water flow from his hands. One might speculate, given Carver's work and background, that he sees and feels the water as both an agent of growth vital to his crops and other projects, and a metaphor for time, change, even humanity itself. The waterfalls and large expanse of water on the right side of Torluecke's design demonstrate that the artist sees water as a crucial ingredient in life, particularly its ability to show the flow of life and time, as well as its ability to nourish and purify, even heal the wounds that have occurred during the course of human developments.

The other human forms in Torluecke's picture are not meant to be portrait likenesses; rather, they are generalized children who, in their inclusion, directly speak to the work's overall theme. The children in the background toward the left side polish an egg, one of many eggs to be found in the imaginary landscape. By polishing the egg, the children are in effect preparing themselves for the glorious flight on which they will soon embark. Ridding their spirits, their essences of accumulated dirt, they prepare for a fresh voyage; the egg will soon hatch within them, and they can go forth into the world with voices and characters that represent the next phase of human acceptance and ingenuity. Such conscientious work is balanced, however, by the healthy play and joy of life that is seen in the children in the foreground. Building upon the examples and creations of individuals from the near and distant past, today's children are poised to advance humanity to the next level-- and they will very much enjoy such an adventure. From a freshly-cleaned egg will emerge the most glorious of offspring, and caring adults can content themselves in marveling at the beauty of seeing children stretch their wings.

The flow of a waterfall in Torluecke's design leads viewers to a creek or river, which then leads to a body of water. The water leads the eye to a shore, then to an old-fashioned street, then ultimately to a modern metropolis. On a roadway in the metropolis, a modern stylish sportscar moves rapidly. It gradually transforms before the viewer's eyes into a lovely cardinal (the Indiana state bird, incidentally). The cardinal gracefully arcs in flight and arrives at the feet of a child; it is now the child's turn to continue the cycle of life, of growth, of progress. In the midst of this dramatically-presented cycle, life blossoms and flourishes as heart and mind co-exist in equilibrium. Torluecke embeds within his design numerous pleasant, even delightful details or images to keep viewers exploring, wondering, seeing.

While art is so often primarily a cerebral enterprise revolving around examinations of formal elements and their interplay, Torluecke is able through his passion and talent to re-awaken a fascination with visual art that was so engaging to most people in their childhood. In an environment of color, of symbol, of metamorphosis and transformation, cars can turn into birds and hearts can grow among the oaks. A dog can drink happily from a lake while the night segues elegantly into day. In Torluecke's breath-

taking design, people of all ages can see a world, even though parts are stylized and depicted symbolically rather than literally, that is their world, and that speaks to issues that concern, move, and fascinate them. His urge for humanity to be equally attentive to the mind and heart, and to communicate this message to the children who, with their talents and energies are able to lead the world into an exciting future, is timely and vital, especially when conveyed through such a symphony of color, scale, allusion, imagery, and overall formal invention.

The Gilbert Wilson Memorial Mural Project through Indiana State University is a wonderful gift to the people of Terre Haute whom over the years will have a full collection of brilliantly-colored murals to enjoy, having their imaginations captured by a visual presentation of the cycle of life and the celebration of the potential of young people!

Gregg Hertzlieb, Director/Curator
Bruer Museum of Art, Valparaiso University