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“Passages” Mural on College Union Building

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“Passages” Mural on College Union Building

Description

The mural “Passages” in the back of the Ballroom in the College Union Building may seem to be another painting on the wall to add to the décor of the room, but it can be found to be a case of “history in plain sight.” The mural depicts the history of Gettysburg College through the art work of Ellen Elmes on four separate panels. But the mural is more than a visual reminder of Gettysburg College’s past. It was donated by Luther Ritter, Class of 1933, and as such is a reminder of all the great Alumni who have passed through Gettysburg College. [*excerpt*]

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- Course Title: *HIST 300: Historical Method*
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- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

Hidden in Plain Sight is a collection of student papers on objects that are "hidden in plain sight" around the Gettysburg College campus. Topics range from the Glatfelter Hall gargoyles to the statue of Eisenhower and from historical markers to athletic accomplishments. You can download the paper in pdf format and click "View Photo" to see the image in greater detail.

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Hidden in Plain Sight, College Union Building, Ellen Elmes, mural, college history

Disciplines

Public History | United States History

Campus Location

College Union Building

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Hidden in Plain Sight:
“Passages” Mural on College Union Building

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Elizabeth Ryan

Fall 2006

The mural “Passages” in the back of the Ballroom in the College Union Building may seem to be another painting on the wall to add to the décor of the room, but it can be found to be a case of “history in plain sight.” The mural depicts the history of Gettysburg College through the art work of Ellen Elmes on four separate panels.¹ But the mural is more than a visual reminder of Gettysburg College’s past. It was donated by Luther Ritter, Class of 1933, and as such is a reminder of all the great Alumni who have passed through Gettysburg College.

Before one can understand the importance of the mural, they must understand what is on it. The mural itself is composed of four panels, each one representing a different time in college history. The first, which focuses on the years 1832-1868, depicts many of the people involved with the founding and the early years of the College, like Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin Rush, and Samuel Simon Schmucker. The title of the piece, “Passages” is evident with the placement of buildings like Pennsylvania Hall. Elmes also placed events on the mural that meshed with Gettysburg College history; for example, the wounded soldiers who were said to be taken care of inside Pennsylvania Hall and Lincoln giving his famous Gettysburg Address. The foundation of the College in Lutheran ideals and with those Pennsylvanians with German ancestry has its place in “Passages” through the German Bible.²

Elmes also used her own interpretation of colors and imagination to bring the mural to life. Many of the elements of the mural, especially in this first panel, connect to other events or times. For instance, the blooming flowers represent the new beginnings of the college. The buildings are not always in their rightful colors, but Elmes felt they had an emotional connection. “I decided to translate what I was ‘hearing’ from the buildings into color, painting them not in

¹ Program from the Dedication of “Passages”, June 3rd. 1995.1

² Ellen Elmes, Passages: A Mural Tracing the History of Gettysburg College From its Founding in 1832 (Gettysburg College: 1995) 1-5

their actual colors, but in colors that I think they evoke historically.”³ Hence, the President’s house is shown in green, which shows an always growing campus, and the cupola is “a celebrative birthday cake.”⁴ Other examples of Elmes’ interpretation include the Greek bust, which is placed to represent the “classical, the ideal, and the traditional in courses of study, moral values, and religious beliefs”⁵ which were present at the beginning of Gettysburg College.⁶

The next panel covers the years of 1868-1912, a time of growth for the College. Here Elmes uses Mercury as the center piece, as he was chosen to be on the seal by early faculty members, and is a god “most versatile in his abilities and powers.”⁷ She also shows how students of Gettysburg at this time lived; she depicts the orange and blue wool cap, the Pen and Sword Society hat, the dink, a top hat, and a bowler—all headwear that would have been popular on campus. She also places Brua Memorial Chapel in the mural, reminding us that all students (except those living at home) were expected to attend services. Professors Stahley, Himes, Breidenbaugh, and Bikle exemplify the different courses of study available for students to choose from, while Mary G. Stuckenberg, Cora E. Hartman, and Margaret R. Himes represent women’s interests during the time when women first matriculated at Gettysburg. This was also the time when many clubs were gaining popularity. For example, there are many depictions of the drama club, the newspaper, sports, and the orchestra. Elmes depicts the 1901 sports captains in this panel. She also shows more “passages” through the entrance of the newly constructed

³ Ellen Elmes to Elizabeth Ryan via email, September 28th, 2006.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Elmes, Passages Pamphlet; 4.

⁶ Ibid, 1-5.

⁷ Ibid, 5.

Glatfelter Hall, and shows the continued growth of Gettysburg College with flowers in full boom.⁸

The third panel in the mural covers the years of World War I and II—1913-1945. Elmes focused this panel on themes of the Alumni and Trustees of Gettysburg College with the future of the College in mind. She places notable Alumni, or symbols of Alumni on this panel (even if they are not associated with this time period) to represent what people of Gettysburg College have done, not only for the College but for the world. Many of these would be hard to understand unless there was a reference tool, or if one was very familiar with Alumni. For example, the Newbery Medallion represents author Jerry Spinelli, Class of 1963, who won the Newbery Medal in Excellence in Children’s Literature for his book Maniac Magee. The DNA molecule is for Louis Kunkle, Class of 1971, a medical geneticist and professor at Boston’s Children’s Hospital who was named to the American Academy Science. Other depictions include the 50th and 75th anniversaries of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913 and 1938 respectively (and Woodrow Wilson at the ceremony in 1913), the Alma Mater, and President Henry W.A. Hanson.⁹

The last panel (since 1945) uses many different representative images that show Gettysburg College projecting into the 21st century. Elmes chose the Roman god Janis, who was the god of beginnings, to be the center piece for this section of the mural. The “imagery flowing from the top of the head represents the spectrum of courses, relationships, and campus life” that were now present at Gettysburg College as it entered the technology age.¹⁰ Musselman Library is shown just for this reason, as is a computer. The globe represents service learning projects and community out reach programs, thus projecting Gettysburg College into the world. The

⁸ Elmes, Passages Pamphlet, 5-11.

⁹ Ibid, 11-20.

¹⁰ Ibid, 23.

“unfinished” work on this panel shows how there is still more developing in Gettysburg College’s history, and the last picture is an open book with the right side blank—for all the years to come.¹¹

What does all this mean to Gettysburg College? Clearly history of an institution is important, but it is not usual to see undergrads deep into huge volumes of history. To have all this history in one visible, accessible place means that many more college students should be able to appreciate their institution. According to Carl Ritter, whose father commissioned the project, his father wanted it in a place where it could be seen. Jean LeGros of Alumni Relations agrees.¹² It is so important for students of Gettysburg College to be able to look at this mural and see their past, and thus what their futures may hold.

The man behind the mural was an Alumnus by the name of Luther Ritter, member of the Class of 1933. As the Gettysburg magazine says, “through Luther Ritter we are connected to 66 years of Gettysburg College history.”¹³ On the Gettysburg Campus, Ritter was a member of the Alpha Tau Omega Fraternity, the Y.M.C.A. cabinet, the French Club, and Alpha Psi Epsilon Society.¹⁴ After graduation he established the Littonian Shoe Company in Littlestown, Pennsylvania. He served his community as a councilman, the president and secretary of the Rotary Club, and Chair of the Red Cross. His wife, Margaret, was also active to her community, and the program from “Passages” dedication thus reads, “It seems fitting that community leaders

¹¹ Ibid, 20-27.

¹² Carl Ritter to Elizabeth Ryan, Phone Interview, September 27th, 2006; Jean LeGros to Elizabeth Ryan, Interview, September 29th, 2006.

¹³ Class Notes in *Gettysburg*, 86 (Autumn 1995): 24.

¹⁴ Spectrum, The Yearbook of Gettysburg College (1934). Although all sources state that Luther W. Ritter was a member of the Class of 1933, he is listed as a junior in the 1933 yearbook and a senior in the 1934 edition. One explanation could be that Ritter graduated early, in Fall 1933, so he was not in the yearbook for the previous year.

of this caliber should commission *Passages*, the chronicle of an institution that has played an important role in this community.”¹⁵

Mr. and Mrs. Ritter saw Ellen Elmes’ work in her mural, “The History of Western Maryland College” when they were visiting Mrs. Ritter’s alma mater (now McDaniel College). The Ritters were impressed. Since they “wanted to do something permanent for the college” they thought it a great idea to give to Gettysburg College.¹⁶ Because of the nature of the gift, Ritter approved through the Development Office. Jean LeGros, who at this time was director of Alumni Relations, was part of the committee that worked with the Ritters and Elmes. She remembers them both as great to work with, especially Ms. Elmes. The mural was commissioned in 1993, and was dedicated in 1995.¹⁷

Ellen Elmes is currently the head of the Visual Arts Program at Southwest Virginia Community College, and has been involved in numerous shows, community projects, and murals. She says that Ritter became very involved in her work after he first saw it displayed at Western Maryland, and drove down to meet her in her home. After making a presentation to “a Gettysburg College Foundation Committee, the project was approved and I started my research.”¹⁸

To gather all the necessary research for this project, Elmes primarily used Charles Glatfelter’s history of the college, and the library archives to gather visual images of the people and places. She also visited the college and surrounding battlefields to gain a better understanding of the world she was attempting to recreate. Even though she did not attend

¹⁵ Program from the Dedication of “Passages”, June 3rd, 1995.

¹⁶ Luther Ritter, as quoted in Class Notes, in *Gettysburg*, 24.

¹⁷ C. Ritter to Ryan; Elmes to Ryan; LeGros to Ryan.

¹⁸ Elmes to Ryan; Ellen Elmes’ personal webpage, <http://humanities.sw.edu/ellen/>, viewed on October 1st, 2006.

Gettysburg College, it could be assumed that she knows more about its history than do most students.¹⁹

By 1995, “Passages” was dedicated on June 3rd, 1995. This was the Saturday of Alumni Weekend, and also the day when Luther Ritter was to receive a Meritorious Service Award. Therefore, it seems fitting that the two should happen on the same day. LeGros remembers that it was a well attended event, completed with refreshments and comments on Ritter. Even though Mrs. Ritter had passed on, her name was placed on the plaque underneath the mural.²⁰

The mural was placed in the ballroom because Ritter thought it a very accessible area for students to enjoy and view, and yet it was not much promoted among the current students. LeGros believes that for a time after the dedication the program was available for anyone to take while looking at the mural, thus making it easier for students and visitors to understand the mural in detail. Even so, some of the students questioned who were in attendance during the time of the dedication do not remember it being promoted.

For example, Robb Johnson, Class of 1996 “and a half”, wrote in an email, “I remember no fanfare at all about the mural. In fact I didn't remember if I had seen it at all, or if it had been there my whole tenure (fall 92-fall 96). Sorry I cannot be of more help.”²¹ Although he feels that he has not helped by not knowing about the mural, his testimony helps to prove the point that many students were not aware of its presence. Keira Kant, Class of 1995, also does not remember any advertisements or promotions for “Passages,” but does remember noticing it during a “party for seniors and their families.”²² Jennifer Nesbit, Class of 1996, has “a vague

¹⁹ Elmes to Ryan.

²⁰ LeGros to E Ryan; Program from Dedication.

²¹ Robb Johnson to Elizabeth Ryan via email, September 30th, 2006.

²² Keira Kant to Elizabeth Ryan via email, September 28th, 2006.

recollection of references to it during a couple of Common Hours, but I don't remember a grand unveiling or any other broad discussion of it and its significance."²³

It appears that something so significant to Gettysburg College and to its history was not well publicized to the student body. There is no reference to the mural in any issue of the *Gettysburgian* during the spring or fall of 1995. The lone reference in the *Gettysburgian* comes from an "Alumni Trivia Contest" which ran on September 17th 1998. Above the questions it reads as a "fact of the week":

'Passages,' the mural located in the College Union Building Ballroom, depicts the history of Gettysburg College. The mural was commissioned by and for Gettysburg College under the patronage of Mr. Lither W. Ritter '33 and Mrs. Margaret L. Ritter. The mural was painted by Ellen Elmes, head of the visual arts program and director of Arts Across the Curriculum at Southwest Virginia Community College.²⁴

This little blurb cannot represent the meaning of the mural, and yet this is one of the only references students would have access to concerning the mural.

There is one exception to the idea that students had no background in the significance of "Passages", and that can be found in Gettysburg College's yearbook, Spectrum, for the year 1996. On the pages which start each new chapter one can find photographs of the mural—pages 3, 9, 23, 49, 95, 119, 141, and 157 to be exact—eight in total. When questioned about the mural in her yearbook, Nesbit answered that she had to "pull out her yearbook to get a sense of what [I was] referencing."²⁵ It may never be known many students who attended Gettysburg through the 1995 year actually remember and know about "Passages," but it can be assumed that there are few students who know all about it.²⁶

²³ Jennifer Nesbit to Elizabeth Ryan via email, September 28th, 2006.

²⁴ *Gettysburgian* CII (September 17th, 1998); 13.

²⁵ Nesbit to Ryan.

²⁶ Spectrum (1996); 3, 9, 23, 49, 95, 119, 141, 157.

What about Gettysburg students today? Do they have a sense of what the mural means, or even recognize that there is a mural in the Ballroom at all? To find out, a brief, unscientific survey was sent out via email to about 150 current students. They were not randomly chosen, but picked on the basis of accessibility, so the results can not be projected onto the whole of the student population. Nevertheless, the results overwhelming show that most of the current students know that the mural “Passages” exists in the Ballroom, but they do not understand its importance. Of 91 responses, 64 people responded with this, or 70%. Meanwhile, 17 people (or 17%) had not realized there even was a mural, and 8 people claimed to know all about it. 3 people were in the middle—they did not know all about it but felt they had sufficient knowledge. Of the people who knew about it, a few stated that they were art majors, which would definitely lead them to study the mural more than, for example, a chemistry major. One person even said that she would like to know more about it.²⁷

What does the mural represent for the students of Gettysburg? As demonstrated, it is a pictorial depiction of Gettysburg College history, which gives students a place in that history. In order to understand what they are a part of, they should know where they come from. Through the man who donated “Passages” and all the Alumni represented on it, students can receive a connection to the students the past and see how they too can make a mark in the world and in the book of Gettysburg College. LeGros believes that we are all connected to the past, and that “we are here because of what those before us contributed.”²⁸ How important it is for students to

²⁷ Email survey sent out by Elizabeth Ryan to the members of Alpha Phi Omega, the Newman Society, and the Pennsylvania College Guard, September 30th, 2006.

²⁸ LeGros to Ryan.

realize this, and to thus take a more active interest in the mural “Passages,” which is so readily accessible for them.²⁹

²⁹ The author understands that many students at Gettysburg College do not have the time to do the research needed to learn about what each section of the mural “Passages” represents. She hopes that one day the brochures describing the mural will be once again available to the general student population, either in a box under the mural or at the CUB desk. As this is the 175th Anniversary of Gettysburg College, it is more important than ever.

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