

Celebrating the Refabricated George Ortman Banners

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President, Indiana University

Musical Arts Center Lobby, Mezzanine Level

Saturday, February 15, 2014

7:00 p.m.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you. Gwyn (Richards).

And thank you all for joining us tonight as we celebrate the re-fabrication and the return to the Musical Arts Center of the splendid banners designed by renowned artist George Ortman.

This evening, we express our thanks to all those who made the restoration of these treasured works of art possible, especially the members of the staff of the Residential Programming and Services Sewing Room.

2. GEORGE ORTMAN AND THE MAC BANNERS

George Earl Ortman, an abstract artist who works with a variety of materials and whose works often incorporate geometric shapes, designed these magnificent banners for the Musical Arts Center. Ortman was, in fact, one of the pioneers—beginning in the 1950s—of an approach to art that incorporated elements of painting, sculpture, and architecture. By the late 1960s, his works appeared in the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C.—and he is now regarded as one of the finest abstract artists of the second half of the 20th century.

Ortman has designed about 17 banners during his career, twelve of which were created in 1966 for the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis as part of a series of banners based on the Stations of the Cross. Those banners were part of a 1971 exhibit of his work at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, which still counts a number of his pieces among its collections.

The installation we celebrate tonight is the third fabrication of the Ortman banners. The originals, fabricated by a firm in New York according to Ortman's specifications, were installed for the MAC's Dedication Week Festival in 1972. The banners are constructed of felt, and, unfortunately, they have been subject to extreme fading from the sun streaming through the large windows of the lobby. Around the time of the MAC's 25th anniversary, the same New York firm fabricated replacement banners. Over time, those faded as well—to the point that they had to be taken down.

But the Ortman banners were not forgotten.

3. RECONSTRUCTING THE ORTMAN BANNERS

Linda Hunt, Assistant Vice President for Capital Planning and Facilities—and a dedicated opera patron—remembered the banners fondly and became an advocate for their return to the Musical Arts Center. It was Linda who brought the fact that the banners had disappeared to my attention, so we owe her a great deal of credit as we celebrate their return to the MAC.

As it turned out, because more than 40 years had passed since the construction of the original banners, the New York firm that fabricated the first and second sets of banners no longer had the specifications and having the firm fabricate them from scratch would have been cost prohibitive.

Last summer, however, Linda and campus art curator Sherry Rouse approached the members of the RPS Sewing Room to see if they would be interested in taking on this complex and difficult challenge.

Connie Ducker, Kathy Duncan, Adria Boruff, Lucy Cabrera, and Jenna Salyers enthusiastically took on the project—and, as you can see, they did a truly marvelous job.

Of course, reproducing large works of art is not part of their everyday duties. The Sewing Room is part of Residential Programs and Services' Interior Design office, and as such, they create the window treatments and furnishings that make our residence halls and auxiliary spaces attractive and comfortable for students. Such are their talents, however, that, over the years, they have been called upon to sew everything from covers for cash registers and animal cages, to equipment bags for the water polo team, to uniform patches for IU Police officers, and a wide variety of other projects.

The two 21-by-21-foot Ortman banners were, by far, the largest and most ambitious project they have ever undertaken.

The sheer size and weight of the banners alone made their fabrication a complex and difficult project. Just to cite one example—there was not even enough space in the Sewing Room to lay the banners out flat, so the ladies had to use the dining room on the floor above them in order to spread the material out fully. And, as I have mentioned, they had no patterns or specifications of any kind from which to work, so they had to inspect the old banners, make sketches, conduct research at the IU Archives, and consult photographs to be able to reproduce the shapes, proportions, and colors as accurately as possible.

4. SPECIAL THANKS

There are a number of people in addition to the Sewing Room staff who deserve our recognition this evening.

I want to thank Pat Connor, Executive Director of RPS as well as Larry Isom and Maggie Talmage, the director and assistant director of RPS Facilities Management, for their support of this project.

Would you join me in thanking them?

I also want to commend Sherry Rouse, who curates all the art on campus and who has done so much to shepherd this project.

Linda Hunt not only inspired this project, she remained closely involved throughout, visiting the Sewing Room to learn about the process and even to sew a few stitches herself.

Would you join me in expressing our thanks to Sherry and Linda?

And, of course, our deep gratitude goes to the five staff members of the RPS Sewing Room who worked for many months to construct these banners from scratch based on photographs from IU Archives.

Connie Ducker manages the Sewing Room and was, in many ways, the lead on the project. She began her career at IU 32 years ago in the School of Education and joined RPS in 1988. Connie also repaired a third, smaller banner that George Ortman designed to fly outside in front of the MAC on performance days.

Kathy Duncan has worked at IU for about 30 years. She first worked in the residence hall kitchens, and joined the Sewing Room staff about 18 years ago. Being a part of the

Ortman Banner project had a special significance for Kathy, as her father, Gordan Duncan, was a carpenter at the MAC in the 1970s and helped build scenery for productions here.

Lucy Cabrera has worked at IU since 1988. She began at the IU Police Department, where she worked for about 10 years, and joined RPS about 13 years ago.

Adria Boruff has been with RPS for about three years. She is a relative newcomer to the world of sewing and has already learned a great deal from her colleagues.

Jenna Salyers is a student at Ivy Tech University who has worked in the RPS Sewing Room over the last two summers and was part of this construction project. Her father is head of maintenance at Collins Living-Learning Center. Jenna plans to transfer to IU in the near future and is considering studying optometry.

I had the pleasure of meeting these ladies and of visiting and touring their shop while they were working on the banners. I was truly impressed by their dedication, by the quality and the variety of the work they do, and by the tremendous spirit of teamwork that is so evident in their shop.

They remind us all that Indiana University is a special place because our excellent staff help make it so. These five women are outstanding examples of the thousands of men and women across the university whose dedication and service contribute to quality of our institution.

And I am sure that the women we celebrate tonight would be the first to say that they are part of a much larger team that supports the fundamental missions of this great university.

Tonight, I am very pleased to have this occasion to publicly recognize and thank the staff of the RPS Sewing Room for taking on this difficult task that was, without question,

above and beyond the call of duty. And in so doing, we are also recognizing the thousands of men and women of IU's professional and support staff across the university whose outstanding work has collectively contributed to the great successes the university has enjoyed over the years.

5. PRESENTING THE E. ROSS BARTLEY AWARD

And now, I would like to ask Connie, Kathy, Adria, Lucy, and Jenna to join me at the podium.

In 1969, University Chancellor and President Emeritus Herman Wells established the E. Ross Bartley Award as the highest award available to honor administrative and support staff at Indiana University. Ross Bartley, after whom the award is named, was one of the most dedicated, knowledgeable, and loyal staff members in Wells' administration.¹ According to Chancellor Wells, the criteria for the new award were to be "based on the kind of service Ross gave—above and beyond the responsibilities of his office and the limits of the campus."²

Award recipients receive a commemorative parchment and have their names added to a plaque in the Indiana Memorial Union on the Bloomington campus. They also receive an honorarium as a token of the university's gratitude for all their service.

Without question, the five of you have given service above and beyond the limits of your positions. Thus, by the authority vested in me by the Trustees of Indiana University and in acknowledgement of all that you have done for the university, for the thousands of students and staff who have benefited from the wide variety of work you have done over the years, and for the magnificent contribution you have made to the tradition of public art on the Bloomington campus by taking on the difficult task of reconstructing the

¹ Wells Letter 13 May 1969.

² Wells Letter 13 May 1969.

Ortman banners from scratch, I present to each of you the E. Ross Bartley Award for meritorious administrative service.

Congratulations.

Thank you again for your dedicated service and for the truly momentous contribution you have made to public art on the Bloomington campus. Thanks to you, many thousands of patrons of the Musical Arts Center will be able to enjoy the Ortman banners for many, many years to come.

Thank you very much.