A Pair of Prized Portraits

Whenever visitors walk into the lobby of the Activities Center on campus, two faces smile serenely down on them. A pair of oil paintings of Unity founders Charles Fillmore and Myrtle Fillmore have long been a welcoming presence here.

The oil portraits were commissioned by Charles R. Fillmore (the founders’ grandson) and Unity School of Christianity, and they were unveiled in 1980 at the annual conference of the Association of Unity Churches (now Unity Worldwide Ministries). At more than five-feet tall, they are hard to miss, hanging in a place of honor on either side of the doors that lead into the Activities Center itself.

The paintings are treasured for more than their subject matter, though. They were created by world-renowned artist Frank Szasz, who had a long and difficult journey from his native Hungary to his eventual home in Kansas City, Missouri.

Born in 1925, Szasz was working for the resistance during World War II when he was captured and forced into hard labor in Budapest. The Jewish underground helped him escape, and he began using his artistic skills to create false identity papers for other Jews. Captured by the Soviet Union at the end of the war, he was again sent to a labor camp, this time in Siberia.

During the next six years, his drawing skills likely saved his life. Szasz was assigned duties like creating a portrait of Joseph Stalin instead of more grueling tasks, and he traded sketches of the guards for extra food rations until his release in 1951. In the midst of the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956, he sought help from an uncle in the United States who sent him the money to cross the Atlantic with his mother.

Once in the U.S., Szasz worked as a book illustrator in New York City for several months before the founder of Hallmark Cards, Joyce Hall, brought him to Kansas City. Szasz eventually became a noted portraitist, starting his own portrait business in the 1970s and painting the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa, and a wide range of other artists, thinkers, and leaders. He was also an instructor at both the Kansas City Art Institute and Rockhurst College. When Szasz died in 1995, he was only 69 years old.

As the Fillmore portraits aged, dust and grime accumulated and the original varnish and surface coating started flaking, separating from the paint. In 2018, these treasures were sent to Van Witt Fine Art Conservation, just across the state line in Overland Park, Kansas, for professional restoration. Van Witt spent several weeks doing a careful cleaning, applying a protective varnish layer, repairing the frames, and affixing new name plates. When the portraits returned, staff at Unity were surprised to discover that Myrtle's dress wasn't the gray it had previously appeared to be—it was actually pale blue!

The next time you walk into the Activities Center, be sure to stop in the lobby to admire these portraits—a reminder both of Unity history and of the remarkable story of Frank Szasz.

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