



Conroy Schelhaas, of 105 West Gore St., peels back wallpaper that for decades had covered a 19th century mural in a hallway at 12 Elizabeth St. Photo by Scott Wishart

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Painting uncovered during renovations

Mysterious mural baffles historians

By Mark Stewart
staff Reporter

If only the walls could talk.

Earlier this month, Ken and Judy Morley began to renovate a 19th century home at the corner of Mornington and Elizabeth streets when they uncovered a mystery mural on a hallway wall.

As contractors peeled back the aging wallpaper from the front entranceway, they discovered a faded oil painting that has been part of the house for close to 100 years.

Officials from the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture have visited the Stratford home — built in 1882 — and estimated that the wall painting was done sometime in the 1890s.

"We haven't found any signatures on it, so we're not really sure who painted it," Stratford archivist Jim Anderson said Friday. "It's not the finest art in the world, but I'd say it was done by a very gifted amateur."

An impressive countryside hunting scene was painted directly on the plaster wall and local heritage officials say portions of the work might have been copied from a stencil drawing.

The house itself — at 12 Elizabeth St. — was first owned by E.H. Dufton, who operated the Stratford Woolen Mill, once located at the present site of the Shakespearean Garden.

"They were flabbergasted," Mr. Anderson said of the Morleys' surprise when they reported their discovery to the Archives two weeks ago.

"Wall painting was done in a number of (Stratford) houses but not quite as extensively

as this one," he said. "This is in pretty good shape"

The ceilings are also elaborately decorated with intricate patterns and moldings. The paintings are bordered by pillars, arches and columns suggesting remnants of a Greek revival style prevalent in the mid 1800s.

However, Mr. Anderson dismissed suggestions of Greek revival, as that period ended in the 1860s, more than 20 years before the house was even built.

He said the pillars and arches were simply a personal technique used by the artist to break up the separate paintings.

Mr. Anderson said the appearance of a royal crest — perhaps British — indicates that the work of the realist painter may have been inspired by an overseas trip.

"But one wall is completely missing," he said, disappointed because a previous owner had decided to put a toilet only a few paces from the front doorway. The wallpaper was likely put on during the 1950s when "anything old was out".

The Morleys have indicated that most of the mural will be covered again with the exception of the hunting scene that — despite a crack running across the painting — might be restored to its original color.

"If it were my house I'd leave it just exactly the way it was," Mr. Anderson said, indicating how difficult it is to find expert art restorers. "You don't have to do anything with it. Leave the battle scars — they're part of the history."