

Next week, Notre Dame Cathedral is privileged to host the display of a historic fresco of the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus over the Ottawa skyline with Parliament Hill and other local landmarks in the background.

The Franciscan Order had commissioned the fresco for their monastery and church of St. Vincent de Paul in New Edinburgh. Created by the noted painter Ugo Chyurlia in 1957, the fresco is 307 cm high and 149 cm wide.

The fresco was saved from destruction when, following the closure of St. Vincent de Paul parish, the Franciscans decided to vacate and sell their monastery and church in the 1990s. Public uproar and the work of a few dedicated individuals, including Jerome Chyurlia, the artist's son, ensured that this work of art is still with us.

In the Heritage Ottawa newsletter (Summer 1998), Jean Palmer wrote, "A petition is being circulated asking Ottawa city councillors to save and recognize the frescoes of the Church of St-Vincent de Paul and the adjacent monastery."

In a later article, in which Palmer announced that the artwork would be saved, she wrote, "Ian Hodgkinson, Professor Emeritus of Art Conservation at Queen's University, and a local restoration firm, Craig Johnson Enterprises, have succeeded in removing nearly all the frescoes and mosaics using time-tested methods." The technique for removing and preserving a fresco is a science in itself, extracting and re-setting a fragile medium that was never intended to be moved.

"Fresco" can refer to various types of mural painting, but in its strict sense, the term pertains to paintings in which a wall's or ceiling's surface absorbs the pigment. The Italian architect and painter Giotto perfected the technique near the end of the thirteenth century. For the creation of a genuine fresco, the surface was usually covered with an even layer of plaster, which was allowed to dry before the artist applied the paint to another layer of plaster while it was still damp and fresh (*fresco* in Italian). Because the plaster dried quickly, the artist could paint no more than a section of the composition at a time, such a section being called a *giornata* or "a day's work."

Prior to acquiring the fresco, the Canadian Museum of History offered this perspective: "a magnificent Madonna painted by Ugo Chyurlia in a very free style. The faces of the angels, for example, exemplify this liberty which belongs to a more modern tradition, as if the artist wanted to remind us that these creatures also belong to the terrestrial world ... characterized by its abstract components, the vivacity of the colours, and the softness of the faces—here, Chyurlia seems to forgo volume in favour of the shaping of contours: shallow faces with dreamy and meditative expressions, this without adversely affecting the lyrical inspiration so dear to the artist—the Madonna has a life, a warmth that we find only since the Renaissance and in certain frescoes of Giotto in the Basilica of Saint Francis."

You may view the fresco at the Cathedral Basilica on Sussex Drive during opening hours (9AM-6PM) on May 1–3, except during religious services (noon to 12:45 and 4:45–5:30PM weekdays), and between weekend Masses on May 4–5. Admission is free. The fascinating stories of Ugo Chyurlia, the sacred art of Notre Dame Cathedral, and the history of the Franciscan Monastery and St-Vincent de Paul Church will be the subjects of free lectures at 7:30PM on May 1-3.

Notre Dame acknowledges the collaboration of the City of Ottawa and the Canadian Museum of History in this significant exhibition.