

A Decorative Scheme for a Collaboration Without Strings

By Colin Cabot

One wintry day in December of 1992 David Birn, designer, and Colin Cabot, one of the principal forces behind the development of the new theatre in Milwaukee, met in New York City to discuss a possible design for the decoration of the structure that was emerging on the corner of Broadway and Menomonee Streets in Milwaukee's Historic Third Ward.

David suggested that, because the project was the result of a collaboration between three theatres and their audiences and had been accomplished without incurring any direct obligations to other community or civic institutions, the decoration should celebrate the fact that the creative forces behind pure artistic expression had triumphed over recent trends which evinced a diminution of interest in and resources devoted to the arts. The style of decoration should be reminiscent of 18th century allegorical decorative painting, and should reflect the excitement shared by the audiences of all three theatres preparing to experience the new theatre for the first time.

For years Colin had been saving a short article by Stephen Greco culled from a playbill that outlined the attributes of the nine muses who have provided inspiration to creative artists since the ancient Greeks. Having worked in theatre all of his life, they signified to him the taproot of inspiration that gives the theatre its power to make a difference in people's lives. During the meeting he realized that there were nine boxes in the third balcony of the new theatre: one for each muse.

Together, in a flash of inspiration, they realized that they had happened upon a scheme that would serve to make the new opera house altogether different than any other built recently in America, reflective of the classical tradition, and appropriate for the audiences of the theatres involved.

The allegory for the theatre is called The Triumph of Art. It is to be developed in three areas of the new building: the entrance, the grand salon and the theatre house.

Its justification is that the project symbolizes the triumph of an artistic aesthetic over the countervailing cultural forces at work across all levels of western civilization in the waning years of the twentieth century.

The entrance will celebrate The Anticipation of Art, by crossing the threshold the audience member leaves the cares of the modern world and the modern, sometimes negative perception of "art" behind in preparation for a heightened experience of the human spirit through the artistic event beyond. (An alternative name for the entrance allegory might be Art In Chains and might depict a conventional American family of couch potatoes enmeshed in the invidious combination of prime time sitcoms and super slick commercial messages.)

The grand salon will depict (on pilasters between the windows) The Power and Process of Art, a series of master artists from history creating their art in various different disciplines. (Drama, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, crafts)

The theatre itself depicts The Triumph of Art. Each of the nine boxes on the gallery level has as its decoration the attributes of one of the nine muses:

Clio (history) *gallery left box number 1* traditionally wears a laurel wreath and holds a parchment scroll, often with a trumpet and water-clock. On the façade of her box is a panel in which the following objects, as her attributes, can be found: a program, featuring the Skylight Comic Opera's first logo complete with a skylight window, for one of the first productions at the first Skylight theatre on Jackson Street (which, before it was turned into a theatre had served as a mortuary, an architect's office and a bootlegging joint); a sign reading "Caffe Espresso No. 1" which used to grace the ground floor bay window of that building; one of five terra cotta lion's heads that Clair Richardson, the theatre's founder, pried loose from the cornice of the old Blatz Hotel across from the Pabst Theatre, shortly before it was demolished in 1962—three of the heads spent the last thirty years on the exterior staircase of the old Skylight Theatre on Jefferson Street and now can be seen on the exterior of the pillars between the windows of the grand salon; one end of the urn that holds Clair Richardson's ashes which are housed under the stage at his request—he always wanted to be able to say that what went on the stage, went on over his dead body; the music underneath the objects is titled *An Evening With Gilbert & Sullivan* (the Skylight Opera Theatre's first production in 1959) and includes snippets from *Iolanthe* (We are dainty Little Fairies) and *HMS Pinafore* (Kind Captain I've Important Information), and Papageno's aria from *The Magic Flute*.

On the ceiling Clio is dressed in African clothes leaning against another copy of the Caffe Espresso Numero Uno sign.

Melpomene (tragedy) *gallery right box number 4* has her attributes not only the traditional tragic mask and "sides" (playscript) but also a dagger of Scottish design which pierces one of the eye holes of the mask; a bough of hemlock and a chalice in which to drink a suicide potion concocted thereof—Seneca, in Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*, did himself in this way; a dropped handkerchief with two strawberries on it (a reference to Shakespeare's—and Verdi's—*Othello*); a vial of pills spilled as in an effort to overdose; and a tassel similar to those in the theatre's grand drape. The music under these objects is from Verdi's *La Traviata* and from Bizet's *Carmen*.

On the ceiling Melpomene clutches a theatrical curtain in a self-consciously dramatic effort to cover her night dress, her face averted in anguish, and her left hand bespotted with blood.

Erato (poetry) *gallery right box number 3* is a hopeless romantic of the old fashioned school. She has Cupid's bow and arrow sequestered in her panel and has also provided roses with a bottle of wine and a glass should they become needed at any moment. She has been studying the words to several songs: Schubert's "Wer Ist Sylvia", the English lament "The Ashgrove", and Edith Piaf's hit "La Vie En Rose".

Terpsichore (dance) *gallery left box number 3* is traditionally depicted dancing with cymbals and lyre. In her attribute panel she is a full-fledged ballerina of the golden age. An old pair of toe shoes is cast aside as she wears a new pair to dance onto the ceiling. Next to her lyre is the omnipresent pack of dancers' cigarettes and a lighter. Dancers worry constantly about their silhouettes and all too often their diet is restricted to cigarettes and water. Our Terpsichore is no

exception and at the rear of her panel is a bottle of Evian water. At the left of the panel is a rosin box with a bag of rosin in it so that she will not slip or slide as she dances among the clouds. Her music is the waltz from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and Irving Berlin's beloved "Cheek to Cheek".

On the ceiling she is wearing a tutu and bodice appropriate to her role as Giselle.

Euterpe (music) *gallery center box* has the place of honor in a theatre built to house operatic performance. However, like all good things, she has been forced to accept compromises in order to maintain her place right above the equivalent of the royal box: her attribute panel has a light pipe through its middle, she has been required to take up the saxophone in honor of President Clinton's new administration, she listens to rap music on CDs and she jogs daily listening to a Walkman.

But all is not newfangled; she has a viola da gamba (complete with an old fashioned piece of rosin in a cloth for her bow), a mandolin-like descendant of the lute family, a French horn—as opposed to a "cor anglais"—and, tucked under everything at the left side of her panel, a magic flute.

Her music is from Beethoven's *Pathetique Sonata* and from J. S. Bach's *Sechs Partiten fur Klavier*.

None of the muses is at home when the audience arrives at the theatre. Instead they have climbed out of their boxes and across the cornice of the trompe-l'oeil balustrade that rings the theatre and are ascending, each in their own way, full-bosomed and pink cheeked, towards their mother **Mnemosyne**, goddess of memory. She is holding the light of truth in her hand (the chandelier) which illuminates the audience below, as she flies towards the stage in anticipation of the curtain rising.

The Muses

They have been held responsible for some of the highest forms of human achievement, yet reproved for their unreliability. They have frequented the heights of Mount Parnassus and the sacred springs of Hippocrene and Aganappe, yet have also been known to hang out in the garrets of struggling composers and playwrights. Despite their errant behavior, their mythological pedigree is impeccable: their parents were **Zeus**, supreme god of the ancient Greeks, and **Mnemosyne**, Goddess of memory.

They have sung for the gods and taught the Sphinx its riddle, but they owe much of their glory to mere mortals, who for centuries have called upon them as a source of inspiration.

They are the Muses—nine of them, according to Homer and Hesiod, though references to another three turn up here and there. Classical sources have not always agreed upon their appointed arts and attributes, but they have been traditionally represented thus: there is **Clio**, Muse of history, who is known for wearing a wreath of laurel and holding a half-open parchment scroll, or sometimes a trumpet and a water-clock; **Melpomene**, Muse of tragedy, seen often

with one of the well known masks of the theatre and a scroll on which is written, perhaps, her part in the drama; **Thalia**, Muse of comedy, shown with her mask and script, and sometimes with a suggestive shepherd's crook; **Calliope**, Muse of heroic poetry, depicted with her stylus and tablet, and often looked upon as the chief muse (although Apollo Musagetes is acknowledged as their leader); **Urania**, Muse of astronomy, sometimes seen wearing a crown of stars or pointing upward, or holding a globe and compass; **Polyhymnia**, Muse of song or oratory, who often appears deep in contemplation, her finger poised against her lips; **Erato**, Muse of love and marriage songs, shown wearing a wreath of rose and myrtle, the shrub sacred to Venus; **Terpsichore**, Muse of dance, seen, appropriately enough, dancing, with cymbals and lyre; and **Euterpe**, Muse of music, playing a flute or other instrument. (Indeed, the word music derives from the Greek mousike, and originally pertained to any art over which the Muses presided.)

Nowadays, instead of with religious reverence, we mention the Muses as casually as we do Santa Claus. In the past five hundred years since the invention of moveable type, the arts of memory have become less important to the cultivation of knowledge—thus putting Mnemosyne's daughters out of a job. We rarely distinguish among them, referring to "the muse" in the singular, if at all—as if we cannot be at pains to invoke the appropriate one. Perhaps the general category of "animating spirit" seems too archaic or too quaint for our modern sensibility.