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St. John Berchmans Catholic Church

Artist Keith Morris glues a portrait of St. John Berchmans to the wall of the catholic church that bears his name Wednesday.

“Exposed for the first time since the nearly century-old paintings, which feature prominent religious art treasures that were hidden from their view for nearly 50 years.”

Monsignor Russell Harrington, pastor of St. John Berchmans Catholic Church in Cankton, since 2012, said until he began his own investigation, few of the current churchgoers recalled the paintings, which feature prominent scenes, psalms and passages found in the Bible and New Testament.

“It wasn’t until I began asking around that some of the older (parishioners) vaguely remembered that something was there and had been covered up.” Harrington said.

Early in the renovation process, the Masonite panels were removed to reveal the painted ornamentation and paintings hidden beneath the nearly century-old religious art treasures. That’s when the paintings, affixed to the walls, vanished from view. As the decades passed, memories of their presence also faded.

Harrington said part of that现代化 project involved nailing Masonite paneling over the church’s original pine interior walls, then suspending a false ceiling made of Celotex squares above the pews.

The paintings, about 33 inches wide, disappeared under the paneling, not to be seen again until an accidental discovery was made by a seminarian in 2013. Harrington said.

Harrington said the mystery of the paintings began to unfold while Salatre, the seminarian, was examining a large scrapbook of the church history. “He saw in a picture of one of the paintings on the wall where we now have a cry room for infants, and he...”

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Texas couple booked in Scott killing

Lafayette Parish sheriff’s deputies arrested a Texas couple Saturday accused in the fatal shooting of a 30-year-old man early Tuesday morning near Scott. Deputies arrested Sergio Vasquez, 30, and Magdalena Rojas, 20, after the Rosenberg, Texas, couple confessed to the killing of 30-year-old Martin Dominguez, said Capt. Craig Stansbury, a Sheriff’s Office spokesman.

The couple told detectives in Texas that they drove to the Lafayette area Monday night and fatally shot Dominguez, whom they had a “volatile relationship” with, Stansbury said.

Dominguez was found with multiple gunshot wounds lying outside his apartment in the Iles des Cannes apartment complex near Scott shortly before 1 a.m. Tuesday, the Sheriff’s Office has said. Dominguez died at the scene.

Vasquez and Rojas were booked into the Fort Bend County Jail, southwest of Houston, on counts of second-degree murder, Stansbury said. Both are awaiting extradition to Lafayette.

Man robs yogurt shop Saturday in Lafayette

Lafayette police on Saturday were looking for a man who cut off the power to a yogurt shop before entering the store and robbing employees at gunpoint.

The robbery happened about noon Saturday at the Yogurtland near the intersection of East Kaliste Saloom Road and West Pinhook Road, said Cpl. Paul Mouton, a police spokesman.

Employees told police that the man shut off electricity to the store before coming inside armed with a pistol. Employees handed him an undisclosed amount of cash before he flee, Mouton said.

Witnesses told investigators that the man wore a traffic vest, dark pants, work boots and a bandana over his face during the robbery. No one was injured.

Police ask anyone with information about this incident to call them or Crime Stoppers at (337) 232-8477.

Saturday home invasions investigated

Lafayette police are investigating two Saturday morning home invasions in which several people were robbed of...
Locating the existence of the paintings has helped spark an overall church restoration project that Keith Morris, an interior design specialist from Baton Rouge, said will eventually recreate the inside of the church as much as possible to its appearance after it was constructed in 1925.

The current project has already stripped away the Masonite boards. Removal of the Celotex also has revealed a large mural featuring Mary’s Assumption that had been painted on the church’s original ceiling, said Harrington. “It’s been somewhat like an antique roadshow moment the last year or so. You begin to find out so many things about the church which have been obscured or lost over time and you want to restore them,” Harrington said. “All the paintings were in various stages of disrepair and all of them needed cleaning because of the dirt and dust.”

Morris said the St. John Berchmans project has been personally intriguing in a building that first served the rural area southwest of Sunset and Grand Coteau as a Jesuit missionary church in 1912.

Morris said over the years, scenes on some of the paintings became obliterated, while parts of others were obviously cut away from their canvases, perhaps by parishioners seeking to preserve portions of the paintings that they wanted to remember.

Restoration has also been arduous, as Morris has had to remove tiny nails and the damage they created.

No one is sure who did the original paintings, but Morris said he and Harrington have found similar religious scenes which were probably mass produced and could be ordered for churches during the 1920s.

Locating facsimiles of the originals has helped, Morris said, as he has had to clean and repair them. “I’ve tried to restore them as close as possible to their original look that they had in the 1920s. I’ve also had to patch cracks in the paintings, remove the debris left by dust and roaches that invaded them.”

Morris said he’s also had to use some creativity and imagination in some cases, where portions of the paintings were no longer there.

“On one painting there was not much left, but it looked like there had once been a animal there, probably a lamb, so I had to paint a lamb over a scroll onto the canvas.

“In another case something had been cut out of one painting, but there was evidence of perhaps a fish’s tail, so I drew in and painted a fish, which I thought should be a redfish because of the Louisiana theme.”

“Father wants the inscriptions on the paintings to be in French, so I thought the indigenous redfish might be appropriate,” Morris said.

Morris said some of the work is also done in his Baton Rouge studio and the images sent to Harrington via email.

“We do a lot of our correspondence that way. It makes it easier, so I don’t have to be on site all the time,” Morris said.

Morris said the project also includes restoring paintings of the 12 apostles, whose canvases resemble those of the other paintings. The apostles’ paintings have always been visible, even during the modernization era, Harrington said.

Harrington said the last painting discovered was probably the most important to the history of the church. “As the boards were removed from the church foyer, there it was, a painting of St. John Berchmans, for whom this church was named. It was as if finding that painting was the climactic event in all we had uncovered so far,” Harrington said.

John Berchmans, church officials believe, is responsible for miracles, including one in Grand Coteau during the 1860s, when a young nun was cured of what physicians thought to be a terminal illness.

Harrington said that when finished, the project also will feature a new painting by Morris of Henriette Delille, of New Orleans, who founded the order of the Sisters of The Holy Family.

Delille’s painting will overlook a section of St. John Berchmans that was once segregated away from the white worshippers.

“It’s been frustrating more than difficult,” Morris said of the overall scope of the project. “When you realize the quaint, rustic ambiance that this church has you realize its character, you begin to realize all this work will be worth it.”