CIVIC CENTER PAINTINGS FIND A HOME

Betty Munro's watercolor paintings of the Mulroy Civic Center under construction have a new home. It's the Onondaga Historical Association, according to executive director Gregg Tripoli. He promised the 27 works will be displayed as soon as possible at the Civic Center, perhaps nine at a time.

Betty Munro is retired at age 91. She lives in Madison, Wis., where she grew up. She did the paintings on the scene back in 1974 and 1975 when the combination performing arts center and county office building was put up. She showed up for work wearing a hard hat.

The paintings were in her Fayetteville home when she moved to Wisconsin. They were exhibited along with other of Munro's work at the Spring gallery in Fayetteville late last year and in January and February.

The artist had wanted the Civic Center paintings kept together as a group. She said she considered them as "one continuous watercolor," rather than individual works.

Any other way "would be like separating a family."

Last month, Spring gallery announced it had arranged to sell the watercolors — called "Civic Center Suite" — as a group to an anonymous donor. Patsy Scala, program director of The Spring, said the sale would be handled through an account at the Central New York Community Foundation. The gallery is a 501-3 organization.

Gregg Tripoli said, "we are particularly pleased that these beautiful watercolors will be kept together and kept in the community for everyone to enjoy."

He said that prior to being notified of the gift, the historical association bought two Betty Munro paintings from those displayed at the gallery "because we thought it was important to have Betty represented in our collection."

Betty Munro was a familiar figure in downtown Syracuse, usually working at an easel "on the scene." Her paintings include many city scenes: Clinton and Hanover Squares, City Hall, Columbus Circle and Gifford Zoo.

She moved to Syracuse with her husband, the late John Munro, an attorney, in 1966. She explained she turned to watercolor painting because "it's more fun. You never know what's going to happen when you start painting."

She recalled when she arrived at the Civic Center building site that first day "everyone and everything was moving. I felt a need to record the excitement and action with my brush."

Rob Crandall / The Post-Standard, 1986

BETTY MUNRO paints at Columbus Circle in Syracuse in 1986.

First showing

Stories about Betty Munro's paintings brought a comment to me from Bob Oliver, who was house manager at the Civic Center during construction, and afterward:

"The construction of the Civic Center was an exceptional time here in Onondaga County. Everything was really rolling, from industry to education to cultural expression.

"Betty and I became friends during the final stages of construction of the Civic Center theaters and, as house manager, I installed the first public show of the Civic Center series of watercolors in the lobbies of the Crouse Hinds concert theater just prior to opening night.

"We stayed in touch and when the center's 10th anniversary came around, we rehung the show as part of that celebration. She felt very strongly about the building and what it represented, a major home for the performing arts here in Central New York. She felt equally strong about the watercolors that documented its construction and was insistent about keeping them together.

"Glad to hear they will be staying together and coming out of retirement."

The Post-Standard, 1976

THIS WATERCOLOR, "A Dream Come True," is part of the series of paintings Betty Munro did of the construction of the Mulroy Civic Center.

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, dcase@syracuse.com.