

ARTS

Meaningful mural graces local school entrance

Milton man dusts off artistic skills to create painting of original Martin Street building

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Dormant, but not diminished. That's a fairly accurate description of Martyn Mitchell's painting skills, which after about three decades have recently resurfaced — much to the delight of those at Martin Street School.

With his youngest son Spencer attending the local elementary school last year and wife Katherine then part of the parent council, the 48-year-old Miltonian dusted off his long-ago abandoned artistic flair when the opportunity to create a backdrop for the students' production of Pinocchio presented itself last spring.

"I do sketches for my work in mechanical design, but hadn't done any real art since I was a teenager," explained Mitchell.

Apparently time had not robbed him of his ability, which with the responsibilities of adulthood had simply been put aside.

Now sooner did his creative contribution to the play hit the stage than another opportunity — one involving a bigger commitment and more lasting significance — came to the forefront.

Seems Martin Street School had a front foyer that principal Robert Harrison — among others — found rather bare.

"There's a space on the wall when you first walk in that really needed something," said Harrison, now in his second year at the school.

His desire for a more inviting entrance to the school and his admiration of Mitchell's work on the backdrop forged the basis for a project that's been quite meaningful for all concerned.

Gracing the school's foyer since the holiday break is a seven-foot-by-three-foot mural of the school's original building from the 1920s — complete with its distinctive dome

top — which at the time was a high school but only about a third of its current size.

Said Harrison, "For this to be the first thing you see when you walk in I think shows how much this school community cares about its history. It's created a lot of buzz among students and visitors, and I can't say enough about this mural or the work Martyn put into it."

The latter part is hardly lip service, given that Mitchell's commitment to the project began well before putting paint brush to canvas. Through school secretary Barbie Taylor and later Milton Historical Society's Jim Dills, he was able to get his hands on an original photo card of the school from fellow long-time historical society member John Duignan.



"If you need a picture of a historical building in town, I'm the guy you come to," said Duignan. "I've only seen the mural in an e-mail, but I think he really captured the spirit of it."

Along with using the photo card as a template, Mitchell talked to a number of people — including an elderly man who attended Martin Street and lives just a stone's throw away — to find out about the building's colour scheme (since the photo was obviously in black-and-white) and how the school's surroundings looked at the time.

"Being in mechanical design requires great attention to detail and that's what I tried to bring to this project," he said of the painting, which just this week won a visual arts award from the historical society. "I wanted it (school) to be as historically accurate as possible."

That included the addition of a pair of martins (type of bird), the school's mascot and quite common to the area due to the proximity to the Mill Pond.

The giant painting took nearly three weeks to complete last month, with Mitchell putting in about eight hours each day in a makeshift studio — his living room.

"My wife was pretty understanding about the mess, and even if she wasn't it was because of her that I took on the project so I could just blame her if she complained," quipped the local artist.



ARTIST AT WORK:
Martyn Mitchell is all smiles now that he's rediscovered his love of painting.
GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

but then again after 30 years of not painting it's a miracle it came out as well as it did," he said. "I'm happy to have been able to give back to the school in this way."

Mitchell's already on to his next work — of Montreal's Champlain Bridge, near where Katherine grew up — and would certainly consider taking on similar projects as the one offered by Martin Street School.

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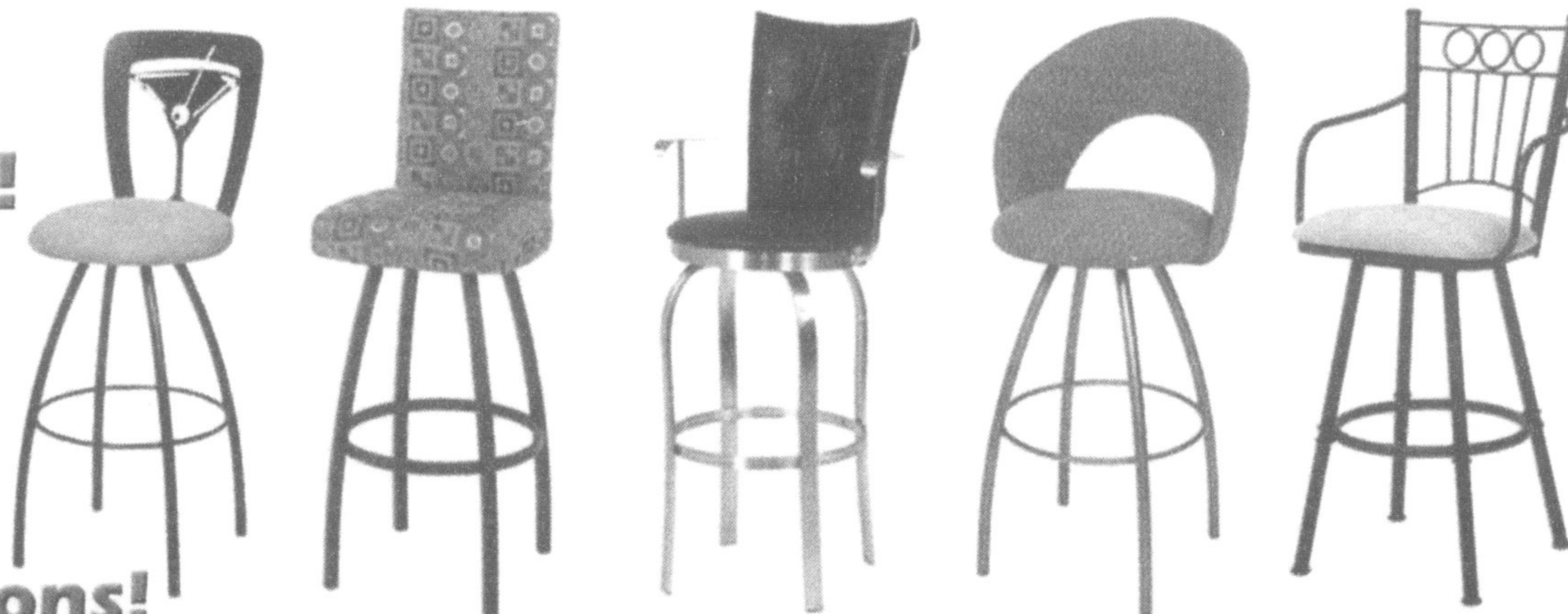
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