

MANSFIELD

# A palette as large as life

By Elaine Cushman Carroll Globe Correspondent, September 1, 2013, 12:00 a.m.

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Artist Ian Gaudreau, a 2000 graduate of Mansfield High School, was chosen to paint a mural on the wall of a highway underpass on Route 106 representing the history of the town. The mural includes 10-foot tall geese, race horses morphing into airplanes and historical figures spread across a canvas that is roughly 4,000 square feet. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

MANSFIELD — Before he began his most recent project, the largest amount of acrylic paint artist Ian Gaudreau had ever purchased was in a 16-ounce tub. Since May he has been buying it by the gallon as he fills out his vision that includes a 10-foot-tall goose, race horses morphing into airplanes, and historical figures, all spread across roughly 4,000 square feet of space.

That space is the wall of a highway underpass on Route 106, Gaudreau having been chosen to paint a mural on it representing the history of his former hometown.

Passing motorists often beep their approval at Gaudreau when he is working just inches from the roadway. But the project has also raised eyebrows and the ire of some town officials who were reluctant at first to back the mural and later were quick to balk at sponsor recognitions they felt could give the area a NASCAR feel. “It’s been a long haul,” said Nancy Wall, who helped form the Mansfield Mural Committee about three years ago that entrusted the project to Gaudreau.

Wall said that despite the fears some people had, the mural presents the town's history tastefully and fits in with plans to improve the appearance of its North Common. That area, which abuts the commuter rail station, is separated from the rest of downtown by Route 106.

Standing on the sidewalk beside the mural recently, Ken Butler, executive director of MMAS Inc., the Mansfield Music and Arts Society, an organization that includes a black box theater and an art gallery, explained how the idea of the mural came about. He said a major reconstruction of Route 106 was completed about three years ago, and shortly after the work was done, he and a group of artist friends were standing outside the nearby MMAS headquarters when their eyes were drawn to the large white space on the wall of the underpass.

“We were talking that we should somehow raise money to put something on that white wall,” Butler said.



The mural includes 10-foot tall geese, race horses morphing into airplanes and historical figures spread across a canvas that is roughly 4,000 square feet. Nancy Wall, a member of the Mansfield Beautification Committee, had the same idea and, after receiving the OK from selectmen to investigate the idea, the committee put out a request for designs using seed money from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Proposals started coming in from around the country and Canada, and Gaudreau, a 2000 graduate of Mansfield High School, was chosen in June 2011. His was one of about a half-dozen proposals received, and stood out for the depth of research and quality of design.

But at that time, selectmen declined to officially support the mural, even though it would be painted with private funds. They asked the mural's backers to bring the measure before Town Meeting, and earlier this spring, voters overwhelmingly approved it.

“I think people were afraid that it could appear to be urban art,” Butler said. “But it doesn’t give that feel at all.” The mural is still a sensitive topic, and the mural committee recently was forced to drop a plan to recognize the names of up to eight sponsors who had donated \$5,000 by putting the company names in 2-by-3-foot spaces near the base of the mural.

Selectman Doug Annino, an architect who has designed a nearby building, said the recognition plan was unfair to voters since it was not included in earlier drawings. And Selectman Kevin Moran said that it was not the look the town was hoping for and that it was “more like NASCAR.”

Selectman Olivier Kozlowski said the five-member board is warming up to the mural as more of it is completed. “I’ve always thought it was intriguing,” he said. “It seemed it could be done nicely, or not. I think it’s turning out OK.”

The major sponsors will instead have their names listed in a kiosk to be located on North Common that will also explain the historical aspects of the work. One donor has dropped out because of the change, but organizers are still confident they can reach their goal of \$50,000. Donors giving \$100 can have their names in script that looks like a line in the drawing. Those giving \$500 can have their faces painted into the crowd at the town’s former racetrack.

On a hot day recently, Gaudreau was dressed in painting shorts and cap as he gathered materials to begin work on his giant creation.



Ian Gaudreau, a 2000 graduate of Mansfield High School, who was chosen to paint a mural on the wall of a highway underpass on Route 106.

“My strategy is that no job is too small and no job is too big,” he said. “This is a really big canvas. The design really has to consider the space that it’s in, and it’s in a really big space.”

Gaudreau said he has learned much about the history of the town, adding that he has relied on Mansfield historian Jennie Copeland's book, "Every Day But Sunday." A likeness of her is included in the mural.

In May, he began covering the entire wall with a primer of beige and white followed by outlining 3,450 grid squares in pale blue. In the next step, Gaudreau sketched out the under painting in purple and magenta, which drew complaints from people who did not like the colors.

Gaudreau, who lives in Rhode Island and has a bachelor's in fine arts from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said the mural begins on the right with a depiction of workers harvesting bog iron. These iron deposits were harvested from marshlands, and were used as currency. "It's red, pitted, and very heavy," Gaudreau, who, inspired by the story, traded a bonsai tree to obtain a piece of bog iron to have a more physical connection to the history.

The mural also depicts geese, chocolate, and straw hats, all commodities that added fame to the town that was incorporated in 1775. A locomotive is on the mural, as are historical houses and other scenes from history. The town once boasted a racetrack on land now occupied by Mansfield Municipal Airport, and the artist shows the transformation with racehorses that morph into airplanes.

Gaudreau and a few faithful volunteers have continued to paint every dry day, but they face a deadline of Oct. 1, when temperatures are likely to drop too low to use the artist-grade acrylic paint that can be used on concrete and sells for up to \$80 a gallon. "The project will be about 90 percent complete by the end of August," Gaudreau said. "I'll spend about a month . . . completing details after people will think it's all done."

He said taking his work from conceptual drawings to the wall was a huge step, and he was happy to work alone for many days early in the project. He said he spent those days getting to know the huge "canvas" and reworking the design. "I was surprised at how comfortable I was able to get with the space," he said. "At first I thought: 'This is way too big.' Once I acclimated to the size of the wall, I was surprised to find myself wishing that in some places that I had more room . . . that it was taller in this place or that."

Although he has officially worked about 200 hours on the design and about 600 hours painting it, the number of hours it has taken cannot be separated from the rest of his life, Gaudreau said. "It is always on my mind," he said. "The design is always being modified. It will be modified again today."

He admits he was not able to resist the temptation to include himself in the work, and has himself standing as a boy with his earliest mentor, Lee Ann Wilhelmson, an art teacher at Mansfield High who died about 10 years ago. "In the mural, I'm showing her the work I would have shown her if she was still alive," Gaudreau said. "She was really my inspiration. I believe if you do a good work, it always speaks for itself."

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<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/regionals/south/2013/08/31/mansfield-artist-painting-his-hometown-history-giant-canvas-highway-underpass-wall/voWjD7C786xjcAhvldtGJO/story.html>