

## News



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

The restored portrait of Martin Murphy Jr., originally painted by Andrew P. Hill and Louis O. Lussier in 1878, is the first of several the historical society wants to restore.

## Martin Murphy is all spiffed up

By Allison Rost

To this generation, Martin Murphy Jr. has never looked so good. After an extensive restoration process that took two months and cost \$8,000, the portrait of Sunnyvale's founding father hangs in the historical museum

minus decades of grime and fire damage. Where there was once the hint of gilded cord now shows the cord as part of the chair where Murphy posed.

The restored painting was unveiled at a ceremony on Sept. 14 at the Murphy Park Building. But the newly hung painting seems out of place on the fluorescent-lit wall of the makeshift museum. It's surrounded by dingy

works that have yet to receive the same facelift. That's exactly what the Sunnyvale Historical Society wants to change. The group is undertaking active fundraising for two specific causes: restoring the remaining Murphy House artworks and building a new museum to display them. Both needs were created when the Murphy House caught fire in 1960.

At the time, the property was under dispute because of the planned construction of the Central Expressway. Though some suspect that the fire was intentionally set, the city of Sunnyvale stated that the damage to the original wood-frame structure was too severe and tore the building down. The items inside were sold at auction, with most keepsakes purchased by the historical society and the Sunnyvale library.

"The Murphy House was the social center, the cultural center, the political center of this whole area," says Laura Babcock, a member of the Sunnyvale Historical Society's board of directors and the head of the committee working on the Heritage Museum project. She is overseeing a massive fundraising project to raise \$1.6 million for the museum construction. In 15 months, she's raised \$864,000, with the city of Sunnyvale pledging \$500,000 in support and the possibility of more money coming through Proposition 40, which funds cultural and historical conservation.

Babcock has been hard at work soliciting donations. Efforts kicked off with a pledge dinner last fall, and a dance in the relocated Bianchi barn raised \$18,000 for the cause. "We've raised a lot in the last year. We've got some good momentum going," Babcock says. She's also approached the Bay Area branch of Questers, a historical preservation group, about the possibility for sponsorship. More local programs haven't been very successful—a "scrip" program through MasterCard gives a small percentage of each purchase back to the historical society, but it requires interested donors to sign up for a new credit card. "People are wary of filling out something that requires them to supply all of their personal information," Babcock says.

The land for the new museum will be donated by the city of Sunnyvale—an area of the community-center property between the Bianchi barn and the Orchard Interpretive Exhibit. When the Bianchi barn was relocated to the property, engineers installed utility lines and environmentally appropriate water channels not just for the barn, but for the future museum as well. "We had the foresight to appropriately size the utilities, because we knew the museum was going to go there," says Robert Walker, the head of Sunnyvale's Parks and Recreation Department. This will save the museum project \$10,000 from its multimillion-dollar cost.

Plans and specifications have already been drawn up and approved and are just waiting for the funding to come through. The museum was designed to look just like the Murphy House, and the historical society plans to recreate a bedroom, the kitchen, dining room and parlor based on photographs taken inside the house before its destruction.

A classroom and museum space will host educational programs for Sunnyvale students during the day, and two additional rooms will feature rotating displays of the extensive Sunnyvale artifacts in the society's possession.

"We've crammed an amazing amount of information into the displays we have now," Babcock says. The expanded space in the museum will allow

have now," Babcock says. The expanded space in the museum will allow some room to grow.

She also plans to house the original Murphy House artifacts in its modern-day counterpart. The society has items like the Murphy family grand pianos ready for display, but many original portraits and lithographs are still awaiting restoration. Babcock hopes the recent unveiling will inspire members of the community to sponsor a piece. Clocks and candelabras from Tiffany will require \$2000 each for restoration, and each colored lithograph costs \$4000. A previous revitalization effort involved spray-painting the gilded lithograph frames with gold spray paint, and Babcock wants to ensure that they're properly treated this time.

There are also a number of Murphy family portraits, like the one recently revealed, that require the same restorative process. Alejandro Reyes-Vizzuett did the painstaking work on the Martin Murphy Jr. portrait and will likely take on the others if the money is raised. He dismounted the painting from its frame for transportation to his home in Hollister, where he cleaned off dust and soot and remounted the canvas. It's now back in its frame, which also requires work.

"It took quite a search to find him," Babcock says. "He's familiar with the style and the oils, and the way they were used." Reyes-Vizzuett has restored other works by the same artist—Andrew P. Hill, who was assisted on the Martin Murphy Jr. portrait by Louis O. Lussier. Currently, this portrait is the only one with an identifiable signature and date, which is 1878. "Maybe once the others are cleaned, we'll be able to find more dates," Babcock says.

All of the historical society's efforts may seem like they're more trouble than they're worth, but Babcock and others are committed to seeing these projects through. She was recently talking to the aunt of Linda Taaffe, a descendant of Martin Murphy Jr.'s daughter Elizabeth. The woman didn't understand why her family's history was so interesting to the historical society. "She considers it her family's history, but to us, it's Sunnyvale's history," Babcock says.