

## Aquatic Park Bathhouse Prismatarium Conservation Project Description

The project will conserve the painted mural ceiling and walls of the Prismatarium, a room within the Aquatic Park Bathhouse, a contributing element of the Aquatic Park National Historic Landmark (NHL) District, located in San Francisco, California.

The Aquatic Park Bathhouse Building contains nationally significant works of art including murals by internationally known artist Hilaire Hiler. The Prismatarium is a large, round, open room, approximately 54 feet in diameter with a continuous mural painted on the walls and ceiling. The room is a color wheel mural with 190 distinct colors that was created by Hilaire Hiler. A Time magazine article of February 6, 1939 states of Hiler that:

“For the last two years, large, free-speaking Hilaire Hiler has been in San Francisco, working mostly on the Aquatic Park Murals. ... Unquestionably Hiler’s masterpiece, this mural embodies a refinement of intelligent detail and one of the most thoroughly studied color systems now at the command of an artist. He has evolved his own color chart, with 24 hues based not on the spectrum, obtained by the mechanical refraction of white light, but on pigments found in nature and the observed human reactions to them. He is far prouder of the Aquatic Park’s ‘color chart room’ – in which these hues and their tints, shades and tones are painted on a 60-foot [sic] ceiling – than of the undersea murals [located in the building’s lobby].”

The work in this building is considered Hiler’s best and this mural is part of a Works Progress Administration project that has no rival on the West Coast. This mural, painted on canvas that is adhered to plaster, is a unique artwork that is not only a product of the artist’s vision and ability, but also the unique conditions of the walls and ceiling it was painted on and the environment of the building it was painted within. The mural has been impacted by 70 years of dirt and grime, has been damaged from ladders and the installation of museum exhibits, and suffered from condensation and water damage that was found throughout the building from window and roof leaks. These leaks were repaired in 2007-2008 as part of a major project to repair the roofs and windows in the building.

The park contracted with a fine art conservator who tested each area of color to determine the proper chemical makeup of the liquid or gel to use to clean each area. When working on the grey scale walls, the conservator discovered that the grey paint has broken down and is no longer adhering well to the substrate, but easily flakes or dusts off. Worse, the grey paint has a very high lead content.

The conservator determined that it would be impossible to remove the layer of grime and the stains from the grey painted walls without removing significant amounts of the paint as well. In addition, the remaining lead paint would continue to separate from the substrate.

The paints and stains used for the colored sections at the very top of the walls and in the ceiling do not contain high levels of lead, and they have been cleaned without significant loss of original paint.

For the grey walls, the park has determined that the best course of action, based on the planned use as an exhibit space, is to encapsulate the lead paint. The existing gray paint is very dirty, streaked and stained. Since the gray walls cannot be cleaned, it will be necessary to replicate the gray wall paint

design over the original encapsulated paint once the ceiling is conserved, in order for the color design to appear as it was originally conceived by the artist. A portion of the wall, around the entry doors, will be encapsulated, but not painted over so that the original surface will be visible.

To address the lead paint hazard, the conservator encapsulated the paint with Avalure, a polymer that is reversible using an aqueous-based solution facilitated by a slightly alkaline pH of about 9. This polymer allows the walls to breathe through the coating while also firmly adhering the paint to the substrate.

Applying the Criteria of Effect, we find that the proposed project will have an effect on the Aquatic Park Bathhouse, specifically the Prismatorium. Applying the Criteria of Adverse Effect, we find that the proposed project will have an adverse effect. Painting over a portion of the artwork in the Prismatorium Room, even though the design will be replicated, diminishes the amount of original artwork in the Aquatic Park Bathhouse visible to the public. The treatment is reversible, but it is not easily reversible.







