



Studio Inferno

Hot glass and charred saints in St. Bernard Parish

By John R. Kemp

NEW ORLEANS ARTIST

Mitchell Gaudet had planned to study psychology in college. But that was until he found his direction beyond the writings of Freud and Jung. He discovered that molten glass and creating art led him through the spiritual world of his childhood.

Since the early 1990s, this internationally acclaimed glass artist has been on an existential journey. His cast hot glass assemblages often reflect disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Deep Horizon BP oil spill. But more often, they explore his spiritual

upbringing in a New Orleans Cajun and Italian family. Like any good art, his glass and found-object constructions demand a response from viewers who can't help but internalize his work in the light of their own experiences.

These experiences fill Gaudet's Studio Inferno gallery, located in an old movie theater on St. Claude Avenue just across the St. Bernard Parish line in Arabi. A visit to the studio is like moving backstage during a casting call for Dante's epic poem "The Divine Comedy," where charred saints and scorched angels

await transformation in the "Seven Terraces" of Purgatorio. His studio is filled with thousands of found objects, cast glass figures, 19th-century portraits, distressed religious icons and assemblages that stand like ex voto prayers for long-forgotten divine favors. They call to mind the artificial hands and leg braces that hang from the walls of the old St. Roch Cemetery chapel in New Orleans where the afflicted gave thanks for curing them of some dreaded disability.

Growing up Catholic in New Orleans' Ninth Ward in the 1960s, Gaudet lived in a world of saintly icons and ancient religious mysteries. This incense-clouded spiritualism and pageantry of pre-Second Vatican Council Catholicism profoundly influenced his art. "I am Catholic and I subscribe to most Catholic stuff," he explains, "but I'm also inter-

ested in the Shintos in Japan, Buddhism, and the calligraphy in mosques. I can see how there's good and bad in all. I was born, weaned and grew up in the Catholic Church, and I am all about the ritual of religion. When the Vatican took out the rituals, that was it for me. I need the rituals."

Gaudet's on-going series "The Seven Deadly Sins" of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath and sloth is an example of how these impressions have driven his work. Begun in the early 1990s, the project has evolved over the years. At first he developed his themes with cast glass symbols representing each sin. More recently, he has incorporated 19th-century portraits purchased at auctions and estate sales. He surrounds each portrait with glass castings depicting the sins. For a show in early 2016, he

will include statues of saints charred in fires or salvaged after Hurricane Katrina from flood-damaged churches.

Inspiration also comes in little objects that he collects. Reaching over to a shelf filled with small 19th-century glass bottles, patent medicine vials, broken clay pipes, and small porcelain objects, he picked up a small Victorian porcelain cup with the words "Present for Mary" inscribed across the surface. "I could do a whole show based on this cup," he says. "These objects are my words – my vocabulary that I write stories with is glass. I use them over and over again. They are like a keyboard. I can press each object into sand or make a plaster cast that I push into the sand. My palette is imagery."

That palette also includes architectural fragments from old New Orleans houses and buildings. "They give me the patina like New Orleans, like the old graveyards," he explains. "They give me the nuances of the architecture and texture of the city. I use to go to the graveyards with my Italian grandparents. It was fun. My love of that and this method of working with glass went hand in hand. I love working with old found materials and abstracting my images." New Orleans and its culture, he says, "have a place in everything I have made and will continue to make."

Finding that expression came in a round about way. After completing high school, Gaudet attended LSU where he majored in psychology. As a lark, he signed up for "fun" courses such as ballroom dancing and stained glass. He found that he liked working with glass so he took other courses in art and eventually ended up with a degree in fine art. He then went on to get a master's degree at Tulane University.

In college, Gaudet particu-



larly enjoyed casting molten glass. "Glass intrigued me," he says, describing his fascination with ladling lava-hot glass into sand molds. "It was different. Glass has a mysterious quality. It captures light and luster. I enjoy the seductive quality of glass. I found that I could select objects that I found and create collages by pressing the objects into the sand. That was it. In my love of older stuff, how could I compete with the stained glass windows of the old cathedrals, but sand casting was new."

In late 1989 Gaudet and two friends founded the New Orleans School of Glassworks in an old building on Magazine Street. By late 1990, Gaudet decided to move on. He purchased a 16,000-square-foot building at 3000 Royal St. in what was to become the city's trendy Bywater neighborhood. Gaudet claims the funky old building that once housed a bottle plant and a uniform factory was the inspiration for Ignatius Reilly's fictitious "Levy Pants, Inc." in John Kennedy Toole's novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. "The place was filled with old sewing machine needles," he says. On April Fool's Day 1991, Studio Inferno opened.

In naming the new studio, Gaudet and business partner Scott Benefield, a glass blower, borrowed the word "inferno" from the sign of a nearby boilermaker shop. Here the two could not only create their own artwork but also produce decorative glass objects for commercial markets across the country. They also subdivided the building into smaller studios to rent to other artists. By the late 1990s, the former psychology major, who by now had bought out Benefield, had become a successful artist, teacher, maintenance man, landlord, arts district pioneer, and a glass manufac-



turer with 14 employees and 400 commercial clients.

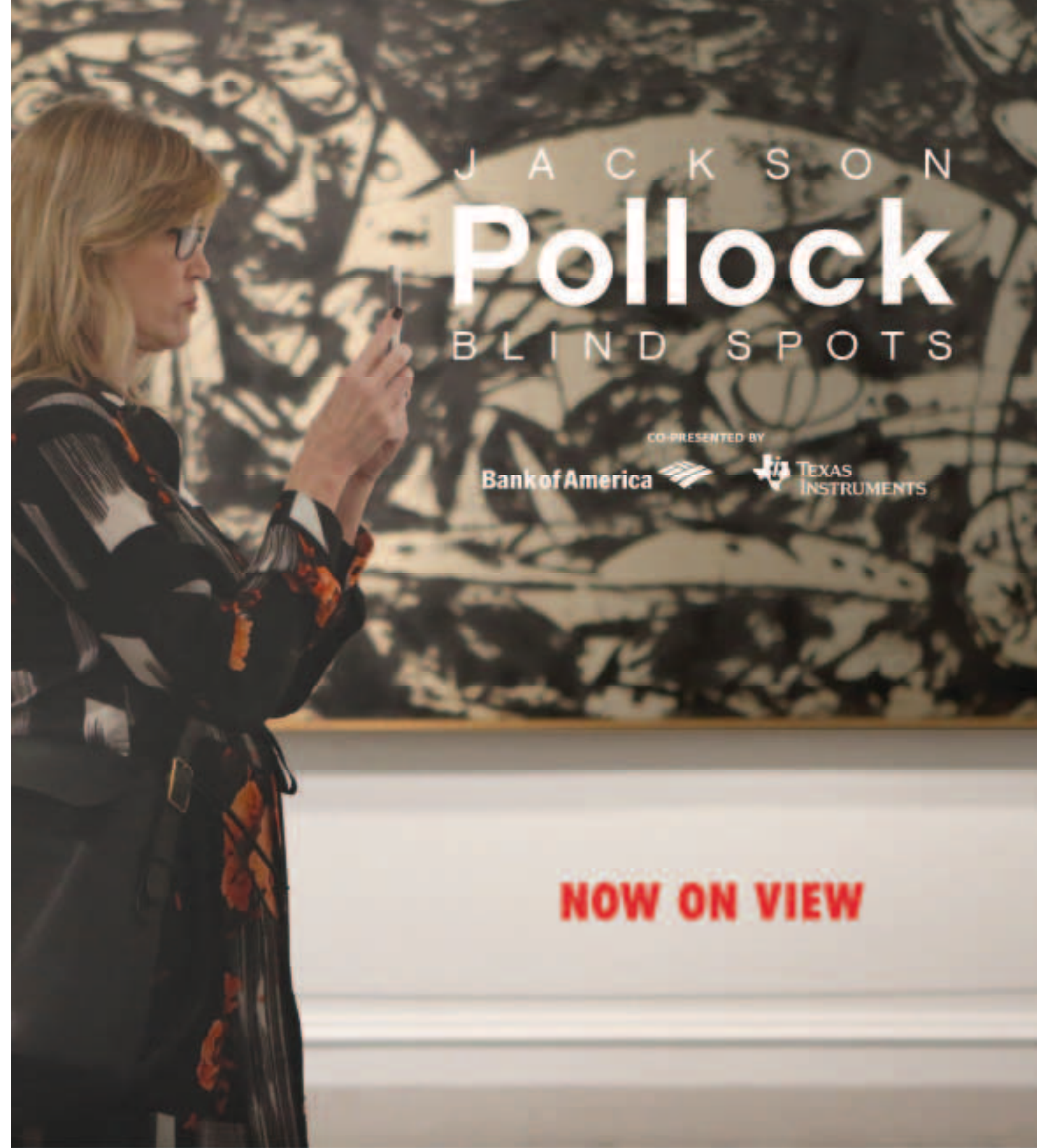
Unfortunately, Bywater's rising popularity in post-Katrina New Orleans also meant skyrocketing property taxes and increased street crime. In 2011 Gaudet decided to move again. One afternoon while driving down St. Claude Avenue to his home on Bayou Sauvage in eastern New Orleans, he noticed a for sale sign on the vacant 1940s Arabi Theater. He bought the building, moved in two years later, set up his studio and gallery, cut back on his decorative glass production, reduced his staff to one and concentrated more on his fine art work and commissions. "I drove through old Arabi and it was the same as Bywater with great old houses and light industrial," he says, looking out over the old railroad tracks running down St. Claude Avenue. "So I mortgaged my house, sold 3000 Royal St. and bought this building and

an old sheet metal shop." The old movie house, with its spacious light-filled lobby and extensive interior, has been an ideal location for his gallery, studio and glass furnace.

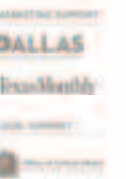
Focusing on one task, however, is not in Gaudet's entrepreneurial nature. In addition to giving tours of the studio and glass art workshops around the world, he and his artist wife Erica Larkin Gaudet are working with the Meraux Foundation of St. Bernard Parish to transform Arabi into a new arts district. To attract artists, the foundation has put up \$2.5 million to purchase and renovate four buildings adjacent to Studio Inferno. When completed this February, Gaudet says the structures will provide a black-box theater and up to 12 studio workspaces for artists.

Right now, he says, "I am living on luck."

For more information, visit [facebook.com/infernonola](https://www.facebook.com/infernonola). ■



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RICHARD REEVES

*Carving Winged Symbols of Peace
in St. Tammany Parish*

BY JOHN R. KEMP



After over 30 years as a New Orleans policeman who witnessed many of the city's saddest and most troubled times, Richard Reeves of St. Tammany Parish has found peace and expression, not in writing that unfinished crime novel, but in recreating the beauty of wild birds in life-like wood carvings.

"Every block of stone has a statue inside it," Michelangelo once said, "and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." The same is true for Reeves as he examines blocks of wood, deciding which wild bird to release. Like sculptors chiseling away bits of stone, Reeves's carving knives peel away layers of wood until the graceful

form of a songbird emerges from the shavings. Working in his small studio or behind his house on a dock overlooking a large wooded lake north of Covington, he gives detailed attention to every aspect of the carving, including the bird's natural colors. As a result of his exceptional work, Reeves has gained international acclaim for his life-like carvings of wild birds — including three world and four North American championships. He has also won a string of other national awards, including over 100 best of show awards in every major competition.

Carving wild birds was an unexpected career for Reeves, who grew up in the 1950s

in Chalmette, worked for a brief time at the now defunct Kaiser Aluminum plant, and joined the New Orleans police department in late 1964. During his 33 years on the job, he rose from patrolman to major, received degrees in law and criminology from Loyola University and taught pre-law and criminology part time at Holy Cross College, Loyola and Tulane University. Even before retiring from the department in 1997 as head of internal affairs and later executive officer to the deputy superintendent of field operations, Reeves had decided teaching and practicing law were not for him.

"I knew I didn't want to turn criminals loose," he says. "I

could practice family law. It was profitable but I couldn't live the rest of my life being miserable."

He then turned to a hobby he had stumbled upon in the late 1970s.

"Once I rose in the ranks, the politics got worse and I stopped enjoying being on the police department," Reeves says. "I needed something to relieve the stress and pressure."

Reeves found that relief while attending an exhibition sponsored by the Louisiana Wildfowl Carvers and Collectors Guild. His words called to mind the thoughts of writer Eugene Stiles in "A Small Book of Angels":

"As with angels, some birds are symbols of uplift and peace."



Reeves joined the guild and the following year he won a novice best of show award for his carving of a green-winged teal duck. He started out carving with a simple jackknife until his wife, Kathleen, gave him a set of professional carving tools.

"I said this is easy, but it wasn't," he says. "It takes perse-

verance to carve well. You need lots of study, other carvers' advice, and keeping at it. I found that it was not only fun but you can make money at it."

With his \$500 novice prize money in hand, Reeves went on to develop his natural skills by taking classes, attending meetings, buying books on the subject, and studying the works

of other carvers. His birds now fetch anywhere from \$1,000 for a miniature carving to \$20,000 depending upon size and complexity.

With so many shows and titles under his belt, Reeves now receives commissions from customers all across the nation. His work has appeared in numerous national carving

**"I would be doing
this even if I didn't
make money at it."**

publications and collections. Before setting blade to wood, he thoroughly studies every aspect of the bird, examining photographs, searching through books, the internet and museums to find paintings of birds especially those that are extinct. John James Audubon's critically acclaimed mid-19th century Birds of America series has been an invaluable resource.

Those resources recently came in handy when Reeves received a commission to carve the long-extinct Carolina parakeet. Not only did he find an example of the parakeet among Audubon's paintings but he also found a mounted specimen of the bird in a museum during his online research. From those two places, he was able to determine the bird's coloring and dimensions. The last known Carolina parakeet, once prevalent across the Midwest and Eastern United States, died in 1918 at the Cincinnati Zoo. After completing his research on a bird, Reeves draws a rough pattern on paper, which he then transfers to a block of wood. Not all wood is suitable, he says. Carvers prefer tupelo gum for its fine grain and lack

of knots. Earlier in his career Reeves ventured out into the local swamps in his pirogue to cut his own gum trees, but now he purchases what he needs, because it's easier and safer. Once considered a "trash" tree of little value, Reeves now pays up to \$700 for a single block.

Though most carvers concentrate on one project from beginning to end, Reeves moves from one to another, often carving five or six hours each day. He finds this process helpful. When he returns to a carving that he has put aside for a few days or weeks, he can often detect flaws that he had missed and can now correct. His studio is filled with carvings in various stages, waiting for the next stroke of a blade or sweep of a paintbrush. It is a process that requires a good bit of concentration and time.

"I would be doing this even if I didn't make money at it," he says. "Next to playing with my grandchildren, I enjoy this the most."

He is also active in the carvers' guild, having served seven terms as president. Each year the organization sponsors a festival to showcase new work by its members and to auction donated carvings which raise money for wetlands restoration and wildlife rehabilitation projects and for participating Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops. The guild is also anxious to get elementary, middle and high schools involved in the festival. It sponsors a painting contest for the students and donates money to their school art programs. The



challenge, Reeves explains, is to recruit new members and to get younger generations interested in the craft.

This was especially true after losing so many members in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Like Reeves, who lost his house in Chalmette to flood waters, many suffered severe property damage and moved away while others remained to rebuild. So far, the guild has done well. It is now almost back up to pre-Katrina levels with 300 active members.

"We hope to keep it going," says Reeves. "It's one of the true American art forms, but it is a dying art."

For more information about the Louisiana 2016 Wildfowl Carvers and Collectors Guild's Festival, Oct. 1 and 2 at the Castine Center in Mandeville's Pelican Park, visit LWCCG.com. ♦

BEST DOCTORS



JOHN COOKSEY, M.D.

Dr. John Cooksey is a board-certified family physician with over 20 years of experience. He is currently the Medical Director of the Family Medicine Department at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Dr. Cooksey is also a member of the Louisiana State Medical Society and the American Academy on Physician and Patient.



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Elise Grenier

XAVIER GONZALEZ

*Restoring a Golden Age in Aviation
in New Orleans* BY JOHN R. KEMP

For over a year, Elise Grenier and her assistants have patiently restored seven large, historic murals lining the grand atrium of the 1930s-era New Orleans Lakefront Airport. It is one of Louisiana's finest examples of Art Deco architecture, built during the age of Amelia Earhart and the early years of commercial air travel.

Constructed by the Orleans Levee Board between 1928 and 1933 at a cost of about \$3.6 million, the airport — one of Governor Huey Long's pet projects — sits on a spit of land jutting out into Lake Pontchartrain. The board's architects, Weiss, Dreyfous and Seiferth, hired the

Mexican-born New Orleans sculptor Enrique Alferez to create bas-relief friezes for the building's interior and exterior and Newcomb College art instructor Xavier Gonzalez to paint murals depicting the wonders of international air travel for the terminal's walls. Initially, the airport bore the name Shushan Airport for levee board chairman and Long crony Abe Shushan. The board renamed it New Orleans Airport after Shushan and other Long allies fell from power during the state's political scandals of the late 1930s.

Until now, the airport's elegant Art Deco façade stood hidden behind drab concrete panels added in 1964 to

modernize the building. Interior ceilings were lowered and walls covered with wooden panels. Those panels protected the murals. Unfortunately, sections of Alférez's exterior deco designs were destroyed to make way for the concrete outer walls.

Then came Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, and an opportunity arose to restore the terminal and murals. According to Wilma Heaton, director of governmental affairs for the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East and a prime mover in the airport's restoration, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and his unpopular recovery czar Ed "Cranes-in-the-Sky" Blakely wanted to level the building.

"The storm surge damaged the first floor and the roof leaked into the second floor," Heaton says. "The building was a wreck, but I knew it could be restored to 1934 instead of 1964. I informed Dr. Blakely that the mayor would not be demolishing the terminal because he did not have jurisdiction. I told him the airport was owned by the Orleans Levee District, a political subdivision of the state.

"He pulled out his flip phone and called the mayor to relay my declaration. The mayor said I didn't know what I was talking about. Well, Blakely is back in Australia, Nagin is in federal prison, and I am chairman of the New Orleans Lakefront Airport Committee. As you can see the airport was not demolished."

Between 2006 and 2013, the levee district, working with Richard C. Lambert Consultants of Mandeville — the lead architect was Alton Ochsner Davis — and a group of contractors, restored the terminal with \$20 million in hurricane restoration grants from the Federal Emergency Management Administration.

The stunning restoration is nearly complete. Grenier and her assistants, Meghan Murphy and Kaitlyn Richard, are restoring seven of Gonzalez's murals, which were painted on canvas and glued to the walls in 1933. They bear the titles "Paris and the Lindbergh Landing," "Mayan Ruins," "Egypt," "New York Metropolis," "Admiral Richard Byrd's Flight Over the South Pole," and "Mount Everest." He originally painted eight murals, but one titled "Bali" has been missing since the 1964 remodel. Another one, "Rio di Janiero," went to the Louisiana State Museum but was recently returned to the airport. Grenier, with old photographs in hand, plans to recreate the "Bali" mural to fill the vacant wall. Airport

"Gonzalez was not into politics like Picasso or Alférez. He did art for art's sake. He wanted to capture the beauty and safety of flying, which was still very new to most people."

officials hope the original will turn up one day.

Looking up at Alférez's friezes, Grenier says Alférez was, in a friendly way, critical of Gonzalez's murals.

"He said the murals were like travel postcards, tame," she says with a smile. "Gonzalez was not into politics like Picasso or Alférez. He did art for art's sake. He wanted to capture the beauty and safety of flying, which was still very new to most people."

After the airport project, Gonzalez worked for the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration, or WPA,

painting murals in Alabama, Texas and Louisiana, including post offices in Covington and Hammond. He later moved to Washington, D.C., and eventually to New York. In 1936 Alférez, also working for the WPA, built the monumental but controversial fountain "Four Winds" that stands crumbling just beyond the airport's front entrance.

Restoring murals like these requires special training, Grenier says. With a master's degree in art history from LSU and diplomas in art restoration from universities in Italy,

she has restored artworks in major historic buildings across Italy and Louisiana. Grenier also owns an art conservation company in Baton Rouge and Florence, Italy. The Gonzalez murals are her latest challenge.

"These paintings are in such good condition despite time, cover and Katrina," she says. "They didn't require any retouching at all."

During the 1964 remodeling project, someone applied rice paper to the surface of each mural to protect them. She and her assistants are meticulously removing that paper.

"It's like surgery," Genier says. "You don't know what's ahead. The most important phase is testing to determine materials, what they can withstand during restoration and what the issues are. When the treatment is correct and successful, it is a wonderful feeling."

During these restorations, Grenier has become an unintended guide for people visiting the airport.

"I have met everyone from World War II pilots to men who met their wives at dances in the airport's famous Walnut Room," she says. "I love talking

to them. One person told me to be careful of the friezes because his grandfather had worked on them."

Meanwhile, Wilma Heaton hopes to create a small museum in the airport to capture these stories and to celebrate its contribution to a golden age in American aviation history.

"I'm just so glad to see this airport come back to life again," Grenier says, tracing her finger across a section of mural yet to be cleaned. "I'm really attached to this airport. It's like my baby." ♦

