D
oes a Louvre security guard ever tire of Leonardo da Vinci? Do maintenance workers in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts grow numb to Mary Cassatt? I have often wondered this as I have trudged up or skipped down the stairwells of the Du Bois Library for more than a dozen years, passing a work of art every sixteen steps, give or take, each work someone's concept and expression. Whether it is my third or 300th pass by a particular mural—there are currently 51 existing murals, all rendered by students' hearts and hands since 1986—I am always caught for at least a moment. While the Du Bois murals may not all be Leonardo's or Cassatts, the colors and designs intrigue, adding at turns wonder or introspection to an otherwise routine journey between floors. I often think about how each mural belongs to someone, someone with a story. The murals program originated as part of the student-fueled library spruce-up scheme of the mid-1980s, called Mass Transformation, and the majority of the murals in those early years were created by art students invited to submit ideas. Mural painting activity fell off in the early years, and the Du Bois Library for more than a dozen years, passing a work of art every sixteen steps, give or take, each work someone's concept and expression. Whether it is my third or 300th pass by a particular mural—there are currently 51 existing murals, all rendered by students' hearts and hands since 1986—I am always caught for at least a moment. While the Du Bois murals may not all be Leonardo's or Cassatts, the colors and designs intrigue, adding at turns wonder or introspection to an otherwise routine journey between floors. I often think about how each mural belongs to someone, someone with a story. The murals program originated as part of the student-fueled library spruce-up scheme of the mid-1980s, called Mass Transformation, and the majority of the murals in those early years were created by art students invited to submit ideas. Mural painting activity fell off in the mid-1990s and had a resurgence about a decade ago. I caught up with one of the earliest muralists over the summer to learn her story. Brenda Wiberg '89 comes from a long line of Rockport, Massachusetts, painters; if you’re been to this artists’ colony on Cape Ann, you’re likely familiar with the busy-covered red fishermen’s shack on the wharf known as “Motif #1.” Wiberg's grandfather had a studio on the adjoining Bearskin Neck and would paint portraits for tourists at street level; upstairs, after hours, he was less bridled, creating abstractions or “controlled accidents.” His daughter, Wiberg’s mother, Betty, also became a portrait painter, often rendering the children of her father’s former subjects, now grown with families of their own. Brenda displayed the Wiberg talent for painting but had not intended to join the family business; she set out for UMass Amherst to find her calling—and soon realized it was art, after all. Her undergraduate years flew by one art class after another, and as she neared graduation, she answered the invitation to submit a library mural idea. For Wiberg, the concept was easy; she walked into the stairwell, and “it was a small, enclosed cement area,” she recalls. “The idea was there right away. I’m in a cave, I’ve entered a cave.” Wiberg had learned that cave artists left their handprints as signatures, so she did, too, in her Rhino Hunt (1988), which evokes a prehistoric cave painting of people and animals. After UMass, Wiberg lived for a few years in the Pioneer Valley before returning to the coast; some health issues led her to discover and practice polarity therapy and, ultimately, to choose her artistic journey. Wiberg has continued to paint murals. “There’s something about your being a wall. It’s a little nerve-wracking because you are very committed, it’s up there, it’s on the wall,” she says, “but it’s fun to have that open space, it’s not as small of a boundary.” Some of Wiberg’s recent works include the Seven Days of Creation—held paper collages for her church, Swedenborg Chapel in Cambridge, Mass.—and intricate spirit masks of clay and found objects that fit in the palm of your hand. Robert Levine ‘89, who painted Singer (1988), a Steven Tyler-inspired portrait, remembers being part of a group of artists painting in the library at the same time. “For a number of weeks, we each worked diligently in our own curved corner of the stairwell. It was great to walk by and see my friends translating their images onto this unorthodox canvas,” he recalls. “I don’t think any of us had ever tackled anything like this, but we all figured it out.” Levine now has his own design and illustration company, specializing in a type of illustration called bird’s-eye perspective, used in five murals in his hometown of Ashland, Mass., called Bird’s Eye Ashland. The mural was removed due to water damage but Levine has agreed to return to repaint it. In January 1992, a brochure called “Student Art in the University Library” was issued, probably the first complete public guide to the murals. Over the years, some murals have been removed for renovation or repairs: more than once, leaking pipes caused enough damage that they had to be painted over. The Du Bois mural program is far from static: new ones are painted annually in recent years, and MuralMondays are a social media hit. Stairwell murals have appeared in Library publications (Ancient Character, from 1987, by Shan Shan Sheng ’87) and on holiday greeting cards (University Fugue, from 1991, by Shannon Watson ’91). Still, a complete and up-to-date listing of all the murals has apparently not been maintained; how can we reliably recreate information about all the ones that have been removed? This year, as we mark the 45th anniversary of the dedication of the Tower Library (it opened in 1973, was dedicated in 1974, and named for W. E. B. Du Bois in 1994), we’ve set out to compile as much information on the murals as possible. Longtime UMass Amherst photographer Ben Barnhart worked his way up and down the stairwells in July to capture all existing artwork and provide the most complete visual record to date of what exists. We’ve reached out to every muralist for whom we can find contact information and asked them to provide missing information via a questionnaire. We’ve begun collecting videos of muralists who are willing to share memories on camera. We created an online catalog, where retrospective artist statements and images can be found online, and with our Libraries’ Digital Scholarship Center colleagues, we’ll continue to build out the catalog—and the stories—of the Du Bois Library murals. Reconnecting with the muralists has been the most interesting part of this project. We have been humbled to learn what inspired them, what they recall of making their murals, and how art remains part of their lives. Inspiration ranges from academic studies to nature at hand: Jean (née Lafond) ‘86 Crossman’s Imaginary Tropical Garden (1986) was inspired by the Dufresne and Smith College greenhouses, which she sketched avidly as a student. Still at UMass, she currently works as program coordinator in the Department of Architecture. “Our students go through the same Foundations Program I did,” says Crossman. Deb Tompkins Smith ’88 remembers she wanted to do something abstract. Looking at her work, Blue Tropism (1986), with fresh eyes, she admits, “I may...
have been influenced by Pac-man-esque shapes. To this
day, blues are still my favorite color scheme.” Nowadays,
Smith is a user experience architect, designing the front
end of digital experiences.

For all of the muralists, the process was an
adventure. Dana Evernden ’12, spent three
eight-hour sessions in 2010 working on a
tribute mural to George Parks, the late beloved UMass
Amherst bandleader, finishing it just in time to move
out of Amherst for the summer. “A word of advice: do
it during a break when there won’t be tons of people
walking up and down the stairs,” said Evernden. Thea
Kearney ’86, working on Untitled (1988), remembers
gathering the materials for her mural and hauling cans
of paint and a small step ladder from her apartment in
Northampton. “It was so long ago, I honestly don’t
know how I managed,” she said. “I must have taken
the bus or had a friend drop me off at the campus.”
(Nowadays, the supplies are bought and provided by
the Libraries.)

For many, it proved a learning experience. “I had to
learn the process for transferring a small 11x17 image to
a large wall. I also had to learn color matching in order
to purchase latex paint colors that matched the gouache
that I had used for the illustration,” says Charlene
Maguire ’92, who painted Untitled (1990). Her career
has taken her into other artistic materials and media,
including creating and illustrating an oracle card deck,
The Language of Heart Alchemy, and publishing two
coloring books.

“I was unable to spray paint indoors for this piece, so
I had to re-create many of the techniques I previously
relied upon with a paint brush,” Toby Armstrong ’16
remembers. His Untitled (2016) “was one of the first
acrylic paintings I ever completed, and quite a huge one
at that, so much of the time spent painting was trial
and error as I experimented with the new medium. The
whole process took close to 24 hours, though much
of that time was painting over failed experiments. The
whole experience was like a boot camp in acrylics, and
it jump-started my interest in the medium. Now they’re
all I paint with.”

We are thankful to the Du Bois Library muralists who
have generously enhanced the Library stairwells, and
the lives of those who travel them, with their art. As
part of our outreach to learn their stories, we also asked
muralists if they wanted to share any advice with future
artists. Charlene Maguire’s words of wisdom resonate
both for muralists and for those who encounter the
murals on their journey: “Have fun, and let the process
teach you things about yourself.”

Are you, or do you know, a Du Bois Library muralist?
If so, please contact Carol Connare:
(cconnare@umass.edu, 413-545-0995).

From top: Blue Tropism, Dael Tompkins Smith (1988);
George Parks, Dana Evernden (2010); Untitled, Toby
Imaginary Tropical Garden by Jean (née Lafond '86) Crossman (1986). Jean, who works on campus, came by recently to touch up her mural.