

From battles and hurricanes to a yearly dose of Mardi Gras, Mobile has survived it all. And with the arrival of the city's 300th birthday, the Mobile Register is preserving Mobile's rich history by commissioning local artists to capture the 30 most significant events, 10 for each century, to line the halls of their new Water Street building.

The brainchild of Mobile Register publisher Howard Bronson, the project has been five years in the making.

"When it occurred to us that our building was going to be completed in the tricentennial year, we started thinking about how we could tie it in with the tricentennial and make it an experience," Bronson said.

In order to ensure quality of art and historical accuracy, two committees, one art and one history were formed. Each committee was made up of experts in the field. There were no artists on the art committee, only art experts who paired local artist with the subject matter.

Tom Curry, director of marketing for the Mobile Register, took the role of facilitator in the project. Curry helped form the committees and said both worked hard to make sure they were representing Mobile's history.

"They took it very seriously and put a lot of thought into it," Curry said.

While it is not uncommon for a business to commission art for a building, Curry said the local emphasis makes this project unique.

"It's almost unheard of for a corporation to go out and get local art like this," Curry said.

A reception for the artists was recently held at Morris Gallery. Owner Bill Morris is also one of the commissioned artists. A three-time duck stamp winner, one federal and two at the state level, Morris gained national notoriety, allowing him open the Hillcrest Road gallery last April.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The Mobile Register celebrates the tricentennial opening of its new building by commissioning local artists to recreate 30 scenes from Mobile's 300-year history.

TEXT AND PHOTO BY BETH ANDERSON



Commissioned artists gather for a reception at Morris gallery.

Morris said the Register's project is a real boost for the local art community.

"What a great way to support local arts," he said. "We have so many wonderful artists in this town."

Loran Chavez was commissioned for two paintings, the Annual Indian Congress and the dedication of the Cochran Bridge. Chavez said she had to do her homework to make sure the painting was historically accurate.

"I'm having a lot of fun with it," she said. "To me, it's really an adventure."

Mannie Pair, owner of The Victorian Teal Art Gallery, will be capturing the Trail of Tears using a mixed media approach. Pair will not only paint the scene, but accent it with fabrics to bring the clothing, wagons and animals to life. While Pair isn't featuring a particular American Indian tribe in the painting, he still went through a lot of research learning about each one that was in the Mobile area.

"It kind of grieved me," he said. "The conditions and the treatment — it saddened me."

Gina Walcott, interior architect with Walcott and Adams Verneuille in Fairhope, is part of the team responsible for the architectural design of the public areas. Walcott said the size of the building worked to their advantage, making each of the three floors represents one century of Mobile's history.

"It kind of fell into place," Walcott said. "We're fortunate there are three floors."

Each floor will be designed to capture the feel of the time period. The first floor, which is dedicated to the 1700s, will be decorated with heavier material, the second floor of the 1800s will be accented with wood, and the third floor, featuring the 1900s to the present will have a lighter feel using metal accents.

While nothing has been decided yet, Bronson anticipates incorporating the opening of the building and art display with the Mobile Register's annual Fourth of July fireworks show.

"We have a lot of very talented artisans, more than I realized in the Mobile area, and I think the public is going to see that," he said.

While the original plan was to have only 30 historical events featured in the exhibit, the historical committee insisted on including one more — the founding of Alabama's first newspaper, the Mobile Register. ■