



— Reggie Jarrett/special

LaVilla School of the Arts proudly displays a 31-by-8 foot mural that used to hang in the old Sears building downtown. The mural depicting Timucuan hunters, painted by the late Lee Adams, was brought back to life after being stored at Lee High School for years.

## Painting has been resurrected at LaVilla School of the Arts

By John Carter  
Staff writer

**T**hey say every picture tells a story. And in this case, at least, the adage seems accurate.

A huge oil painting that for decades hung behind the long diner counter of the Sears department store in downtown Jacksonville has been recovered and restored and now hangs in the cafeteria of the new LaVilla School of the Arts at Beaver and Davis streets.

The 31-by-8 foot mural depicts Timucuan hunters surrounding Jean Ribault and French troops landing in the Fort Caroline area in the 1560s. When the downtown Sears building on Bay Street closed in 1981, the painting was rolled up and stored in the basement of Lee High School.

Pedestrian Gallery owner and artist Jim Draper, who coordinated the restoration, said the

Maybe they could find the painting, dust it off and explore the possibility of hanging it in the newly renovated City Hall building on Hemming Plaza.

Turns out, it was going to take a little more than a good dusting to make the painting presentable.

"When we removed the painting from the box and unrolled it, what we found was pretty much garbage," Draper said. "There was rat mess, those little dotted roach trails, paint was flaking and missing, whole sections of canvas were eaten completely through."

And those roaches, it turns out, were big-time art lovers.

"Oh, there were just whole areas where the roaches had just eaten the paint completely off," Draper said. "There were major problems. Serious problems."

The painting was completed in 1959 by Jacksonville artist

Overton, then president of the City Council, discovered that the painting belonged to the school system and eventually helped secure an appropriation of about \$10,000 to restore the work.

Draper agreed to coordinate the restoration of the painting. Most of the work was done by Marilyn Linder, a free-lance painter and restorer who came up from Gainesville three days a week for six months to complete the project.

Meanwhile, Overton was still envisioning the painting hanging in the historic St. James building, renovated to house the new City Hall. But that was before longtime educator Jane Condon, now principal of the LaVilla School of the Arts, got wind of the painting and its restoration. She lobbied successfully to have it displayed in her school.

High School.

Pedestrian Gallery owner and artist Jim Draper, who coordinated the restoration, said the huge painting was "almost literally brought back to life" during the past couple of years.

And he's convinced that analogy is fitting.

"When the Sears building was torn down, they rolled the painting up and put it in this kind of weird wooden box they made just to store it," Draper said. "The box had a wooden lid, which was nailed. And it seemed sort of like opening a casket when we brought it out."

And on top of that, when the "casket" was opened, almost everyone agreed the painting seemed dead on arrival.

A few years ago, City Councilman Jim Overton, who remembered the painting from its "Sears days," had an idea:

Draper said. "There were major problems. Serious problems."

The painting was completed in 1959 by Jacksonville artist Lee Adams, recognized by art historians as one of the foremost painters of natural history subjects in the United States. Adams, also an environmental activist, died with his wife in a car accident in 1971.

And although the painting was heavily damaged by age, neglect and hungry critters, Overton couldn't get the painting out of his thoughts.

"I remember it from when I was young, going to Sears with my mother," Overton said. "I remember seeing Jean Ribault in the painting. I just kept thinking, 'We need to do something about this historic painting stuck in a basement.'"

toration. She lobbied successfully to have it displayed in her school.

"I was in the process of opening a brand new art school," Condon said. "And, I mean, this is art. It belongs in an art school."

She couldn't be happier, she said, that the painting has been brought out of its dark sarcophagus in the basement of Lee High, restored to grandeur and displayed proudly in a school where hundreds of youngsters — students interested in the arts — see it every day.

"This is a new life for a large work of a significant painter," Condon said. "It's really taking on a new life, so in that sense it's very much a rebirth for the painting."

**HOLIDAY SAVINGS**