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Painting conservator Jerry Litmer applies a coat of preservative adhesive to the wall-mural image of St. John.

SAVING OLD ST. MARY'S

BY OWEN FINDSEN / The Cincinnati Enquirer

Flake by flake, the painting of St. John the Evangelist was pulling away from the wall.

"We had to do something right away because the paint was ready to fall on the floor," says Robert Stephan, a member of the parish council.

The damaged work of art is one of two paintings on the walls flanking the altar of Old St. Mary's Church in Over-the-Rhine. Built in 1841, the church is Cincinnati's oldest standing house of worship.

There was no time to waste. Scaffolding was assembled, and specialists began the tedious process of rescuing the art.

"We're not trying to . . . make it

look new," says Bill Wiebold, owner of Wiebold Art Conservation in Terrace Park, who heads the rescue effort. "What we're trying to do is to preserve what's left."

The two paintings, the other depicts St. Luke, need to be stabilized before they crumble. They are only a small part of a large sanctuary. The walls and ceiling have darkened from the smoke and pollution of more than a century. Statues are chipped. The stained glass is sagging. It all needs to be saved.

"It's a daunting project," Mr.

Wiebold says. "Fortunately, the structure of the church and the paint are in magnificent condition, considering the age of the building."

The leaking roof was repaired in 1996, before much damage was done to the interior. But hit hard were the two paintings of the saints. "St. John" is particularly fragile.

"There is a chimney behind that wall, and moisture has been coming down that chimney and seeping in behind the painting for who knows how long," Mr. Wiebold says.

"The cause of the damage has been repaired, but now we've got to save the painting."

Conservators go behind the paint

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Old St. Mary's has daily Mass in English at 12:10 p.m. Sunday Mass in Latin at 9:15 a.m., German at 11 a.m. and English at 12:30 p.m. Guided tours may be arranged by calling 721-2988.

Treasure: Oldest church undergoing extensive work

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and inject resins into the plaster to stabilize it and prevent further crumbling.

The paint is softened with heat and chemicals. Then we "lay it back down against the plaster and reattach the paint," Mr. Wiebold says.

The paintings "have been cleaned fairly recently so they only need a surface cleaning rather than a thorough chemical cleaning. When we're done they should be safe for another 50 years."

Ben Albers, a member of the parish council, watches the process. He's taking a break from painting the walls of the sacristy.

"They're using hypodermic needles, hair dryers and an iron," he says.

Mr. Albers, a volunteer, has been helping with church upkeep for more than 40 years.

"This church is important to the German-American community in Cincinnati, just as it was to their parents and grandparents before them," he says.

Old St. Mary's is one of Cincinnati's most important historic structures because it plays a significant role in the history of the German community. Its 171-foot steeple houses the city's oldest clock and a 3,300 pound bell cast by Levi Coffin, the famed "conductor" of the Underground Railroad. The church, school and rectory have been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1976.

New immigrants from Germany built the church, baking the bricks in their home ovens, according to tradition.

Designed in Classic Revival style by German architect Franz Ignatz Erd, its sanctuary is a vast space, unhampered by columns. Ten thousand people attended the laying of the cornerstone on March 25, 1841. Dedication ceremonies on July 4, 1842,

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— Bill Wiebold,
Wiebold Art Conservation

lasted 11 hours, and included the first Roman Catholic procession through the streets of Cincinnati.

Originally called St. Marien Kirche, the name was changed to Old St. Mary's in 1904 when the new St. Mary's Church was built in Hyde Park.

The church has been decorated and redecorated numerous times since it was built.

It was lengthened by 48 feet in 1864. The interior became more elaborate and artworks were added, including three 15-foot-high paintings of the Virgin Mary: *The Immaculate Conception*, *The Annunciation* and *The Coronation* by Munich artist Xavier Glinck. The three paintings hang behind one another and are raised and lowered from the loft during the appropriate season. That renovation cost \$20,000.

In 1892 the church celebrated its 50th anniversary with a major renovation. Art was imported from Germany and the sanctuary was given an elegant Baroque decor. That included a ceiling by artist Anton Mahler, painted to suggest an elaborately constructed design of gilded plaster.

A new roof and a fresh paint job came in 1925. A new organ was installed in 1929, using pipes from the Music Hall organ. The interior was radically redecorated in 1932 but was returned to its 1892 interior

after World War II.

Then, in 1996, the congregation once again set out to restore the church by rebuilding the roof and painting the exterior.

"That turned out to be more costly than we had estimated, because of the extra cost of removing the old lead based paint, among other things," the church's pastor, the Rev. Albert Lauer, says.

"After the restoration, the parish was left with a \$700,000 debt," Father Lauer says. "We were paying \$800 a week in interest. We had a 10-year plan to get out of debt, but we had some miracles and some great sacrifices. Many people came forward to help and we got out of debt in eight months."

"We're probably the only parish in the city that is out of debt," Mr. Stephan adds.

Now Father Lauer and members of the congregation are meeting with Mr. Wiebold and learning about what it takes to preserve a 168-year-old church. It's a time-consuming and expensive process that could cost as much as \$1 million.

"The overall concept of the project is kind of overwhelming; when you think of cleaning this church not by the square foot but by the square inch," Mr. Wiebold says.

"But because it is as old as it is and because it has the residue of pollution and candle smoke it is probably going to be very surprising as to what the end result will be when it is cleaned."

"There are a lot of short cuts, but we propose the high end, the best possible way to do it, but there are ways to save money," Mr. Wiebold told the parish council. "You can divide it into individual projects and do the ones that are most important. You can cut back in any area that is not detrimental to the integrity of the historical site."