



# Herman and Gertrude Du Brau

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## Their murals decorate the Lyric Theatre in Baltimore and Masonic Temple in Cumberland.

Smaller murals that once enhanced public buildings and churches throughout the region also originated from the same studio, making it one of the most prolific in local history. Despite productive careers, the artists associated with the murals have slipped into obscurity with barely a mention in the historical records of Allegany County and state of Maryland. Once studio owners and painters of renown, Herman and Gertrude Du Brau left behind many reminders of a bygone era that deserves a second look and a reintroduction to contemporary residents.

The Herman Du Brau story began in Prussia, a German state that later became part of the German Empire. In later years, Mr. Du Brau moved from his birthplace to the city of Berlin where he trained at the Royal Academy of Arts. Successful completion of the academy program meant that he was awarded the degree, Master of Arts. Following marriage to Anna Augusta, two daughters

were born, Charlotte and Gertrude. It was Gertrude who would later join her father in the studio business and launch an artistic career.

The Du Brau family emigrated from Germany in 1892 and settled in Baltimore where Herman set up a studio. According to newspaper advertisements, he offered a variety of products and services including wallpaper, mural painting, hardwood floor installation, stained glass, house painting, and related items.

In 1896, a partnership was established with a fellow German immigrant that quickly dissolved into legal disputes. Following the business failure, the Du Brau Art Ornamental Company was established in 1899 under Herman's ownership, a business arrangement that would last more than one decade before it also experienced financial and legal difficulties.



Gertrude was only two years old upon arriving in the United States. As a youngster she demonstrated superior artistic talent that warranted her acceptance into the Maryland Institute of College Art. During Gertrude's senior year at the institute, she studied under Charles Yearly Turner, one of the most important mural painters in the country. Formal studies continued upon return to Germany, where she enrolled at the Royal Academy in Leipzig and Dusseldorf Academy of Art. Gertrude returned to the United States in 1912 and accompanied her father in artistic endeavors until his death in 1922. The two artists were responsible for a large number of public paintings that represent the Progressive Era in United States history.

Progressivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasized participatory citizenship. Public murals were part of the movement; idealized and larger than life themes that all economic classes could

enjoy were commissioned throughout the country.

Herman Du Brau's first major civic work happened in 1900 when he was commissioned to decorate the Allegany County Courthouse located on Washington Street, one of the largest interior spaces in the city. Apparently, the ceiling of the recently completed courtroom was too high for proper courtroom acoustics. Both circuit court judges reported difficulties in hearing witnesses' testimonies and decided that modifications to the courtroom were in order. A contractor was subsequently hired to lower the ceiling by 4 and a half feet. The new ceiling was to be covered with plaster and then painted, a task awarded to Herman Du Brau.

**Facing Page: Old Testament, King Solomon and a group of workmen at the building of the Temple; a mural on the second floor of Cumberland's Masonic Temple.**

**Below: Faith, Hope and Charity stand above the entrance to the Masonic Temple Lodge Room in Cumberland, MD.**





**Du Brau mural in Cumberland's City Hall rotunda depicting historical scenes surrounding Fort Cumberland.**

Herman Du Brau painted the ceiling and also redefined the plain interior of the court room. A broad frieze divided by ionic pilasters brightened the formerly austere room, while a second remodeling in 1913 allowed Gertrude to recreate the Great Seal of the State of Maryland. Reportedly, the Du Brau's also painted a Roman jury in the deliberating room and the allegorical figures of Virtue, Vice, Wealth and Poverty in the judge's chamber. Today, the Great Seal and ionic pilasters remain, but there is no evidence of murals in the other rooms.

The Du Braus' subsequently moved from Baltimore to Cumberland in 1913 where they purchased a small house on Piedmont Avenue. The move was fortuitous because a second major commission was awarded by the local Freemasons to decorate their newly constructed temple at 15 Greene Street.

The Masonic Temple paintings are among the most spectacular the Du Braus' ever produced. Gertrude's rendering of the allegorical Cardinal Virtues; Temperance, Fortitude, Wisdom, and Justice adorn the lodge room. Faith, Hope



and Charity stand above the entrance to the lodge room, while above the staircase is depicted an expansive rendering of the Old Testament story, “Judgment of Solomon.” Two women claim one infant, and the wise king must determine the rightful mother. Gertrude dramatically illustrated the infant’s true mother reaching out for the king’s compassion. Masonic records note that Herman DuBraun was awarded the painting contract in 1911 for a fee of \$1,200. Thomas Footer, owner of Footer Dye Works and a local Mason, generously donated funds to cover the cost.

The best known Du Braun mural is the oil-on-plaster found in Cumberland’s City Hall rotunda. In 1921, city officials advertised for the painting project but received a monetary offer and artistic proposal they had not anticipated. The low bidder apparently followed the advertised terms and offered to paint interior and exterior surfaces for \$3,300, a routine job. The Du Brauns unexpectedly provided sketches and verbal descriptions of a grand mural showing historical scenes surrounding Fort Cumberland for a cost that exceeded the low bidder by more than \$800. City officials found

favor with the ambitious mural project, and subsequently, awarded the Du Braus a contract that included depictions of more than 270 figures, horses, guns, and appropriate scenery surrounding the fort. Scenes include the arrival of British General Edward Braddock in 1755 and George Washington's review of troops in 1794. While Herman and Gertrude apparently planned the massive mural, only Gertrude's signature appears on it.

Herman Du Brau died in 1922, thereby ending a prolific partnership. While artistic talents and accomplishments were credited to Herman, business failures caused financial hardships until the end of his life; he died a poor man.

Gertrude remained active across the region following her father's death. One noteworthy endeavor included entering a mural contest in Philadelphia that attracted artists from major metropolitan areas. Gertrude won the contest and brought notoriety to her home town when she was described in a *Washington Post* column as "the Cumberland girl." It seems, however, that Gertrude generally did not seek large mural commissions following her father's death.

To generate income, Gertrude taught art classes at her studio on North Liberty Street in downtown Cumberland. The shop also advertised gift wrap, souvenirs, and greeting cards. Financial hardship struck once again when the March 1936 St. Patrick's Day flood destroyed the contents of her studio. Apparently distraught at the circumstances, Gertrude returned to Germany in 1938, just months prior to the outbreak of World War II.

Gertrude remained in Germany during the war and lost her American citizenship in the process. It was not until 1955 that nieces and nephews, acting as sponsors, made possible a return to the United States. Gertrude resided with her sponsors in Tacoma Washington and remained active in painting circles until her death in 1965.

Over the years, the Du Brau's style of painting faded from popular acclaim, as did their personal notoriety. Rarely mentioned in local or regional literature, the Du Braus have faded from the historical record despite a long list of credits. Boldly signed murals have been lost to time, as have the stories of the painters who created them. Fortunately, three outstanding examples of the Du Braus' Progressive Era painting style remain in public view and close proximity for visitors and residents to enjoy.

***The City Hall rotunda painting may be viewed during regular business hours – 57 N. Liberty Street, Cumberland.***

***The Allegany County Circuit Courthouse painting may be viewed as circumstances permit – 30 Washington Street, Cumberland.***

***The Masonic Lodge is open to the public during special occasions – 15 Greene Street, Cumberland.***

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Gertrude Du Brau's rendering of the four Cardinal Virtues adorns the Lodge Room of Cumberland's Masonic Temple. Left to right: North – Justice, South – Fortitude, East – Temperance, and West – Prudence.