Photographs by Sheri D. Thomas, NCSU, unless otherwise noted.

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Art in the Libraries:
The Joe Cox Color Wall

By Karen Ciccone, Natural Resources Library, and June Brotherton, Administration and Advancement

Driving along Hillsborough Street at night, passersby used to enjoy an ever-changing display of colors in the large open window on the first floor of the NCSU Libraries’ book stack towers. Today, however, the light sculpture, created by Raleigh artist Joe Cox, is barely visible, as broken color filters and other technical problems have left it dim and colorless. As a result, faculty, staff, alumni, and other citizens in the area who loved the light sculpture for decades have called the Libraries to inquire when and if it can be repaired. Plans are underway to raise the necessary funds to repair the sculpture and restore it to its original beauty.

“In response to the volume of inquiries we have had concerning the potential plans for restoration of the Color Wall, the Libraries has created a Libraries Art Preservation Fund,” Vice Provost and Director of Libraries Susan K. Nutter states. “We hope that alumni, faculty, staff, and anyone interested in helping the Libraries restore and maintain the Color Wall and other works of art commissioned for or donated to the Libraries will consider making a donation to this fund.”

No fund currently exists to support the repair and maintenance of the Libraries’ works of art. In addition to the Color Wall, the library’s
Donations to restore the Cox Color Wall and to help maintain other works of art in the Libraries’ collection may be sent to:

Donations to this fund are fully tax deductible.

Hillsborough Street through the windowed first floor of the tower, twenty-three lights in seven different colors shone on the wall, creating lighter hues in their overlap. A mechanical timer, which operated the lights, caused the pattern to change approximately every four seconds. According to one source* on Cox’s art, this amounted to two changes in about the time it took a person to walk past the mural. Black metal

vanes on the wall cast shadows, themselves multicolored because of the selective blocking of light. The result was a kinetic display of hundreds of vertical bands of intense color. Passersby in the library corridor also became part of the work when their silhouettes and multicolored shadows merged with the display.

In recent years, the piece has suffered the fate of many light sculptures of its era. Bulbs have burnt out, and several of the color filters have become cracked, broken, and lost. The thirty-year-old timing mechanism operates intermittently, and the color and timing charts were lost for many years, preventing major repairs from being accomplished.

The NCSU Libraries brought this situation to the attention of the University Standing Committee for Art Acquisitions. Committee members decided that the piece should be restored, but were stymied by a lack of information about the original condition of the piece, especially the colors of the missing filters and the correct timing of the lights. Fortunately, the committee eventually located a cache of materials at the State Archives of North Carolina in Raleigh that were deposited there by the Friends of Joe Cox. The color and timing charts, wiring diagrams, and other specifications for Cox’s light sculptures, including the Color Wall, were found there. Facilities staff from the Libraries provided an additional critical piece of information by locating the original manufacturer of the light housings and color filters. Using this information, the Libraries and the committee have the necessary information to begin the work of returning the piece to operating condition.

NC State Chancellor John D. Caldwell, who commissioned the Color Wall. From Special Collections.
Focus, a newsletter published three times a year, seeks to promote the services, activities, needs, and interests of the NCSU Libraries to the university, the Friends of the Library, and beyond.

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